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A Strong-Minded Southern Woman: Sarah Joe Alston Claiborne

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Capstone Project

Book Proposal

A Strong-Minded Southern Woman:

Joe Alston Claiborne

by

Cathy Johnson

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Master of Arts in Professional Writing

Kennesaw State University

Submitted: April 2, 2012

MAPW Professor Committee

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This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Capstone Framing Narrative

Book Proposal: *A Strong Minded Southern Woman: Joe Alston Claiborne*

This project has been a challenge for me, representing a daunting task. If I could liken the completion of a published book on the life of my Civil War ancestors to reaching the top of Mount Everest, then in my mind, what I have accomplished with my capstone is equivalent to standing atop one of the base camps. It's been quite a climb and an accomplishment, and not one every writer can make, yet there are still peaks to surmount and new goals to reach before I make it to the top of Mt. Everest. In short, my capstone project, "A Book Proposal for *A Strong-Minded Southern Woman*" represents a work in progress.

In some ways, this project began with my father, David Mann, who relished history in general and was the family keeper of any ancestral memorabilia, furniture or keepsakes. I was fortunate to come from an extended family on my father's side who had traced our family's lineage back to England and Wales before the British colonized America. So, our family tree in the United States had been traced and documented and talked about as I grew up and moved into my adult years. Sometime in my late thirties and with a young family of my own, I became aware of a collection of letters, pictures and other memorabilia from some relatives who had lived during the Civil War years and, in particular, had lived in Petersburg, Virginia during the historic siege of that city. Not only had my relative been a surgeon in charge of Confederate hospitals in Petersburg during that time, but also I learned his experience was well-documented through daily letters to his wife and family who were living in North Carolina.

Reading typed copies of his letters (which had been transcribed by his granddaughter in the 1940s); I became intrigued with the story of their lives. Perusing the letters represented a turning point for me. For the first time I saw historical events through the lens of some of the people who lived it and who played a part, however large or small, in shaping the events of the past. In the letters, I could see my ancestor's fears about the war and the times that unfolded. They expressed uncertainties about the outcomes of battles that I'd read about in history class. They wrote about concerns over the smaller details of life such as such as food to eat, where to buy cloth for the children's winter clothing and how to discipline an unruly toddler. They wrote about longing to see each other, concern for health and well-being of family members, but also happy times such as an unexpected visit or a family celebration.

For me, as a person who writes and enjoys words and literature, reading the original words and thoughts of my ancestors was a profound experience. I gained a deeper understanding of their perspectives about the changing times in the South during the 1860s. Their written language had a rare beauty to it. The descriptions of their own emotions were expressive, elaborate and, elevated. A reader could easily identify with their feelings and understand their heart-felt expressions, even though separated by different centuries and cultures. Their choice of words appeared deliberate and, quite frankly, I needed to consult a dictionary more than once to understand the true usage of their words. I was fascinated because, while these were personal letters from husband to wife, the writing was not casual or careless; but carefully worded and thoughtful, in the same degree of excellence people today might construct a thesis paper or publishable document. Also, I noticed their opinions about the government, the war, and the politics of the Confederacy were thorough, detailed, educated and persuasive to their particular points of view.

I became more interested in the lives of this couple: They were Dr. John Herbert Claiborne from Virginia and Sarah Joseph Alton Claiborne from North Carolina. To learn more, I read Dr. John Herbert Claiborne's published autobiography, written toward the end of his life in 1904. *Seventy-Five Years in Old Virginia* is an account of his early life, time spent in the Virginia legislature during the time leading up to the Civil War, his war experiences and life afterward.

My father and my stepmother both died 2006 and I inherited these letters, along with a host of other family memorabilia, photographs, documents and keepsakes. Over the next few years as I looked through the boxes, I realized there were more letters to the collection than the ones I originally knew about from the siege. There are letters dating from the 1830s written by Dr. John Herbert Claiborne's parents to him when he attended Randolph Macon College, love letters from John Herbert Claiborne and from "Miss Joe Alston" during the 1850s, letters from their early marriage years and when he was in the House of Delegates in the period leading up to and including the early years of the Civil War. Finally, there are letters written in the months after the war ended. There are 630 letters in all.

After reading some letters in this treasure trove of family memorabilia, I became intrigued by the lives of these relatives I had never known—their challenges, their relationships, their joys, their tragedies and losses. They were ordinary people but they lived during extraordinary and turbulent times in our country's history and the South. Questions emerge. How and why did they come to believe so ardently in secession from the United States, a government that by their own admission they and their ancestors supported wholeheartedly? How did they treat their slaves and why did they believe in that "peculiar institution?" How did

they handle the tragedies of the war and how did they cope with the loss of the culture they had grown up in? Why do some people survive and thrive through tragedy while others do not cope?

