

ANGEL RINGS: PRISON JEWELRY, FEMALE AID CIRCLES, AND
CONFEDERATE RESISTANCE IN THE CIVIL WAR NORTH

by

ANNELLE WINIFRED BRUNSON

(Under the Direction of Stephen William Berry II)

ABSTRACT

This thesis employs a material culture lens to examine the finger rings carved by Confederate prisoners and worn and sold by female civilians within the North. It centers on Elizabeth Church Robb, one of the many elite white women who, under the guise of humanitarianism, banded together to supply rebel prisoners, raise funds for the Confederate cause, and even help soldiers escape and return south to fight. Through the carved rings, preserved prisoner-of-war correspondence, and partisan newspaper accounts, we discover pockets of outright Confederate resistance—and even treason—north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The expansive sale and display of jewelry from Union prisons makes a compelling case for why the “Confederacy” needs to be understood as a *political* entity rather than a *geographical* one, as well as the prevalence and importance of women in the North who acted upon their own volition in supporting the Confederate cause to keep millions of African Americans in bondage.

INDEX WORDS: Prisoners of War, Material Culture, Women’s History, Confederate Resistance, Lost Cause Martyrdom

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Anthony and Susan Brunson,
for showing me the love of a family unit.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction – Ties That Bind: Confederate Prisoners and Female Sympathizers	1
1. The Southern Lady in the North	7
2. The Traitor Among Us	16
3. The Martyr Remembered	27
Bibliography	32

Introduction

Ties That Bind: Confederate Prisoners and Female Sympathizers

Standing in an antique-furnished bedroom, I twirl 150 years of heritage in my fingers. The gutta-percha ring glitters in the midday light; the brass adornment bears the initials “E. C. R.” of my research subject—Elizabeth Church Robb.¹ As the family story goes, a Confederate prisoner carved the ring in appreciation for Robb’s wartime benevolence to soldiers held in Chicago, Illinois. Romanticized stories abound about these resourcefully crafted jewels. It is easy to picture the lonely rebel prisoner, son of a distant Southern family, sitting on his cot, whittling time away in the name of a sympathetic woman. “I have become quite a mechanic in the art of ringmaking,” prisoner J. G. Anderson mused to one female recipient from his barracks at Fort Delaware in 1864.² Lost Cause promoters have remembered these wartime rings exclusively as gifts to family members, friends, and supporters of the prisoner and his cause.³ While this is part of prison jewelry’s provenance, this one tiny ring is also the key to a whole hidden dimension of the American Civil War.

Such vignettes long retold by proponents of the Lost Cause fail to capture the scale, scope, and significance of the Confederate “ring trade” at its height. Archaeologist David R. Bush’s microhistory of Wesley Makely, a prisoner at Johnson’s Island, uncovers how one soldier

¹ Prison rings were commonly referred to as gutta percha, even when made from other materials.

² J. G. Anderson, Fort Delaware, to Anna Miller, October 10, 1864, transcription in POW Collection (hereafter POWC), American Civil War Museum, Richmond; all references to the POW Collection herein are to the transcriptions, the originals are now at the Virginia Historical Society.

³ A similar practice of ring exchange may have existed in the South; however, there were fewer Northerners living in the South than vice versa at the outbreak of the conflict, and the Confederacy under the Sequestration Acts engaged in a deeper purge of pro-Union activists; for more on Unionists in the South, see Thomas G. Dyer, *Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

experienced jewelry making during confinement.⁴ Focusing on a single place, Elmira, New York, Michael Gray centers the ring trade in our understanding of Civil War prison economies at large.⁵ Known for his work on Confederate flag memory, museum curator John Coski has also emphasized the contributions of Federal guards to the crafting process and their roles in selling the prisoner's jewelry.⁶ However, despite the recent historiographical preoccupation with material culture, artifacts made by prisoners of war remain largely sidelined from other studies of Civil War relics. Historian Joan E. Cashin has pushed the whole field forward, yet she still places "objects generated by prisoners of war" to the periphery, disclaiming they "were created under duress and present a different set of issues about symbolic value" from other objects produced and trafficked by whites during the war.⁷ For all of these scholars, the ring trade becomes synonymous with the men who made and disbursed prison jewelry, leaving out civilian women's fundamental contributions to the production, marketing, and sales of the goods.⁸ This thesis builds upon the study of Confederate prison jewelry through a critical examination of the women who bought, wore, and sold it.

Beyond the beauty of its intricately carved symbols, prison jewelry held deeper meanings; it signified the political views of not only its makers but also its wearers and sellers.

⁴ For a material culture microhistory of Wesley Makely, a Johnson's Island prisoner and his ring crafting, see David R. Bush, *I Fear I Shall Never Leave This Island: Life in a Civil War Prison* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).

⁵ For an in-depth study of the ring trade inside Civil War prisons, see Michael Gray, *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and Its Civil War Prison* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001).

⁶ John M. Coski, "The Museum of the Confederacy's Prisoner of War Art Collections," *North-South Trader's Civil War* 31, no. 6 (2006), 21–30.

⁷ Joan E. Cashin, *War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁸ Similar instances of women's wartime political dedications through their jewelry appear across time and place. In the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932 in São Paulo, Brazil, a group of upper-class women, who donated their gold jewelry in exchange of "proudly wearing the [inscribed] metal band" representing their cause, became "the visual embodiment of the 'Campanha de Ouro' (Gold Campaign)." For more on this comparative perspective of the ways gender and class intersect, see Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 183.

This brings us to a larger, more systemic issue in the historiography of American women's wartime politics.⁹ Female spies remain an enduring staple of Civil War history, yet they are most often portrayed as harmless heroines.¹⁰ Ladies sneaking prisoners out under their hoopskirts and even firing guns under "perilous" circumstances, captivate the average reader with tales of playful gender inversion. The truth is that those abetted escapes returned soldiers to their regiments; those smuggling operations restocked Confederate supplies; those guns took lives. Stephen Towne may be right that "popular histories of espionage activities in American history have given undue emphasis to such 'amateur' efforts, while usually neglecting the more productive, if less thrilling, endeavors of professionals, who were often in the military."¹¹ But his point needs clarity: is his understanding of "productive" exclusive to men? Union supporters, Federal officers, and the Commander-in-Chief saw through the screen of female "aid work" to recognize the women wearing Confederate prisoner's rings as important political actors, even and especially when their actions were considered treasonous. Historians need to do the same.¹²

"Angel Rings: Prison Jewelry, Female Aid Circles, and Confederate Resistance in the Civil War North" draws together the historiographies of Civil War prisons, material culture, and women's political action to (re)examine the finger rings carved by Confederate prisoners and worn and sold by female civilians within the Union. Through the rings themselves, preserved

⁹ To be sure, the wartime heroine is not exclusive to American history. For instance, much has been written on the elusive World War I spy, Mata Hari, whose stage name became a symbol for all female spies. See Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (New York: New York University, 2003), 126–144.

¹⁰ Edwin Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 5.

¹¹ Stephen E. Towne, *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland*, Ohio University Press Series on Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 3.

