

UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY

The Richmond Bread Riot of 1863:
Class, Race, and Gender in the Urban Confederacy

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This morning early a few hundred women and boys met as by concert in the Capitol Square, saying they were hungry, and must have food. The number continued to swell until there were more than a thousand. But few men were among them, and these were mostly foreign residents, with exemptions in their pockets. About nine A.M. the mob emerged from the western gates of the square proceeded down Ninth Street, passing the War Department, and crossing Main Street, increasing in magnitude at every step, but preserving silence and (so far) good order. Not knowing the meaning of such a procession, I asked a pale boy where they were going. A young woman, seemingly emaciated, but yet with a smile, answered that they were going to find something to eat.¹

Confederate war clerk, J.B. Jones's description of the Richmond Bread Riot of 1863, clearly highlights the suffering which permeated the urban centers of the Confederacy by the midpoint of the Civil War. The production and transportation of goods became increasingly difficult in the war torn nation. Inflation undermined the value of Confederate currency and made it difficult for those on fixed wages to provide for themselves and their families. The influx of thousands of refugees into Richmond created a deficit of housing in the city and raised the already inflated prices of goods. By 1863, most citizens remarked that they found it almost impossible to feed themselves. As Emory M. Thomas has observed, "a nation of farmers could indeed go hungry."²

Although the Confederates ended 1862 militarily on a high note with the victory at Fredericksburg in December, the staggering casualties at Antietam and the ensuing Emancipation Proclamation combined to create undercurrents of doubt in the fledgling nation.³ The military's performance, however vital to the Confederacy's hope for

¹ J. B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary at the Confederate States Capital* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott & Co., 1866), 284-285.

² Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation: 1861-1865* (New York: History Book Club, 1993), 206.

³ The military circumstances had a significant impact on the morale of the people on the home front according to historian Gary W. Gallagher; Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85. The Fall of 1862 witnessed several important battles. Late in August, General Robert E. Lee decisively defeated the Union troops at the Second Battle of Manassas. The victory prompted a significant boost in confidence on the home front and within the army itself. Furthermore, the Union encountered severe leadership problems.

survival, did not affect the lives of the citizens on the home front to the extent that the government's domestic policies did.⁴ In fact, much of the Confederacy's legislation, passed in the opening months of 1863, only accentuated whatever feelings of resentment existed at the end of the previous year. In pursuit of success on the battlefield, the Confederacy abandoned many of the principles on which the nation had been founded. The Richmond Bread Riot demonstrated that Confederate domestic legislation and treasury policies combined to create a level of discontent on the home front which spurred people to step outside traditional notions regarding gender roles and social norms.

The Confederates were unable to take advantage of the Union's disorganization following Second Manassas. Furthermore, Battle of Antietam did not end well for the Rebels. Although the battle ended indecisively, the South suffered a severe blow to morale because of the high casualties and the army's ensuing retreat back into Virginia. The Union pounced on the opportunity to claim a Union victory and President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, a mere five days after the battle. This only intensified the feelings of hatred between the two sections. J.B. Jones wrote on September 30, 1862, "Lincoln's proclamation was the subject of discussion in the Senate yesterday. Some of the gravest of our senators favor the raising of the black flag, asking and giving no quarter hereafter," J.B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 159.

The Confederates made their comeback at the Battle of Fredericksburg, December 11-15, 1862. The Confederate troops managed to inflict massive casualties on the assaulting Federal troops. The Union army lost over 12,000 men and retreated back across the Rappahannock River. The military's superb performance left the morale of the army high as it ended the 1862 campaign and went into winter quarters.⁴ This thesis contradicts Gallagher's argument that by the middle of the War, General Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army had become the sole focus of nationalism for Southern patriots. I echo Paul D. Escott's argument and assert that class conflict, Confederate legislation, and domestic suffering dominated the minds of the home front citizens, whose support was imperative for the successful undertaking of a massive military campaign. The hardships of these wives and mothers encouraged many soldiers to desert and, ultimately, detracted from the efficiency and fighting capability of the Confederate military machine. The suffering of these individuals undermined the support for the Southern cause and directly contributed to the defeat of the Confederacy; Paul D. Escott, "'The Cry of the Sufferers': The Problem of Welfare in the Confederacy," *Civil War History* XXIII (Spring 1977): 228-240.

Class, Race, and Gender: The Trinity of Southern Society

In order to understand the consequences and implications of the actions taken by the women who participated in the Richmond Bread Riot, a certain understanding of antebellum social norms is needed. Southern individuals determined their role and position in society according to race, gender, and class. Drew Gilpin Faust, one of the foremost scholars of women in the Confederacy, notes:

White men and women of the antebellum South had defined and understood themselves in relation to a number of categories: race, which marked the difference between bound and free, superior and inferior; gender, which was designed to distinguish independent from dependent, patriarch from subordinate; and class, more subtle and hidden in a society that rested within a democratizing America but present nonetheless in distinctions of wealth, power, education, and refinement, in claims to honor and gentility.⁵

Each of the three categories was intimately connected to the other two. An assault on one category fundamentally challenged the others as well. Thus, when the Civil War mobilized the population and took men away from their families, it undermined the entire Southern social system.

The War noticeably affected gender roles in Southern society. In the antebellum era, strict notions with respect to gender permeated Southern culture; men and women

⁵ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3-4. Faust notes that many scholars disapprove of the present reliance upon race, class, and gender in historical inquiry; however, after extensive primary source research, she has found that the women of the antebellum era consistently based their identities on these principles. She asserts, "Their persistent acceptance and articulation argues for their fundamental importance. As the nineteenth-century women's voices that fill this book amply demonstrate, these were the categories by which women of the South's slaveholding classes consciously identified themselves. The intertwined features of race, class, and gender were the defining characteristics of ladyhood; these were also assumptions directly assaulted by the social and cultural forces unleashed by the Civil War" (see page 260). My research confirms her assumptions. The diaries written by Richmond ladies regularly used the language of class, race, and gender in their entries. Moreover, the Richmond Bread Riot supports Faust's assertion that the Civil War undermined traditional notions about these categories. The poor women leapt outside of the antebellum norms regarding acceptable female behavior by participating in a violent uprising and challenged the longstanding norms about female propriety.

had explicitly defined roles. Ladies were to remain uninvolved in politics and business.⁶ They were also expected to be educated, refined, and genteel. Daniel Hundley attempted to detail the delicate dynamics of the Southern social system. He used terms of the utmost admiration for the Southern woman when he wrote,

Ah! thou true-hearted daughter of the sunny South, simple and unaffected in their manners, pure in speech as thou art in soul, and ever blessed with an inborn grace and gentleness of spirit lovely to look upon, fitly art thou named:

“A perfect woman, nobly planned,
To warm, to comfort, and command;
And yet a spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light.”⁷

Thus, Hundley, in the manner of most men, attributed to the women of the South a certain divine quality and mission. This purpose involved the support of the nation and the spiritual development of its citizens. Hundley postulated:

When the Apostle commanded that women should not be suffered to speak in public, but on the contrary to content themselves with their humble household duties, he not only spoke as the inspired servant of God, but also as a man possessed of uncommon common-sense. For since to the family belongs the education and gradual elevation of the race, it is most important that mothers should be pure, peaceable, gentle, long-suffering and godly—which they never can be, if permitted or inclined to enter the lists and compete with selfish and lustful man for the prizes of place and public emolument.⁸

Both the men and women of the South accepted these assertions. The War’s manpower requirements, however, undermined these norms. In the absence of men who were

⁶ Although women did not participate publicly in politics, many pursued an active private interest in current affairs. Mary Chesnut, for example, felt no qualms about critiquing the politicians in the early days of secession. She wrote, “One of the first things which depressed me was the kind of men put in office at this crisis, invariably some sleeping deadhead long forgotten or passed over. Young and active spirits ignored, places for worn-out politicians seemed the rule—when our only hope is to use all the talents God has given us.” See C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 5.

⁷ Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in our Southern States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

consistently serving on the front, women assumed unprecedented positions of leadership and responsibility.

In antebellum Richmond, strict notions of class also existed. As in many of the long-established cities of the South, the elite circle allowed for very little social mobility. Richmonders themselves recognized the division of their society along these class lines and the language of class abounded in the literature, editorials, and diaries from the antebellum period. Hundley attempted to depict the social structure of the South in his 1860 work, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*. He concluded that eight categories existed in the South: the Southern gentleman, the middle classes, the Southern Yankee, cotton snobs, the Southern yeoman, the Southern bully, poor white trash, and the negro slave. Hundley came from an elite background because of his birth into a landholding and slave owning family in Alabama and, consequently, he glorified the qualities of the Southern gentleman, while demeaning the middle classes, the yeomen, and the poor whites.⁹ This represented a typical upper class perspective on other tiers of society.

Richmond possessed a unique social structure because of its position as an industrial and manufacturing center. Richmond was, in fact, the nation's largest manufacturer of tobacco and the second largest miller of flour.¹⁰ According to historian Virginius Dabney, "Richmond was the industrial center of the South and the region's wealthiest city, based on per capita property valuation."¹¹ Further, the city was an important intersection for many rail lines. This urban and industrial character contributed to the development of a distinctly urban class system.

⁹ Hundley, *Social Relations in our Southern States*, xv.

¹⁰ Virginius Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Whereas in the rural environment class was based on slave and land ownership, in Richmond, membership in the upper class was based on birth.¹² According to T. C. DeLeon, “In the country districts habit and condescension often overrode class barriers, but in the city, where class sometimes jostled privilege, the line of demarcation was so strongly drawn that its overstepping was dangerous.”¹³ DeLeon also believed that class determination was based almost solely on familial standing, rather than entrepreneurial endeavors. He wrote,

Trade, progressive spirit and self-made personality were excluded from the plane of the elect, as though germiniferous. The “sacred soil” and the sacred social circle were paralleled in the minds of their possessors.¹⁴

Hundley also observed the rigidity of the Southern class structure. With regard to the members of the upper class, he concluded, “Indeed, to state the matter fairly, he comes usually of aristocratic parentage; for family pride prevails to a greater extent in the South than in the North.”¹⁵

¹² Historians generally agree that those who owned twenty or more slaves constituted the elite twelve percent of the population based on the distinctions made in the 1850 and 1860 census. James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982). James Oakes analyzes the progression of American slaveholders from the Revolutionary era to the end of the American Civil War. He attempts to accurately portray the upper class in the rural South while neglecting the influence of dominant stereotypes. He also seeks to “elicit larger patterns of political, ideological, economic, and demographic development without doing violence to the evidence of diversity within the slaveholding class” (see page ix). *The Ruling Race* remains the authoritative work on the upper class in the antebellum and wartime era of the South

In reference to the rural class structure, he writes, “In 1860 perhaps a third of all southern whites owned little more than the clothing they wore, while fewer than four percent of the adult white males owned the majority of black slaves...The majority of slaves were held by the one-fifth of slaveholders who owned twenty or more bondsmen” (see page 36). Thus, the South possessed a distinct class of people who appeared to be much better off than the majority of citizens. This class system dominated not only social interactions, but politics and occupations as well. In this rural setting, the class system was not entirely insurmountable. Social standing was based on possession of land and slaves and, thus, anyone with an entrepreneurial spirit could buy their way into the upper class. Oakes writes that most Southerners in the west and in rural settings expected to own slaves and land, even if they arrived with little or no property. That expectation was feasible (see page 41). Conversely, rich planters could sink into poverty if they mismanaged their estates.

¹³ T.C. DeLeon, *Belles, Beaux, and Brains of the 60's* (New York: G. W. Dillingham Company, 1907), 59.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hundley, *Social Relations In Our Southern States*, 27.