About this time, I entered the Masters of Professional Writing program at Kennesaw State University and this represented another turning point for me in regards to the family letters. I enrolled in the PRWR 6000 *Issues and Research in Professional Writing* class taught by Dr. Anne Richards. Our class visited Kennesaw's Rare Books Library and Collections, which was a wonderful experience that reinforced the value placed on rare books and old documents. As a class, we were given an assignment to consider using original documents and sources in our own writing. It occurred to me I could use my own family documents as a source for a writing project assigned in this class. I came up with a theme of surviving traumatic experiences and tried to tie it in with contemporary traumatic events such as surviving a major catastrophic event or living through experiences in our current wars on terror in the Middle East. While this was a valiant attempt to pursue a good writing idea, it showed me I had a lot to learn about the world of Civil War America more than a century before.

Dr. Richards and some members of the class and Dr. Richards encouraged me to archive the letters to preserve them and to organize them and work with them some way in the future. So I, along with my family members, organized and categorized these letters in a better way either for our own storage or to donate them a library or archival facility. Also, we realized we needed to preserve and archive these letters in a better way. My daughter Caroline spent a summer organizing the letters chronologically, filing them in notebooks and placing them within acid free paper sheaths. They were now in a format that we could read and transcribe them if we wished. This was an important step because we could now better understand the depth of the collection. Also, Caroline has scanned the full collection of letters and there are backups now stored on CD.

Next, I began personally reading and transcribing the letters. Well over half have been transcribed and saved to files and disks. This is a slow process because some are faded and some handwriting and phrasing is hard to read. However, it is a labor of love and has turned into somewhat of a hobby. I've spent many hours enjoying the discovery of what was happening, what the feelings showed and how the people involved were acting and reacting.

During the course of my studies in the MAPW program, I have been able to experiment with various genres and writing approaches using the letters as my subject material. Of particular value was a course in *Advanced Creative Nonfiction* with Dr. Linda Niemann. A light bulb went on when we read and wrote in the genre of creative or dramatic nonfiction. The various books we read and the "how-to" approaches studied were valuable. Two texts in particular, "Truth as Art" by Judith Barrington and "Writing for Story" by Jon Franklin, have been especially enlightening and useful to me. The workshop experience gave me positive criticism and encouragement about my writing.

During another course, *Introduction to Fiction Writing* taught by Anthony Grooms, I was challenged to experiment with the events described in the letters as a fiction writer. The workshop experience was valuable, once again, in showing me the challenges of creating a meaningful story using true-to-life events. I received encouragement from my classmates and from my professor to "find a way to share the voice of Dr. John Herbert Claiborne with this generation of readers."

I began to narrow my focus toward the historical fiction or nonfiction genres as I completed my last nine hours of my masters program. In *Introduction to Literacy Studies* taught by Dr. Beth Daniell, I did a class presentation on "When I Can Read My title Clear: Literacy,

Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South” by Janet Duitsman Cornelius. This book gave me a good inside look at plantation life and its interaction with people as slaves and provided an in-depth social history about the times during which my ancestors grew up and came into adulthood. This exposed me to this type of social history, something I was unaware of until then, and how valuable it could be as I tried to understand the unique culture that existed before the Civil War. Social history books, similar to this, became invaluable as I started to write my capstone the next year.

Even during a class in *Web Content and Development*, taught by Dr. Anne Richards, I gained insight into writing about history. Students chose an author who blogged on the Web and communicated with him or her back and forth. One historical fiction writer, in particular, gave good advice to me if I were to write historical fiction, “Get the story down first and then realize you will probably have to rewrite the story five times. Don’t worry about offending kinfolk—you can take out the negative things later on.”

For my final class in the MAPW program, I chose to do an Independent Study, “Writing Historical Fiction,” and Dr. Richards guided me through this study. My goal was to identify various genres and subgenres in the field of historical writing in the market today and to analyze these subgenres in light of my family records and letters. I experimented with writing narratives from various character points-of-view and wrote character sketches to see which approach was the most “comfortable” for me.

One of the best assignments that ultimately helped narrow my capstone project was to research the history publishing market looking for different genres and approaches authors used when writing popular historical narratives. It is useful to include a summary of the genres I

found, as well as a reflection on the suitability of the various approaches I could take, if I wanted to publish a work someday using this collection of family letters.

Historical Fiction

A successful approach when writing about history is the genre of historical fiction. Persia Woolly in “How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction” defines this genre as “set in a time other than that of the reader, with characters that react in some degree to the historical events of their eras....it interests the reader in part because it is different from their present culture” (Woolly 5). Parke Godwin said, “The historical novelist is one who synthesizes fact and fiction” (12). There is a wide latitude of historical fiction books that are popular today: Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, Mary Renault’s *The King Must Die*, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, Boris Pasternak’s *Dr. Zhivago*, Lew Wallace’s *Ben Hur* and Colleen McCullough’s *The Thorn Birds*; among many others.