¹² For a look at female Confederate resistance in Missouri, see Thomas F. Curran, "'Making War on Women' and Women Making War: Confederate Women Imprisoned in St. Louis during the Civil War," *The Confluence: A Publication of Lindenwood University Press* 2 (Spring–Summer 2011), 4–15; although border states are beginning to come into focus for scholars of Confederate women's aid work, much remains in connecting their wartime activities across the North.

prisoner-of-war correspondence, and partisan newspaper accounts, we push beyond Copperheadism and recent scholarship on guerrilla warfare in the Upper South to discover pockets of outright Confederate resistance—and even treason—north of the Mason-Dixon Line.¹³ Operating under the guise of humanitarianism, Elizabeth Church Robb and other elite white women banded together to supply rebel prisoners, raise funds for the Confederate cause, and even help soldiers escape and return south to fight. Confederate-leaning newspaper writers softened and swept under the rug of memory the partisanship of their aid, but I argue that Union authorities' gradual acknowledgement of the military threat these women posed culminated in Mary Surratt's infamous execution. The expansive sales and displays of jewelry from Union prisons makes a compelling case for why the "Confederacy" needs to be understood as a *political* entity rather than a *geographical* one, as well as the prevalence and importance of Northern women who acted upon their own volition in supporting the Confederate cause to perpetuate slavery and keep millions of African Americans in bondage.

Elizabeth Robb's political motivations behind her aid work in Union prisons are revealed one letter at a time in archives throughout the country.¹⁴ Collections in the Southern Historical Collection in Chapel Hill, NC and the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, VA contain correspondence from numerous Confederate prisoners to similarly situated women. Many of these letters to Confederate-sympathizers in the North, as well as those to family members at home, offer insight into the dynamics between prisoners and the women who supplied them and their cause. After the war, Lost Cause adherents martyred these women as guardian angels to the

¹³ For Copperhead resistance generally, see Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Most of Robb's surviving correspondence is in the Howell Cobb Collection at the Hargrett Library in Athens, GA and the James Robb Collection at the Williams Research Center in New Orleans, LA. Her brother-in-law's family papers are at Starkville, MS. And her daughter Sallie Craig's enrollment records from the late 1850s remain at Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem, PA. Several City of New York municipal records note her death in 1868.

soldiers. In the case of Elizabeth Robb's obituary and remembrances, they paralleled her death to the prisoners she aided using her symptoms stemming from her concurrent battle with ovarian cancer. Period medical literature in the Historical Medical Library at The College of Physicians of Philadelphia helps to situate Robb's experience in what it was like to die of female cancer in the Victorian era. In addition to wartime letters and medical journals, partisan newspapers suggest how the public viewed women's aid to Confederate prisoners. All of these sources help tell the story of the women behind the prison jewelry.

In this thesis, I make three related arguments. First, like the liberty head pennies Peace Democrats wore to identify themselves, prison jewelry became potent symbols of Southern-sympathizing women's sometimes open, sometimes clandestine Confederate activity in the North.¹⁵ Second, the benevolent ladies who wore these rings were the same women who provided aid, passed information, and helped prisoners escape and return to their regiments. They also sold the gutta-percha rings through women's circles and at sanitary fairs, which raised significant funds for the Confederate cause and helped sustain morale. And finally, the Lost Cause architects used tales of female aid work at Union prisons and the war-produced jewelry to emphasize women's maternal natures while eliding their political motivations. These rings were gifts, but they were also symbols of massive Confederate resistance. Abraham Lincoln identified the "fire in the rear"—the shots his war effort was taking from *within* the North—as among the most withering threats to the Union.¹⁶ I argue that we should take him seriously, which means we need to take Confederate-sympathizing prison aid work seriously as evidence of women's political expression.

¹⁵ Scott Reynolds Nelson and Carol Sheriff, *A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America's Civil War, 1854-1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 187.

¹⁶ Charles Sumner to Francis Lieber, January 17, 1863, quoted in Edward L. Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, Volume 4 (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1893), 114.

What I am twirling in my fingers then is not a ring but a portal. As historians, we have spent considerable time focused on the gendered dimensions of Confederate resistance within the South and individual Border States.¹⁷ “Occupied Women” have become staples in our understanding of how the guerrilla war was fought—and arguably won.¹⁸ However important, this scholarly focus overshadows Confederate women in the North, reducing their acts of aid to one-off aberrations, or more commonly, explaining it away as impartial humanitarianism. Prison jewelry takes us into the unfolding of Confederate resistance from Illinois to New York, and reminds us that behind the benevolent veil of local prison aid work is a story of elite women’s deep economic and political commitment to preserving the Confederacy.

¹⁷ This thesis seeks to expand the argument that Union soldiers understood Confederate women’s undermining of the Federal war effort as serious threats in the South to those operating in the North; see Jacqueline Glass Campbell, *When Sherman Marched North from the Sea: Resistance on the Confederate Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁸ LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

1. The Southern Lady in the North

During the American Civil War, more than 400,000 soldiers were taken prisoner and sent to one of over 150 prisons operating between 1861 and 1865. Camp Douglas in Chicago, Illinois occupied a notorious position among Union prisons, located within a major city, operating much of the war, and at one point confining over 12,000 Confederates. Like many military camps, sanitary conditions worsened with overcrowding and the subsequent lack of potable water and fresh food. Coupled with the harsh winters on the banks of windswept Lake Michigan, Camp Douglas earned its reputation as “eighty acres of hell.”

Camp Douglas began the war as a long established training ground for the Federal army. Within days, a group of women from Grace Episcopal Church formed the Camp Douglas Aid Society to provide supplies for sick and injured troops.¹⁹ After the battle of Fort Donelson in February 1862, the camp was transformed into a barracks for captured Confederates. “Such nice things as the ladies, especially from Kentucky, prepared, and took down to Camp Hospitals and dealt out with their own fair hands,” wrote the camp reverend, “naturally made the rebs open their eyes and mouths, and, I think, as they swallowed the good things, began to reason, we were not such bitter enemies after all!”²⁰ Although some locals came to gawk at the prisoners, most came in “a self-appointed detachment” to provide food and clothes.²¹ While the women argued that their actions were a mere extension of household caretaking, many Northerners quickly

¹⁹ Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of Chicago: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, Volume 2 (Chicago: A. T. Andreas Co., 1885), 324; the Aid Society appeared to provide aid to *all* soldiers until it merged with other societies late in 1863.

²⁰ Rev. E. B. Tuttle, *The History of Camp Douglas: Including Official Report of Gen. B. J. Sweet: with Anecdotes of the Rebel Prisoners* (Chicago: J. B. Walsh & Co., 1865), 11.

²¹ William Bross, *Biographical Sketch of the Late Gen. B. J. Sweet: History of Camp Douglas* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1878), 13.

began to suspect their motives were less than purely benevolent. The *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, immediately protested “the practice of allowing daily admittance to half frantic female rebels,” for their blatant support of the prisoners’ cause necessitated the commandant to “close the gates and bar access to these crinoline traitors.”²²

Elizabeth Church Robb was one of these “crinoline traitors.” Robb had moved to Chicago, following her second marriage to Unionist banker James Robb, after a long reign as the belle of Athens, Georgia. The daughter of University of Georgia president and slaveholder Alonzo Church, Robb’s childhood peers bowed to the inevitable by crowning her May Day Queen in 1837.²³ Although little else is known of Robb’s youth, her peculiar access to politically charged lectures and debates by college students, professors, and household visitors seem to have helped shape her as a relatively outspoken, political, and entitled woman. This confidence only strengthened with her first marriage to Lieutenant Colonel Lewis S. Craig, and her subsequent widowhood upon his death in 1852.

