In addition to their horror over the tragic cessation of young lives, Civil War parents had to face increased difficulty in every type of childrearing role. Many young people had to take on adult roles years before they were ready. Parents watched as hundreds of thousands of teenage sons went off to war with Union or Confederate
troops. Far more deadly than guns and mortar were the diseases that fell eleven of every twelve who died in the military camps. In the southern war theaters, Confederate parents tried to protect their children from Union soldiers and armaments, as well as from the ravages of a devastated economy, while more than five thousand members of the enslaved population dubbed “contraband of war” sought means to escape with their children to the Union lines. The wives and children of men who joined the United States Colored Troops, especially from the border states, sometimes had to face the wrath of their owners against themselves and their offspring. In both the border and southern states, some whites attempted to kidnap, sell, or illegally apprentice African American children so that they could retain them as unpaid laborers. Families themselves fought for custody of orphans or struggled through separation and custody battles, and almost all parents wanted their children to be educated.

Diaries and Reminiscences

A ten-year-old girl, Carrie Berry, whose diary is at the Atlanta History Center, vividly captured the horrors and complexities of the war experience for childrearing. The child’s diary clearly shows that her mother was attempting to train her in household tasks and send her to school and church, in spite of the violence near their home. It was impossible for her mother or father to return her home to normalcy amidst the warfare surrounding them. Young Carrie explained that on Monday, August 1, 1864, she had to care for her younger sister “but before night we had to run to the cellar” for cover during an assault. She later reported, “We did not feel safe in our cellar because the shells fell so thick and fast.” She stated that they could “hear the canons and muskets very plane [sic], but the shells we dread. One has busted under the dining room which frightened us very much. One passed through the smoke-house and a piece hit the top of the house and fell through but we were at Auntie Markham’s, so none of us were hurt. We stay very close in the cellar when they are shelling.”

Wednesday, August 3, was Carrie’s birthday. She wrote, “I was ten years old, but I did not have a cake times were too hard so I celebrated with ironing. I hope by my next birthday we will have peace in our land so that I can have a nice dinner” (Carrie Berry Diary, August 1, 1864–January 4, 1865).

In her 2000 article “Of Necessity and Public Benefit”, Southern Families and their Appeals for Protection,” Amy E. Murrell looks at letters from a South Carolina woman named Margaret A. Easterling. Trying to run the family plantation, care for her children, slaves, and her aged mother in “a neighborhood which [N]egroes number twenty to one,” Easterling asked Confederate officials to keep her oldest and strongest son, Willie, who was seventeen in the military, but send home her “feeble” son, Josiah. She wrote, “I know our cause is worthy of every and any sacrifice . . . but I am not mistress of my fears.”

Another schoolgirl diary once more points to a loss of youth and growing bitterness because of the violence and changes around her. Kept by sixteen-year-old Alice Williamson in 1864 in Gallatin, Tennessee, and held by the Atlanta History Center, the thirty-six page diary describes the violent occupation of the area by Union forces led by General Eleazar A. Paine and details her disgust of Union sympathizers, African American soldiers, and ambitious contrabands who also wanted to be educated. It is obvious that Williamson’s parents were trying to keep her in school, but by the time that her journal closes, the school has shut down and she speculates that her teacher is going to teach the contrabands. Williamson accuses General Paine of a number of atrocities. She stated that on March 11, Paine

went up the country a few miles to a Mr. Dalton’s whose son came home from the Southern Army the day before and had the same day taken the Amnesty Oath. Riding up to the door he enquired of Mr. Dalton if his son was at home but before he answered his son came to the door. Old Nick then told him to get his horse and go with him. After insulting the father he carried his son a half mile away and shot him six times. Bidden to rise and go home, the young man has never been heard of since. (Alice Williamson Diary)

This account is most likely untrue because the general would almost certainly have had an enlisted man shoot him, if he had wanted him shot.

On June 5, Williamson reported that “the Tennesseans set fire to the contraband school.” By June 10, she is relating that

The country is overrun with Yanks: they are camped in the woods in front of us and have already paid us several visits killed sheep, goats and chickens Our new yankees are very neighbourly. They come over to see us every few minutes in the day. Some came today and demanded their dinner at two o’clock but did not get it. They went off cursing us for being d_n rebels.

On September 16, she lamented, “Todays paper brings sad news, Atlanta has certainly been taken: Sherman has ordered every man, woman and child from that place . . . .” (Alice Williamson Diary).

An African American Perspective

Susie King Taylor was a teen, a wife, a mother, a laundress and a nurse during the Civil War. She published a memoir in 1902 entitled Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd U. S. Colored Troops. Late Ist South Carolina Volunteers. In the book, she relates how her mother, a market woman, and her grandmother helped provide her with a clandestine education, since it was illegal for slaves to learn to read. Susie wrote that by 1861, she had heard
a great deal about freedom, President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), and the Yankee soldiers. After the Civil War began, the slaves believed that Lincoln and the Yankees were soon coming to set them free. As Union soldiers moved into the South, slaves flocked to their camps and Susie was among them. President Lincoln, however, remained as reluctant to allow black men to enlist as soldiers as he was to declare the slaves free. Blacks were allowed only a limited role in the war effort for the first three years. Nevertheless, slaves from miles around left their owners and sought refuge behind Union lines wherever the troops moved, and free black men independently or under Union soldiers’ direction began to train for combat and practice military drills. Because Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and the surrounding area were recaptured by the Union early in the war, blacks began to converge upon that area to join with and work for the Union troops.

At the arrival of the Yankees in the South, Susie, just fourteen years old, left with her uncle and his family for the South Carolina Sea Islands in order to find the Union army. Susie wrote that she was overjoyed to see the Yankees. She, like thousands of other slaves, believed that her liberation was at hand. She was willing to help in the struggle for freedom in any way that she could.