I have invested a lot of time exploring the historical fiction genre. It has been a worthwhile endeavor and was the one approach I wanted to take with this project for a long time. One aspect of historical fiction I liked was “these books humanize past events and they provide room for speculation as to why historical events happened the way they did. Woolly offered a word of caution that became important to me in choosing an approach for my capstone: “If your first love is history, stick with nonfiction. If you get swept up in the intricacies of why or how a historical event took place, it will interfere with the flow of the fiction. No one will buy it” (9).

Within the genre of historical fiction, a “history-driven” plot usually requires more background, buildup and understanding, and so moves at a slower pace than does a character-driven plot. An example of a history-driven in Boris Pasternack’s *Dr. Zhivago*. An example of

character-driven historical fiction is found in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. There is historical background in the novel, but this novel is told almost always from Scarlett's point-of-view and her main interest is trying to get Ashley to fall in love with her.

In the final analysis, I chose not to take this direction with my capstone project. First of all, I am not bent toward writing fiction. My professional background is in journalism. Writing about true events, people or news from an objective point-of-view is vastly different than creating "truth" using characters and events to tell a good story. I understand what fiction does and I respect it. I tried in earnest to write the story of my ancestors as a fictionalized narrative and simple could not bring it off. Part of the problems, besides my inclination toward non-fiction, were that I simply knew too much about their lives through the letters. I felt I was "watering down" the real drama of war and its effects by trying to recreate it as fiction. I was afraid I was not portraying who Herbert Claiborne or Joe Claiborne in their essence because my characterization was somehow skewed. In short, I felt they could somehow "tell" their story, through the actual words in their letters better than I ever could.

Family Saga Based on Truth

The best example of this genre is *Roots* by Alex Haley. Sharon DeBartolo Carmack says in *You Can Write Your Family History*, "Because it is fiction, this type of writing is not documented, but some historical or genealogical fiction writers add an author's note, which includes the sources they consulted" (10). This approach could work for my project, but I have a lot of documented material and plenty of historic information about the Civil War in Virginia and Petersburg on which to draw. I believe I would need to fictionalize more of my family history as the expense of the true facts I have on hand about them, and the true story of their lives

would be compromised. I would also need to do more research about the lives and times of nineteenth-century Americans to finish this, and I did not have the resources to complete a realistic project of this nature during this school year.

Narrative History in Novel Form

Another genre is classified as a narrative history in novel form; an example being *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara. The author used primary sources of diaries and letters and the words of the men involved. He also gets inside the characters' heads to recreate the battle of Gettysburg. The book is filled with drama and excitement that we associate more with fiction than with history.

Biography as Fiction

Some other choices that might possibly be marketable are a biography as fiction. I read Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, *Burr* and *1876* and was inspired by them all. This approach would be practical as a biography of "ordinary people" and include a personal memoir aspect to it or an autobiography of me as contemporary ancestor. Two problems exist with this approach. First, Dr. John Herbert Claiborne has published his own autobiography with a forceful account of his war experiences and his life before and after the war. It was his story to tell and he did it convincingly: I have nothing to add.

Secondly, most of the successful biographies told as fiction are of public figures. Readers are interested in the lives of these notable people in history and want to know more background and explore feelings and attitudes as it relates to the period of history written about. My ancestors lived in extraordinary times and were close to historic events, but they were

ordinary people. I did not think I had enough unique or new information to share to make a workable book.

Family History Memoir

The family history memoir tells a nonfiction story centered on the author's search for his or her ancestors. Family history memoirs are usually told as first-person accounts and the narrator or author shows growth as a person as a result of the family history search. While this approach works in many cases successfully, I did not have enough of a compelling storyline in my search for my ancestors. They were handed down to me, and family members in previous generations have done a thorough job of genealogical research to create a framework. I may discover something about my ancestors through new genealogical research, but at this time, I have enough information to go on and not enough can be told of my own personal growth in the process than has already been told.

Edited Letters and Diaries

An approach I almost took was one under the heading of edited letters and diaries because I had a substantial collection of letters, diaries, memoirs and other memorabilia upon which to draw. I would be the editor of an ancestor's materials, transcribing and publishing the documents and add annotations to unexplained or mysterious references in the documents. Also, as an editor, I could add historical narrative and explanation where needed. This approach was rejected after it was tried the first semester of my capstone year. The letters, as is, would not make very readable copy and it's hard to tell the story of their lives by publishing the letters as is. They were hard to edit and I brought almost none of my own perspective to it. To be effective, I would have to

weave together the letters to tell the story of the people's lives, and there are probably better ways to approach the subject to get the story across.