This elite, urban class prided itself on its refinement and high standards, which hailed back to the earliest days of Southern settlement. Hundley described the Southern gentleman as a man of the highest education, manners, and generosity. These individuals were articulate and maintained an active interest in world affairs and their communities.¹⁶ The rigidity of the class structure was such that even Mrs. Jefferson Davis, the first lady of the Confederacy, was never fully accepted into Richmond's elite circle. Mary Boykin Chesnut, one of the best known ladies of the Southern upper class, commented that "Mrs. Davis and Jeff Davis proved themselves anything but <well-bred by their talk>."¹⁷ Mary Chesnut was herself not a Richmond native. She and her husband moved from South Carolina to the capital after her husband became an aide to President Jefferson Davis.¹⁸ Mrs. Chesnut was accepted into the Richmond elite only because she was a prominent member of the South Carolina upper class. The elite of well-established eastern cities were more acceptable in Richmond than those individuals from the West. Mississippi, Texas, and the rural areas of Louisiana were still considered, in many cases, the frontier regions. Thus, the long established elite of Richmond considered even the wealthy or landed elite from the west unequal.

Conceptions of class also carried into the physical division of Richmond. Richmond was a city of several hills: Union, Church, Oregon, Council Chamber, Shockoe, Gamble's, and Navy.¹⁹ The upper class lived in certain areas of the city, specifically on Marshall, Cary, Franklin, and Grace Streets. Mary Wingfield Scott wrote, "By 1850 Grace and Franklin were already the handsomest streets in Richmond and

¹⁶ Hundley, *Social Relations In Our Southern States*, 20-76.

¹⁷ Woodward, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 85. Woodward uses the symbol <> to "enclose effaced or erased passages restored by the editor."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxix.

¹⁹ Alfred Hoyt Bill, *The Beleaguered City: Richmond, 1861-1865* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1946), 296.

certainly the most sought after by wealth and fashion.”²⁰ The lower classes tended to live near Union, Church, and Shockoe Hills. Location had much to do with the class composition of the neighborhoods. Scott noted that the Tredegar Ironworks, located near Oregon Hill, had a distinct interest in maintaining housing near the factory. She asserted, “So far as we know, the Tredegar Iron Works had no actual financial part in the development of Oregon Hill. But it needed workmen’s homes within walking distance.”²¹ Thus, Richmond was not only divided by class in terms of society, but also along physical location.

This traditional class system worked with surprisingly few episodes of lower class discontent in the antebellum era. Whereas in the North, class based riots erupted fairly frequently, no riots of this kind surfaced in the South.²² In his analysis of American riots in the antebellum era, historian David Grimstead concludes that different patterns of riots existed in the North and South. Many riots and mobs did erupt in the South; however, they were often based on racial fears. Grimstead writes, “Of the 403 Southern riots, about 66 percent fall into three distinctively Southern categories: mob punishment of alleged criminals (68); insurrection scare mobs (35); and mobs against those labeled abolitionist,

²⁰ Mary Wingfield Scott, *Old Richmond Neighborhoods* (Richmond: The Valentine Museum, 1975), 167.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²² Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 71-75. Notable instances of class based riots which erupted in the North prior to the Civil War included the Flour Riot in New York City on February 12, 1837, the destruction of Philadelphia railroads in 1840 and 1841, and most significantly the Astor Place Opera House Riot on May 10, 1849. George C. Rable also notes the infrequency of social uprisings in the antebellum era. “Despite the South’s long history of violence,” he writes, “there was no tradition of mass uprisings comparable to the food riots in Europe. In general, Southerners had favored more personal kinds of retribution such as dueling, lynching, or brawling to organized revolts directed at bringing about social change. The premium place on individual and family honor left little room for either collective action or the direct expression of class hostilities.” See George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 108.

although usually there was no evidence of abolition activity (162).”²³ Thus, although Southerners incorrectly asserted that their society did not experience any episodes of violent outburst, they accurately noted that few instances of class-based insurrections erupted in the seemingly harmonious antebellum era.

Many scholars argue that the contentedness of the lower classes revolved around the third category of the Southern social system: race. The existence of black slaves meant that those individuals occupied the lowest class of society. This automatically elevated the social position of even the poorest of whites in the South. Scholars dub this concept: *Herrenvolk Democracy*.²⁴ Although Hundley was not familiar with the term, he described the lower classes’ support for slavery in almost identical language:

Were you situated as the Southern Yeomen are—humble in worldly position, patient delvers in the soil, daily earning your bread by the toilsome sweat of your own brows—would you be pleased to see four millions of inferior blacks suddenly raised from a position of equality with yourselves?²⁵

The lower class whites were relatively content with their position because, regardless of whether they were poor or yeomen, they were never considered the dregs of society. That classification was reserved for blacks alone. Consequently, the elite of the South were an aristocracy based fundamentally on race.

Richmond’s antebellum conceptions of class, race, and gender proved unable to stand the stresses of war. War magnified the disparity between the upper and lower classes because it undermined the three fundamental components of the seemingly harmonious society and required women to step into roles which previously had been

²³ David Grimstead, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 101.

²⁴ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 68.

²⁵ Hundley, *Social Relations In Our Southern States*, 219.

unacceptable. In the face of starvation and the loss of loved ones on the battlefield, the poor, able in the antebellum years to accept their lower status, refused to tolerate the privileges which the upper class seemed to enjoy. They demonstrated their willingness to defy convention by taking drastic action in the Richmond Bread Riot.

Confederate Domestic Legislation: 1861-1863

The Confederate government, overwhelmingly composed of elite members (see Table 1), produced legislation which accentuated the feelings of lower class resentment. The first signs of discontent emerged as a result of the first Confederate Conscription Act, passed on April 16, 1862. The loss of every major battle in the West, combined with the loss of the major southern port city, New Orleans, served to convince the Confederate Congress of the necessity of a slightly more drastic solution. From the first days of secession, the South had been at a serious disadvantage in terms of manpower, and although Southerners voluntarily enlisted in impressive numbers, by 1862, the number of soldiers fit for duty did not meet the required criteria. The government's solution, the Conscription Act, mandated "all persons residing within the Confederate States, between the ages of 18 and 35 years, and rightfully subject to military duty, shall be held to be in the military service of the Confederate states..."²⁶ In September, Congress expanded the act to the ages of 18 to 45.

The drafts served mostly to arouse fear of military despotism in the South. Many citizens believed the draft conflicted "with the individualistic instincts of Southerners and with their conceptions of genuine manhood."²⁷ Voluntary enlistment, they contended, was the height of fulfilling one's duty to country. Hence, the draft conveyed to many a sense of cowardice. Loyal citizens held that the government's utilization of a draft only proved its lack of faith in the honor of its people. Furthermore, several prominent men believed that the act violated the Confederate Constitution. Vice President Alexander Stephens and Governor Joseph Brown of Georgia were among the most prominent

²⁶ *Journal of Congress II*, 220, quoted in Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 152.

²⁷ Albert Burton Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy* (New York: Hillary House Publishers Ltd., 1963), 17.

dissidents. They protested that the act violated the rights of the states. Although the drafts evoked significant resentment, the ensuing amendments prompted harsher accusations of class bias.

The policy of substitution, approved by the Conscription Act, allowed anyone to purchase a substitute to serve in place of one drafted to serve. The availability of this option gave the distinct impression of government favoritism. Although the Confederate government's intention was "to utilize the potentialities of men along industrial lines,"²⁸ most Southern citizens could not afford to procure a substitute and were, therefore, obligated to serve when conscripted. Substitutes were often offered over \$4,000, a sum which, in the war torn south, only the wealthiest citizens could pay.²⁹ The government's refusal to regulate or alter the policy of substitution only fueled the claim that the war had evolved into "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight."³⁰

The first amendment to the draft, the "class exemption" system, also generated significant resentment among the people. This amendment allowed men of certain occupations to evade the draft. These occupations included "national and state officers, railroad employees, druggists, professors, schoolteachers, miners, ministers, pilots, nurses, and iron-furnace and foundry laborers."³¹ Many citizens who could not escape the draft and were unable to procure an exemption believed that the amendment served only to shield those too cowardly to enter the service. Historian Stephen Ambrose believed that the exemption acts actually undermined the Confederate war effort because they highlighted the inequality within the legislation. He wrote,

²⁸ Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy*, 29.

²⁹ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 387.

³⁰ Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy*, 33-34.

³¹ Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 153.

The 'Scarcity [*sic*] of Men' was indeed a major problem for the yeomen. Men were needed to raise crops, protect the families, from unfair governmental levies, and to ward off roving raiders from both armies. But although the Confederate Congress was willing to exempt large numbers from conscription, small farmers were not among the privileged group.³²

Congress's approval of these exemptions fueled the discontent which emerged as a result of conscription and the perception of an unequal burden of service became more prevalent among the lower classes.

By far the most hated amendment was the "Twenty Negro Act," passed in October of 1862, which exempted "owners or overseers of twenty or more slaves."³³ The act exhibited blatant class favoritism because in the rural South, ownership of twenty or more slaves constituted planter status. The majority of Southerners did not own twenty slaves; many did not own any slaves at all. Although Congress passed the exemption in hopes of stimulating food and crop production, it served mainly to aggravate the class resentment which had been growing slowly. The outcry of the poor grew louder against the perceived inequality of sacrifice.

Also augmenting the poor's disapproval of class based legislation were the currency issues which plagued the Confederacy throughout its existence. Eventually, the shock of the Federal blockade of the Southern coasts contributed to a notable reduction in the supply of goods which were produced outside the South.³⁴ Eugene Lerner asserts,

³²Stephen E. Ambrose, "Yeoman Discontent in the Confederacy," *Civil War History* 8 (1962): 264.

³³ Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 154.

³⁴ Initially, the Northern blockade had little chance of success. According to Emory Thomas, "In July of 1861 the United States, which possessed about a hundred ships, was attempting to seal the 189 openings along the 3,549 miles of Confederate coastline with fewer than thirty-three vessels." See Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 129. The United States however, quickly built up an effective fleet of 300 ships by January, 1862. The blockade then became much more efficient at blocking both Southern exports and foreign imports.

“The blockade was felt in every corner of the southern economy.”³⁵ Many of the luxury items which citizens were used to enjoying on a regular basis became almost impossible to find. Likewise, necessities such as coffee, salt, and paper became difficult to procure.

Southern exports also declined significantly because of the blockade. Lerner writes, “As the war continued, the invading Union armies, the northern blockade, and the reallocation of southern labor tended to reduce output.”³⁶ The war effort became the primary focus of the fledgling nation and it mobilized all of its forces for the pursuant military effort. This made it extremely difficult to maintain the pre-war levels of production, and therefore, profit decreased.

The Confederacy’s own financial mismanagement compounded the nation’s problems with supply. Generally, Southerners and nineteenth century Americans abhorred taxation. Any tax mandated at the national level directly contradicted the policy of state rights and impinged upon individuals rights. Although the Confederate Secretary of the Treasury, Christopher G. Memminger, promoted taxation as the most effective means of raising money for the war effort, he never managed to convince either the people or President Jefferson Davis of its necessity. He did, however, persuade Congress to pass a tax law in April of 1863. This law

Levied a license tax on just about every form of occupation or business, a graduated income tax whose scale varied from 1 percent of incomes less than \$500 to 15 percent of incomes over \$10,000, and a tax-in-kind tithe on agricultural produce and livestock: 10 percent of everything grown or slaughtered in 1863.³⁷

³⁵ Eugene M. Lerner, “Money, Prices, and Wages in the Confederacy, 1861-65,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 63, no. 1 (February 1955): 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁷ Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 198.

The Tax-in-Kind affected almost the entire Southern population, but its enforcement varied significantly from region to region; the collectors often abused their responsibilities and took more than the law mandated. Many citizens believed the Confederate government had far out-stepped its bounds. Taxation, they contended, was under the jurisdiction of the states. That Congress passed a national act of such scope convinced many Southerners that the government had, by 1863, abandoned many of the principles that had originally justified secession.