The Robbs’ early marriage in 1860 seemed propitious enough. “We like the house we have taken very much, it is very convenient and comfortable,” she wrote to her only child Sallie Craig at boarding school, “it was partly furnished and when entirely so will be very nice.”²⁴ But any hope for a happily ever after vanished with the firing at Fort Sumter. Robb’s family wished she were not in “exile from her own Sunny South” yet recognized the benefit of having a Confederate sympathizer in the North. Her sister wrote how “truly grateful that a kind Heavenly Father has permitted her to be an instrument of mercy to our noble prisoners.” From the first train

²² *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 1862.

²³ Augustus Longstreet Hull, *Annals of Athens, Georgia, 1801–1901* (Athens: Banner Job Office, 1906), 125–126.

²⁴ Elizabeth Robb, Chicago, to Sallie Craig, Bethlehem, PA, October 17, 1860, James Robb Collection, MSS 265 (hereafter JRC), Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans; Sallie Craig attended Moravian Seminary from January 1858 to 1861.

of Confederates brought into Chicago, Robb sent word home that she “had been permitted to go to the prisoners, night and day—such destitution and sickness she never saw. Some had no article of clothing save those they fought in at Donelson, many had died, and many were very sick & that she was doing all she could to relieve them.”²⁵

Perhaps Robb’s greatest asset in gaining access into Camp Douglas was her seamless ability to move between political groups. Less than two years before in a celebration of nuptials “at Gov Fish’s, which reminded me very much of the Washington dinners & persons,” Robb recalled to her best friend Mary Ann Cobb, “although a B. R. [Black Republican, Fish] is an exceedingly agreeable person.” “You said you hoped I would not turn B. R. when I got to Chicago if I have any politics. I am a Democrat and unless I am left by the Party, expect to remain so....”²⁶ Robb had solidified her sociopolitical connections as a widow sojourning in the White House during the winter of 1858.²⁷ Despite how ardent Robb’s views were—and they certainly were ardent—her access to the highest social caste and chameleonic personality allowed her to blend into cross-party spaces.

On June 2, 1862, Robb picked up the *Chicago Journal* to find her husband, who had been nominated Military Governor of Louisiana by Lincoln, was a Breckenridge democrat “and has contributed nothing from his wealth for the aid of the soldiers or the war.”²⁸ After a restless night, she ate a small bite and marched straight to the editor’s office. Asking for Mr. Wilson, “I then took his article and dissected it before his mental vision, told him of your having given \$500 to the US Sanitary Commission and how much your wife had given to every strong minded

²⁵ Elvira Lee to Mary Ann Cobb, May 3, 1862, Howell Cobb family papers, ms 1376 (hereafter HCP), Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.

²⁶ Elizabeth Robb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 2, 1860, HCP.

²⁷ William B. McCash, *Thomas R. R. Cobb (1823–1862): The Making of a Southern Nationalist* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 84.

²⁸ *Racine Journal*, June 4, 1862, reprinted from *Chicago Journal*, June 2, 1862.

woman like Mrs. Hoge who had called on her, told him you were not a Breckenridge Democrat and told him everything else that I ought and nothing that I ought not.”²⁹ No matter her own convictions, Robb certainly was not going to let the local newspaper slander her husband’s good name—or hers. The paper had emphasized “the fact that members of his family here are known to sympathize strongly with the secessionists, should have caused the President to hesitate before appointing him to so delicate and responsible a position.”³⁰ Two days later, the *Journal* retracted the report and claimed that James Robb “expressed himself in emphatic terms in favor of the Union and in denunciation of secession...has contributed five times more than any other citizen of Chicago to the fund of the Sanitary Commission;” and more importantly, “his family has never hesitated to contribute such aid as was in their power for the comfort of our sick and wounded soldiers, when called upon to do so.”³¹ When James Robb ultimately declined the appointment, Elizabeth Robb wrote “You did not ask any wifely advice about your Governorship so I did not presume to give it, but I can say that I am delighted some one else has been appointed.”³²

As president of the Chicago and Alton Railroad and a financier in New York, James Robb spent much of his time away from home. During a typical moment of loneliness, Elizabeth Robb wrote to her daughter then living in Athens, “my heart goes out towards my birthplace recalling familiar scenes, dwelling upon incidents which for a long time have been hidden in the store house of memory, and vainly endeavoring to picture to myself the sadly altered condition of affairs, since last I left the locality around which my affections linger...and can only say that

²⁹ Elizabeth Robb to James Robb, June 4, 1862, JRC.

³⁰ *Racine Journal*, June 4, 1862, reprinted from *Chicago Journal*, June 2, 1862.

³¹ *New York Times*, June 8, 1862, reprinted from *Chicago Journal*, undated.

³² Elizabeth Robb to James Robb, June 11, 1862, JRC.

my heart is with you all.”³³ Occasionally Robb wrote out her “sad thoughts” to her husband who loved her “more than anyone else in this part of Yankeedom,” claiming she knew “nothing beyond the limits of our house, which I have not left for over three weeks.”³⁴ Robb’s spells of depression were broken only when the North flooded with her countrymen: Confederate prisoners.

Joining a circle of Chicago women who began to bond over issues of supporting Camp Douglas prisoners, Robb found her purpose. One Confederate recalled “Mrs. Philip Larmon, Mrs. J. H. Larmon, Mrs. Marshall, Mrs. Belle Waller, Miss Pet Boone, Mrs. Robb” and Mary Morris, among others “visited the prisoners, nursed the sick, fed the hungry, and clothed the suffering.”³⁵ In an effort to prevent scurvy, “Mrs. Morris and other ladies of Chicago sent in seed, and prevailed on the commandant to allow the prisoners to cultivate vegetables in the ground between the fence and the dead line....”³⁶ News of the women’s efforts swiftly made its way South, reassuring Southern mothers that their boys were in good hands; a process that condensed Confederate solidarity and nationalism on both sides of the Union line.

Stories arose of similar groups at other Union prisons. “Mesdames Dresser, Bradford, Pope, and Brown, all Southern women by birth, often went to Camp Butler and took delicacies to the Confederate prisoners.”³⁷ Along the coast, prisoners were eager to circulate with the ladies who traveled by boat to visit. “You cannot feel more deeply than I do” wrote one Fort Delaware prisoner of “the inexorable fate that prevented my seeing you & Mrs. R again before your final

³³ Elizabeth Robb to Sallie Craig, December 11, 1862, JRC.

³⁴ Elizabeth Robb to James Robb, June 4, 1862 and July 23, 1862, JRC.

³⁵ Thomas A. Head, *Campaigns and Battles of the Sixteenth Regiment, Tennessee Volunteers, in the War Between the States* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, 1885), 485.

³⁶ Deadlines defined the boundaries of Civil War prisons, which if crossed, prisoners could be shot dead; T. M. Page, “The Prisoners of War,” *Confederate Veteran* 8 (1900), 63.