The Union officers were surprised to find that Susie could read and write and pressed her into service as a teacher of slave children and some adults. She also tutored some of the soldiers who were eager to learn how to read and write. In the camp, she met and married Sergeant Edward King of the first South Carolina Volunteers. They had one son.

Lincoln announced that the proclamation would take effect on January 1, 1863. The Emancipation Proclamation proclaimed that all slaves in the Confederate states would be “forever free.” Although scholars argue the effectiveness of the proclamation, Susie, her family, and the other recruits and contrabands who were with them felt that they were free from that moment and were willing to fight and die to keep their liberty.

The government promised that U.S. Colored Troops would get equal pay, but it did not fulfill that promise. Susie’s husband and the other troops and their officers were extremely disappointed, and many black men refused to take any pay that was less than that of white soldiers. Eventually, the government reversed its position and agreed, again, to give the soldiers full pay with all of the back pay due, but by that time many members of the Colored Troops, Susie sadly reported, had died without receiving one dime for their service.

Traveling with her husband and the Colored Troops, Susie worked alternately as a teacher and nurse, never receiving any pay for her services. She traveled with them as far south as Florida and camped with them in Georgia. She nursed sick and wounded men according to their needs and worked alongside Clara Barton (1821–1912) in the Sea Islands for several months. Susie, still a teenager, marveled over how quickly she got over the sight of bloodied, maimed, and mangled bodies. She recounted that whenever she would see wounded soldiers her only thoughts were about how to alleviate their suffering.

After the war, Susie and her husband, Edward, returned to Savannah, where she opened a school. Edward died in 1866, leaving Susie as a widow at only eighteen years old.

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Debra Newman Ham

**MOTHERHOOD**

At the start of the Civil War in 1861, the conventional roles of women shifted to include new practical responsibilities and social positions. Before the war, husbands often established household rules and provided families with security, while few women worked outside of the home. As the primary caretakers of children and spouses, women already had full-time work inside their households. With the onset of the war, however, it became necessary for many mothers to become leaders of the household and pursue jobs outside their homes. In addition to the changes in practical responsibilities, the war forced women to examine their identities as mothers.
ARMY NURSES AS MOTHERS

Many soldiers and women were initially recoiled from the new interactions between the sexes in Civil War hospitals, but duty necessitated that they make the best of it. In order to do so, women, who had never taken care of anyone other than family members, and soldiers, who had never been taken care of by anyone but their mothers, fused these roles together to form public families. Soldiers could therefore be taken care of by their “mothers” and nurses could take care of their “children.”

Several nurses, most notably Mary Ann Bickerdyke (1817–1901), were known to all as “Mother.” Mother Ransom of Indiana and Grandmother Newcomb of Illinois are other prominent examples. Mother Bickerdyke dispensed motherly care for the soldiers, leading the mother of a wounded soldier to remark, “It is no wonder you are called ‘mother’” (Holland 1895, p. 525). Nurses not officially known as “mother” were often given that title, though, and they saw their patients as their children in many cases. According to the editor of the diary and letters of Hannah Ropes, Civil War nurses often saw themselves as responsible surrogate mothers for the soldiers in their care (Brumgardt 1980, p. 15). As for Ropes herself, she once said that “the poor privates are my children for the time being” (p. 77).

Emily Elizabeth Parsons also often referred to her soldiers as children, stating her role in the hospitals as that of “see[ing] after the many wants of my children, so my men seem to me” (Parsons 1880, p. 22). Parsons referred to her job of making forty-four beds every day as analogous to the endless work of a well-known nursery rhyme character, as she remarked that she had “more children than the old woman in the shoe” (p. 52). Ada W. Bacot, a Confederate nurse, often referred to her patients as “poor children” and comparing her devotion to the Southern cause to the love of a “fond mother” (Berlin 1994, p. 51). Bacot claimed to be a child of Southern ideals herself, demonstrating the blurring of family lines between public and private, real and idealistic. Fannie Beers, another Confederate nurse, also discussed her conceptions of family in the Civil War hospitals. She referred to all her patients as her “boys,” regardless of their age. Beers even pointed out that some were upset that she took the liberty of referring to men who were husbands and fathers as “her boys,” but to Beers, “these are my boys—still—always my boys” (Beers 1888, p. 311).

JOHN FRENCH

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Divided Families and Changes in Family Relationships

As the country was divided through war, families’ relationships shifted as well. Some families grew closer; the emphasis on emotional attachments within families and moral development in children during the nineteenth century, including during the Civil War years, was stronger than the earlier, stricter perspectives on children’s statuses, although one historian has noted that this shift in emphasis could be seen as early as the American Revolution (Marten 1998, p. 22). Children were relied on less for earning and contributing to household incomes, and were instead regarded as central family members to be nurtured. Mothers were increasingly interested in the growth and personal development of their children.

Pressures generated by the war influenced and expanded the responsibilities of mothers. As many households lost male family members temporarily or permanently to the war, mothers were faced with new challenges in raising their children alone. Without the support of husbands, or a mother’s concurrent daily concerns as a wife, women had to reexamine their domestic duties. Therefore, they often took on work typically performed by males, such as physical tasks around the home. Mothers also became accountable for disciplining children, which had traditionally been the fathers’ task (Sutherland 1989, p. 63). The uncertainties of the war, including its duration and practical consequences, forced mothers to make such rapid changes in daily living.