Because of this dedication to state rights and individual liberties, the Confederacy funded its war effort primarily by issuing treasury notes and loans. Often, the government did not collect on its loans, and the Treasury Department flooded the economy with empty treasury notes. Confederate currency became valueless. After conducting extensive statistical research, one scholar has concluded that “for thirty-one consecutive months, from October, 1861, to March, 1864, the general price index of the Confederacy rose at an almost constant rate of 10 per cent a month.”³⁸ Yet, while inflation increased rapidly, the issue of treasury notes did not cease. Instead, the government continued to produce the valueless notes. The Confederacy based these notes on the anticipated money to be made by selling cotton to Europe. Emory Thomas postulates, “Beyond the limited amount of specie, estimated at \$27 million, and the uncertain potential of cotton, the Confederacy had little in the way of economic resources, hence its reliance on fiat money and popular faith in its domestic economy.”³⁹ As the war progressed, that faith decreased drastically.

³⁸ Lerner, “Money, Prices, and Wages in the Confederacy,” 23.

³⁹ Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 138.

A notable aspect of Southern inflation is the fact the wages increased disproportionately to inflation. After studying wage quotations and account books from large Southern firms, one economist concluded, “the average wage increased approximately ten times during the four years of the war, or at a rate of 4.6 per cent a month.”⁴⁰ This increase was less than half of the price index (percentage) increase. Citizens on fixed wages felt the brunt of this reality. T.C. DeLeon noted the disparity in his journal:

The pinch began to be felt by many who had never known it before; and almost every one, who had any surplus portables, was willing to turn them into money. In this way, those who had anything to sell, for the time managed to live. But the unfortunates who had only what they needed absolutely, or who were forced to live upon a fixed stipend, that did not increase in any ratio to the decrease of money, suffered terribly.⁴¹

An analysis of one of the major firms in Richmond, the Tredegar Iron Works, also displays the inadequate increase in fixed wages. Historian Charles Dew, the authority on Tredegar, writes:

The Tredegar provided a small increase to \$4.50 in January 1863. These advances did not begin to cover the rise in the cost of living in the Confederate capital, however. By the beginning of 1863, Tredegar wages were up only 80 per cent over antebellum levels while the general price index for the eastern Confederacy had risen to seven times the level of the first four months of 1861.⁴²

These low wage workers in Richmond were unable to provide for themselves or their families. Their suffering contributed to the growing cynicism about the Confederate government’s inability to adequately support its citizens.

⁴⁰ Lerner, “Money, Prices, and Wages in the Confederacy,” 32.

⁴¹ T.C. DeLeon, *Four Years in Rebel Capitals: An Inside View of Life in the Southern Confederacy, From Birth To Death* (Mobile: Gossip Print Co., 1890), 236.

⁴² Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 239.

The presence of citizens willing to take advantage of the financial chaos only added to the people's frustration with the Confederacy's deteriorating fiscal situation. Many citizens saw the potential for profit in the economic uncertainty of the South. These people, deemed speculators, bought goods and hoarded them. They took merchandise off of the market and drove prices still higher. Many Southerners used the speculators as scapegoats and blamed all of the Confederacy's economic problems on these "wicked" individuals. The *Richmond Dispatch* attributed the price increase specifically to the speculators, whom the paper referred to as "those pests of society."⁴³ One article laid out two tables comparing prices for basic items in 1860 to the cost of the same items in 1863 (see Table 2). It read, "So much we owe the speculators, who have staid [sic] at home to prey upon the necessities of their fellow citizens."⁴⁴ Despite the animosity toward speculators which permeated all of Southern society, their activities did not contribute to the financial problems to the extent that inflation did.

Impressment also aroused a great deal of discontent in the Confederacy. On March 26, 1863, Congress approved an "act to regulate impressments." The act stated: "impressments of forage or other property authorized, when necessary for the army. Value thereof to be determined by appraisement."⁴⁵ The War Department created a standard price for common items; these prices, however, were often well below the market price. The act even allowed for the impressment of slaves. Because slaves fell into the category of "other property," they could be seized at any time in the name of military necessity. This irked many citizens, especially because many of these Southerners had

⁴³ *Richmond Dispatch*, 16 January 1863.

⁴⁴ *Richmond Dispatch*, 29 January 1863.

⁴⁵ James M. Matthews, ed., *The Statutes at Large of the Confederate States of America... Third Session... First Congress* (Richmond: R. M. Smith, Printer To Congress, 1863), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/22conf/1863stat.html> (accessed December 6, 2009), 102.

supported secession on the basis of the sanctity of private property. Thus, many farmers and merchants came to fear an encounter with a government impressment agent as much or more than Union invasion.

The Impressment Act also required that merchants possessed a passport to either enter or leave the cities. These passports were often difficult to attain. The *Richmond Enquirer* reported:

The owners of a number of country carts that used to bring supplies to this market have of late ceased to come, though the markets are destitute of vegetables common to the season. As many carts as formerly start for the city, but many now stop before reaching their destination, haul up at some convenient place by the roadside, sell their goods and put for home instantly. The market men allege, with show of justice, we presume, that when they come into the city, they are bothered half out of their wits to get out again. When applying for a passport, they have to produce somebody who knows them, as a voucher, a thing not easy to do. Then, again they say they are stopped on every corner of the street and subjected to cross questioning by the military guard whose importunities are not always to be resisted.”⁴⁶

Thus, the Confederacy’s problem, in some instances, was not a deficiency of supply, but one of policy. The continued enforcement of offensive legislation sustained public criticism of the government. Moreover, a large proportion of the population wondered why the government refused to amend policies which so obviously added to the suffering in crowded urban centers. Many reached the conclusion that the government had abandoned its responsibilities, especially to those least able to provide for themselves. Essentially, the Confederacy abdicated its duty to the home front in pursuit of military success.

⁴⁶ *Richmond Enquirer*, 15 June 1864.

Richmond: Spring, 1863

The city of Richmond itself changed significantly because of wartime stresses. The rapid increase in the population compounded the problems of food supply, housing, and inflation. The city had a population of approximately 38,000 in 1860.⁴⁷ However, after Richmond's selection as capital of the Confederacy, it attracted an abundance of visitors and new residents and the population of Richmond doubled only a year after secession: by 1863, the population had reached 100,000 inhabitants.⁴⁸ Midori Takagi believes that the bulk of the population was due to the influx of Confederate soldiers; at least ten to fifteen thousand troops traveled to Richmond rapidly after its designation as the Confederate capital.⁴⁹ The swollen population, however, did not return to normal after the departure of the troops. Refugees moved to Richmond from everywhere in the South (specifically from Maryland and rural areas of Virginia) due to the city's abundance of both government and industrial employment opportunities. In addition, Richmond's designation as one of the prominent social centers attracted foreigners and job seekers. Thus, historian Mary Elizabeth Massey contends that Richmond remained the most crowded city in the South for the duration of the war.⁵⁰

The availability of housing did not increase at a rate which corresponded to the population increase. As early as 1862, residents noted the dearth of space for newcomers. Judith McGuire, a refugee searching for lodgings in Richmond, found it almost impossible to find a place to stay in February, 1862. She remarked, "The city is overrun

⁴⁷ John S. Wise, *The End of An Era* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), 63; Midori Takagi, *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction": Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1999), 126; Bill, *The Beleaguered City*, 3.

⁴⁸ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 277.

⁴⁹ Takagi, *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction,"* 126.

⁵⁰ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 74.

with members of Congress, Government officers, office-seekers, and strangers generally. Main Street is as crowded as Broadway, New York; it is said that every boarding house is full.”⁵¹ The next day she wrote, “I do not believe there is a vacant spot in the city.”⁵² McGuire’s statements were not an exaggeration: housing was extremely scarce and demand was high. Prices for boarding soared to extreme levels. The City Council echoed McGuire’s sentiments. It noted in February, 1863, that rent had quadrupled in the years since the war erupted.⁵³ Many worried they would not be able to continue to pay the required fees. Margaret Brown Wight expressed her relief at receiving a letter containing money from her husband who was in the army:

A letter came from John enclosing \$15 which was handed him by a gentleman, saying it was money put in his hands for me, that John must ask no questions about it, he could only tell him it was for me...It is certainly respectable for we have not enough to pay for our own board much less supply ourselves with necessary clothing.⁵⁴

Wight’s appreciation for such a small sum shows that previously well-established citizens, like Margaret Wight and Judith McGuire, worried that they could no longer support themselves or their families. By early 1863, many urban Southerners concurred with J. B. Jones’s assertion: “How we, ‘the people,’ are to live is a thought of serious concern.”⁵⁵

Other notable problems also arose as a result of the population increase. Crime rates skyrocketed; gambling, gang activity, prostitution, thievery, and murder all permeated the Confederate capital. Women moved into the work force in unprecedented

⁵¹ Judith W. McGuire, *Diary of A Southern Refugee During the War* (New York: Arno Press Inc., 1972), 88.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Louis H. Manarin, ed., *Richmond at War: The Minutes of the City Council* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 285.

⁵⁴ Margaret Brown Wight Diary, Mss# 1W6398a2-4, 14 February 1863, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁵⁵ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 261.

numbers. The war and its effects overturned both antebellum standards of behavior and the accepted social order.

One example of this change was the evolution of prostitution in Richmond. In the antebellum era, prostitutes kept to themselves and practiced their trade discreetly in order to avoid severe social stricture and prosecution. One scholar writes, “On the eve of the Civil War...Richmond prostitution could be characterized as a relatively invisible occupation.”⁵⁶ The prevalence of soldiers, isolated from their families and looking for female companionship, changed that “invisible occupation” into a commonplace career in wartime Richmond. Historian Catherine Clinton notes, “The Civil War created the largest increase in the sex trade in nineteenth-century America, perhaps the largest growth spurt in the nation’s history.”⁵⁷ As the war progressed, these women, secure in their numbers, ventured unashamedly into unfamiliar territory, and alarmed many of the more conventional citizens. The *Richmond Daily Dispatch* noted the unprecedented behavior and complained,

It has been well known for some time past that cyprians, resident and accumulated since the removal of the seat of Government to this place, as well as loose males of the most abandoned character from other parts of the Confederacy, have been disporting themselves extensively on the sidewalks and in hacks, open carriages, &c., in the streets of Richmond, to the amazement of sober-sided citizens compelled to smell the odors which they exude, and witness the impudence and familiar vulgarity of many of the stime [*sic*] faced of the prostitutes of both sexes.”⁵⁸

The distinction between “respectable” ladies of Richmond and the “unmentionables” blurred as wartime stresses necessitated the drastic increase in working women.

⁵⁶ Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 163.

⁵⁷ Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 61.

⁵⁸ *Richmond Dispatch*, 13 May 1862.

Children's gangs also presented a significant challenge to the local and state governments. The gangs had existed prior to the outbreak of the war, and as one local noted, "There never was such a place as Richmond for fighting among small boys...the boys of particular localities associated in fighting bands...there were the Shockoe Hill Cats, the Church Hill Cats, the Basin Cats, the Oregon Hill Cats, the Navy Hill Cats, etc."⁵⁹ The absence of active parental figures produced predictable results: the frequency of violence increased. Attempts to quell this gang activity had little effect. Even President Jefferson Davis had an unsuccessful encounter with the "Hill Cats" and the "Butcher Cats." The Davis's young black servant boy was beaten while attempting to negotiate with the children of the gangs. The President, upset about the violence, tried to reprimand the gang members. His speech had no effect, and the hostility continued. These gangs and their complete lack of respect for authority showed the extent to which crime had permeated the wartime city of Richmond.