Family History Narrative

Carmack offers this definition of the genre: "Narrative family histories are fully documented and tell the story of a family. One might call this creative, dramatic or literary nonfiction writing. Written in third person, the focus is on people and the setting; the story has a plot and reads like a novel" (9). Family lore and social, oral, ethnic and women's history facts are woven within the documentation. It seems that if there is enough audience appeal and if the narrative is of enough quality, it can be commercially published, published by a scholarly genealogy press or self-published. Examples of this genre abound.

In the end, I chose a form of the family history narrative genre for my capstone project. I relied upon the works of social historians about the nineteenth-century culture and letter-writing, using the works of Karen Lystra and her book, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*, along with similar studies, to inform my capstone. This approach seeks to give context to the times and culture in which my ancestors lived while informing the reader of the values they likely held and the ways they would have approached their lives.

The completed chapter on courtship gives an example of the form in which I chose to present the documents in a family history narrative genre. I deliberately chose to leave as many quotes and passages directly from their letters as I judged would hold the reader's interest. I chose quotes that I thought best reflected their personalities and gave a good representation of what was most important to them at the time they corresponded. I wanted the reader to have a

sense that Herbert and Joe were telling their story in their own words. At the same time, I wanted the reader to have a sense that a story was progressing and Herbert and Joe were moving toward the companionate marriage they sought. I wanted readers to feel the tension that I felt while reading them and to get a sense that a love story was unfolding. The social history context hopefully sheds light on the uniqueness of courtship and marriage in the nineteenth century.

Choosing to focus on Joe, instead of Herbert, was an important decision and one I hesitated to make for a long time. Practically speaking, I have a lot of information on Herbert and his life in general as a doctor and his thoughts and opinions contained in his memoir. His Civil War experience of being under siege and his proximity to the surrender at Appomattox makes a good story. But it is not unique and there is a large volume of literature in circulation today about the Civil War. I did not think I could add anything unique to the market.

I needed to find a unique lens with which to view and write about my Civil War ancestors. The angle needs to be original enough to capture readership and maintain interest. Focusing on Joe as a Southern woman and on her home front experiences during the time is a good start. It gives the reader a perspective that has not been talked about much in history books or among general interest readers. There are fewer books on the market about women during the Civil War than on battles and stories told from a male point-of-view.

I began this narrative by saying that my capstone project is a work in progress. Deciding to focus a book on Joe as the leading character presents me with some challenges at this time. More research needs to be done. In the areas of women's studies and social and cultural history, I'd like to find answers to the following:

1. What was a childbirth experience like during the nineteenth-century?
Contraception? Prevalence and causes of death in childbirth and stillbirth?
2. Since Joe experienced a stillbirth, what were grieving practices like?
3. Among Southern women, what kinds of community activist practices or social work did they engage in? Did Joe engage herself with political or social activism?
4. What was the experience of slaves in Petersburg like? What was the experience of females living in slavery in regards to marriage, childbirth, raising children and life in general? Particularly, I'd like to explore the slaves in the Claiborne family and try to trace their experiences after emancipation.
5. What was the reconstruction experience like in Petersburg immediately following the War and in the decade afterward.
6. Finally, I'd like to explore the possibility of drug use among well-to-do Victorian women. Many women used laudanum, a form of opium, during the nineteenth-century, especially those with war close by. Since Joe was married to a doctor, she would have had access to laudanum. My goal is to keep looking for a small, unique and specific lens to narrow the focus of this story further.

For the most part, I need to conduct more genealogical work and research for Joe's side of the family. Also, I need to find out more about the locations she and her family lived—in Louisburg and Petersburg. My goal is to make site visits and research court records and places in and around these areas. Specifically, I need to know how Joe died and learn more about the reasons and what life was like immediately following the war. At this time, I feel this will yield the most information about Joe's war experiences and its effects on her life.

Overview

A Strong-Minded Southern Woman: Joe Alston Claiborne draws from a wealth of poignant letters to her husband—first during courtship, early marriage and the heartbreak of stillbirth; then during the turbulence of secessionist Virginia politics, and on through separation during the Civil War and the personal loss after Confederate defeat. This book is unique in that it provides both the true story of a southern woman's life and a social and cultural history of the times in which she lived.

It begins with Miss Joe Alston as a young belle in North Carolina being courted by a doctor from Petersburg. Through traditional characteristics of Victorian letter writing, we follow Joe and Herbert's courtship through testing each other, disclosure their true "romantic self" and presenting negative self-images and affirmations. Are they prepared adequately for the realities of normal married life, as well as married and family life while immersed in a Civil War?