Explorations of self-identity and purpose added strains to the already difficult circumstances of experiencing a period of national upheaval. Family relationships were stressed and tested in a variety of ways during the years of the Civil War. One historian maintains that women not only often felt frustrated by or unequal to their new responsibilities but also began to question men’s supposedly superior competence and wisdom (Faust 1996, p. 134). As the contours of personal identities shifted, wives could no longer count on their menfolk to buffer them from harm or to serve as the foundation of the family. Naturally, major life events could not be put on hold simply on account of a spouse’s prolonged absence. Mothers often had to experience or endure such significant events as the birth or death of a child without the feelings of safekeeping conferred by a united family or any male support.
Additional Roles and Responsibilities

Mothers often acted as links or channels of communication between an absent father and the children. They tried to shorten the distances between soldiers and their homes by reporting the mundane events or changes in their children. Documenting such pieces of news as language development or new lessons learned at school helped mothers hold their families together, even across distances. In a letter written to her husband shortly after he enlisted with the Union Army in 1863, Martha Glover, a slave in Missouri, said that “The children talk about you all the time. I wish you could get a furlough & come to see us once more. We want to see you worse than we ever did before...” (Berlin et al. 1987, p. 12). Mothers like Ms. Glover who were legally slaves faced tremendous burdens—including the unpredictability of personal safety—in addition to worrying about their children’s well-being and future. Glover’s letter clearly expresses the uncertainties many mothers were forced to endure: “… I do not know what will become of me & my poor little children” (Berlin et al. 1987, p. 12). Concurrently, concerns about spouses held by other slave owners or recruited to fight for emancipation added to many daily difficulties and apprehensions about the future as slave families were separated by events beyond their control.

Mothers also frequently had the responsibility of explaining the life-changing events of the early 1860s to the children. Children in the South and the North were exposed to many realities of war directly through family members leaving for battle and society’s preoccupation with the war. While families living in the South confronted dangers that few Northern families faced because so much of the war was fought in Southern territory, both sides endured the difficulties of divided families, which often included the loss of fathers, spouses, or sons (Marten 1998, p. 21).

Regardless of where the families lived—in Northern or Southern states—mothers were forced to realize that the subject of war was often at the forefront of children’s minds. Even young children experienced the rhetoric of war in multiple forms—games, books, toys, theater performances, and newspapers were among the many forms of entertainment and mass media influenced by the topic. Women had to help their young ones to understand a dangerous and changing world, while communicating a sense of safety and protection that the majority of mothers in any period of time work to convey. With the younger generation’s futures as the motivation for many soldiers to fight for the Union or Confederate armies, or the encouragement for many slaves to fight for emancipation, mothers had the complex task of explaining why fathers had to be away from home while comforting their children and reassuring them of their importance and safety. Likewise, wives often reassured their husbands that they would help the young family members remember their fathers and the causes for which they fought (Marten 1998, pp. 11–13).

Another responsibility mothers confronted was working outside the home. With many males away at war during the early 1860s, the United States experienced an increase in the number of female workers. Mothers who had devoted their energies to raising a family and maintaining a home abruptly assumed financial challenges without the husband’s income. While there was no massive or permanent displacement of men in most occupations, the tradition that women’s only legitimate place was in the home had been weakened by the end of the war (Sutherland 1989, p. 62). The rise in the number of female workers occurred together with the increased burdens mothers were taking on inside the home. Although some mothers could delegate certain household chores to older and responsible children, the war changed the composition of family life, both inside and outside the home—financially, practically, and personally. Many women, including mothers and daughters, particularly in the South, found jobs that supported the war effort by working in government jobs, such as positions in the Treasury Department or in factories (Marten 1998, p. 172). Such employment often helped them to establish a new sense of self-worth as well as connections to the military causes of their regions. However, finding employment overall was a difficult task. Most mothers were not accustomed to looking for work or spending a majority of the day outside the home. The availability of jobs varied, with greater potential for paid employment in larger cities. Also, the cost of living was increasing, which added economic stresses to the already intense realities of guiding a family through a period of war.

Motherhood in the North and South

Mothers in the North experienced a different range of lifestyle adjustments from those in the South. With the exception of southern Pennsylvania and some of the border states, most Northern households were located at a safe geographical distance from the battlefields. Therefore, families could feel a type of abandonment and confusion about the future without the ability to see conflicts firsthand. In addition, because Northern mothers were not able to help with the immediate impacts of war, they often felt uneasy and lonely remaining in the North, far from sons or husbands (Silber 2005, p. 91). Domestic life was turned inside out. Overall, a mother’s world, whether trying to maintain a home in the North or the South, became much more difficult.

Living in the South generated distinct challenges and reputations for mothers as well. Being located closer to areas of fighting created constant worry of invasion by Northern troops. The sense of safety within the home became a daily concern. In addition to the practical challenges of living near war sites Southern women had distinguished reputations for being strong nationalists,
Fatherhood

willing to put aside their domestic traditions to support sons and husbands. They felt the fighting was for a greater purpose than their domestic world and were often admired for such devotion to their cause (Silber 2005, p. 91). On the other hand, the war also forced them to examine the racial divisions that had persisted, which they had accepted. Up until the war, privileged and wealthy white mothers in the South had relied on the work of slaves to maintain family estates and to help in raising their children.

Women also questioned their moral duties as mothers. A common concern was how to retain an influence on sons while they were away from the home environment with its strong maternal presence. One way for mothers to prolong their influence and maintain a sense of responsibility for grown sons was to write letters that communicated the values they had worked to instill during their sons’ childhoods. In many cases these letters included reminders of religious beliefs and principles (Silber 2005, p. 96). It comforted mothers to some extent to continue such instruction of values through long-distance communication with their children. The connections through letters, however, were small substitutions for the strong presence mothers had had in their sons’ lives before the separations.

Up until the war, many mothers had devoted their energies and identities to raising children and maintaining a household. When the composition of the households shifted, along with the social structure of the country, mothers reevaluated their multiple responsibilities to their families, homes, and personal identities.

