Civil War Memory and American Feminism: The Reconciliationist Role of White Supremacy in Early Suffrage Movements – by FollowingAllie

In contemporary public discourses on Civil War memory, the impacts of women are generally ignored as debates over the values of the long-standing reconciliationist vision of the war clash with those of the strengthening emancipationist vision.¹ Nevertheless, women played a significant role in shaping these discussions and in transforming Civil War memory throughout the 20th century, inevitably augmenting their influence in American society and creating a suitable environment for the rise of feminism.² This text seeks to determine how Civil War memory affected feminism and women’s rights in the post-Civil War era, as well as to identify what allowed feminist causes in the North and the South to unite in the late 19th century. The essay claims that Southern Civil War memory shaped and united the national feminist movements in the late 19th century. More specifically, this research paper argues that, while Southern feminist movements failed to directly implement significant political enfranchisement changes, the Lost Cause ideology espoused by Southern women’s groups and suffragists created the nation-wide racial social conditions which united Northerners and Southerners on the basis of white supremacy, ultimately providing the rhetoric that was so central to the initial successes of feminism and the adoption of the 19th amendment. This argument will be developed by first defining the term ‘feminism’ and expanding on its early roots in women studies as the first wave of feminist movements. The rise of the Lost Cause through the civic involvement of Southern


women will then be explained in depth, as will the development of a reconciliationist tone through the work of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The effects of the popularity of the Lost Cause rhetoric on feminism and women’s suffrage will be described through the depiction of the explicitly and implicitly racist tactics adopted by groups of Southern and Northern women united over white supremacist ideology.

The first wave of feminism was a period which saw the rise of women’s movements, the emergence of feminism and the development of suffrage movements, mainly through the existing relationships between white women and African Americans. Although feminism has a multitude of contentious definitions, the portraiture in this paper uses 19th century suffragist Laura Clay’s words to provide an appropriate depiction of what feminism resembled during the late Victorian era. Clay asserted that the objectives of the women’s rights movements were to gain “absolute equality with men in the right to free enjoyment of every opportunity that civilization, the joint work of both sexes, offers for the development of individual capacity” and “to forge a new role for women with greater legal, educational and economic opportunities and fewer social constraints.”

This claim to female empowerment emerged in the 1830s in the northern part of the United States through abolitionist movements, which were the first organized forms of women’s groups and tied to Quaker theology of female leadership on social issues.

Women were increasingly involved in the organization of abolitionist societies and in public, political activism; Angelina Grimke, for example, was the first women to speak to a

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legislative body in the United States in 1838, to whom she presented a petition signed by over 20,000 women who were against slavery. However, as women developed prominent roles in these anti-slavery organizations, they began to “ponder the parallels between the women’s status and the Negro status” and to “identify with the plight of the slave.” Women began to publically question the existing system which only applied fundamental American principles of natural rights and individualism to white men; Abbey Kelley was grateful to slaves for having shown women that they too were “manacled,” while Sarah Grimky wrote a pamphlet admonishing the absence of basic rights available to married women. In 1848, angry over the treatment of women at the 1840 London Anti-Slavery Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women’s right convention in Seneca Falls which saw 100 of the attendees sign the document containing a suffrage resolution. The 1848 convention generally marks the start of what women’s studies call the ‘first-wave of feminism,’ which focused on augmenting the legal and political rights of women, and ended with the passing of the United States’ Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. While the early decades of the first-wave saw women using African American slavery as a means to advance their own causes through comparative analysis,

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6 Ibid.


8 McElroy, “The Roots of Individualist Feminism.”


the Civil War and the post-war period transformed the later decades of the first-wave into an era of collaboration between Northern and Southern suffragists over a white supremacist ideology.

The post-Civil War era saw a change in Southern gender roles as women became increasingly involved in civic affairs as a means of “rehabilitating Southern white men” and defending Southern culture after the embarrassing loss to the North. The shifting of gender roles began during the Civil War as Southern women participated directly in the war efforts; women like Loreta Juaneta Velasquez dressed up as men and became Confederate soldiers, others like Mary Anne Pitman and Mary Frances Battle served as Confederate spies, while the “daughters of the regiment” cooked, cleaned and taught within the regiments they followed. Women took over the masculine duties of their households and the professions available in towns, from shopkeepers to teachers, while enduring the physical and mental hardships attributed with close proximity to war. Women, who were expected to be devoted housewives with little public presence, found themselves becoming army nurses, running hospitals in local Churches and running soldier aid societies to provide Confederate soldiers with supplies. After the war, the shortage of men and family deaths meant women needed to enter new occupations and assist in

\[\text{References:}\]
14 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 69.
15 Middle Tennessee State University, “Women and the Civil War,” 2.
the rebuilding of the South; the “changed social and economic environment” forced women into new roles and increased involvement in public affairs.16