The weather in the winter and spring of 1863 only compounded the problem of morale in the city. The weather cut supply to the city off almost entirely. Throughout February, March, and April, Virginia sustained heavy storms of both snow and rain. Almost every diarist noted the severe weather. One Richmonder, Herbert Augustine Claiborne, as many other diarists during the Civil War, dutifully recorded the temperature and weather conditions for every day of 1863. According to his notes, over half of the days in March and February brought heavy rain or snow. The snow was over eight inches deep on March 21. The warm weather in the opening days of April melted the snow

⁵⁹ Wise, *End of An Era*, 59.

rapidly. Although at the outset, the warmth may have seemed a welcome relief, in fact, it created vast problems for supply.⁶⁰

The unusually wet, spring weather had already saturated the dirt roads leading to Richmond. The rain, in conjunction with the preponderance of melting snow, made the roads an impassable mud trap for those attempting to deliver supplies into the city. Margaret Wight mused about the effects of the weather and wrote about her fears of starvation. She concluded that the spring of 1863 brought “The gloomiest state of weather I ever saw.”⁶¹ Robert Garlick Hill Kean, head of the Confederate Bureau of War, made similar observations. He noted, “High water and deep mud will be the consequences which will postpone military operations until in April.”⁶² The unusual weather was also a common subject in the newspapers. The *Richmond Dispatch* reported, “The supply of vegetables, poultry, fish, and butchers' meat, have all been cut short by the difficulty experienced in making headway against the acres of mud and slush encountered in the attempt to get to Richmond.” These sources all display the serious concern evoked by the further decrease in supply due to the dreadful weather conditions. The price of necessary items in Richmond, already remarkably high on account of inflation, speculation, and impressment, rose dramatically.

An explosion in one of the Confederate Ordnance Department's laboratories added to the unrest among the working class in the capital throughout the spring of 1863. On March 13, over 69 women and children were killed or injured in an explosion at the laboratory on Brown's Island, in the James River, at Richmond. According to the Chief

⁶⁰ Herbert Augustine Claiborne Diary, Claiborne Family Papers, Ms# 1C5217c9, February 15, 17, 22, 26, 27; March 1, 7, 8, 10, 11, 19, 20, 21, 22, 31, 1863, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁶¹ Margaret Brown Wight Diary, March 20, 24, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

⁶² Edward Younger, ed., *Inside the Confederate Government: The Diary of Robert Garlick Hill Kean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 46.

of the Ordnance Department, Josiah Gorgas, “The accident was caused by the ignition of a friction primer. The primer stuck on the varnishing board and [Mary Ryan] struck the board three times very hard on the table to drive out the primer.”⁶³ The first explosion caused a chain of explosions due to the presence of an excess of combustible material. Initially, over 40 people died, but the numbers rose significantly each day as the injured expired from serious burns. Gorgas had few words of condolence for the casualties, focusing instead on his admiration for his wife: “Mamma has been untiring,” he wrote, “in aiding visiting & relieving these poor sufferers, & has fatigued herself very much. She has done an infinite deal of good to these poor people.”⁶⁴

Local resentment increased as a result of the government’s failure to provide safe conditions for these women and children. The casualties were consistently referred to in terms reminiscent of female helplessness. The *Richmond Daily Dispatch* called the victims, “poor creatures,” and J.B. Jones accurately dubbed them “little indigent girls.” These women and children made only meager wages, which “varied from \$1.50 to 2.40”⁶⁵ per day. The over 300 women and children whom the laboratory employed continued to work although their salary was insufficient to provide them with the means to procure food for their families. Yet, these workers could not hope for better paying jobs because they were largely illiterate.

Contrast the experience of the Ordnance Department workers with that of the women who worked for the Confederate Treasury Department. The so-called “Treasury Girls” signed thousands of worthless Confederate treasury notes and bonds each day and

⁶³ Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, ed., *The Journals of Josiah Gorgas 1857-1878* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), 57.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Mary A. DeCredico, “Richmond Goes To War: 1861-1865” (unpub mss), 21.

they earned as much as \$65 a month for their work. The applications for the relatively few positions arrived at the department in astounding numbers. Consequently, the positions were extremely competitive. Literacy was an obvious requirement, and it automatically precluded many poor women from the office. Similarly, employment depended upon social standing. Many members of the lower strata of society viewed the distinction with disdain. One woman wrote,

Why is it that ... poor women engaged in a perilous and hazardous occupation ... are denied a living compensation for their labour, when so many of the departments are filled with *young ladies* (not dependent on their pay) with nothing to do, at salaries equal to and in some cases better than the best male clerks in the different departments?⁶⁶

The explosion at Brown's Island only highlighted the dangers associated with many lower class professions. It illuminated the inequalities related to employment opportunities and hazards. Consequently, many citizens believed their needs and safety were not a significant concern to their employers or to the Confederate government.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Maxwell et al. to Zebulon Vance, October 8, 1864, Vance Papers, NCDAH, quoted in Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 90.

The Richmond Bread Riot

On the evening of April 1, 1863, a group of women met at Belvidere Hill Baptist Church in Richmond. The church was located on Church Street in Oregon Hill, a notably working class section of the city.⁶⁷ The women resolved to gather the next morning in order to demand food at government prices from Virginia Governor John Letcher. Mrs. Burton Harrison, a Richmond resident, described the mob as comprised mostly by “women and children of the poorer class”⁶⁸ As evidence of the working class nature of the participants, one of the leaders, Mary Jackson, worked as a huckster and another participant, Barbara Idoll, made tents for a living. Additionally, although most women came from the neighborhoods of Oregon Hill, Sydney and Penitentiary Bottom, and Sheep Hill, some women traveled from the outskirts of the city in order to attend the meeting.⁶⁹

The next morning, April 2, 1863, these frustrated women gathered as planned in Capitol Square, near the Governor’s mansion. They demanded to speak to Governor Letcher. Instead, they were met by Colonel S. Bassett French, a member of the

⁶⁷ Scott, *Old Richmond Neighborhoods*, 206.

⁶⁸ Mrs. Burton Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 137.

⁶⁹ Michael B. Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines? A New Look at the Richmond Bread Riot,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 92, no. 2 (April 1984): 139-143. “Harlots and Heroines” is considered the authoritative article concerning the Richmond Bread Riot. Emory Thomas, George Rable, and Alfred Hoyt Bill also discuss the riot. See Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate State of Richmond: A Biography of the Capital* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); idem., *The Confederate Nation*; and Rable, *Civil Wars*; However, their coverage is dated and not as detailed as Chesson’s article. Many of the secondary sources contain major errors. Ella Lonn’s 1965 publication, *Foreigners in the Confederacy*, not only reports that the riot occurred in the spring of 1862, but also succumbs to the primary source bias and classifies the rioters as “a mixed crowd of Germans, Irishmen, and free Negroes,” see Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1965), 342. Chesson’s article seeks to detach itself from these obvious biases and delve into the facts. The major weakness of “Harlots and Heroines” is Chesson’s reliance on the *Richmond Examiner’s* 1888 reexamination of the Richmond Bread Riot. The paper questioned known participants and observers approximately 25 years after the riot had occurred in an attempt to create a more accurate summary of the event. But, the paper conducted these interviews during a period when the Cult of the Lost Cause flourished and glorification of the Confederacy was often the ultimate goal. In general, however, Michael Chesson provides the most detailed and accurate portrayal of the Richmond Bread Riot.

Governor's staff. He seemed reluctant to speak to the women, and informed them that the Governor had already left for work at the Capitol. Many of the leaders immediately approached the Capitol building. As the crowd increased in both magnitude and riotous intention, the Governor eventually appeared in Capitol Square and addressed them. He informed the women that it was impossible for him to mandate that goods be sold at government prices. Angered by Governor Letcher's words, the women rushed out of Capitol Square and toward the business district. The group rapidly transformed into an angry mob of rioters. Most carried weapons, which ranged from clubs and axes to knives and pistols. They began looting stores on both Main and Cary Streets, and seized as many goods as they could manage to carry on their person or load into the carts they stole along the way.⁷⁰

As the rioters proceeded down Main and Cary Streets, spectators joined in the looting and many who heard the disturbance went out into the streets to investigate. Local thoroughfares became so crowded, it was impossible to determine the actual number of rioters; hence, conflicting reports about the size of the mob emerged. William Walter Cleary estimated that the crowd numbered "7 or 800 women aided by a few men."⁷¹ Catherine Ann Devereux wrote she heard "that the riot in Richmond was more serious than we supposed, 20,000 persons assembled in the streets."⁷² It is possible that 20,000 people were present in the streets at the time of the riots. The population increase in

⁷⁰ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?", 143-145.

⁷¹ William Walter Cleary Diary, Mss# 10 no: 74, April 2, 1863, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁷² Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton, eds., "*Journal of a Secesh Lady*": *The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston: 1860-1866* (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 379.

Richmond had crowded the city with more inhabitants than it could contain. The average estimate, however, and the most likely approximation, neared 5500 participants.⁷³

As rioting continued on Main Street, city officials took decisive action.

Richmond's mayor, Joseph Mayo, addressed the crowd on Cary Street and read the Riot Act. His words had little effect, and the rioting persisted on both Main and Cary Streets.

As the mob grew, the violence increased.

According to historian Michael Chesson, the women targeted both supposed speculators and government agencies: "Some of the looters continued down Cary, breaking into a Confederate commissary and into another government warehouse."⁷⁴

Other stores looted included bakeries, shoe stores, grocery stores, and jewelry stores.

Many Richmond citizens believed that a significant number of the city merchants had procured draft exemptions out of cowardice and in order to make profits. Business was indeed profitable for those who remained in operation throughout the War.

Richmond citizens also targeted foreigners and Jews. The city had a tradition of blatant anti-Semitism. Once the War erupted, many Richmond citizens openly blamed the Jews and foreigners in the city for speculation and charged them with disloyalty.⁷⁵ Sallie A. Putnam, for instance, believed that the Jews in Richmond profited from the war. She exhorted, "They were not found, as the more interested of the people, without the means to purchase food when the Confederate money became useless to us from the failure of

⁷³ William Walter Cleary Diary, April 2, 1863, Virginia Historical Society; Crabtree and Patton, "*Journal of a Secesh Lady*," 379; Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 284; Stephen E. Ambrose, "The Bread Riots in Richmond," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 71, no. 2 (April 1863): 203; Mrs. Roger A. Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1904), 239.

⁷⁴ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?", 145.

⁷⁵ Michael B. Chesson, "Richmond Jews and the Bread Riot of April 2, 1863: Myth and Reality" (Paper for the Sixth Annual Conference on the Jewish experience in the South for the Southern Jewish Historical Society, Mobile, Alabama, November 7, 1981), 2-4.

our cause.”⁷⁶ Major John W. Daniel contended that local stereotypes allowed the rioters to target Richmond Jews. After the War, he reminisced, “certain people down there were credited with great wealth. It was said that they had made barrels of money out of the Confederacy, and the female Communists went at them without a qualm of conscience.”⁷⁷

According to the Richmond City Council minutes, the rioters actually did significant damage to several businesses they targeted. On April 13, the council noted, “Accounts for the property taken by the late rioters in this City, one in the name of J. T. Hicks amounting to the sum of \$13,530.00 and one in the name of Tyler & Son amounting to the sum of \$6,467.55, were laid before the Council and referred to the Committee on Claims.”⁷⁸ Several instances of violence also occurred. Eyewitness Hal Tutwiler wrote,

One woman knocked out a pane of glass out of a shop window, of which the door was fastened, & put her arm in to steal something, but the shopman cut all four of her fingers off. I was right in the middle of the row all the time, it was the most horrible sight I ever saw...⁷⁹

The *New York Herald* also reported a bloody encounter between the women and those attempting to pacify them. In its April 11th report, the *Herald* read, “A few individuals attempted to resist the women, but without success. One man who struck a female was wounded in the shoulder by a shot from a revolver, and the threatening

⁷⁶ Sallie Brock Putnam, *Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal Observation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 105.

⁷⁷ *Richmond Dispatch*, 16 December 1888.

⁷⁸ Manarin, ed., *Richmond At War*, 321.

⁷⁹ Ambrose, “The Bread Riots in Richmond,” 203; Ernest Taylor Walthall, *Hidden Things Brought To Light* (Richmond: Press of the Dietz Printing Co., 1933), 24; Putnam, *Richmond During the War*, 208.

attitude of those armed with hatchets, &c. intimidated others from attempting force.”⁸⁰

For the most part, however, the women damaged property, but harmed few individuals.