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FATHERHOOD

In 1861 Joseph Hopkins Twichell enlisted in the Army of the Potomac as a chaplain. Feeling a call from God to participate in the nation’s great struggle, Twichell promised to serve his regiment faithfully and guide them on their quest to victory. Twichell had written every week to his father since his days as a seminary student; thus the two men had a strong emotional bond that transcended distance. The father had also served as a chaplain, and one of Joseph’s primary reasons for his enlistment was the encouragement offered by his father. Two years later, Twichell received a disturbing telegram telling him to rush home because his father had died. Not only had the younger man’s hero and source of inspiration been snatched away from him, but so too had his primary correspondent—someone with whom he could share his innermost feelings. When Twichell recovered from the unexpected loss, he sat down to write to his mother but found the task more hurtful than helpful. “I shall never write—‘Dear Father’ again—never . . . . How many times, when I was . . . disturbed, has the mere writing of them called me to peace and a better mind” (Messent and Courtney 2006, pp. 229).

The grief he felt cascaded over him; Twichell had to reassure himself that he had lived up to his father’s expectations. “I only wish he had known how much I loved him. I hoped to show it someday, but now, Oh God! Blankness gathers about the future.” Without his father’s direction, the uncertainty of the future weighed upon Twichell and he longed for the reassurance and stability his father had once provided: “Oh! For another touch of his hand!—and hour of his company—the sound of his voice! Would that I could hear him call me ’Joe’ again. Nobody ever did, or ever can speak it as he did” (Messent and Courtney 2006, pp. 230–231).

American Ideals of Fatherhood

The genuine grief articulated by Twichell upon learning of his father’s death demonstrates the important position that fathers maintained in everyday life during the Civil War. Tradition dictated that fathers act as their families’ leaders, decision makers, and primary breadwinners. Prior to the Civil War, small family-owned shops and farms dominated the rhythm and pace of life. Fathers often managed their family members as they would employees. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, however, growing sentimentality surrounding family life also demanded that fathers take on a more nurturing and loving role within the family.

The growing cultural influence of the middle class was primarily responsible for this challenge to the traditional role of fatherhood. The middle-class ideal perpetuated throughout antebellum America glorified the nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and children. The ideal family, according to the historian Amy Murrell Taylor in The Divided Family in Civil War America, “was meant to be an emotional sanctuary, a small and child-centered refuge from public life that replaced
traditional patriarchal authority with affection and love” (Taylor 2005, pp. 1–12).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, American fathers presided over their families in a stern but loving manner. They played important roles in the development in their children and spent much of their lives instructing their offspring. For example, fathers taught their sons the importance of ambition and manly independence, yet both of those qualities were necessarily bound by the father’s authority. This confrontation between an established authority figure and an upstart youth defined many father-son relationships and likewise prevented a family from realizing the ideal. Fathers similarly raised their daughters to continue the traditions of domesticity but also encouraged limited forays into greater independence (Rose 1992, pp. 162–177).

The antebellum notions of the father as authority figure were complicated by the war because fathers were often called away from home to serve in the military for men from all realms of society. Other domestic responsibilities also made the ideal difficult to realize. Poor farmers were forced to put sons and daughters to work in order to both plant and harvest crops. Northern factory workers watched as their youngest children went to work in textile and other factories. African American slaves in the South never had the opportunity to create ideal families. Forced into bondage, black slaves found family life tenuous at best. Without the ability to protect their families, black fathers remained at a loss until they earned their freedom.

Effects of Civil War

With the onset of the Civil War in 1861, Abraham Lincoln’s declaration that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” rang true not only for the political existence of the American nation but also for households across the country. Hundreds of thousands of men enlisted to serve in both the Union and Confederate armies, which created a great crisis in the nature of family life. No longer able to realize their vision of the ideal family, fathers and sons across the nation still sought to retain emotional bonds with their family despite their inability to remain a cohesive unit. Many young men...
who went off to fight kept in close contact with their fathers and reassured them not only of their decisions to enlist but also that they had been raised well.

In April 1862, just before partaking in his first action of the war, a young soldier from Louisiana, Jared Sanders, wrote home to his father about the hardships he had encountered so far in the field. “Our march was very trying to our men, for the day before we had marched until midnight, & were tired down before we started. Our men stood the march better that I expected.” Lest his father think that he had raised an unmanly son, the green recruit affirmed that he was “determined to fight now & forever & to “rough it” like a man. I stood the walk like a man of 25 miles in 24 hours” (Sanders 2001, pp. 65–66).

Other sons focused on more mundane matters to prove their manhood and also to show their fathers that their prewar lessons had not been lost on them. Will McKee of Georgia sent his father seventy-five dollars to use as his father saw fit. Despite that sum of money, McKee could sense his father’s displeasure for not sending larger sums during such difficult times: “I expect you think hard of me for not sending my money home where it would be taken care of.” Not wanting his father to worry that some of his money might be spent on vices rather than on food for his family, McKee guaranteed his father that “I try and be save for the future” (McKee 2000, p. 56.). Though having been thrown into a life-and-death struggle, McKee sought to show his father that he had learned lessons of thriftiness from his parent’s example.

But McKee’s letter also demonstrated how the war, rather than a father’s tutelage, had shaped a generation of men. So far from home, many soldiers became the effective heads of their families and their fathers relied on them not just for monetary support but for advice as well. Oliver Wilcox Norton of Pennsylvania wrote home to his father when he learned that his brother sought to enlist. “I expect that when the call is made and recruiting commences in your vicinity, he will want to enlist, but don’t let him.... One representative from the family will do.” Norton remained convinced that his younger brother would not last long in the army. “Let him see a ditch half full of dead and wounded men piled on each other; let him see men fall all round him and hear them beg for water; let him see one-quarter of the awful sights of the battlefield, and he would be content to keep away” (Norton 1903, p. 99). The experiences that young men had witnessed during the Civil War legitimized their elevated stature in their family. By asking for his son’s advice in family matters, a father also recognized his son’s passage from boyhood into manhood. Though warfare was brutal and terrible, it served as a more effective rite of passage than a father’s teachings.

