

The Federal Occupation of Huntsville and Women of Alabama

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

It has been 163 years since the United States experienced combat zones inside its borders and the memory continues to fade as American society changes. In the 1860s, citizens of the South experienced the Goth returning destroying their homes and lives during the War Between the States. Numerous men and women wrote journals of their lives during the period of the war. From these journals, we read what they experienced and develop an understanding what the ones that did not write suffered in the war. A young lady during that period put it plainly, “It is all very well for you to talk, you who have never known the wrongs that we have had to endure; you know nothing about the war.”¹

Alabama’s lack of major battles within its borders produces little thought in discussions about the war but there were 194 running military clashes mainly in North Alabama until 1865 when Federal General Wilson and his troops went down through the middle of Alabama burning and destroying what was left with Confederate General Forrest’s men nipping at their heels as the Federals rolled their tide through. The Tennessee River dipping into North Alabama gave the Union Navy an avenue to attack plus Union gunboats patrolled waterways through Alabama. Major naval battles were fought in Mobile Bay during 1864.

It is estimated that 100,000 Alabamians joined the Confederate Army and in the beginning were sent to Virginia to help protect the Confederate capital. Because the state was divided about succession, several counties threatened to succeed from the state. When Lincoln called for volunteers to join the Union army to fight the South, the counties did not leave the state. About 2,700 Alabama men did join the Union army fighting against their own kin.

Most of the men were yeoman who had been raising food crops to feed the state. In the beginning of 1861, they were still on the farms preparing the fields for planting. Their leaving their families to take care of the farm fell on the women to plow, plant, harvest, cut wood, tend to the animals, and care for the remaining family members. The women left as head of household had no protection from the Federal invaders or outlaws and often fell victim. Farming communities were plundered, destroyed, and crops burned by Federal invaders throughout the war.

Meanwhile in the city of Huntsville where thousands of Federal invading soldiers took control, the women did what they could to defy the Union’s efforts to crush their rebel spirit. After war was declared and before the invasion of North Alabama, the women of Huntsville gathered to make uniforms for men in the Confederate army. They used everything available to furnish the men clothing who were fighting for their homeland. When the invasion came, the women helped

¹ Cummings, Kate, *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*, Louisiana State University Press, © 1959

their men to escape out of the city. The women took supplies sewn in their clothing out to the Confederate soldiers as often as they could while under Federal rule in town.

Federal General O.M. Mitchel invaded Huntsville on April 11, 1862, at the crack of dawn with over 8,000 soldiers to conquer half that number of civilians who were women, children, slaves, freemen, and the elderly. The Memphis & Charleston (M&C) rail line dipped into North Alabama making it a valuable tool for transporting troops and supplies to the army, it was fought over by both sides, Union and Confederate. When Union General Mitchel came into Huntsville, train cars were running on the M&C line through Huntsville which made it possible for Mitchel's men to capture "18 engines, 100 freight cars, 6 passenger, 2 baggage, a large number of smaller cars."² Two cars held Confederate soldiers, one got away but one was captured that held wounded soldiers coming from the Shiloh battlefield.

Mrs. Bradford, a widow, led several of the ladies to General Mitchel to ask permission to take care of the wounded soldiers on the train. Mrs. Chadick, a minister's wife, wrote in her journal: "The object of the visit then was stated to Mitchel by Mrs. Bradford, when, instead of a direct reply, he went on to speak of the very great surprise he had given us that morning, and expressing great surprise on his part that we had no reception prepared for him! Mrs. Chadick wrote, "I had it in my heart to let him know that we had a grand reception prepared for him at Corinth, but considering that discretion was the better part of valor, kept silent."³ The ladies carried food and drink to the wounded soldiers aboard the car.

General Mitchel, being the first to invade Huntsville, made oppressive rules for the captured citizens to follow such as having to take the oath to the Federal Government (the South's oppressor) before buying anything including food, and have permission to travel anywhere, near or far. Mitchel allowed his men to burn surrounding communities outside of Huntsville and rob citizens in the city. Burning of communities left families homeless refugees. He supported Colonel Turchin in the sacking of Athens. Union General Buell, Commander of the Army of Ohio, wrote that "General Mitchel allowed his federal soldiers to be lawless: destroy, rape, arson, and plundering without punishment." By the time Mitchel was transferred out of Huntsville, his nickname had become "Ohio Monster Mitchel" by the citizens.

Women raped during this time of war, were too ashamed to tell anyone or if witnessed, had to live in fear and humiliation for the rest of their lives. It was not only the federal soldiers that plundered, and abused the citizens but the growing number of outlaws were to be feared. With the majority of males gone, the outlaw population grew with no restraints. They murdered, stole, and raped at their pleasure and entertainment without any law to hamper or stop them.

² Harncourt, Paul, *The Planter's Railway*, Heritage Publishing Company © 1995.

³ Rohr, Nancy, *Enduring Voices, Women of the Tennessee Valley: 1861-1865*. Huntsville Madison County Historical Society, 2023.