We follow Joe, the plantation girl, into marriage in Virginia's third largest city, Petersburg, where she faces the heartbreak of a stillbirth and then challenges as she finally starts a family. She learns important lessons in managing a household in a slave society and we follow unique relationships with slaves.

The war brings special hardship as she must leave her home in Petersburg and live with her parents during the first part of the war. She gives birth during war time and must care for her children while her husband away on the battlefield as a surgeon during the start of the Civil War. She must learn to stand on her own two feet as she makes decisions and copes with the war all around her. Readers are immersed in the daily struggles of a mother on the home front during wartime. When her husband returns after the surrender at Appomattox, defeated and

discouraged, Joe must take the lead in bringing the family back together under one roof. She emerges with a new identity that has met the struggles of war head on. This is a story of survival and a portrait of a Southern woman who is part of a people who resolve to overcome defeat

This narrative is taken from over 600 original, unpublished letters collected from the author's ancestors. Careful research and detail has gone into making *A Strong-Minded Southern Woman: Joe Alston Claiborne* a true-to-life account of this tumultuous period in American History. Social and cultural history sets the stage for the reader to feel immersed in the world of Civil War Virginia.

The Market: Who Will Buy This Book?

Ken Burns' PBS documentary, "The Civil War," attracted an audience of 14 million viewers over five nights in 1990. An untold number of fans viewed the series afterward through DVD rentals and sales. Many agree the most memorable aspects of this Emmy winner is the detailed human element as quoted from letters and memories of ordinary soldiers and citizens who lived during America's greatest drama.

PBS continues to feed the demand for true-to-life narratives about the past with the series, "Faces of America." NBC has a popular show called, "Who Do You Think You Are?" Ancestry.com membership has skyrocketed in recent years. Our appetites are whetted for narratives that help us discover who we are as Americans and motivate us to learn more about our rich and varied roots. There is a built-in demand for true-life stories of ordinary people who lived through both turbulent and peaceful times.

The year 2011 marked the Sesquicentennial of the start of the Civil War. In 2006, Virginia's General Assembly created the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission to commemorate the Civil War in Virginia. Millions of people will visit Virginia from now until April 2015 to reconnect with a part of history that still resonates today. This story is set in Virginia and is about Virginians.

The commission established "The Civil War 150 Legacy Project to locate original, family-owned manuscripts to scan and place in a permanent archive. The website reads, "Of particular interest to the project are global and pacifist perspectives and the viewpoints of individual African Americans and women."

It is interesting to note that some of the most sought-after material is for the perspective of women about the Civil War. Joe's perspective offers readers a look at antebellum family life,

the citizenry's political attitudes toward session, daily life on the home front during the Civil War, and the immediate post-war months.

Target audience

The strongest target audience for this book will be those who read for pleasure, a better understanding of the past, genealogy, or scholarly pursuits. A primary market will be composed of middle-class educated women, genealogists, history buffs, students and teachers, and readers of general history books and personal narratives. In particular, those interested in social and cultural history, the Civil War and gender issues are potential readers. Additionally, there is a geographical audience available in Virginia and North Carolina.

People who have traced their ancestry or who have inherited family manuscripts and are looking to understand more about the Southern culture during the mid-nineteenth century will benefit from this work. Those who are interested in the language, communicating by the written word, and the personal values held by individuals of the Victorian era will find this work valuable. It is targeted to anyone who would like to be more informed about women's issues and family life on the home front during the Civil War era. It discusses romantic love, marriage, childbirth, families and raising children.

The Competition

It is difficult to determine the direct competition for this book because the personal narrative genre contains original stories of individuals. The variety of settings, time periods and cultural and social changes add to the unique experience a reader encounters each time a new book is read. Since each story is different, new publications introduced into the marketplace should contribute to and enhance the body of published work already in print.

There are several good publications with edited letters from the Civil War era. Three in particular are:

- *A Civil War Courtship: The Letters of Edwin Weller from Antietam to Atlanta, by Edwin Weller* This is a collection of courtship letters from a Union soldier to his sweetheart back home in New York. It focuses on the daily life a soldier who participates in almost every major battle in the Civil War. The story is told from a male perspective.
- *Rose Cottage Chronicles: Civil War Letters of the Bryant-Stephens Families of North Florida, edited by Arch Fredric Blakey.* This is a lengthy work which includes the bulk of about 1000 letters and some diaries entries of a young married couple.
- *Go If You Think It Your Duty: A Minnesota Couple's Civil War Letters, by James Madison Bowler.* This is a historically edited collection of letters from a Minnesota soldier to his wife back home and from her to him.