Thus a generation of young men took on a greater measure of authority because of their experience during wartime. On the other hand, many families, usually wealthy ones, had the luxury of maintaining prewar family standards. The politically powerful Clay family of Kentucky remained loyal to the Union during the war, but none of Brutus J. Clay’s sons enlisted. Instead, all three of his sons obeyed the authority of their father and stayed out of the fighting. One son, Cash, enrolled at Yale and was appalled at his treatment by what he considered abolitionist students and professors. “A man who has the least respect for his own feelings and honor cannot attend the societies. They declare all Southern men barbarians. They say ignorance and vice reign supreme in all the slave states and that we are not half as good as cannibals.” For young Cash, his loyalty to his father’s wishes and to the Union cost him abuse and social humiliation (Berry 1997, pp. 362–373).

For the slaves, however, the Civil War provided an opportunity for freedom and for separated families to reunitize. One slave, Ms. Holmes, recalled that her father, Frank, had left her with his owner’s family while he went to fight for the Confederate Army as a replacement for the youngest son of the planter’s family. Only three months after joining the Confederate Army, Frank deserted and made his way to the Union lines. There he became a Union soldier and began fighting for his freedom. While he was gone, his wife married another man and effectively abandoned Ms. Holmes, who had now come under the care of her owners. While living with her white surrogate family, Ms. Holmes learned rudimentary reading and writing but she also came into a family situation for the first time and she commented that “they took care of me just like I was their own people.” This improvement in her life lasted only briefly; when her father returned from war, he took his daughter and tried to make a new life (American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology).

Fatherhood in the Civil War became intimately connected to the happenings on the battlefield. As fathers and sons gave their lives in the conflict, families were torn apart and had to recreate the ideal family as best they could. Though not all families were harmed by the war, most sent at least one son into combat. The loss of family cohesion created a rupture in family life that antebellum Americans had worked hard to avoid. Though the family remained the integral unit of social organization after the war, the ideal family seemed to have less credibility than before. With so many fathers and sons lost to death or injury, families were forced to organize themselves in new ways directly following the war’s outcome. While fathers still held authority, the generation of soldiers who survived the conflict had experienced more hardship and was granted their own form of authority. African American fathers also had the opportunity to earn their freedom and to provide a more stable and secure home life for their families.
CHILDREN AND CHILDBEARING

The Civil War disrupted the lives of children regardless of their proximity to the fighting. Household routines, schooling, and family dynamics changed for children in the United States while parents coped with the realities of a country divided. News about the war came from adults, newspapers, and local discussion. Children wrote about their feelings and experiences, corresponded with family members in military service, and received information tailored to them in newspapers and schoolbooks.

Northern Children

Children living in the North did not suffer many of the war-related problems endured by children in the South. Food continued to flow to family tables, schools stayed open, and routines were maintained. But even with few disruptions, children could not ignore the war. With many men gone to war, children did more to help on farms and in their homes. Some, such as those in areas of Pennsylvania and in border states, witnessed short periods of violence. Newspapers featuring children’s columns attempted to explain the conflict in language children understood.

Children participated in the war effort, supplementing their daily routines with aid to soldiers. Public acknowledgments of their efforts came with graphic descriptions of how their gifts were used. In the *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* James E. Yateman, president of the Western Sanitary Committee, thanked a young St. Louis girl for saving her money to send snacks to soldiers. He explained that the men who received her snacks had lost limbs in the battle of Pittsburg Landing, and that they cried tears of joy to know that little children remembered them and sacrificed on their behalf. Jane Bradbury, who sent envelopes to Union soldiers stationed in Tennessee, received a thank-you letter from a Wisconsin man who told her the donation would allow other men to write to loved ones (Bohrnstedt 2003, p. 227). Adults did not refrain from providing children with descriptions of battle injuries, making the realities of war stand out as a stark reality to the undisturbed calm of most Northern homes.

Although the war was a central feature of their lives, children still faced the same hazards typical to children in peacetime. Often they were separated from their parents by sickness, accidents, and death unrelated to the war. Both President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) and General William T. Sherman (1820–1891) lost children during the war. Parents who suffered this plight were encouraged to celebrate the innocence of children at such a dark time in the nation’s history.

Despite the troubled times, children in the North did not suffer the same level of educational disruption that took place in the South. William Morse of Woodbury, Vermont, managed to attend school the entire winter of 1864 despite the death of his mother and the absence of his soldier father (Silber 1996, p. 165). Northern children made sacrifices through donations and hard work; their counterparts in the South struggled with daily necessities.

Southern Children

Notwithstanding their enthusiasm for the Confederate cause, many white children living in the South were subject to drastic changes in their daily routines in addition to the stresses of missing male family members. Bombardments of Vicksburg and Atlanta brought the kind of deprivation experienced by soldiers directly into the lives of children for extended periods of time. As cities such as Richmond ran low on supplies and food, children were sent out to collect scraps of useable materials. Some took on added responsibilities because their families had fled encroaching battles. Some families, such as the Bosses of Virginia, moved into the homes of relatives when the head of their household died in the war. Such extended kin networks helped parents and children struggling without a breadwinner (Cashin 2002, p. 115). Many Southern colleges and country schools shut down; those that stayed open challenged their curricula to reflect the spirit of the Confederacy (Werner 1998, p. 53).

The Confederate cause required all able-bodied people to help, and children were no exception. A reminder
in the Savannah, Georgia, *Daily News and Herald* encouraged children to use every open space to plant corn. Northern observers remarked on the adamant loyalty expressed by Southern women and children who would rather suffer than surrender. But for many, by the end of the war their suffering had gradually eclipsed the enthusiasm of earlier years. Many children had to work in the fields because of the lack of laborers, tools, food, and animals.

Some children professing Confederate loyalty lived in Union states. In Maryland, their typical war games pointed to split affections, as children on both sides of the fight emulated their favorite generals and soldiers. For some children, this play connected them to family and the larger cause.