Government officials’ attempts to put a stop to the riot continued. After the Mayor appeared, the next public official to approach the rioters was Governor John Letcher.

Most primary accounts attribute Letcher to calling out the Richmond Public Guard.

According to Chesson, the primary responsibility of the Public Guard was the defense of important institutions in Richmond, notably the “Capitol and Capitol Square and the state (now Confederate) armory and penitentiary in the western part of the city.”⁸¹ Although

Lieutenant Edward Scott Gay was the commander in charge at the time of the riot, the Public Guard ultimately reported to the Virginia Governor. According to many accounts,

the Governor ordered the women to disperse. When the women refused to comply, he threatened to order the Public Guard to shoot on the crowd. War clerk J.B. Jones

recorded,

Thus the work of spoliation went on, until the military appeared upon the scene, summoned by Gov. Letcher, whose term of service is near its close. He had the Riot Act read (by the mayor), and then threatened to fire on the mob. He gave them five minutes’ time to disperse in, threatening to use military force (the city battalion being present) if they did not comply with the demand.⁸²

Other eyewitnesses, including Judith McGuire, Sallie Putnam, Sara A. Pryor, Hal

Tutwiler, and Ernest Taylor Walthall all gave the credit to the Governor.

Letcher’s aide at the time, Colonel French, believed that his former employer was not only influential, but solely responsible for taking drastic action in order to save the city. In 1878, in response to renewed attention on the Bread Riot, he wrote to Letcher, “If

⁸⁰ *New York Herald*, 11 April 1863 cited in Frank Moore, *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events*, Vol. 6 (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1863), 523.

⁸¹ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 146.

⁸² Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 285.

Mr. Davis attempted to quell the mob I was not witness to it, nor did I over hear of it, until I read it in the paper you sent me; that you did quell it by decisive measures you threatened is beyond dispute.”⁸³ As Governor, it is logical that Letcher called out the Public Guard and had the authority to issue the five minute ultimatum; however, many eyewitnesses credited Confederate President Jefferson Davis with calling out the Public Guard.

Most scholars believe Jefferson Davis also addressed the mob. While some accounts seem to depict Letcher as primarily responsible for dispersing the crowd, others, notably Varina Davis’s biography of her husband, actually portray the President as primarily responsible for the dissolution of the riot. Varina Davis wrote:

He concluded by saying: “You say you are hungry and have no money. Here is all I have; it is not much, but take it.” He then, emptying his pockets, threw all the money they contained among the mob, after which he took out his watch and said: “We do not desire to injure anyone, but this lawlessness must stop. I will give you five minutes to disperse, otherwise you will be fired on.”⁸⁴

Her account, however, is unique in its crediting Davis. Most journals and letters portray Davis giving a compassionate speech to the rioters, rather than taking a definitive military stance. Sara Pryor’s friend, “Agnes,” wrote Sara a letter which depicted the president as sympathetic and deeply moving in his speech. “The President then appeared,” Agnes recalled, “ascended a dray, and addressed them. It is said he was received at first with

⁸³ John Letcher Papers, Mss # 1L5684aFA2, Letter from S. Basset French to John Letcher, April 17, 1878, ser. 7, folder 452, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁸⁴ Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir by his Wife*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1990), 375. Davis most likely wrote the biography of Jefferson Davis in an attempt to portray her husband in favorable terms. Additionally, as Michael Chesson notes, she wrote when the Cult of the Lost Cause sought to glorify every aspect of the Confederacy. See Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 147.

hisses from the boys, but after he had spoken some little time with great kindness and sympathy, the women quietly moved on, taking their food with them.”⁸⁵

Other officials of lesser importance also appeared on the scene and took measures to end the riot. According to his wife, Colonel John B. Baldwin, a Confederate congressman, was actually responsible for suppressing the mob. In her account, Colonel Baldwin rushed toward the riot and “made another earnest [*sic*] appeal to them promising to do all in his power to aid those who were in want.”⁸⁶ According to this portrayal, by the time the Mayor and Governor addressed the crowd, Baldwin had already dispersed the rioters.

There is no doubt that several government officials addressed the crowd at different points during the Richmond Bread Riot. The mob was so extensive that different individuals may have subdued the crowds in different locations. Mrs. Burton Harrison believed that “President Davis, Governor Letcher, General Elzey, and General Winder, with Mr. Seddon, Secretary of War”⁸⁷ all appeared on the scene and spoke to the rioters. Similarly, the Richmond City Council counted all officials equally responsible for dissipating the mob. During the special session on April 2, called in response to the bread riot, the Council resolved,

that the Council do tender their thanks and gratitude to President Davis, Governor Letcher, Mayor Mayo, and Honorable John B. Baldwin, for their timely and appropriate addresses and exertions during the continuance of this disgraceful affair, and by which the Council believe it was more speedily quieted.⁸⁸

The different accounts make it impossible to determine which individual was primarily responsible for the ultimate quelling of the riot. The common denominator

⁸⁵ Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War*, 239.

⁸⁶ Thomas David Ranson Papers, Mss# 1R1752a1, Virginia Historical Society. Richmond, Virginia.

⁸⁷ Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay*, 137.

⁸⁸ Manarin, ed., *Richmond At War*, 312.

throughout the evidence is that many public officials found their appeals to the crowd unsuccessful and hence, they were forced to resort to threats of violence in order to subdue the masses. The riot destroyed the façade of class harmony, and the elite found their influence over the poor significantly reduced.

After the crowd finally dispersed, the Richmond police force quickly proceeded to arrest known and suspected participants. The threat of riot remained even after the crowd dissipated. Many eyewitnesses noted the formation of unruly women on the morning after the riot, April 3rd. Herbert Augustine Claiborne reported, “Riotous Spirit again manifested to day. Several women gathered. Doubtful whether the spirit assunder [*sic*] will cease until blood is shed. The government will do it if necessary. The actual suffering used by the rioters is a pretext.”⁸⁹ Others reported that the women attempted to resume rioting. On April 3, John Waring wrote, “The women started to brake [*sic*] in a store this morning but the officers stopped them.”⁹⁰ However, the Richmond City Council and the Confederate government took several steps to prevent the outbreak of any riots in the future. The councilmen placed cannon on Main Street and called Confederate troops into Richmond.⁹¹ Ultimately, the authorities arrested forty-three women and twenty-five men.⁹² These individuals stood trial in the Richmond Hustings Court throughout the months of April and May, 1863.

⁸⁹ Herbert Augustine Claiborne Diary, April 3, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

⁹⁰ Waring Family Papers, Mss# 2W2334b, Letter from John Waring to “Brother” and Addie, April 3, 1863, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁹¹ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 286; Putnam, *Richmond During the War*, 209; Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 173. Chesson notes that troops under Major General Arnold Elzey were ordered to report to Richmond in order to prevent the eruption of further violence.

⁹² Werner H. Steger, “‘United to Support, But Not Combined to Injure’: Free Workers and Immigrants in Richmond, Virginia, During the Era of Sectionalism, 1847-1865” (PhD diss., Columbian School of Arts and Sciences of The George Washington University, 1999), 291.

In the aftermath of the riot, the Confederate Secretary of War, James A. Seddon, issued a notice ordering the suppression of all public reports concerning the riot.⁹³ The government and the local elite believed reports of the riot would allow the Northern press to exaggerate accounts of suffering on the Southern home front. Catherine Edmondston elaborated on common perceptions of the Northern press: “Their hope now is to starve us out. They think we are suffering, ignore the fact of the depreciation of our currency, & quote the high price of provisions to prove it, [they] are jubilant over some mobs & riots which they call ‘bread riots.’”⁹⁴ Thus, the day after the riot, April 3, J.B. Jones recorded, “No account of yesterday’s riot appeared in the papers to-day [*sic*], for obvious reasons.”⁹⁵ He was slightly mistaken. The first report appeared in the *Richmond Examiner* on April 3. In some respects, this was not surprising given the editor’s openly anti-administration position. On the other hand, the *Richmond Enquirer*, *Sentinel*, *Dispatch*, and *Whig* complied with the government’s request not to print articles related to the riot.⁹⁶ Those dailies did, however, publish accounts of the riot once the trials began.

The local press and the portrayal of the riot in many diaries conveyed a markedly biased tone against the rioters. Almost all of the diarists who included descriptions of the Bread Riot believed many citizens in Richmond suffered, but they did not think the riot participants were actually desperate for food. William Walter Cleary noted, “while provisions are scarce and prices high there is no doubt much suffering by the poor—the persons engaged in this were not poor or starving—but were actuated by motives of plunder, dry goods, jewelry, and Fancy goods seeming to be the objects of their

⁹³ Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 204; idem., “The Richmond Bread Riot of 1863: ‘A Manifest Uneasiness in the Public Mind,’” *The Virginia Cavalcade* 18 (Summer 1968): 46.

⁹⁴ Crabtree and Patton, “*Journal of a Secesh Lady*,” 378.

⁹⁵ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 286.

⁹⁶ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?,” 169-170.

Robbery.”⁹⁷ Margaret Brown Wight also suspected the rioters had ulterior motives: “The worthy women among the poorer class had not concern in it.”⁹⁸

Similarly, the absence of beggars in Richmond convinced many that starvation was not a serious problem in the city. J.B. Jones commented, “To-day [sic] beef was selling in market at *one dollar* per pound. And yet one might walk for hours in vain, in quest of a beggar.”⁹⁹ He went on to elaborate, “Not a beggar is yet to be seen in this city of 100,000 inhabitants!”¹⁰⁰ Judith McGuire, another Richmond resident, concurred with Jones’s analysis. She wrote:

I saw the Rev. Mr. Peterkin, who is perhaps more thoroughly acquainted with the state of the poor than any man in the city. He says that they are admirably attended to. Large sums of money are put in the hands of the clergy for their benefit; this money is disbursed by ladies, whose duty and pleasure it is to relieve the suffering. One gentleman gave as much as \$5,000 last winter. Besides this, the industrious poor are supplied with work by the Government, and regularly paid for it.¹⁰¹

McGuire failed to recognize two things. First, although most individuals were indeed employed by the government, their wages were not sufficient to provide the necessary food and clothing for their families. Secondly, she, like many of the elite, underestimated the pride of the poor. They were not seeking charity. T.C. DeLeon conveyed his surprise when a poor woman refused to accept his money. He wrote,

A poor, fragile creature, still girlish and refined under the pinched and pallid features of starvation, tottered to me one day to beg work.

“It is life or death for me and four young children,” she said. “We have eaten nothing to-day; and all last week lived on *three pints of rice!*”

Will Wyatt, who was near, made a generous offer of relief. Tears sprang into the woman’s eyes as she answered, “You mean kindness, major; but I have

⁹⁷ William Walter Cleary Diary, April 2, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

⁹⁸ Margaret Brown Wight Diary, April 2, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

⁹⁹ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 257.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁰¹ McGuire, *Diary of A Southern Refugee*, 204.

never asked charity yet. My husband is at the front; and I only ask a right—to be allowed to work for my children!”¹⁰²

DeLeon, had difficulty understanding this reaction, but attributed it to her dedication to the Southern cause, rather than to pride. In a similar manner, the Bread Riot began when women attempted to procure the right to *purchase* food at reasonable prices. These individuals were not accustomed to receiving aid and were often too proud to beg.¹⁰³

This misconception carried into the printed media’s view of the rioters as foreigners, “Yankees,” and prostitutes. The rhetoric of the press was decidedly biased against the rioters. The *Examiner* depicted the leader of the riot, Mary Jackson, as “a good specimen of a forty year old Amazon, with the eye of the Devil.”¹⁰⁴ Even the Confederate First Lady utilized these stereotypes in her description of the incident. Varina Davis also described Mary Jackson as “a tall, daring, Amazonian-looking woman.”¹⁰⁵ The term “Amazonian” evoked notions of public women—prostitutes, not worthy of the sympathy of the community.