Some of these books are lengthy and include long letters. This has merit and is geared toward genealogists and the research community, with general readership as a secondary audience. A

Strong-Minded Southern Woman is distinguished in that it includes short passages from the letters and social history and commentary throughout.

Other books told from a woman's perspective about the Civil War era are defined as surveys of Confederate women with a collection of stories about representative women of the times. While these give a good overall picture of a number of women important to the Civil War, they do not focus on the life of one woman, her family and her experience. Some examples in this category include:

- *Tara Revisited: Women, War, & The Plantation Legend* by Catherine Clinton. The author draws from letters, diaries and other accounts to show diverse communities of Southern women during the era.
- *With Courage and Delicacy: Civil War on the Peninsula* by Nancy Scripture Garrison. This book focuses on the Virginia experience of nurses, volunteers and administrators in the Sanitary Commission.
- *Amazing Women of the Civil War* by Webb B. Garrison. This is an overview book on women and the Civil War in their various roles as nurses, soldiers, journalists or spies.
- *Women in the Civil War* by Mary Elizabeth Massey. This book details the effects of the Civil War on all classes of women from the North and the South, rich or poor.

Other books offer stories of women posing as Confederate soldiers or spies and portray direct involvement in the war. *A Strong-Minded Southern Woman* portrays battles with children, poverty and loneliness at home while the husband is absent. It is an in-depth story of survival told through letters in Joe and Herbert's own words.

A Strong-Minded Southern Woman: Joe Alston Claiborne

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Epilogue

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Introduction

As a young girl, I used to walk the Civil War battlefields in Virginia with my father. We lived near the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Southwestern corner of the state. My dad, David Mann, walked the historical sites with a sense of purpose, his long legs striding quickly across fields or wooded paths, gazing along the horizon. I went with him, mostly just to be close to my dad and spend time with him.

He held a lifelong devotion to Virginia's Civil War history. The shelves in our home were filled with books and atlases and biographies of the Civil War and its heroes. Our den held portraits of Robert E. Lee and his Generals. Bull Run, Manassas or New Market were part of my early vocabulary. Most people mark their calendars by referencing favorite holidays and birthdays. Our calendar also noted the major battles fought in the Civil War.

As a young adult, I turned my attention to more modern ideas. Now, in middle age, I find I want to reconnect with my past. I'm interested in rediscovering our family's Civil War heritage and the times and events that captivated my father's devotion for so many years.

I realized that part of the reason my dad delved into the history of the mid-nineteenth century was because we had family members who lived and moved and breathed during the drama and conflict of the Civil War years. Two family members stood out as major characters, Dr. John Herbert Claiborne and his wife Sarah Joe Alston Claiborne. Not only were their births and deaths recorded in the census books, but they also left a vast treasure trove of written records of their lives—letters, documents of business transactions, old Confederate bonds, receipts, business cards, and photos.

It is the personal letters between John Herbert Claiborne and his wife, some 600 in all, that reveal their inner lives—their hopes and sorrows, laughter and tears, anger and reconciliation, dreams and hardships. Their letters, written between 1862 and 1868, weave together the threads of a story of young people who first fall in love. They share expectations and dreams of happiness, face the hardship and sacrifices of war at their doorstep and deal with the realities of family life with its unique challenges and rewards.

Who were these Civil War ancestors? Where did they live and what was their daily life like? How did they react to the stormy times in which they lived? How did they feel about slavery, secession, upheaval and war? What type of involvement did they have in Secession, politics and the Civil War? Were they passionate about secession, the Confederacy and the war itself? Or were they bystanders, swept up in the changes during the time? How did they feel about their losses—personal losses due to war and destruction and ideological losses due to the breakup of the Confederacy?

John Herbert Claiborne, M.D.

Dr. John Herbert Claiborne, who went by the name of Herbert, was my great-great grandfather. According to the family Bible, he was born on March 10, 1828, in Brunswick County, Virginia. There was a discrepancy about the year he was born, however, and he relates this story in his memoir, *Seventy-five Years in Old Virginia*, published in 1904.

I was told, as far back as I can remember, that I was born on the day and at the hour of a very severe earthquake which traversed this portion of the state in the early twenties—an earthquake so severe that in some places there were considerable chasms in the earth. But this occurred in 1829, not 1828; and there is no record of an earthquake in 1828. If the seismic

convulsions occurring about that time augured anything of the troubled and tempestuous life which was awaiting me, I should rather incline to the [1829] tradition (18).

Herbert grew up on a 500-acre plantation in Brunswick County, Virginia, which originally grew the cash crops of tobacco, wheat and corn. Census records show his father, John Gregory Claiborne, owned 37 slaves, a group of servants who would have represented a large holding for the time. The events, feelings and relationships of the slaves, or servants, as they were always referred to, are talked about often in the letters. The Claiborne plantation was named Roslin and was situated about 30 miles north of present-day Lawrenceville, Virginia. Herbert's father, who was known as "Claiborne of Roslin," not only worked the land, but also practiced law and was an itinerant Methodist minister.