**Slave Children**

Besides facing their usual amount of work and deprivation, slave children had to work harder to compensate the loss of labor and lack of supplies as the war lengthened. They received information about the progress of the war by listening to adults, both white and black, and many eagerly anticipated freedom. Slave families who fled to Union lines could expect little help. The “contrabands,” as escaped slaves became known, received the fewest supplies and and the least medical care from the army, and those encamped with the troops suffered outbreaks of disease, starvation, and exposure.

Northern newspapers printed touching stories of slave children aiding the Union cause. The San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* published a short song for children about a small slave girl riding to freedom on a federal cannon. Other stories of daring escapes from slavery reached Northern readers. Slave children who survived were used to teach important lessons about the themes of the war. Plymouth, Massachusetts, celebrated the baptism of a small girl born into slavery who had been rescued by a Northern nurse. Reverend Beecher reminded his congregation that the youngest victims of Southern power needed the continued efforts of all Northerners. The Union soldier William Bradbury, who visited a school for freed slaves during his service, told his children that black children varied in color and that “the whitest were not always the smartest” (Bohnstedt 2003, p. 290).

Many slave children were separated from their families as a result of the war. Some masters liquidated their assets during the war, resulting in the sale and dispersal of their slaves, or otherwise sent their slaves away from the fighting. During Confederate forays into the North, freed people were captured, moved south, and sold into slavery. African American women and children were the most likely victims of this wartime profiteering because most of their men had left home to aid the army. As the Union army pushed farther south, an increasing number of slaves escaped to the freedom of the battle lines.
Former slaves who joined the Union army often brought their families along to ensure their freedom and care, but camp following often led to dangerous outbreaks of smallpox, and the lack of supplies for these civilians brought illness and death. Some children benefited from their time in military camps, though, because it afforded them the beginnings of an education. The Liberator printed the accounts of camp teachers impressed by the enthusiasm of freed slave children despite their frequent illnesses (Silber 1996, p. 94).

Other slave families needed to be rebuilt at the end of the war. Adults separated from their children tried to locate them, and to keep older children under their control. The Freedman’s Bureau handled numerous cases of parents fighting to control the labor of their own children under constant pressure from white landowners seeking laborers (Berlin and Rowland 1997, ch. 7).

Corresponding with Children

Parents separated from their children because of the war offered advice and continued parenting via letters. Fathers serving the army in particular used letters to stay connected with the children they had left behind at home; without these expressions of affection and guidance between fathers and their children, some worried they would be forgotten. Fathers often requested information about the education and behavior of their children, who responded with news of momentous occasions such as the loss of a tooth, a sibling’s first words, or the arrival of a new farm animal. Eight-year-old James Cabot of Boston asked his father to send a cannonball or a secession dollar. The fascination with memorabilia worried some fathers, who understood the true brutality of fighting (Cashin 2002, p. 237).

Many fathers used their correspondence to inform their children of the dangers of the war. Grant Taylor of Texas reminded his children that he might not return home, and looked to the afterlife for a reunion: “O dear children be good and meet me in Heaven where we will never part anymore” (Blomquist and Taylor 2000, p. 194). William Bradbury, a Union soldier, wrote poems for his children so they could recite the simple rhymes that included his fondest memories of home life.

The frustration of separation was evident in family correspondence. Major General Lafayette McLaws expressed annoyance that his two young sons failed to write him even though they were old enough to do so (Oefinger 2002, p. 166). Isaac Brooks from Rhode Island gently chastised his children for not writing to him, and reminded them to obey their mother. In attempting to explain his absence, he wrote, “I think it is for the best and it is the duty of us all, to do what we can for our country and to preserve its integrity even to the sacrifice of our lives” (Silber 1996, p. 60). Fathers also worried about what happened in their absence. McLaws asked his wife and children to send news of his sons’ fishing and hunting expeditions, and sent specific instructions to ensure safe handling of firearms: “keep it fired off in the house…he must be careful in loading so as to keep the muzzle away from his body” (Oefinger 2002, p. 174).

Mothers shared news of daily activities in letters, too. Malinda Taylor wrote to her Confederate soldier husband frequently, telling him the difficult truth about the effect his absence had on their children. Their children missed him badly and often told people he was “outside”; the youngest child stopped asking for him a few months after his departure (Blomquist and Taylor 2000, p. 6). Some women told their husbands that their young children did not recognize their fathers from photographs. Jane Bradbury’s worried mother described the girl’s nightmares in letters to her father. Jane’s father, William Bradbury, constantly reminded his wife Mary to keep close watch of the children’s penmanship, education, and compositions. In some of his letters he chastised his children and wife for their lack of care with their writing (Bohrnstedt 2003, p. 34).

Pregnant women and those with newborns had a particularly difficult time because they were forced to depend on older children, neighbors, or extended family to care for their families during their confinements. The Bradbury family faced this situation, and William encouraged his daughter Jane to help her mother with two infants. Basic aspects of parenting such as the naming of a new baby might require frequent letters to resolve a disagreement. Many fathers never met their infant children, and others waited many months before meeting new additions to their families.

Children continued to play, learn, grow, and explore despite the stresses of war. Mothers accepted new tasks, and young people took on new responsibilities around the home. Newspapers, letters, and regular discussions kept children connected to the war effort even when the fighting happened hundreds of miles away. Fathers who feared they might never return home did not limit their parenting to reminding children to be good and respect their mothers; often they tried to explain the reasons for their absences and the potential dangers of their situation. Children away from the front lines played war games, and those closer to danger experienced the war in a much more realistic way. White Southern and slave children experienced deprivation and loss on a scale not known in the North, but no child lived through the war without changes to their daily routines.