³⁷ Bruce Alexander Campbell, *The Sangamon Saga* (Springfield: Phillips Brothers, Inc., 1976), 98.

departure from the Island.”³⁸ Care baskets taken into the prisons were soon overtaken by packages sent through the mail, a result of both visitation impediments and the women’s desire to reach more captives.

Progressively, female aid work morphed from ad hoc, informal donations into a coordinated and sustained effort, requiring a more sophisticated response from local, state, and federal government, including a permit system. Prisoner A. H. Hutchinson catalogued in his journal a correspondence “with Mrs. [Elizabeth] Robb,” when he sent her a permit for clothing, received, and answered her letters.³⁹ Another sent Adeline Egerton, a Baltimore sympathizer, “a Permit, from [Commandant] Capt. Ahl. You will observe that the permit is general, that is, you need not be confined to the articles mentioned in the letter, but can send any article in the clothing line.”⁴⁰ By 1863, most prisoners had to obtain a permit from their commandant to be given to the person intending to send a package, and then have the label placed on the box to identify its contents. A Fort Delaware captive recalled a “multitude of things – boxes - boxes packages - bundles arriving daily in the post for prisoners. It is often a marvel to me how they can be disposed of with any accuracy before the next cargo comes.”⁴¹

Among the supplies that women provided was morale. Sometimes the men asking for assistance would flirt with their pen-pal sympathizers, prompting the women to disclose their marital status; “you feared I would be disappointed when I heard you was a married lady, but you are only mistaken for I appreciate a correspondence with you as highly as if you were a single lady of only sixteen.” This came after the soldier heard that Egerton had given “the ring I

³⁸ J. T. Dowell, Fort Delaware, to Adeline Egerton, September 19, 1862, Adeline Egerton Letters, 1856–1869, Accession 38559 (hereafter AEL), Personal Papers Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond. The “Mrs. R” referred to here is most likely Mary Rhodes of Baltimore.

³⁹ A. H. Hutchinson, “A. H. Hutchinson Civil War Diary: Transcription,” *Thomas Memorial Collection* 6 (1864–1865).

⁴⁰ Jacob G. Bier, Fort Delaware, to Adeline Egerton, May 16, 1865, AEL.

⁴¹ E. M. Stone, Fort Delaware, to Miss Miller, August 25, 1864, POWC.

sent you to a young lady. And I must [not] think you did not appreciate it.” He went on to tell her “I will not think so if you will accept another....I can send you one with your name carved on it or all most any other sort that you want.”⁴² While the rings given here did not signify a matrimonial bond, they did symbolize a pledge between the prisoner and the sympathetic wearer—representing a kind of spiritual sponsorship.

Most finger jewelry in the United States during the nineteenth century served to link givers and receivers. “You ask if we use the ring in our ceremony?” Elizabeth Craig wrote to her fiancé James Robb in 1860, “It is just as the parties desire on the occasion. I was first married with a ring and like the form, but you can do just as you like about it.”⁴³ Wedding rings, the most common bands, served as symbols of exclusivity, mutual recognition, and spiritual bondage.⁴⁴ Living in a culture steeped in Christian ideology, Civil War Americans readily inferred biblical significance from their rings. Genesis tells of the Pharaoh’s placing of a *tabba`ath* upon Joseph’s hand. Translated from Hebrew, *tabba`ath* means signet—representing one’s signature—hereby implying a ring sealed with the Holy Spirit. Joseph’s acceptance of God’s authority through the signet is the first of many passages where a sanctified ring is given to a receptive servant.⁴⁵ A female sympathizer’s acceptance of a prisoner’s ring symbolized both her commitment to the soldier and a vow to the Confederacy for which it stood.

Baltimorean E. Baker, for instance, thanked a prisoner for “the beautiful ring you so kindly made me” and told him “it will be highly prized, not only for its intrinsic value, but as a

⁴² T. P. Bentley, Point Lookout, to Adeline Egerton, April 15, 1864, AEL.

⁴³ Elizabeth Craig to James Robb, January 22, 1860, JRC; Elizabeth Robb’s first husband, Colonel Lewis S. Craig, had been killed on a boundary expedition in 1852 by military deserters near Fort Yuma.

⁴⁴ Vicki Howard, “A ‘Real Man’s Ring’: Gender and the Invention of Tradition,” *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 4 (2003), 840; George Frederick Kunz, *Rings for the Finger* (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1917).

⁴⁵ James Hastings, John A. Selbie, A. B. Davidson, S. R. Driver, and Henry Barclay Swete, *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature, and Contents, Including the Biblical Theology*, Volume 4 (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 286.

gift of a kind friend.”⁴⁶ The ring, like the preceding aid, served to connect the prisoner with a “rebel young lady between whom and myself there is no bond of interest, no tie [except] that both are rebels.”⁴⁷ Another Confederate said it clearer: “Twas not of the name, but of the cause in which he had suffered” that led women to project their “kind feeling [onto] the prisoner.”⁴⁸ Determined to support the Confederacy despite residing in enemy territory, women sought an aegis for their prison aid work.

Religion provided the strongest inoculation for women to aid Confederate prisoners. Catholic nuns were especially shielded from accusations of political leanings, given the Church’s longstanding history of non-partisan almsgiving.⁴⁹ Quaker women (and other abolitionists) wielded a similar defense through their involvement with antebellum prison reform. A New York Quaker active in the movement became known as the “angel of light,” for her relief efforts were “so universally known and respected...that all prisons, all public benevolent institutions are open to her.”⁵⁰ With the combination of churches pledging support to prisoners, Acts vindicating the imprisoned Peter through God’s timely deliverance of an angel, and the Victorian transformation of angels into anatomically-female comforters, sympathizing women became the fitting object of the virtuous label.

Female aid workers in Union prisons were merely one group of humanitarians elevated to merciful ‘angels.’ In some cases, the women who led the United States, Western, and Christian

⁴⁶ E. Baker, Baltimore, to Ambrose Green, January 10, 1865, Ambrose George Green Papers #5490, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁴⁷ H. B. Davidson, Fort Warren, to Asenath Harwood, May 22, 1862, James K. Harwood Papers, ms 1022 (hereafter HP), Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

⁴⁸ John Gregg to Asenath Harwood, May 2, 1862, HP.

⁴⁹ For an account of Catholics ministering to Confederate prisoners, see Betty Ann McNeil, ed. *Balm of Hope: Charity Afire Impels Daughters of Charity to Civil War Nursing* (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, DePaul University, 2015), 87–110.

⁵⁰ Fredrika Bremer, Adolph B. Benson, and Carrie Chapman Catt, *America of the Fifties: Letters of Fredrika Bremer* Volume 23 (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1924), 325.

Sanitary Commissions were the same ones providing for Confederate captives.⁵¹ The angelic status ascribed to benevolent women, especially those of devout religion, afforded them a protection in their activities that extended well into the Civil War. It was not until 1864 that the Commissary-General of Prisoners, William Hoffman, grew tired of the privileged access granted to Confederate women operating under religious guises, stating “I am under the impression that the Sisters of Charity take advantage of their position to carry information from and to prisoners which is contraband, and if this is so, they cannot under any circumstances, be employed at the hospital.”⁵²

All of this only meant, however, that Confederate women in the North had a tremendous veil for their activities and an opportunity to push humanitarianism all the way to the gates of treason.