Soldiers kept journals during that period such as Colonel John Beatty, 3rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry, wrote in his journal, “The men of Huntsville have a patient endurance of military rule. The women, however, are outspoken in their hostility and marvelously bitter.”⁴ Many of the women’s journal describe their feelings toward the Federal invaders. They were bitter at being captive, aggrieved by the ill treatment toward them, hated the destruction the soldiers did to their homes, and the pillaging. Miss Mary Frances Fielding told one Federal soldier, “maybe when all the men are killed, you’ll have the glory of conquering women and children, but we won’t give up before.”⁵

Official records and journals tell that Negros fought on both sides, often without a choice. The Federal soldiers surrounded a Negro church in Huntsville and after the service when the men came out, the Federals gathered them up and sent them to Nashville to build fortifications, thus taking them away from their families. Many ran to the other side hoping for help but little was given because the Federals were more interested in caring for their own men. The Negros had it rough either way they went because they were not considered citizens at that time. Many Negros fought the enemy when they went with their masters to battle. Even free men volunteered to fight for their homeland went into servitude to go into the Confederate Army which many did. The ones that had a certain amount of freedom but mistreated by the Federals turned to the Confederacy. Many journals during the period discussed what Negros experienced and their reaction. Miss Cassie Fennell wrote in her journal, “The Negros here are badly frightened by the yankees because they treat the Negros very badly over in Madison and Limestone Counties...We have not as yet had but two Negros to go with the yankees. The yankees are surprised themselves at our Negros remaining at home when nearly everybody is losing theirs.”⁶

Miss Cassie Fennell was educated in D.C. then came home to Guntersville right before the beginning of the hostilities. She kept a detailed journal of her feelings about all that happened in Guntersville and in Huntsville. Raised in Ohio Mrs. Chadick married a preacher who was sent to Huntsville to preach in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church joined the Confederate Army. She kept a detailed journal on what was happening in Huntsville during the period of the war. Mrs. Otey was married to an invalid, older man and they lived in the country outside of Huntsville. She wrote about the continuous problems of protecting the animals and food supplies from the Federals that raided her plantation routinely.

⁴ Col. John Betty, 3rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. <https://www.minecreek.info/confederate-forces/john-beatty-a-union-soldier.html>

⁵ Rohr, Nancy, *Enduring Voices, Women of the Tennessee Valley: 1861-1865*. Huntsville Madison County Historical Society, 2023.

⁶ Copy of a portion of Cassie Fennell’s journal can be found at the University of Alabama Huntsville, Archives.

The children growing up during the war developed a hatred for northerners that lasted a life time and carried on through generations. The children during the war and their children saw how it affected their family passed down stories through generations.. There are many traces of journals from women during that time describing their daily lives and what was happening to them and their love ones. Huntsville changed hands many times; the Federals came then they left, the Confederates came then left, the Federals returned then left, and so on. The period in between the Federals gave the citizens a breather. Mrs. Virginia Clay wrote about her experience as a refugee. Her husband was sent to Canada by President Davis leaving her without a place to be while Huntsville was captured. Virginia wrote “Of the months of ’63, the story of my life is one of continuous change”⁷

Miss Kate Cumming of Mobile volunteered her time nursing the wounded soldiers after the Battle of Shiloh and Chickamauga. She provides us with information on being a young single woman nursing men and the daily attitudes one had to deal with about what she was doing for the men. It was more favorable for a married woman nursing men than young single woman.⁸ Miss Augusta Evans of Mobile, known author at the time of war, broke her engagement to a northerner because he supported Lincoln. She devoted her time helping the wounded and supporting the Confederacy in many ways. Mrs. Juliet Hopkins sold her lands and gave over \$500,000 to the Confederate government to build hospitals which she ran for three years. She was shot twice while rescuing wounded men from a battlefield. After the war, she was left with a bad limp and nothing to live on. Fannie Beers writes about being on the battlefield, “The dead lay around us on every side, singly and in groups and piles; men and horses, in some cases, inextricably mingled. As I passed my arm under his head (wounded soldier) the red blood saturated my sleeve and spread in a moment over a part of my dress. We went on, giving water, brandy, or soup; sometimes successful in reviving the patient, sometimes able to only to whisper a few words of comfort to the dying. My hands and dress and feet were bloody, and I felt sick with horror.”⁹

By the end of the war, everyone in the South was suffering. The women had been working throughout the war to support the men in the field: their husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, nephews, cousins, and friends. As the men came home after the war, broken and wounded, the women continued to work to help them. The women formed groups across the South to help raise funds to house the homeless veterans, help the widows and orphans, support veterans’ camps, and paid for monuments to honor the beloved men who served their country. These

⁷ Clay-Clopton, Virginia, *A Belle of the Fifties; Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-66*. Doubleday, Page & Company, 1904.

⁸ Cumming, Kate, *Kate, The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*. Louisiana State University Press, 2012.

⁹ Beers, Fannie A., *Memories, A Record of Personal Experience and Adventure During Four Years of War*; Reprint Silver Street Media, Original J. B. Lippincott Co., 1889. Page 154

groups of women across the country organized into the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and continue to honor the men and women, white and black, who will fight for their home and country during a war.

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