By the 1870s, the gradual improvement in economic conditions in the South allowed women to increasingly get involved in public voluntary associations, first for missionary purposes, then through the Women’s Temperance Christian Union and eventually through women’s groups by the 1880s.17 Wartime aid societies transformed into Confederate memorial associations, which initially sought to memorialize and glorify the dead, but later developed the grander objectives of rehabilitating the defeated men and restoring the “antebellum class and racial privileges” that were so crucial to Southern history and culture.18 As W. Fitzhugh Brundage points out, Southern women, through various civic organizations, became the architects of public memory by “exploring and mystifying the historical roots of white supremacy” and by creating the “infrastructures for the dissemination” of their version of Civil War memory.19 These infrastructures included the censoring of history textbooks, supervising museum content, overseeing the work of historians and archivists, building commemorative monuments to Civil War soldiers, hosting fairs and expositions for the propagation of Southern patriotism and through Civil War preservation initiatives.20 These early women’s groups allowed women to make the leap from pedestal to politics through increasing involvement in public life,

16 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 9; 69.
17 Ibid., 9.
19 Ibid., 115.
20 Ibid., 120-121; 127.
and provided a strong base for the emergence of feminist suffrage movements strongly rooted in Southern traditions of white supremacy and elite rule, associated with Lost Cause rhetoric.  

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) was one of the primary actors involved in the spread of Lost Cause sentiment nationally. The (UDC) was established in 1894 in Nashville, Tennessee by Caroline Meriwether Goodlett and Anna Davenport Raines as a commemorative organization for Confederate soldiers and Confederate history that sought to “[vindicate] the Confederate generation.” The organization was rapidly successful and influential, opening over 410 chapters with a membership of 17,000 by 1900, and reaching a membership of 100,000 by World War I. Similarly to earlier women’s organizations, the UDC actively attempted to reshape public perception of the South’s role in the Civil War through the textbook censorship, monument building, scholarship distributions to descendants of Civil War soldiers and legislative lobbying, among many other actions. The UDC led what came to be known as “the Lost Cause celebration” and strongly believed that, during the Civil War, the South had defended the ‘just’ cause of ‘states’ rights and white supremacy;’ Confederate soldiers were described as noble heroes who were defeated by the overwhelming numbers of the North in their attempts to overcome social and political turmoil. The UDC created a perception of the victimized South fighting for fundamental, American principles and protecting the

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25 Cox, “Women, the Lost Cause, and the New South.”

Southern tradition of “benevolent white masters and contented African slaves.”27 By 1904, all former Confederate states had “adopted texts sympathetic to the Lost Cause” and the UDC has opened chapters in Northern states, including Washington DC.28 The widespread anger over Reconstruction in both the North and the South allowed the emancipationist vision that was popular in the North to be replaced with one of reconciliation based on whiteness.29 The UDC purposely delayed the reconciliation process until it could be achieved on their own terms; they used Reconstruction horror stories to encourage American reunion as “achievable only through regimes of racial segregation.”30 Lost Cause and its idealization of white supremacy, as propagated by women’s groups like the UDC, came to be seen as a necessity for national reconciliation and thus shaped American ideology and historical memories for over a century.31

With the expansion and acceptance of Lost Cause ideology nationally, the United Daughters of the Confederacy and other women’s groups, created the social conditions of white supremacy that feminism used to advance its political causes, namely women’s suffrage. While Marjorie Spruill claims that the Lost Cause “delayed” and “impeded” women’s suffrage in the South due to feminism’s ties with abolitionism, political objectives outside of the Southern expectations of proper womanly behavior and its role as an “enemy to Southern culture,”32 she bypasses the overarching impact of the Lost Cause and its message of reconciliation through white supremacy on national feminist movements and women’s suffrage.

27 Ibid., 278.
28 Dailey, Jumpin’ Jim Crow, 122; Blight, Race and Reunion, 272.
29 Blight, Race and Reunion, 273.
30 Cox, “Women, the Lost Cause, and the New South;” Blight, Race and Reunion, 139.
31 Janney, Remembering the Civil War, 9; Blight, Race and Reunion, 388.
32 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 13; 17.
Southern suffragists emerged as a result of female involvement in Lost Cause associations, like the UDC, and from the Southern expectations of ‘respectable’ women. By the 1890s, most southern states had developed small suffrage societies, despite opposition by Southern white men, through prominent, upper-class white women who represented the traditional, ‘respectable’ Southern belle. Suffragists in the South were “veterans of the reform-minded women’s organizations” who sought to expand the female sphere through political means such as to adequately represent the interests of women and children when faced with a corrupt government comprised of carpetbaggers and socially inferior men. These women believed voting was their cultural right and duty as ladies of the South to continue the Southern tradition of reform associated with wealthy women. Suffrage was thus viewed by these prominent women as a means by which they could use political rights to further Lost Cause ideology and traditional Southern values. Lila Mead Valentine, Nellie Nugent Somerville, Rebecca Latimer Felton and Carrie Belle Kearney were some of the South’s leading suffragists and all were members of the UDC and clear proponents of the Lost Cause. Felton famously used racist rhetoric associated with the Lost Cause to encourage the lynching of “a thousand negroes a week” as a means of inciting political mobilization for women’s rights. Given the close ties between Southern suffragists and the Lost Cause, it is unsurprising that Southern feminist movements quickly adopted white supremacist arguments to further their cause.