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Extended Families

Thousands of homes were adversely affected by the Civil War as men left for extended periods or were wounded or killed. Mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles had to pull together to meet the needs of their children and their communities. A letter to Abraham Lincoln from Kentucky Union sympathizer, William Davenport, dated January 11, 1864, tells of Brigadier General James Shackelford’s family grief and turmoil. Soon after Shackelford had gone home for his wife’s funeral and returned with a heavy heart to his post, he related discouraging news about the members of the family he had just left. Davenport sent Lincoln Shackelford’s petition to return home permanently to his extended family. Davenport wrote: “On reaching home...he [Shackelford] found his mother—a widowed lady 74 years old—confined to bed and in a helpless condition—his Mother-in-law very old and Blind—his Sister a widow far gone with consumption—and his four infant children in a very dependent condition. These persons constitute[d] his family...” Davenport explained that these family members required Shackelford’s “personal attention and care and therefore he asks to be relieved of his Command and tenders his Resignation” (Davenport 1864). Davenport assured Lincoln that Shackelford remained loyal to the Union cause and to the president. The American Civil War—the proverbial “house divided”—often led to great havoc and suffering within extended families. Sidney George Fisher warned in his diary in February 1861 that “one of the evils of civil dissentions is that they produce discord between families & friends & great care should be taken to avoid disputes which may cause ill feelings to arise” (Fisher 2007, p. 379). Nothing was simple during this war. There were some people who lived in the North who sympathized with or fought for the Confederacy and some who lived in the South who remained with the Union. African Americans fought on the Union side and went to war with the Confederates. Black workers were instrumental on both sides of the divide.

Impact of Military Service

Documents and diaries from the period provide example after example of family discord. The most obvious cause of division was that one or more members of the same family split their allegiance, some joining the Union and others the Confederacy. An article by Judith Lee Hunt, “‘High with Courage and Hope’: The Middleton Family’s Civil War,” chronicles the difficulties of a family that had relatives in the North and South with divided loyalties. One sister lived in the North and her husband sought to assure her loyalty to the Union, while a brother in Charleston, South Carolina, tried to keep her allegiance with the South. The sister was in South Carolina when Fort Sumter was bombarded but left immediately, saying that it would most probably be “her last visit to friends and family in the South” for a while. One brother was killed in the war, while another member of the family, a South Carolina naval officer named Edward Middleton, decided to remain with the Union although the majority of his extended family supported the Confederacy and felt that he was shaming them by his behavior. Middleton did request to be assigned to naval patrols in the Pacific Ocean so that he would not have to participate in Civil War combat. Yet when the Confederate government attempted to seize “land, tenements...goods and chattel!” held by Union sympathizers, Middleton’s Confederate brothers had to fight to keep their property (Hunt 2000, p. 107).

A diarist reports another case in which some members of the same family fought in blue and others in gray. As the Confederate soldiers made their way through Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, toward Gettysburg, a young man who was from Pennsylvania but had joined the Rebel cause came through town and visited a relative. The observer, Rachel Cormaly, records what happened on June 24, 1863:

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Megan Birk


“Northern and Southern Lyrics.” *Daily Evening Herald*, November 11, 1862.


I was sitting on Jared’s porch [sic] when a young man (rebel) came & shook hands with Mr. Jared—a relative, his brother is in this army too. He was raised here—His mother is buried here—Mr. Jared told him he ought to go & kneel on his Mother’s grave & ask for pardon for having fought in such a bad cause, against such a good Government. Tears almost came, he said he could not well help getting in, but he would not fight in Pennsylvania. He told his officers so, he was placed under arrest awhile but was released again. Now he said he is compelled to carry a gun & that is as far as they will get toward making him fight. He was in Jackson’s Brigade (Diary of Rachel Cormany, June 24, 1863).

**African American Families**

In 1861, the Union General Benjamin F. Butler refused to return several slaves who had sought refuge at Fort Monroe in Virginia, declaring them to be “contraband of war” (Butler 1861, p. 72). Subsequently, Union leaders vacillated between allowing so-called contrabands to travel and camp with Union troops as support workers and at other times returning them to their owners. No matter what the official policy, the Union troops could not keep thousands of African American extended families from running away to their camps.

After the Emancipation Proclamation officially declared the end of slavery in the Confederacy and called for the enlistment of United States Colored Troops, black extended families often followed the soldiers. Parents and their children, grandparents, aunts, and uncles lived in contraband camps near the Union troops and received some support. In the Border States, contraband families were not as well received by the Union troops and had to provide for their needs as best as they could. Some families were hired by the Union Army or paid by individual soldiers.

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), a member of the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), recorded his impressions of contraband families in Hospital Transports: A Memoir of the Embarkation of the Sick and Wounded from the Peninsula of Virginia in the Summer of 1862:

We have on two of our boats nine contraband women, from the Lee estate... excellent workers...

The Negro quarters are decent and comfortable little houses, and a wide road between them and...
the bank which slopes to the river. [Black children] are rushing about, and tipping into the washtubs. In one cabin two small babies were being taken care of by an old woman who said she was their grandmother… Babies had the measles, which wouldn’t ‘come out’ on one of them. So she had laid him tenderly in the open clay oven, and, with hot sage-tea and an unusually large brick put to his… feet, was proceeding to develop the disease. (Olmsted 1863, p. 124)

A document from the Library of Congress provides Asa Fiske’s reminiscences about African American family life during the war. Fiske, who was assigned in 1863 to serve as assistant superintendent of contrabands for the Department of West Tennessee, directed the care of several thousand former slaves. This involved procuring food, clothing, bedding and medical supplies for them. He was also concerned about their moral and spiritual lives and on one occasion performed one marriage ceremony for 119 contraband families simultaneously. Fiske later wrote to his granddaughter, “This great Wedding day produced most remarkable results on the good order and morality of the entire camp” and he remarked that the “sacredness of the Marital compact was… rigidly observed” (Fiske 1914).