In its representation of the Richmond Bread Riot, the *Examiner* similarly depicted the crowd as composed solely of “prostitutes, professional thieves, Irish and Yankee hags and gallows birds from all lands.”¹⁰⁶ Many of the diarists used the same descriptions. In an attempt to deny that serious need existed in Richmond, the elites used stereotypes to blame the motivation on external agents. After the riot, Catherine Edmondston wrote, “We call them mobs for plunder & believe that they were instigated by the Yankees. They are composed of low foreigners, Irish, Dutch, & Yankee and in place of wanting

¹⁰² DeLeon, *Four Years in Rebel Capitals*, 234.

¹⁰³ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 136.

¹⁰⁴ *Richmond Examiner*, 4 April 1863.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir by his Wife*, 374.

¹⁰⁶ *Richmond Examiner*, 4 April 1863.

bread they threw Rice, flour, etc., in the street & mobbed dry goods & shoe stores!”¹⁰⁷

Sallie Putnam also made dubious claims about the composition of the mob. She wrote, “The rioters were represented in a heterogeneous crowd of Dutch, Irish, and free negroes—of men, women, and children...”¹⁰⁸ T.C. DeLeon blamed the mob on the hated speculators and turned his description into praise for the loyalty and dedication of the Confederate soldiers. He recorded,

Suffice it that the human hyenas of speculation did prey upon the dying South...that thrice they stored the flour the people felt was theirs, in such great quantities and for so long, that before their maw for gain was gutted, serious riots of the starving called for the strong hand to interfere. And to the credit of the Government and southern soldier, be it said—even in that dark hour, with craving stomach and sickening soul—“Johnny Reb” obeyed his orders and guarded the den of the hyena—from his own hungering children, perhaps!”¹⁰⁹

These classifications allowed the upper class members of Richmond to justify the riot as externally motivated.

These illustrations were extremely inaccurate. Historian Elizabeth R. Varon is highly critical of the portrayal of the rioters. She writes, “The response of the Confederate authorities, press, and elite to the riot reflect a distinct lack of empathy for the poor, a virulent sexism, and deep anxiety about the machinations of the ‘secret enemies’ of the South.”¹¹⁰ Varon’s conclusion, although harsh in her criticism, is accurate. The Richmond elite, in an attempt to deny that any fissures existed in the Southern social system, blamed the riot on outsiders and social outcasts.

Contrary to the descriptions provided by the elite, the women who participated in the riot came mostly from the local poor of Richmond. Scholars detect only one instance

¹⁰⁷ Crabtree and Patton, “*Journal of a Secesh Lady*,” 378.

¹⁰⁸ Putnam, *Richmond During the War*, 208.

¹⁰⁹ DeLeon, *Four Years in Rebel Capitals*, 237-238.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth R. Varon, *The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104.

of a wealthy individual's participation. One participant, Mrs. Margaret Adeline Pomfrey did actually possess land and property which made her fairly wealthy. According to the United States Census of 1860, she owned a total of 127.5 acres and a few slaves.¹¹¹ Mrs. Pomfrey, however, was an anomaly.

The majority of rioters did not own slaves or substantial property. One rioter, Martha Jamieson, testified that over 300 women employed by Weisiger's clothing factory took part in the riot.¹¹² Indeed, many of the rioters were starving, according to both J.B. Jones and Sara Pryor's friend, Agnes.¹¹³

In terms of starvation, historian Paul D. Escott believes that it was a real possibility in the Confederacy. He writes, "The extent of suffering was staggering...Some idea of the dimensions of poverty can be grasped from the fact that at the end of the war more than a quarter of Alabama's white citizens were on relief."¹¹⁴ Hospital matron Phoebe Pember believed soldiers' concerns about providing for their families encouraged desertions from the army. She wrote,

Almost all of these letters told the same sad tale of destitution of food and clothing, even shoes of the roughest kind being too expensive for the mass or unattainable by the expenditure of any sum, in many parts of the country...how hard for the husband or father to remain inactive in winter quarters, knowing that his wife and little ones were literally starving at home—not even at home, for few homes were left.¹¹⁵

In Richmond, as much as in the regions Escott describes, a similar situation emerged. Even middle class members observed the suffering. In reference to President Davis's designation of March 27, 1863, as a day of fasting and prayer, J.B. Jones

¹¹¹ 1860 Census, New Kent County, p. 33, quoted in Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?", 162.

¹¹² *Richmond Examiner*, 24 April 1863, quoted in Steger, "Free Workers and Immigrants in Richmond", 297.

¹¹³ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 284-285; Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War*, 238.

¹¹⁴ Escott, "The Cry of the Sufferers," 230.

¹¹⁵ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond* (Jackson: McCowat-Mercer Press, Inc., 1959), 60.

despaired, “Fasting in the midst of famine! May God save this people!”¹¹⁶ Even the middle classes, previously comfortable, could not afford to provide sufficient nourishment for their families. Jones described a common dinner for his family. It consisted of “...twelve eggs, \$1.25; a little corn bread, some rice and potatoes. How long shall we have even this variety and amount?”¹¹⁷ Richmond’s rampant inflation due to overcrowding, impressment, and speculation made it impossible for an increasing number of citizens to provide for themselves and their families. Jones relayed a chilling narrative about his daughter’s encounter with a starving rat:

Some idea may be formed of the scarcity of food in this city from the fact that, while my youngest daughter was in the kitchen to-day, a young rat came out of its hole and seemed to beg for something to eat; she held out some bread, which it ate from her hand, and seemed grateful. Several others soon appeared, and were as tame as kittens. Perhaps we shall have to eat them!¹¹⁸

This suffering permeated throughout the middle and poor classes of the city. Although working class women and children from the city of Richmond composed the majority of the mob, men also participated in the Richmond Bread Riot. Chesson postulates that historians have estimated the role of men incorrectly. He writes, “The role played by men in the bread riot may have been somewhat understated. Although the organizers and leaders were women, the riot had masculine support.”¹¹⁹ Almost every eyewitness commented that men aided the women. Often, these men received harsher judgments than the women involved. Margaret Brown Wight wrote, “They were

¹¹⁶ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 280.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹¹⁹ Chesson, “Richmond Jews and the Bread Riot,” 10-11.

accompanied by men of the worst character who no doubt were at the bottom of this infamous proceeding.”¹²⁰

Similarly, a few women from outside the city of Richmond participated in the riot. Margaret Adeline Pomfrey lived over 11.5 miles away from the city.¹²¹ Most likely, she traveled to her home in Port Mayo (directly outside Richmond) the night before the riot in order to take part the next morning. Her participation in the Richmond Bread Riot proves that word of the April 1st meeting had spread throughout the city. Regardless of the elite observers’ attempts to dismiss the riot as a spontaneous, insignificant event, it was, in actuality, a protest planned in advance as a result of general discontent among the poorer citizens of Richmond. Disapproval existed in the city and the women refused to continue complying with the outrageous demands which the government placed on its citizens.

Although the riot was deemed a “bread riot,” the participants needed much more than just food. The price of clothing increased in a manner comparable to all other prices in the Confederacy. Kate Cumming, a Confederate nurse, noted in her diary, “In the matter of dress we are pretty ‘hard up,’ and if the war lasts much longer, I for one will have ‘nothing to wear.’”¹²² Phoebe Pember noted that many wives applying for furloughs for their husbands cited the deficiency of clothing and shoes on the home front. She wrote, “Almost all of these letters told the same sad tale of destitution of food and clothing, even shoes of the roughest kind being either too expensive for the mass or

¹²⁰ Margaret Brown Wight Diary, April 2, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

¹²¹ Henry Steele Commager, ed., *The Official Atlas of the Civil War* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1958), XIX.

¹²² Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee from the Battle of Shiloh to the End of the War: With Sketches of Life and Character, and Brief Notices of Current Events During that Period* (Louisville: John P. Morton and Co., 1866), 160.

unattainable by the expenditure of any sum, in many parts of the country.”¹²³ J.B. Jones noted that in Richmond specifically, many individuals suffered for lack of clothing. He wrote, “We are all in rags, especially our underclothes.”¹²⁴ Although food presented a more immediate concern, clothing was a matter of more than mere fashion in the Confederacy.

In actuality, clothing represented the most basic sense of social standing for women in the South. Werner Steger cautions scholars not to underestimate the importance of clothing in the minds of the female rioters. He writes, “On the one hand, good and clean clothes were a symbol of respectability for many women; on the other, women were often socially judged solely based on their physical appearance.”¹²⁵ By April, 1863, many women were clothed in threadbare material that barely sufficed to cover their bodies. Shoes were also an almost unheard of luxury. Thus, the looting of clothing and shoe stores during the Richmond Bread Riot did not constitute rampant thievery as many of the accounts portrayed. Instead, the women seized goods which were a necessity for their survival and for their standing as respectable women.

The trials of many participants confirmed the importance of clothing in Richmond society. The better dressed and more attractive women often received more lenient sentences from the Richmond Hustings Court.¹²⁶ The cases of Laura Gordon and Mary Woodward display this tendency. Mary Woodward was described as “genteel looking” and “pretty and handsomely dressed.” Although she was charged with assaulting a police

¹²³ Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story*, 60.

¹²⁴ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 278.

¹²⁵ Steger, “Free Workers and Immigrants in Richmond,” 301-302. Steger conducts the most in depth analysis of the importance of clothing in terms of social standing. He bases his conclusions on Michael Chesson's evaluation of the effects of fashion on sentences received by the rioters.

¹²⁶ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 163.

officer and was caught with stolen goods including flour, soap, and bacon, she was quickly released after her prosperous mother-in-law posted her bail.¹²⁷ Similarly, Laura Gordon was depicted as “a young lady of some means” and “neatly dressed.” The police discovered stolen items in her home and she was originally sentenced to thirty days in jail. After she fainted in the court room, however, the judge reduced her sentence to four hours.¹²⁸

By way of contrast, older women often received harsher sentences. Chesson notes, “Middle-aged and elderly women, even if nicely dressed and able to afford an attorney, did not escape so lightly.”¹²⁹ Two older women, Mary Johnson and Frances Kelley, were indicted despite the fact that they were well represented by lawyers. Johnson, a mother of two older children, received the harshest punishment of all of the individuals tried in court: five years in the Virginia State Penitentiary. Kelley, a widow, was sentenced to thirty days in jail even though she was convicted of stealing goods worth less than twenty dollars.¹³⁰ These older women received notably harsher sentences than the young, well-dressed women. This underscores the importance which clothing and outward appearance held in Richmond society.

These women’s complaints about the scarcity of clothing represented their desire for relief and assistance. The Confederacy’s detached policy regarding support for the poor created a distinct sense of abandonment. Paul Escott believes that the Confederate government unwisely took an inactive stance toward poverty. The elite members of the

¹²⁷ *Richmond Examiner*, 3, 4, 7, 8 April 1863, quoted in Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 163.

¹²⁸ *Richmond Dispatch*, 8 May 1863; *Richmond Examiner*, 16, 28 April 1863; *Richmond Enquirer*, 18, 27 April 1863, quoted in Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 164.

¹²⁹ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 164.

¹³⁰ *Richmond Examiner*, 6 April and 12 October, 1863; *Richmond Sentinel*, 14 April, 22 May, 17 June, and 12 November 1863, 11 February and 1 March 1864; *Richmond Enquirer*, 14 April and 10 October 1863; *Richmond Dispatch*, 17 June 1863, 28 January, 11 February, and 1 March 1864, quoted in Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?”, 164-165.

government did not foresee the problems their legislation created. Escott notes, “Jefferson Davis and his administration were slow to recognize poverty as a major internal problem which demanded their attention, and they tended to respond to it in a piecemeal way.”¹³¹ Moreover, the government supported private or state-run charities rather than assuming an active, visible role. Many of the people who would have benefited from Confederate poor relief would have been the families of Southern soldiers. Proper measures for the support of families on the home front would have decreased desertions from the Confederate army and aided the Confederate war effort.