33 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 20.
34 Ibid., 20.
35 Dailey, Jumpin’ Jim Crow, 130.
36 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 109; Blight, Race and Reunion, 273.
Perhaps slightly more surprising, Northern suffragists also adopted white supremacist arguments in the late 19th century to further their agenda, which allowed Northern and Southern movements to form alliances and to merge their feminist objectives. In 1866, the Eleventh National Women’s Right Convention created the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) whose objective was the acquire “Equal Rights to all American citizens, especially the right of suffrage, irrespective of race, color, or sex.” However, only three years later, anger over the lack of female representation in the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868, and disagreements over the absence of the vote for women in the Fifteenth Amendment arose. AERA split into the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA); the former was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who opposed the Fifteenth Amendment unless it included the vote for women and collaborated with Democrats, while the latter was led by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, who supported the Amendment, the Republican Party and the black vote. In 1890, the organizations reunited and formed the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) as women increasingly viewed Black rights as a hindrance to women’s rights. The national spread of Southern Lost Cause rhetoric led to NAWSA “disassociat[ing] itself from the rights for blacks” and it using “racist tactics quite openly to win support for their cause.”

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39 McElroy, “The Roots of Individualist Feminism.”


41 McElroy, “The Roots of Individualist Feminism.”

Northern women were eager to work with wealthy Southern women who also viewed African American suffrage distastefully. In fact, NAWSA held the annual 1895 National Women’s Right Convention in Atlanta, the first time since the Civil War that it was held outside of Washington DC, and held another in New Orleans in 1903, where African American women were prohibited from attending.\textsuperscript{43} Kentucky feminist Laura Clay is recognized for the prominent role she played as an intermediary to Northern and Southern suffragists, encouraging cooperation by both sides, yet she later opposed the Nineteenth Amendment using racial arguments.\textsuperscript{44} By the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Northern suffragists had entirely adopted the white supremacist rhetoric associated with the Lost Cause, such that the NAWSA leader Stanton and Carrie Chapman Catt, organized tours in the South that purposely excluded long-time black supporters like Frederick Douglass, and emphasized, in 1894, the interest of the association in recruiting the South’s leading suffragists;\textsuperscript{45} Belle Kearney and Nellie Somerville were recruited to run the Mississippi faction of the association, while Kate Gordon was made ‘corresponding secretary to NAWSA, Madeline Breckinridge served as a NAWSA vice-president, Mary Johnston was an editor for NAWSA’s \textit{Women’s Journal} and Lila Meade Valentine was on its Congressional Committee.\textsuperscript{46} Northerners viewed the South as crucial to the success of the feminist movement. This evidence demonstrates the strong links that formed between Northern and Southern suffragists as national reconciliation over the white supremacy espoused by Lost Cause ideology occurred in the United States.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 21; 116.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 20; 140.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 47-48; 116.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., xvii-xx.
The last decade of the 19th century saw the adoption of explicitly racist arguments by feminists involved in the women’s suffrage movement. Suffragists on both sides of the Mason-Dixie line saw the possibilities in using the ‘negro problem’ as a strategy to attain the female vote. The ‘negro problem’ emerged as the disasters associated with Reconstruction were linked nationally with the “corruption and political ineptitude” of black voters.47 The African American electorate was increasingly viewed as an “obstacle to national progress” and a “menace to democracy”.48 Henry Blackwell provided suffragists with statistical arguments exhibiting how greater female numbers in regional populations could present the enfranchisement of women as a means to balance against black suffrage. The idea was that allowing white women fulfilling certain educational requirements to vote would change the white-black voting ratio, ensuring the return of political white supremacy without directly opposing the Fifteenth Amendment. In 1893, NAWSA leaders formally adopted a resolution favoring Blackwell’s statistical argument.49 Moreover, female suffrage was presented to state legislatures as a politically expedient “means of preserving white supremacy and systematic discrimination against blacks.”50 Therefore, feminist movements in the 1890s relied on the ‘negro problem’ and the desire to restore white supremacy to develop strategies that would encourage states to allow female voting.