⁵¹ For a thorough history of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, see Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); on Northern women's relief efforts and organizing generally, see Jeanie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁵² W. Hoffman to Joseph T. Copeland, Alton, IL, June 10, 1864, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereafter OR) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), Series II, Volume VII, 221.

2. The Traitor Among Us

By the time Confederate-sympathizing women walked out of the prison with a ring on their finger, they had truly found their cause. They moved from ministering to one (sometimes related) soldier in a single prison to roving across the North, raising money for the Confederate cause, collecting and supplying information, and lobbying the Union government. “Although known as the agent of the State of Wisconsin,” Western Sanitarian Cordelia A. P. Harvey paid “angel visits” to those in prison with “little regard to state lines,” for which she was remembered doing “truly national work.”⁵³ Prisoner accounts often made note of the long distances from which women traveled and sent supplies. “Mrs. Battel...passed the ordeal of insulting guards and wearisome travel, to visit the suffering and lonely, in prison.”⁵⁴ “Mrs. Clark,” another woman of wealth, “worked and traversed the four sections of the country, to assist in alleviating the sufferings of prisoners.”⁵⁵ And in 1863, Elizabeth Robb wrote to her husband, “Tomorrow I want to go to Baltimore to remain until Monday, I hear there is a poor boy from Geo (not far from my home) who has lost his leg and I want to see him.”⁵⁶ Her old friend Harriet Lane received notice that she had “passed 3 days in Baltimore with Mrs. Gwin & the latter writes me ‘She is the king (Mrs. Robb) of rebels. I wish you could see her.’”⁵⁷ Reports like these show fellow

⁵³ L. P. Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan, *Heroines of the Rebellion: Womans Work in the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1888), 267.

⁵⁴ Joseph Barbière, *Scraps from the Prison Table, at Camp Chase and Johnson’s Island* (Doylestown, PA: W.W.H. Davis, 1868), 259.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 224.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Robb to James Robb, January 15, 1863, JRC.

⁵⁷ Sophie Plitt to Harriet Lane, February 2, 1863, James Buchanan and Harriet Lane Johnston Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington.

sympathizers' acknowledgment of Elizabeth Robb's efforts and the overall wartime mobility of elite women in the North.

Robb traveled freely from Chicago to Philadelphia into Baltimore and up to New York along railroads affiliated with her husband. In 1864, Sallie Craig wrote home that her step-father had left the Chicago and Alton Railroad and "accepted the Presidency of a R. R. in the East, so for the winter at least we are settled in the town of Meadville, Pa."⁵⁸ "I have not made my fortune yet," Craig noted, "although Mother has made an investment in order she says to be able to procure some outer and inner-vestments for our soldiers."⁵⁹ This wealthy corridor from Chicago to New York was lined with hotbeds of secessionist sentiment. "Some ladies of wealth in Baltimore...wrote to a city clergyman here [in Chicago] to employ a careful person to learn the wants of such [prisoners], and supply what they had provided."⁶⁰ As this recollection suggests, religious congregations afforded women an expansive network of known sympathizers and clergymen who helped them skirt arrest. When Elizabeth Robb's friend and fellow Georgian Reverend W. T. Brantly of Philadelphia sought to return home in 1861, at his slave-owning wife's inducement, the newspaper reported he "expects to pass through our lines without difficulty, as a minister of the gospel."⁶¹ Shortly thereafter, the State Department issued a notice that letters to and from ministers would be subject to inspection given their privileged correspondence had been "abused for disloyal practices."⁶²

⁵⁸ Sallie Craig to Jane Church Whitner, November 27, 1864, Sanders, Lee and Sargent Families Papers (hereafter LP), Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries, Starkville; James Robb was briefly president of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad in 1864.

⁵⁹ Sallie Craig to Jane Church Whitner, November 27, 1864, LP; Sallie Craig left Bethlehem for Athens in 1861, and sometime after 1862 when the Church's had died, she went back North to live with her mother.

⁶⁰ Tuttle, *The History of Camp Douglas*, 13.

⁶¹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 26, 1861.

⁶² *Baltimore Sun*, October 25, 1862.

In all of their subterfuge, women's prison jewelry served to suggest membership in these underground circles yet preserve plausible deniability. Even nineteenth-century fiction writers embraced the furtive symbols: "One of these gutta percha circlets I wore habitually...because it stamped me as a Confederate sympathizer, when any other emblem or device would not have been allowed."⁶³ This passage aptly captures prison rings' recognizability as rebel identification, similar to butternut breastpins.⁶⁴

Women were known to be "especially prominent in the disloyal display" of pins, viewing them as "emblematic of the southern soldiers, who were uniformed in goods dyed brown with butter-nut hulls."⁶⁵ While the semantics of rings and pins may seem trivial, these tiny symbols held serious meaning to their bearers. Historian Richard Nation describes an incident in the Hoosier hills of Indiana where the snatching of a girl's pin resulted in gunfire and the death of a man.⁶⁶ In Clark County, Ohio, the Democratic newspaper relayed a church riot where "a resolute, brave" Lizzie Miller, "knowing her rights and how to maintain them, heroically defended herself to the last" against four to five abolitionist women, "and came out of the conflict sustaining no injury, except that some of the ribbons were torn from her bonnet." Walking home unscathed, Miller wore her butternut pin "in triumph."⁶⁷ Following another

⁶³ E. W. Latimer, "The Confession of an Accomplice," *The Cosmopolitan* 13 (1892), 463.

⁶⁴ Butternut pins were worn by men and women to symbolize allegiance with the Confederacy and Copperhead values; for more on the terms and symbolism, see Albert Matthews, *Origin of Butternut and Copperhead* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1918).

⁶⁵ Samuel Alanson Lane, *Fifty Years and Over of Akron and Summit County* (Akron, OH: Beacon Job Department, 1892), 415; Jehu Z. Powell, ed. *History of Cass County, Indiana: From Its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*, Volume 1 (Chicago and New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1913), 186.

⁶⁶ Richard Franklin Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana, 1810–1870*, *Midwestern History and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 208.

⁶⁷ *LaCrosse Democrat*, September 11, 1863, reprinted from *Clark County Democrat*, undated.

“copperhead episode” in Ohio where ladies devolved into a knock-down-drag-out at church, twenty-two women were reported on the following Sabbath present with guns and bowies.⁶⁸

Finally, it should be noted that prison jewelry functioned as a form of wartime currency. “I am vain enough to believe too they were appreciated not for their value at all,” wrote an imprisoned officer who had sent a pin and a ring to the Pennsylvania woman who had supplied him; he preferred to think of the jewelry “as a simple offering of an honest grateful heart.”⁶⁹

This coy cat and mouse game between prisoner and female sympathizer eventually gave way to the less glorious act of direct barter. “I am very much in need of Some US funds if it is convenient for you to furnish me with a small amt,” to which the prisoner proposed, “if You will do so I will send you some nice rings.”⁷⁰ Greenbacks were a common request among prisoners because they could be spent at the sutler’s store or after release, meaning the women served as centers of currency exchange. Prison jewelry’s resale value derived from its novelty factor and the horrific conditions in which “a ring of ‘Rebel’ manufacture” was crafted.⁷¹ This sacralized value-add mirrored antebellum traditions of mourning jewelry.⁷² Rings made by suffering prisoners generated interest for Confederate sympathizers as symbols of solidarity (and for Unionists as trophies of the enemy).