One factor which contributed to the inactivity of both the government and the elite classes was the notion of shared sacrifice. The rhetoric of the Richmond press was steeped with accolades for Confederate women’s untiring sacrifices on behalf of their country and their soldiers. Among the upper classes, many believed that shared suffering lessened class distinctions. The *Richmond Dispatch* reported, “All classes, because of the impossibility of procuring delicacies, have to go without them, but the substantial of life, such as meats, bread, and vegetables, are plentiful, and the few that cannot purchase them readily find aid in their more fortunate neighbors and friends.”¹³² The Richmond Bread Riot illuminated the errors in this assumption. Often, the elite could afford to arrange for goods to be delivered from country plantations. Mary Chesnut wrote in the fall of 1863, “We had sent us from home wine, rice, potatoes, hams, eggs, butter, pickles. About once a month a man came on with all that the plantation could furnish us.”¹³³

This disparity between the goods available to the poor and wealthy members of society only increased as the war progressed. Many of the upper class continued to host

¹³¹ Escott, “The Cry of the Sufferers,” 233.

¹³² *Richmond Dispatch*, 26 June 1863.

¹³³ Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 434.

elaborate parties with an abundance of meat, fruit, and cakes. Although the elite contended they supported the war effort by attending starvation parties (parties where no food was served), they fed themselves in the privacy of their homes prior to attending.¹³⁴ Mary Chesnut, as well as many of the elite in Richmond, complained about high prices, yet continued to procure the delicacies. For example, as late as December of 1863, Mary Chesnut recorded the food provided at dinner on Christmas Day. She wrote, “Today my dinner was comparatively a simple affair—oysters, ham, turkey, partridges, and good wine.”¹³⁵ Chesnut and others believed in the nobility of their monetary sacrifice in purchasing such goods, but they failed to notice that the lower classes could not afford to purchase items of basic necessity such as bacon, corn, or peas.¹³⁶

Another notion which influenced the Confederate government to take a detached stance toward relief was the antebellum tradition of paternalism. As Drew Gilpin Faust notes, “The farm or plantation also served as the primary site of social and political organization.”¹³⁷ The Southern elite adhered to the notion that those who possessed the means were responsible for caring for the less fortunate members of society. Thus, the many small farmers or squatters on the outskirts of plantations often looked to the plantation owners for both advice and support. According to one scholar, George Wythe Randolph served on in the Richmond City Council because of “a sense of enlightened

¹³⁴ DeLeon, *Belles, Beaux, and Brains of the 60's*, 61.

¹³⁵ Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 515.

¹³⁶ Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee*, 159; Harriet E. Amos, “‘All-Absorbing Topics’: Food and Clothing in Confederate Mobile,” *The Atlanta Historical Journal* 12, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1978): 24. Amos’s conclusions regarding the problems of food distribution in Confederate Mobile show that the deficiency of goods on the Richmond market was not an isolated incident. In Mobile, Amos also observes the same pattern of disparity between classes which existed in Richmond. She writes about a young woman named Mary Waring who was offered fruit at a party. Amos concludes, “Though people of limited means found it difficult to obtain special food as the war progressed, those who moved in fashionable circles still enjoyed as late as August 1863 treats such as those offered to young Mary Waring.” The fact that Mobile experienced many of the same problems as Richmond proves that the Confederacy as a whole experienced difficulty adapting its class system to the stresses of war.

¹³⁷ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 32.

social responsibility. His elitist sense of responsibility required him to do what he could for society when the able-bodied men were in the field.”¹³⁸ As the war progressed, however, and the notion of universal suffering dominated the minds of upper class Southerners, many neglected their responsibility of assisting the poor. The rich also felt the stresses of war and often chose to provide for themselves and their families rather than fulfilling the antebellum responsibility of providing for the poorer members of the community. The poor’s sense of abandonment only contributed to the idea circulating among the lower classes that the War was essentially a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”

Although the poor contended that the elite had neglected their paternalistic responsibility, Richmond actually had a distinct tradition of poor relief in the antebellum era. Samuel Mordecai, in his description of pre-war Richmond, emphasized the city’s dedication to the care of those who had difficulty providing for themselves. He wrote, “*The Amicable Society* was instituted in 1788, with the benevolent object of relieving strangers and wayfarers, in distress, for whom the law makes no provision.”¹³⁹ He also noted the existence of other charitable organizations, including the Male Orphan Asylum and the Female Humane Association.¹⁴⁰

In the patriotic afterglow of secession, however, the wealthy lost sight of the tradition of assisting the poor. The Richmond City Council demonstrated its lack of consideration for the city’s lower class citizens when, on June 5, 1861, it resolved, “That the Committee on the Alms House be authorized to stop the work, or any part of it, on the

¹³⁸ George Green Shackelford, *George Wythe Randolph and the Confederate Elite* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 81.

¹³⁹ Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days; Being Reminiscences of An Old Citizen* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 181.

¹⁴⁰ DeCredico, “Richmond Goes To War: 1861-1865,” 30-32.

said Alms House...That the said committee be authorized to allow the use of the Alms House as a temporary hospital for sick soldiers...”¹⁴¹ Thus, Richmond’s leaders proved that their priorities lay in supporting the Confederacy and the Confederate Army, rather than providing security for their own domestic poor.

Although the reaction came too late, the Richmond Bread Riot spurred an alteration of both city and Confederate policies regarding poor relief. The Richmond City Council took the first measures to create a long term solution. On April 13, 1863, the council passed “An Ordinance For the Relief of Poor Persons Not in the Poor House.” It established a free market and provided relief in the form of “provisions or fuel.”¹⁴² The ordinance made it explicitly clear, however, that it would provide relief only to the deserving and “worthy poor.” The “unworthy poor” were those individuals who had “participated in a riot, rout, or unlawful assembly.”¹⁴³ Thus, the Council asserted the notion that riots were not the proper forum of popular protest. The councilmen refused to accept the legitimacy of the claims of the participants in the Richmond Bread Riot. Their reaction, however, proved they acknowledged that at the time of the riot, the city did not employ sufficient relief measures for the lower classes.

The sense of neglect was not isolated to Richmond. The Richmond Bread Riot coincided with numerous other Southern food riots in places as diverse as New Orleans, Louisiana, Dalton, Georgia, Salisbury, Greensboro, and Durham, North Carolina, Mobile, Alabama, and Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia.¹⁴⁴ Historian E. Susan Barber believes that

¹⁴¹ Manarin, ed., *Richmond at War*, 44.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁴⁴ These other food riots also achieved constructive results. The riots in New Orleans, Savannah, and Mobile, for example, prompted the cities to create free markets. See E. Susan Barber, “‘The Quiet Battles of the Home Front War’: Civil War Bread Riots and the Development of a Confederate Welfare System” (M.A. Thesis, University of Maryland, 1986), 17-18.

the riots corresponded to the shortage of supplies which occurred every winter.¹⁴⁵ The riots which erupted in the early spring months of 1863 may have encouraged the women of Richmond to undertake similar action. Moreover, the *Richmond Enquirer's* favorable portrayal of the Salisbury rioters in March of 1863 may have contributed to the women's initiation of the Richmond Bread Riot.¹⁴⁶

The Confederate Congress also reacted to the Bread Riot. Soon after, on May 1, 1863, the Confederate government passed another exemption act which, "gave Confederate officials another means to alleviate individual cases of poverty."¹⁴⁷ This act exempted individuals "in districts...deprived of white or slave labor indispensable to the production of grain or provisions."¹⁴⁸ Essentially, this allowed more men who were necessary for the survival of their families to remain home and continue farming. These acts did little to reverse the damage to public morale, however. One historian classifies this Confederate government initiative "as offering too little, too late."¹⁴⁹ The Confederacy had already lost much of its support on the home front. The failure of the elite and the Confederate government to provide for its needy citizens from the beginning of the war contributed to the outbreak of the Richmond Bread Riot. The legislative responses could not repair the sense of abandonment the poor classes felt.

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¹⁴⁵ Barber, "Civil War Bread Riots and the Development of a Confederate Welfare System," 17.

¹⁴⁶ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?," 137.

¹⁴⁷ Escott, "The Cry of the Sufferers," 233.

¹⁴⁸ Matthews, *The Statutes at Large of the Confederate States of America*, 158-59.

¹⁴⁹ Barber, "Civil War Bread Riots and the Development of a Confederate Welfare System," 79.

The Richmond Bread Riot and the other food riots which wracked the Confederacy were visible signs of the inability of the Southern elite and the Confederate government to adapt to changing wartime requirements. The policies of the government and the stresses of a wartime atmosphere created a volatile social environment. The massive mobilization of war took the elite's focus off support for the community and toward the war effort at all costs. The poor felt neglected, and had a difficult time providing for themselves and their families. Confederate policies aroused dissent among the lower classes, fuelled discontent, and spurred accusations of a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight." The ineptitude of the government in dealing with financial matters contributed to rampant inflation and speculation, which further accentuated the disparity between the upper and lower classes. The stresses of war added to the overcrowding in Richmond and drove prices to even more unrealistic levels. These factors, in combination with the brutal weather of the spring of 1863, made an uprising of some sort almost inevitable. The riot, then, was the result of both Confederate mismanagement and the inaccurate elite perception of the plight of the poor.

The major consequence of the government's shortcomings was the reinforcement of loyalty to the state governments at the expense of loyalty to the Confederate government. Escott believes that the states provided for the welfare of its poorer citizens when they saw that the government in Richmond failed to do so. According to Escott,

Responding to their constituents' needs, state leaders attempted to shield their citizens from further sacrifice, and when they came into conflict with Confederate programs, they raised the familiar cry of state rights as justification. Thus, the quarrels over state rights in 1864 were a symptom of the welfare problem rather than an independent cause of difficulties.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Escott, "The Cry of the Sufferers," 238.

Stephen Ambrose reached a similar conclusion. He also believed that the refusal of the Confederate Congress to incorporate the concerns of the common man in its legislation undercut the war effort. According to Ambrose, “The government had forfeited the support of the Yeomen, and without them the South could never win.”¹⁵¹ Hence, the harmonious society on which the South had prided itself in the antebellum era proved a mere illusion. The “aristocracy of color” served only as an instrument to hide the fissures of class in Southern society; the requirements of war shattered this illusion. Drew Gilpin Faust summarizes the consequences: “The upheavals of war created conceptual and emotional as well as social dislocations, compelling Southerners to rethink their most fundamental assumptions about their identities and the logic of their places in the world.”¹⁵² The Richmond Bread Riot was the most obvious example of this destruction of traditional identity. It forced both women and the poor to re-evaluate their role in society.

After the War’s end, the remaining men returned to their homes and their families; however, they found life much different than they had left it. Their wives had been forced to assume previously unacceptable duties in their absence. Blacks were no longer bound in slavery. Many of the members of the elite stood side by side with the working class in destitution. The boundaries between class, race, and gender, on which Southerners had previously determined their place in society, had shifted beyond recognition. Thus, Southern society remained forever changed and the Reconstruction South became a world of uncertainty and doubt.

¹⁵¹ Ambrose, “Yeoman Discontent in the Confederacy,” 268.

¹⁵² Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 4.

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Table 1
Relative Values of Estate of Confederate Congressmen¹⁵³

Relative Value of Estate	Total Number	Percentage
No Estate (0%)	1	.4
Below Average (1-50%)	11	4.1
Average (21-200%)	35	13.1
Above Average (201-600%)	64	24
Much Above Average (601%+)	130	48.67
Unknown Estate Category	26	9.7
TOTAL	267	100

¹⁵³ Thomas B. Alexander and Richard E. Beringer, *The Anatomy of the Confederate Congress: A Study of the Influences of Member Characteristics on Legislative Voting Behavior, 1861-1865* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1972), 20. Alexander and Beringer compare the congressmen's estates with the average estate in their home counties. According to the authors, and as the above table illustrates, "More than half (130, or 54 percent) of the congressmen for whom this information has been located held estates that were at least 600 percent of the average ownership in their home counties." See page 18.