Suffrage movements in the 1910s, while no longer using explicitly racial arguments, functioned within a racially hierarchical society rooted in white supremacist theories associated with the Lost Cause. The failures of the 1890s suffrage movements were forgotten as the rise of progressive movements and the growing middle class renewed interest and membership in

47 Ibid., 102; 109-110.
48 Blight, Race and Reunion, 355; 364.
49 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 114-115.
50 Ibid., xiii; 113.
suffrage organizations.\textsuperscript{51} Progressives sought to reform society so as to “introduce systemic fairness in commerce, government, and the workplace,”\textsuperscript{52} which allowed their objectives of humanitarian assistance, government reformation and the restoration of the traditional roles of women as agents of morality to overlap with the agenda of feminist associations.\textsuperscript{53} Adopting a state-oriented approach, the united forces of progressives and feminists were extremely successful, such that, along with successfully lobbying for the Nineteenth Amendment which constitutionally granted women the right to vote, by then “28 of the 48 states already had full or presidential suffrage for women.”\textsuperscript{54} This success of feminism, however, was rooted in fundamental notions of white superiority, which is especially evident by how, on March 3, 1913, the feminist parade that disrupted the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson segregated African American women by putting them at the end of the procession, even behind white men.\textsuperscript{55} 

With Jim Crow segregation being officially accepted nationally in 1913 with President Woodrow Wilson segregating the federal government offices, white supremacist ideology was inevitably a fundamental concept in most American’s minds and a structural basis of society.\textsuperscript{56} Social evolutionary theories and progressivism allowed suffragists to develop new roles that “maintained the racial hierarchies” of the time and assumed white cultural and biological

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{52} Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue, \textit{These United States: A Nation in the Making, 1890 to the Present} (New York: WW. Norton & Company, 2015), 64.

\textsuperscript{53} Spruill, \textit{New Women of the New South}, 23.

\textsuperscript{54} McElroy, “The Roots of Individualist Feminism.”


\textsuperscript{56} Gilmore, \textit{These United States}, 96-97.
superiority. Feminism had become fundamentally intertwined with notions of racial superiority and disseminated “race-specific ideas about gender, citizenship, social development, and racial progress.” Feminists and Progressives maintained that “suffrage was not a right of all citizens, but the privilege and duty of those qualified to exercise it,” and those qualified were rarely non-whites. While some Southern suffragists, like the Gordon sisters and Clay, opposed the Nineteenth Amendment due to fears that it would undermine states’ rights and create a chasm for the end of white supremacy and the return of African American enfranchisement, most prominent Southern suffragists supported the Amendment and denied the possibility of it being a threat to white supremacy. In 1915, Pattie Ruffner Jacobs told the United States Senate that the amendment would “not inject any new problems” and that the state could “still protect the exercise of that franchise to the fullest extent.” In 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt claimed it was unbelievable that “the nation would long allow its record of enfranchisement of illiterate men, fresh from slavery, and its denial of the same privilege to intelligent white women to stand unchallenged.” White supremacy had become such an engrained American ideology that it was a fundamentally accepted fact, in the 1910s, that only the most qualified and fit individuals should vote. Therefore, rather than using racist arguments to advance the suffrage movement, most women in the early 20th century worked within the racially hierarchical, white supremacist system, that developed through the UDC’s commitment to the Lost Cause.

58 Ibid., 184.
59 Gilmore, These United States, 69-70; Spruill, New Women of the New South, 101; 110.
60 Spruill, New Women of the New South, 128-130.
61 Ibid., 116.
In conclusion, given the fact that nine of the ten states that did not ratify the Nineteenth Amendment were below the Mason-Dixie line, the influence of Southern women in the suffrage movement is generally overlooked or forgotten. However, the role of women of the post-war South in creating the nation-wide adherence to white supremacy using the propagation of Lost Cause ideology, was extremely significant in allowing women in the North and South to reconcile through the adoption of racially-charged pro-feminist arguments. The first-wave of feminism was deeply intertwined with the relationship between women and African-Americans, from its 1840s abolitionist beginning to its white supremacist end in 1920. The Civil War allowed for changes in gender relations in the South which provided women with voluntary associations where they quickly set about manipulating Civil War memory and developing the Lost Cause ideology. The United Daughters of the Confederacy was especially great at this and eventually succeeded in implementing a reconciliationist vision of the war rooted in white supremacy, which manifested itself in both Southern and Northern suffragist movements. This ideological homogeneity allowed suffragists from both sides of the Mason-Dixie line to form alliances and work together within NAWSA, first with explicitly racist arguments seeking to address the ‘negro problem’ in the 1890s and later by pushing women’s suffrage within a racially-hierarchical society that allowed feminism to disseminate the white supremacist, racially-charged ideas on gender, citizenship and social development that had become fundamental elements of American society. While this paper does not address the role of African American women in the suffrage movements, there is little doubt that the earliest forms of feminism and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment are forever blemished by their involvement in sustaining a reconciliationist memory of the Civil War that reinforced white supremacy and racial segregation.
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