As the ring trade rose in importance and scale, Confederate sympathizers added to the production by supplying raw materials to the captives.⁷³ “I wish you to send me if you can conveniently a gold dollar with which to set a ring,” asked one prisoner, as “I have not the means

⁶⁸ Chester Forrester Dunham, *The Attitude of the Northern Clergy Toward the South, 1860–1865*, Perspectives in American History, Volume 6 (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974), 146.

⁶⁹ Garrett Oglesby, Johnson’s Island, to Adeline Egerton, December 15, 1864, AEL.

⁷⁰ George C. Davis, Fort Delaware, to Virginia Miller, October 17, 1864, POWC.

⁷¹ Geo. P. Bryan, Point Lookout, to Anna Miller, March 5, 1864, POWC.

⁷² Mourning jewelry were dark rings bequeathed to loved ones or given out at aristocratic funerals in remembrance.

⁷³ Robert McCulloch, Johnson’s Island, to Adeline Egerton, February 22, 1865, AEL.

with which to purchase one and I know of no other way to get one.”⁷⁴ Another wrote for “some long black horse hair a needle book and small pen knife...as the material is very hard to get here.”⁷⁵ Adeline Egerton volunteered “to send any kind of impliments [sic] for ring making,” to which the prisoner requested “A kit of chisels, large vast, small files, A small handed vice, and a small hammer.”⁷⁶ Through their timely inputs in the crafting process, women’s contributions were inscribed into the sacred nature of the rings.

With a socio-economic status that granted them access to the prisoners, the ability to provide support, and a cover of benevolence, Confederate women in the North found big business as brokers for artisans and their customers. “Just now there was a great rage among the Yankee women for rings made by rebel officers,” wrote former prisoner W. A. Wash, “they were going off like hot cakes at from 50 cents to \$2.00 in greenbacks.”⁷⁷ For special orders “with name engraved,” prisoners would offer “to furnish them at five Dollars each.”⁷⁸ When they received requests “specifying articles of jewelry...to be made” they would quote the price and time, which in many cases would “take about ten days to finish.” Acting as mediators within the prison and having “the work done in another Division,” prison correspondents would sometimes ask their female agents for “the money in advance.”⁷⁹ Once completed, they would forward the rings, offering “thanks for your kindness in selling them for me.”⁸⁰ “After disposing of the rings, (should they bring as much as the Amt. you sent me) please reserve enough to pay yourself,” a

⁷⁴ E. A. Waze [?], Fort Delaware, to Adeline Egerton, March 26, 1865, AEL.

⁷⁵ John N. H. da Silva, Point Lookout, to Anna Miller, July 24, 1864, POWC.

⁷⁶ Y. S. B., Point Lookout, to Adeline Egerton, May 9, 1864, AEL.

⁷⁷ W. A. Wash, *Camp, Field and Prison Life: Containing Sketches of Service in the South, and the Experience, Incidents and Observations Connected with Almost Two Years' Imprisonment at Johnson's Island, Ohio* (Saint Louis: Southwestern Book and Publishing Co., 1870), 211.

⁷⁸ George C. Davis, Fort Delaware, to Virginia Miller, January 5, 1865, POWC.

⁷⁹ George C. Davis, Fort Delaware, to Virginia Miller, February 7, 1865, POWC.

⁸⁰ E. A. Waze [?], Fort Delaware, to Adeline Egerton, May 1, 1865, AEL.

Johnson's Island prisoner wrote to Egerton, and "should there be any over you can use it for some charitable purpose."⁸¹

Sanitary fairs offered a suitable context for women underground to emerge selling Confederate jewelry.⁸² In 1864, a Baltimore newspaper recorded "that there was a number of rings from Pt. [Lookout] on exhibition," and more controversially, "that half the proceeds were to be given to the prisoners."⁸³ Fundraising expositions featuring Confederate goods were held all over the North, and in some cases, across the Atlantic Ocean. Sarah Walker of Chicago wrote to her imprisoned husband "requesting the prisoners to contribute some curiosities of their own manufacture to be sent to a fair to be held in Liverpool, England for the Confederate prisoners benefit."⁸⁴ This English bazaar became widely known as it reportedly raised over £17,000. Given the diplomatic consequences of foreign aid to the Confederacy (even its captured soldiers), Secretary of State William Seward publicly rejected the sum.⁸⁵ The point is not merely the extensive financial support. The rage for rebel prison jewelry both embodied and fueled Confederate resistance; finger rings became political rings.

And the rings had work to do. Civil War prisons were more porous than we once supposed. Illinois historian Camilla Quinn concludes that the frequency of escapes left prison commandants "so confused that their reports generally indicated the date of escape as 'unknown.'"⁸⁶ In one sense, all Confederate escapes were facilitated by the women who had

⁸¹ R. A. McDowell, Johnson's Island, to Adeline Egerton, March 12, 1865, AEL.

⁸² Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15; Appadurai's argument that commodities' social value is realized in places where the temporal, spatial, and social converge to generate a consumer demand can be used to understand how Civil War sanitary fairs took prison jewelry from a boutique luxury into widespread fashion.

⁸³ "Intercepted Correspondence of a Female Rebel with a Rebel Prisoner," *Hammond Gazette*, August 17, 1864.

⁸⁴ Pamela J. Bennett, Curtis R. Burke and Richard A. Misselhorn, "Curtis R. Burke's Civil War Journal," *Indiana Magazine of History* 66, no. 4 (1970), 323; *Blackburn Standard*, December 28, 1864.

⁸⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, December 22, 1864.

⁸⁶ *Illinois State Journal*, March 24, 1862, quoted in Camilla A. Corlas Quinn, "Forgotten Soldiers: The Confederate Prisoners at Camp Butler 1862–1863," *Illinois Historical Journal* 81, no. 1 (1988), 41.

given prisoners the literal and figurative strength to fight their captivity. At Camp Douglas, where escapes were fairly common, “General Orme received a report of a woman named Walsh, or Welch, helping escapees by sending money and information by way of her little daughter who played around the camp.”⁸⁷ Another account recalled ladies who tried to sneak in a “fine blue uniform coat” to a prisoner, that may or “may not have been intended to help him to escape in disguise.”⁸⁸ Women defended their assistance by citing rates of disease and deaths by starvation. “The sufferings of our men at Rock Island are dreadful,” Sallie Craig reported that “from out of 8000 only 2000 remain. The rest having died by starvation or taken the rail to escape death from starvation.” Craig ceaselessly defended her mother who “works all the time for them.”⁸⁹

Across the Union, authorities recognized the threat posed by Confederate sympathizers helping soldiers return South to fight, and finally began restricting access to the prisons. “I am informed that you continue to permit visitors to see prisoners under your charge notwithstanding my explicit and repeated instructions to the contrary,” General Hoffman pressed, “I should be less inclined to credit the report if I did not know that ladies had been allowed to have interviews with prisoners and to go inside the prison yard, all of which was in violation of my orders.”⁹⁰ Prisoners continued to ask women for aid, “if such things can be gotten into the fort since more stringent rules have been made.” Prisoner Harry Gilmore concluded in his letter to Adeline Egerton, “I should have much pleased to have seen you before the ladies were prevented from calling for us.”⁹¹ About the same time that visitation rules were implemented, sutlers in the camps were forced to close and prisoners were no longer allowed to carry cash.