Herbert entered Randolph-Macon College in 1843, but in 1845, he transferred to Emory & Henry College in southwestern Virginia. He returned a year later to Randolph-Macon and graduated three years later, tying with another student for first honors. After receiving the degree of MD from the University of Virginia in 1849, and after further study at Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia Obstetrical Institute, and the Pennsylvania Hospital, he began the practice of medicine in Petersburg, Virginia in 1851.

A year and a half later, his political career was begun when he was the orator for the 4th of July celebration in Petersburg. His ability, it was said, stunned the audience and he was, a short time later, elected, almost against his will, to represent Petersburg in the Virginia House of Delegates. After a year's term, he was elected to the Virginia Senate to represent the Sixth District. He was a member of the body which, in April 1861, passed the ordinance for the Secession for Virginia. A few days later, he was mustered into service in the Confederate Army with a Petersburg battalion, serving as a captain and surgeon for about a year. In 1862, he set up

a military hospital in Petersburg where his military service centered until the evacuation of that city in April of 1865. He was promoted to the rank of Major and was appointed executive officer of all the military hospitals in the Petersburg area and surgeon on the General Staff of the Confederate Army. He was ordered by General Robert E. Lee to leave Petersburg when the city was evacuated and was near Appomattox when General Lee surrendered the army there. After the war, he went to Louisburg where his family had taken refuge during the war, and then went back to Petersburg and resumed his medical practice.

After the war, Herbert contributed frequently to medical and scientific journals, was the author of "Reports from Private Practice." His memoirs were published in 1904 under the title *Seventy-Five Years in Old Virginia*. His list of honors is long and includes honorary alumnus of the University of Virginia College and Medicine, president and honorary fellow of the Medical Society of Virginia, corresponding member of the Gynecological Society of Boston, fellow-elect of the Victoria Institute of Great Britain, and member of the First Pan-American Congress. He died in Petersburg on February 24, 1905. His epitaph reads, "He fought a good fight, he finished his course, he kept the faith."

Sarah Joseph Alston Claiborne

Sarah Joseph Alston Claiborne was my great-great grandmother and is the primary subject of this book. She was born on April 29, 1834 in Tipton County, Tennessee near Randolph. Her father was Joseph Alston, born sometime around 1793, married Louisa Daniel Thomas in 1833 when he was around 40 years old. Both Joseph and Louisa grew up in Franklin County, North Carolina but shortly after their marriage, they moved to Tipton County Tennessee

where Joseph's father was living at the time. A year later their daughter was born. They first named her Sarah Gillette Alston for Louisa's sister, Sarah, whose married name was Gillette.

Tragically, a short time later, Joseph died in a cholera epidemic that swept through the Tennessee County. Louisa changed the child's name to Sarah Joseph Alston. Soon afterward, Louisa's family in North Carolina, the Thomases, sent a wagon to Tennessee and brought Louisa and her daughter, Sarah Joseph, back to Louisburg, North Carolina. Sarah Joseph came to be known as simply "Joe" by her family and acquaintances.

Louisa married her first cousin, Thomas Knibb Thomas, when Joe was nine years old. Joe and her mother moved into "The White Cottage," the homestead of a large plantation and orchard near Louisburg, North Carolina. Mr. Thomas was part owner of the nearby Portis Gold Mine. He sold the mine to a Philadelphia company in 1866, but retained certain mineral rights. At the time he wrote his will, he acknowledged that most of his estate was in the hands of creditors. He died November 23, 1878. Louisa, who came to be known as "Ma Lou" to Joe and Herbert's children, died on May 3, 1890.

Joe's life and times as a single young lady, wife and mother are told in the pages of this book. She died on February 3, 1869 at home in Petersburg and is buried in Blandford Cemetery in that same Virginia city that she came to love as home.

Their Legacy of Letters

The letters upon which this narrative is based total more than 600 in all. They survived in the conventional family manner—in attics, files, and boxes of descendants, of which I am one. Herbert and Joe had five children, and I am descended from their youngest daughter, Elizabeth Weldon Claiborne. When Elizabeth's husband, Bernard Mann, died in 1930, she moved in with

her youngest son, John Mann. When he died in 1973, having no children, the letters were passed down to my father, David Mann, and eventually to me.