Table 2
Comparison of Food Prices for Small Family
Richmond, Virginia, 1860 and 1863.¹⁵⁴

Item	1860	1863	% Increase
Bacon, 10 lbs.	1.25	10.00	700
Flour, 30 lbs.	1.50	3.75	150
Sugar, 30 lbs.	.40	.75	88
Coffee, 4 lbs.	.50	20.00	3900
Green Tea, ½ lb.	.50	8.00	1500
Lard, 4 lbs.	.50	4.00	700
Butter, 3 lbs.	.75	5.25	600
Meal, 1 peck	.25	1.00	300
Candles, 2 lbs.	.30	2.50	733

¹⁵⁴ Barber, "Civil War Bread Riots and the Development of a Confederate Welfare System," 20. Barber sites the *Richmond Dispatch* article from 29 January 1863 for the information in the above table. The prices only continued to rise as the effects of weather and impressment increased throughout the spring of 1863. However, the *Dispatch* article blamed only the speculators for the sharp increase in prices. It reported, "So much we owe the speculators, who have staid [sic] at home to prey upon the necessities of their fellow citizens." It never mentioned the government's responsibility for inflation.

Appendix I
A Factual First-Hand Observation

Letter from Hal Tutwiler to Nettie Tutwiler, April 3, 1863

We have had a dreadful riot here yesterday, & they are keeping it up today, but they are not near as bad today as they were yesterday. But I will begin at the first.

Thursday morning I went to the office as usual. A few minutes after I got in, I heard a most tremendous cheering, went to the window to see what was going on, but could not tell what it was about & So we all went down into the street. When we arrived at the scene we found that a large number of women had broken into two or three large grocery establishments, & were helping themselves to hams, middlings, butter, and in fact every thing they could find. Almost every one of them were armed. Some had a belt on with a pistol stuck in each side, others had a large knife, while some were only armed with a hatchet, axe or hammer. As fast as they got what they wanted they walked off with it.

The men instead of trying to put a stop to this shameful proceeding cheered them on & assisted them all in their power. When they [the women] found that the guards were on Cary st. they turned around & went up on Main street and broke into several stores. In the morning before they began they went up to the Capitol, & Governor [John] Letcher made them a speech, but it was like pouring oil on fire. After that the Prest. [Jefferson Davis] made them a speech, and while they were engaged in their robbery the mayor of the city [Joseph Mayo] came down to make them another. But it did no good.

I think there were fully 5000 persons on Cary st., if not more, besides that many more on Main and Broad. This morning they began again but they were told that if they did not disperse they would be fired on.

One woman knocked out a pane of glass out of a shop window, of which the door was fastened, & put her arm in to steal something, but the shopman cut all four of her fingers off. I was right in the middle of the row all the time. It was the most horrible sight I ever saw...

Have heard how the riot ended this morning. Gov. Letcher told them he gave the five minutes to disperse & if they did not disperse he would have them fired on by the city guards. They immediately began to leave the streets & in a few minutes they were comparatively vacant. The stores have been closed for the last two days.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Ambrose, "The Bread Riots in Richmond," 203. This is one of the most straightforward depictions of the riot. It contains few editorial comments and bears a striking contrast to Sallie Putnam's judgmental tone.

Appendix II
An Upper Class Observation

Sallie Brock Putnam

Originating in Richmond in the Spring of this year, (1863,) a most disgraceful riot, to which, in order to conceal the real designs of the lawless mob engaged in it, was given the name of the "bread riot."

The rioters were represented in a heterogeneous crowd of Dutch, Irish, and free negroes—of men, women, and children—armed with pistols, knives, hammers, hatchets, axes, and every other weapon which could be made useful in their defence, or might subserve their designs in breaking into stores for the purpose of thieving. More impudent and defiant robberies were never committed, than disgraced, in the open light of day, on a bright morning in spring, the city of Richmond. The cry for bread with which this violence commenced was soon subdued, and instead of articles of food, the rioters directed their efforts to the stores containing dry-goods, shoes, etc. Women were seen bending under loads of sole-leather, or dragging after them heavy cavalry boots, brandishing their huge knives, and swearing, though apparently well fed, that they were dying from starvation—yet it was difficult to imagine how they could masticate or digest the edibles under the weight of which they were bending. Men carried immense loads of cotton cloth, woolen goods, and other articles, and but few were seen to attack the stores where flour, groceries, and other provisions were kept.

This disgraceful mob was put to flight by the military. Cannon were planted in the street, and the order to disperse or be fired upon drove the rioters from the commercial portion of the city to the Capitol Square, where they menaced the Governor, until, by the continued threatenings of the State Guards and the efforts of the police in arresting the ringleaders, a stop was put to these lawless and violent proceedings.

It cannot be denied that want of bread was at this time too fatally true, but the sufferers for food were not to be found in this mob of vicious men and lawless viragoes who, inhabiting quarters of the city where reigned riot and depravity, when followed to their homes after this demonstration were discovered to be well supplied with articles of food. Some of them were the keepers of stores, to which they purposed adding the stock stolen in their raid on wholesale houses.

This demonstration was made use of by the disaffected in our midst, and by our enemies abroad, for the misrepresentation and exaggeration of our real condition. In a little while the papers of the North published the most startling and highly colored accounts of the starving situation of the inhabitants of Richmond. By the prompt preventive measures brought into requisition this riot was effectually silenced, and no demonstration of the kind was afterwards made during the war.

The real sufferers were not of the class who would engage in acts of violence to obtain bread, but included the most worthy and highly cultivated of our citizens, who, by the suspension of the ordinary branches of business, and the extreme inflation in the prices of provisions, were often reduced to abject

suffering; and helpless refugees, who, driven from comfortable homes, were compelled to seek relief in the crowded city, at the time insufficiently furnished with the means of living for the resident population, and altogether inadequate to the increased numbers thrown daily into it by the progress of events. How great their necessities must have been can be imagined from the fact the many of our women, reared in the utmost ease, delicacy and refinement, were compelled to dispose of all articles of taste and former luxury, and frequently necessary articles of clothing, to meet the everyday demands of life.

These miseries and inconveniences were submitted to in no fault-finding spirit; and although the poverty of the masses increased from day, to-day there is no doubt that the sympathies of the people were unfalteringly with the revolution in all of its phases. Our sufferings were severe, and the uncomplaining temper in which they were borne was surely no evidence that there was in the Southern masses a disposition of craven submission, but rather of heroic devotion to a cause which brought into exercise the sublime power 'to suffer and be strong.' While our enemies in their country were fattening upon all the comforts of life, faring sumptuously every day, clothing themselves in rich garments, and enjoying all that could make existence desirable, they made merry over the miseries endured by the South, and laughed at the self-abnegation of a people who surrendered luxuries and comforts without a murmur for the cause of the revolution.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Putnam, *Richmond During the War*, 208-210. Sallie Putnam's description of the Richmond Bread Riot is colorful and critical in its incriminating language. She blames the mob on citizens with criminal intentions rather than considering the fact the many of the rioters may have been suffering. Many of the diary entries and newspaper editorials also contain many of the same stereotypes. The common theme in all of the portrayals is the tendency of the author to deny the legitimacy of the rioters' complaints. The riotous actions of the women violated that long standing veneer of class harmony in the South. Many of the upper class members refused to accept that transition and justified the actions of the women by blaming it on external agents or citizens of ill repute. They developed the concept of the "worthy poor": those who suffered silently and did not engage in unconventional behavior.

Appendix III Comparison to European Food Riots

The Richmond Bread Riot bears a striking resemblance to the European food riots of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. However, few modern accounts of the Richmond Bread Riot incorporate this comparison. Michael Chesson briefly references the European riots; however, E. Susan Barber conducts the most extensive analysis. She seeks to understand whether the Richmond Bread Riot followed patterns similar to the ones exhibited by the European food riots and concurs that the two do, indeed, correspond in both form and motive.¹⁵⁷

Barber correctly concludes that the riot exhibits many of the characteristics of the European food riots of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the foremost historians on women's studies in Western Europe, Louis A. Tilly, proposes that three classifications of food riots existed in France in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. According to Tilly, the first type of riot, the market riot, took place in the cities and "was usually aimed at bakers whose prices were too high and whose loaves were too few, at city residents who were suspected of hoarding supplies of grain in their houses, and at government officials who failed to act swiftly to ease a food shortage."¹⁵⁸ The next classification, the *entrave*, occurred only in rural settings. In this form, the rioters took the grain from wagons on their way to market. Tilly calls the last kind of food riot *taxation populaire*. In this type, the rioters seized goods, set a fair price, and sold the goods in order to reimburse the original seller.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?", 136-137; Barber, "Civil War Bread Riots and the Development of a Confederate Welfare System," 106-109.

¹⁵⁸ Louise A. Tilly, "The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1971): 23.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

The Bread Riot in Richmond most closely resembles the market riot. The riot took place in an urban environment and the women first approached the government officials who they believed had not done enough to solve the problem of unreasonable prices. There is also evidence that the rioters did, in some instances, target known speculators, foreigners, and Jews.¹⁶⁰ The class tension which had been building in Richmond created resentment among the poor toward the successful merchants in the city. The less prosperous members of society believed that these speculators and wealthy merchants were merely profiting from the war effort and had little cause for patriotism, loyalty, or sacrifice. The newspapers were rich with exhortations against these individuals. Many of the women involved in the bread riots had at least one, and in most cases, multiple family members involved in the war and thus, wealthy merchants and those with no apparent ties to the Confederacy constituted the prime targets for looting and violence.¹⁶¹ This targeting reveals that the Richmond Bread Riot closely resembles the market riots which occurred in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The riot also closely resembles the qualities of the English crowd in the eighteenth century as described by E.P. Thompson. He believed that:

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimizing notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community.¹⁶²

Essentially, every community possesses a set of moral norms. When these norms are violated, the crowd believes that unprecedented action becomes permissible. Thompson

¹⁶⁰ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?", 171-172.

¹⁶¹ Walthall, *Hidden Things Brought To Light*, 24.

¹⁶² E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, no. 50 (1971): 78.

elaborated on this idea by defining what he calls the “moral economy of the crowd.” He writes that a violation of societal standards and responsibilities, “taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.”¹⁶³ In the case of the Richmond Bread Riot, the legitimizing notion was the belief that every individual deserved the opportunity to purchase necessary items at a reasonable price. Thus, the rioters exactly resembled Thompson’s descriptions of the rioters in the English crowds.

Another similarity between the European riots and the Richmond Bread Riot was the existence of political motives. Both George F. E. Rudé and Louise Tilly believe in the close correlation of political undercurrents and food riots. Tilly states, “The emergence of the food riot marked the nationalization and politicization of the problem of subsistence, and was based on a popular model of how the economy should work.”¹⁶⁴ The first connection between motives of hunger and political change surfaced during the French Revolution. Public animosity rose first over the price of bread in April, 1789. However, this unrest evolved into political upheaval.¹⁶⁵ The trend did not cease with the end of the Revolution. Rudé wrote, “there are political, ‘patriotic,’ and antiroyalist undercurrents and accompaniments (particularly in the riots of November 1792) ...In Paris, too the grocery riots of 1793, at least, had political undertones.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd,” 79.

¹⁶⁴ Tilly, “The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France,” 26.

¹⁶⁵ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 63.

¹⁶⁶ George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (London: Serif, 2005), 119.

These political motives also surfaced in the Richmond Bread Riot. The women desired the availability of reasonably priced food at government prices. They abhorred the legislation which legalized impressment and the Tax-in-Kind. They first desired to bargain with the Governor, but when he took no direct action, the women took what the government refused to provide them. The rioters took direct action toward remedying the problem of affordable goods.

The Richmond Bread Riot bears a striking resemblance to the European food riots in both form and motive. Although the women of Richmond may not have known about the utilization of the food riot in Europe, they undertook the same method in order to achieve change. Thus, the food riot was an effective mode of protest in both America and Europe.