⁸⁷ Dennis Kelly, “A History of Camp Douglas, Illinois Union Prison, 1861–1865,” United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Southeast Region (1989), 127.

⁸⁸ Tuttle, *The History of Camp Douglas*, 12.

⁸⁹ Sallie Craig to Jane Church Whitner, November 27, 1864, LP.

⁹⁰ W. Hoffman to W. S. Pierson, Commanding Depot of Prisoners of War, Sandusky, OH, July 14, 1862, *OR*, Series II, Volume IV, 215.

⁹¹ Harry Gilmore to Adeline Egerton, September 8, 1863, AEL.

That is not to say early ‘benevolence’ went unnoticed. In 1862, U.S. Marshal William Millward informed Secretary of War Edwin Stanton “I have just searched the house of a lady named Emley, who has four women at work making clothing for secesh prisoners. She does not deny it. Says all her sympathies are with them.” Even more alarming, he noted there “are other parties connected with her. I found two letters addressed to her from Captain Gibson, commander Fort Delaware, thanking her for her kindness.” Concerned that secessionist women’s aid “operates against recruiting” Union soldiers, Millward asked “What shall I do with the parties?”⁹² Stanton simply ordered he forward the seized letters and permit “Mistress Emley...to exercise her charity by supplying clothing or other necessities or comforts to those who are sick or in prison.”⁹³ Unready to call rebel aid work what it was, the wartime administration slowly acknowledged the treasonous nature of women’s assistance to Confederate prisoners.

As the war progressed and the full scale of resistance became clear, however, the government’s response escalated. Unionist civilians continued reporting to Lincoln and his spies “that persons, and especially ladies, are permitted to pass and repass with but little interruption.”⁹⁴ John A. Dix, who arranged the Dix-Hill prisoner exchange cartel in 1862, maintained a strict intolerance for “the families of those who are in arms against the Government” and believed sending them all across the border into “the midst of all this social derangement would be a much more effectual cure for secessionism than a residence among us where no such disturbance exists.”⁹⁵ On March 18, 1864, Lincoln responded to Stanton regarding “the cases of persons, mostly women, wishing to pass our lines, one way or the other, [as] We

⁹² William Millward, U.S. Marshal, Philadelphia, to Edwin M. Stanton, July 30, 1862, OR, Series II, Volume IV, 309.

⁹³ P. H. Watson, Washington, to William Millward, July 30, 1862, OR, Series II, Volume IV, 309.

⁹⁴ Edward Shriver to R. Morris Copeland, Frederick, September 11, 1861, quoted in *Secret Correspondence Illustrating the Condition of Affairs in Maryland* (Baltimore: n.p.), 1863.

⁹⁵ John A. Dix, to George H. Pendleton, Baltimore, March 4, 1862, OR, Series II, Volume II, 252.

have been apparently, if not really, inconsistent upon this subject.” He proposed to allow “all females with ungrown children” to pass freely one time, with the promise not to return during the war and upon the condition of taking the Oath of Allegiance.⁹⁶ William Arnold wrote to Lincoln as “a loyal man...to expose every shadow of treason, I am compelled to state for your consideration some of the views, sayings doings of Mrs. D.” who boasted of raising \$500 for a soldiers release from Fort Lafayette. He felt humiliated “that a person entertaining such sentiments should be a successful negotiator in getting the enemies of my country out of prison & thereby increasing the rebel strength & the rebel influence.”⁹⁷

The federal crackdown on women was bound to catch up with Robb eventually. In 1864, she and Mary Morris became part of an investigation into a ring of Chicago Copperheads and Confederate sympathizers. Robb’s family had long feared that her enthusiastic “errands of mercy” would “lead some with less of independence, to notice her untiring devotion, in such a way as to deprive her of such comforts.”⁹⁸ The commission questioned paroled prisoner and key trial witness John T. Shanks about \$20 given to him by Robb.⁹⁹ Somehow, Robb was never sentenced but Morris was banished to her family’s Kentucky home.

Banishment by military commissions to the Confederate lines seemed to be the most common sentence for women throughout the war, but again, as the years dragged on, the federal government took female political actions (and sanctions) more seriously.¹⁰⁰ In 1864, Sarah

⁹⁶ Abraham Lincoln to Edwin Stanton, March 18, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers (hereafter ALP), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington.

⁹⁷ William P. Arnold to Abraham Lincoln, July 14, 1864, ALP.

⁹⁸ Elvira Lee to Mary Ann Cobb, May 3, 1862, HCP.

⁹⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, November 8, 1864; Andrew Johnson, *Message from the President of the United States in Answer to a Resolution of the House of the 19th December, transmitting papers relative to the case of George St. Leger Grenfel*, 39th Congress, 2nd session, House of Representatives Executive Document 50 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1867), 75.

¹⁰⁰ Military commissions tried nearly 4,000 civilians and soldiers during the Civil War, 3.6% of which were females; Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

Hutchinson of Baltimore was sentenced to five years of Union work at a women's prison in Fitchburg, Massachusetts; the *Chicago Tribune* believed it "a valuable prophylactic to her sisters all throughout the country...we shall hear less of their officious zeal in such behalf, and it may have an excellent Chicago application."¹⁰¹ Historians have yet to estimate how many females were imprisoned during the Civil War, but there are numerous accounts of civilian and enlisted women held at places like Fitchburg and other notable prisons.¹⁰²

No one has properly connected all of this female resistance to the fate of Mary E. Surratt. Surratt owned the boarding house where her son John Surratt, Jr. met with fellow conspirators—including John Wilkes Booth—in the months leading up to April 1865. Following Lincoln's assassination, Surratt was arrested and tried with seven men by the "Hunter commission." On July 7, 1865, surrounded by 1000 witnesses and three others sentenced to hang for their treasonous participation in the presidential conspiracy, as well as their wartime displays of Confederate sympathy, Mary Surratt became the first woman executed by the U.S. Government.¹⁰³ President Andrew Johnson did not grant clemency in the case; however, northern newspapers continued pointing out where "violent she-rebels take up the business of soliciting pardons for heavy fees, the President should shut down the gate."¹⁰⁴ By that point, most Northerners were deeply familiar with the amount of damage Confederate women in their midst could do to their war effort. "Treason in crinoline is treason still," demanded one paper, "and should be punished as such."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *Chicago Tribune*, November 30, 1864.

¹⁰² For an inclusive study of prisoners, see Angela M. Zombek, *Penitentiaries, Punishment, & Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2018).

¹⁰³ Laurie Verge, "Mary Elizabeth Surratt," *The Trial: The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators*, ed. Edward Steers (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 52–59.

¹⁰⁴ *Cleveland Daily Leader*, November 29, 1865.

¹⁰⁵ *Marysville (OH) Tribune*, December 14, 1864.