As more and more African Americans were freeing themselves by simply walking away from the plantations where they lived, whites in the South and Border States often tried to apprentice black children legally so that they would not lose their service. The families of freedmen and women, however, usually felt that apprenticeship was simply another word for slavery. A note from Lt. James DeGrey, an agent from the Freedmen’s Bureau, dated January 29, 1867, appears in *Families and Freedom*. Commenting on a woman’s attempt to have a child released from an apprenticeship, DeGrey wrote, “My belief is, the old lady wants the boy because he is now able to do Some work. The binding out of children seems to the freedmen like putting them back into Slavery. In every case where I have found out children thus far, some grandmother or fortieth cousin has come to have them released” (Fiske 1914).

In addition to trying to make African Americans remain on the plantations, Confederate armies often compelled African American families to travel with them. Rachel Cormany’s diary relates information about blacks who had come with the Confederates as they traveled to Gettysburg. She reported that the rebels… were hunting up the contrabands & driving them off by droves. O! How it grated on our hearts to have to sit quietly & look at such brutal deeds—I saw no men among the contrabands—all women & children. Some of the colored people who were raised here were taken along—I sat on the front step as they were driven by just like we would drive cattle. Some laughed & seemed not to care—but nearly all hung their heads. One woman was pleading wonderfully with her driver for her children—but all the sympathy she received from him was a rough ‘March along’—at which she would quicken her pace again. It is a query what they want with those little babies—whole families were taken. Of course when the mother was taken she would take her children. I suppose the men left thinking the women & children would not be disturbed. (*Diary of Rachel Cormany, June 18, 1863*)

On June 17, 1863, Cormany wrote that among the last to leave were some with soldiers with African Americans “on their horses behind them. How glad we are they are gone—None of our Soldiers came.” The next day Cormany admitted that the townspeople “have to be afraid to go out of our houses. A large wagon train & 500 or 600 Cavalry have just passed & it is now about 3 1/2 o’clock. hope all are through now. Many of the saddles were empty, & any amount of negroes are along” (*Diary of Rachel Cormany, June 28, 1863*).

**Letters from Home**

Some extended families simply relied on extensive correspondence during the war. One Confederate soldier, Thomas Smiley of Augusta County, Virginia, heard from his mother, father, sister, aunts, uncles, and cousins during his enlistment. Ellen Martin, one of Smiley’s aunts, warned her nephew to “prepare to meet thy God.” She also mentions that she was doing community work on behalf of the soldiers. On April 28, 1861, she wrote her beloved nephew about the state of his soul:

> Permit me to enquire whether you have made this preparation or not. Meet God you must, whether prepared or unprepared And how soon you know not, Death may summons to his presence But God has often met you, Both by his providence and by his Spirit, I cannot believe you have lived to be almost nineteen without often feeling the gentle wooings of Gods Spirit. (Ellen Martin to Thomas Smiley, April 28, 1861)

Thomas received similar admonitions from his uncle, James J. Martin, on June 4, 1861, while his cousin, Letitia Berry, wrote about the family and community events shortly afterward:

> Your fathers folks were well this morning father saw Cousin Billie in Newport. Capt Curries Company started yesterday I was in Middlebrook when they passed they all looked very lively went to Staunton in wagons, there was about twenty wagons I think. They were very well fixed, the best of any of the companies from about here, had their tents, knapsacks canteens and almost every thing necessary for a soldier, the ladies have been sewing for them in Brownsburg for two week about sixty there every days and five sewing machines. We have been sewing for you all this week in middlebrook made 61 pants, your tents
started today (Letitia Berry to Thomas Smiley, June 6, 1861).

Another cousin, Maggie Berry, wrote in July 1861, to “Dear Cousin Thomas,” and chided,

“You have no doubt come to the conclusion that I have forgotten you as I have not written to you sooner but not so my good Cousin. Your letter was written the 27th of June came to NewPort & has lain there until yesterday. I was glad to receive one more letter from my good but absent Cousin” (Maggie Berry to Thomas Smiley, July 12, 1861). This family exchanged many additional letters in which the family’s love and concern for this young soldier is evident.

The great volume of Civil War extended family official records, personal letters, diaries and reports clearly indicate that preserving the family was of paramount importance to Americans, white and black, North and South.

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Debra Newman Ham

Courtship and Marriage

In general, courtship and marriage in the United States in the nineteenth century were conducted along well-developed lines. Among the monied classes especially there existed prescribed methods for men to meet eligible women, become engaged to them, and marry them. To have a socially sanctioned marriage meant following these norms, which were reinforced and disseminated by the popular press. The media instructed readers on proper behavior and the best method for catching a prospective spouse, and also on how to conduct oneself once married. Many publications written for male and female audiences weighed in on the question of courtship and marriage rituals.

The October 1864 edition of Godey's Lady's Book discussed some of the methods that young nineteenth-century girls used to divine the identity of their future spouse. In a dispatch titled “From a Correspondent,” an anonymous author asserts that “All Hallow E'en...[is] supposed particularly efficacious for the practice of charms of all kinds relating to love and marriage” (p. 358). One of the more interesting methods of discovering the identity of one’s future husband involved the sowing of hempseed in one’s garden or a nearby field. “I have heard many of my mother’s juvenile friends trying the experiment,” the author claims, “and have performed my own part, years ago, in such a ceremony, as the clock tolled the midnight hour, pale with fear and trembling...[N]o spectre [sic] came mowing after me, and the only result was an extraordinary crop of thistles in our garden” (p. 358). Such activities were largely pursued by young girls, as older ones ready for marriage were too busy refining their manners and trying to find a husband.

Courtship and Character

The American Phrenological Journal, a publication devoted to the notion that a person’s character traits can be determined by an analysis of the shape of the head, seemed especially interested in courtship procedures. John Henry Hopkins (1792–1868), who was the Episcopal Bishop of Vermont for many years and became the eighth Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States in 1865, contributed an article titled “Choosing a Wife” to the September 1863 issue of the journal. The bishop instructed men on the methods of