Historians have wondered why Victorians were so comfortable condemning Mary Surratt to death. When we acknowledge the history of women's rebel politics in the North, the explanation for her death becomes simple. Like Henry Wirz, who hanged for all prison abuses, or Champ Ferguson, who hanged for all the human rights abuses of the guerrilla war, Mary Surratt hanged for all the Confederate women like Elizabeth Robb, who consciously undermined the Union war effort from within in order to preserve the Confederacy, to preserve slavery.

3. The Martyr Remembered

Historians have paid a great deal of deserved attention to the degree to which Southern women presided over the war's commemoration, erecting a memorial landscape devoted to the Lost Cause. Most often these efforts took the shape of forming Ladies Memorial Associations, later the United Daughters of the Confederacy, to raise funds for Confederate monuments and foster a culture of remembrance, which normalized April 26 grave decorating. Nina Silber has suggested sensibly that in the South women could perform the work of memorialization both because they were less damaged and less suspicious.¹⁰⁶ (In the North, men presided over their own 'victory' party.) What's missing from this formulation, however, is the degree to which Southern women—regardless of their wartime geography—presided over a victory party of their own. This is most conspicuously the case with Elizabeth Church Robb, an ideal candidate for Confederate canonization for a number of reasons:

First, Robb was a perfect stand-in for all the rebel women who had done so much to harass the Union from behind enemy lines. She was rich, beautiful, effective, and cunning; tales of her largesse had rippled across the country. Second, she died soon after surrender. On January 10, 1863, Philadelphia gynecologist Ellwood Wilson wrote a letter to James Robb informing him, "Mrs. Robb is suffering from an ovarian growth or tumor upon the right side. It does not admit of medical treatment—other than to relieve such painful symptoms, which may from time to time arise." Robb followed with a letter of her own:

¹⁰⁶ Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); for more on women's memorialization immediately after the war, see Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

You will see from the Dr's letter that there is little or no hope for me, he made a thorough examination the result of which is that when I am stronger (at present he says I could not bear it) I must decide for myself whether I will submit to an operation involving great risk. He talked to me as a friend and as a Christian, but I feel that he considers the case a bad one, he says go home I can do nothing for you...I believe there is a wise purpose in all the dispensations of our Heavenly Father and if it is his purpose, it is for good, at the same time I am human and the love of life is great."¹⁰⁷

Robb's terminal prognosis had been one of the engines of her zeal. "Her health is better and would be still better, had she not prisoner on the brain," Sallie Craig wrote to their Southern family. She "works all the time for them and when she is not doing actual work, she is worrying because she cannot give each of the 50,000 prisoners a blanket, hat, shoes, etc. and have them exchanged in the bargain." Even though Craig reported that "Mother's health is a little better," she also knew the "Dr. holds out no hope of ultimate recovery."¹⁰⁸ Robb made it through her wartime sickness clinging to the Confederate objects of her attention. After James Robb was appointed President of the Bank of Louisiana at New Orleans in 1866, she stayed in New York, too ill to move. In 1867 on a final journey to her "old home" in Georgia, Robb found something she would rather not, "saddened memories the first time in my life, before it was to meet a loving Father and Mother, sisters and brothers, now there are none of that loved family circle here, some in Heaven and others far away from their native land."¹⁰⁹ On that last trip to Athens, a group of former soldiers honored her at a Confederate Memorial Day celebration with a signed parchment for her ministrations to prisoners during the war.¹¹⁰

After four final months of suffering, Elizabeth Robb drew her last breath in the early morning hours of January 6, 1868. "When her death was her own ... unmistakable grief showed how warm were the friends she had already made [in New York.]" Her recent son-in-law Pope

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Robb to James Robb, January 11, 1863, JRC.

¹⁰⁸ Sallie Craig to Jane Church Whitner, November 27, 1864, LP.

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Robb to James Robb, April 2, 1867, JRC.

¹¹⁰ Caroline Patterson, "Guardian Angel of the Prisoners," *Atlanta Journal*, August 23, 1932.

Barrow wrote home to Howell Cobb, “will I be asking too much to beg that you will write what you think is proper to appear in the newspaper in the place of obituary?”¹¹¹

And this is where the legend of Elizabeth Church Robb began. Her biography was perfect; her timing in death impeccable; she was perfectly situated to become a Confederate martyr. The fact that she had borne with her illness throughout her aid to the prisoners made the future parallels of her cause of death to that of imprisoned Confederates all the more convenient. Building upon Cobb’s obituary, the *Atlanta Weekly Constitution* published at James Robb’s death in 1881 “The Golden Lining, To the Silver Cloud of Mr. Robb’s Life.” The essay recalled Elizabeth Robb “being allowed by her husband as much money as she wanted for the purpose, [and] spent the most of her time in visiting the northern prisons and providing for the rebels who were confined therein.” It stated that all “through the south the story of her kindness to the rebels was a household word, and there are thousands of brave fellows all through Dixie to-day who cherish her memory as that of a saint.”¹¹² That same week, a Tennessee veteran published a biographical sketch that featured Robb’s aid. “Perhaps some readers of these lines recall her visits to Johnson’s Island. If they do, they will remember her as an angel of mercy.”¹¹³ Former Confederates played a significant role in angelizing women like Robb. Thirty-six years after the war ended, Alfred G. Ward held on to a prayer book given to him in a prison hospital by Kate H. Keach of Baltimore, prizing it “as a memento of her kindness and visits in those dark days when she served there as a ministering angel.”¹¹⁴ Ward’s letter was published in the *Baltimore Sun* as a response to a previous column honoring women’s aid to Confederate prisoners.¹¹⁵ The

¹¹¹ Pope Barrow, Augusta, to Howell Cobb, January 8, 1868, Howell Cobb family papers, ms 86, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.

¹¹² *Atlanta Weekly Constitution*, August 9, 1881.

¹¹³ *The Tennessean*, August 6, 1881.

¹¹⁴ *Baltimore Sun*, January 25, 1901

¹¹⁵ *Baltimore Sun*, January 4, 1901.

Confederate Veteran published numerous accounts of “angels of mercy” who fed the hungry, clothed the poor, nursed the sick, and saved the prisoners through abetted escapes.¹¹⁶

Descendants of these women were also quick to showcase their prison rings at Confederate reunions.¹¹⁷

Over time, Elizabeth Church Robb’s ring became synonymous with her and her with it. Robb is remembered as a selfless servant of her sunny South—a ministering angel caught behind enemy lines—dying with and for her ‘boys,’ who thanked her with a humble wooden craft. However, this story obscures as much as it reveals. The strategic telling of Robb’s aid work, while eliding her political motivations (and worse, the forced conformance of her death with the performance of Confederate martyrdom), ironically secured her immortality while grotesquely abusing her lived experience. Women’s aid to rebel prisoners was more than impartial humanitarianism, and by the end of the war, most Northerners understood these activities as a mask for treason.

With the romance of reunion, however, Southerners were allowed to raise their memorials and misremember as they pleased. What got erased in the process was an understanding that women like Robb were savvy, effective, political actors. Lost were the political rings within finger rings, the networks of Confederate resistance in the North that deserve to be written back into Civil War history.

¹¹⁶ Thomas F. Berry, “Prison Experiences on Rock Island,” *Confederate Veteran* 20 (1912), 68.

¹¹⁷ *Arkansas Democrat*, May 6, 1911.

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