Sometime before she died in 1948, Herbert and Joe's third daughter and Joe's namesake, Sarah Joseph Alston Claiborne, typed the 138 letters sent during the siege of Petersburg and donated the original copies to the *Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library of the University of Virginia*. None of Joe's letters to Herbert, who was located in besieged Petersburg at this time, survived. But from the letters sent from Herbert to Joe, who was staying in Louisburg at that time, a reader can glean ideas about what her life was like. If I refer to letters sent during the siege, I have referred to the typed copies of the original siege letters. I have personally read and transcribed the original letters for the rest of this study.

The early courtship letters are written on fine embossed stationery and both parties wrote in their own flowing, cursive style. Their handwriting took some getting used to because their "esses" were written in the old Colonial style, resembling "effs," among other variations. After the war started, the paper became plainer, and many letters were written in a "criss-cross" style and in the margins to save paper. Some letters are faded; some well-preserved. During the months following the surrender at Appomattox, when poverty was evident, Herbert's handwriting looked cramped, and some of the letters were written on rough card stock in pencil, and the paper as it appears today is especially brittle and frayed.

I have sought to transcribe their words faithfully—as is—and to leave the language used in the nineteenth intact. The only changes I have made are when a word seems to be dropped or a lack of punctuation is likely to make an idea unclear to the modern reader. I have shortened and paraphrased some letters, and have changed the chronological order of some correspondence to tell a better story.

Chapter One

Letter-Writing

“This letter writing is great business, is it not? Does it not alleviate absence?”

Letter from Miss Joe to Herbert; March 5, 1853.

By the early nineteenth century, literacy was widespread among all classes of free society, and the postal service was reasonably efficient (Lystra 15). Petersburg in Virginia and Louisburg in North Carolina were about 130 miles apart, and Herbert and Joe said they usually received their correspondence by the next day if they each got their letters to the courier on time.

Nineteenth-century lovers had almost no other means to voice themselves across the miles except through pen and paper. Evidence shows that many couples kept their letters for a lifetime and passed them down to future generations, making this category of letters widely accessible to historians and general readers today. My family’s letters are certainly representative of this practice.

Victorians took their practices of writing love letters very seriously: they were not usually the means of conveying lighthearted frivolity. It was typical to pour out one’s heart on paper to his or her lover with extravagant words, hyperboles and beautiful epithets; all of which expressed a broad range of emotional highs and lows.

Herbert and Joe greatly valued their correspondence with one another and opened most of their letters by saying so. Herbert said of Joe’s letters, *“I have not had the happiness of reading one of your letters in so long a time. The reception of your letters contribute to my chiefest*

pleasure.” And common introductions include such thoughts as, *“Your sweet letter has come. It was surely one of your best.”*

Joe describes in detail her excitement about receiving one of Herbert’s letters, *“...a well-known summons from the gate announced your letter—I was expecting it—a few moments more and its contents were revealed. Need I attempt to describe the emotions which agitated my bosom during its perusal? Nay, it would be vain indeed. For almost the first time I realized our engagement—it was a letter from my betrothed I held...”*

Again, she describes her delight in writing to Herbert, *“I have determined to heed your simple request and pleasantly beguile the moments by writing you.”*

My family’s love letters reflect the social letter-writing conventions of the day. The importance of the correspondence was underscored by recording the month, day, and year the letter was written. Often the place the letter was written is recorded. The salutation added an element of personalization to the letters and changed as the level of intimacy between the couple grew.

Herbert and Joe began writing in September of 1852 and ended their courtship correspondence about five days before their wedding on May 3, 1853. But their letter writing practice did not stop on their wedding day. They continued communicating through letters during their early marriage when Joe visited her family in Louisburg, during the time Herbert served in the Virginia legislature, during the war and afterwards. What is left is a rich collection of their thoughts, conversations, dreams and experiences.

In the beginning of their correspondence, before marriage, Herbert addressed Joe as *“Miss Joe,”* which soon became *“Dear Miss Joe,”* and later, *“My dearest friend,”* and finally,

“Dearest Joe.” Early letters from Joe have the formal salutation, *“Dr. Claiborne.”* After she agrees to marry him, the greeting changes to *“My Friend”* and *“My Best Friend.”* The term “friend” had a much stronger meaning in the nineteenth than today. Calling a person a friend signified an intimate or exclusive relationship, either of the same gender or, as is the case here, with a fiancé.

Closing forms in the love letters showed a similar evolution as the couple’s relationship deepened and their intimacy grew. At the beginning of the correspondence, Herbert signs off with *“Very respectfully,”* and his full name, *“John Herbert Claiborne.”* Joe closes her letters in the same way, *“Very Respectfully, Sarah Joseph Alston.”* Herbert’s closing soon changes to one he uses throughout the course of his letters, *“Yours devotedly.”* Joe’s most common closing form is *“Yours, Joe”* or *“Your Very Own, Joe.”*

The openings and closing of love letters were similar to the forms used in business correspondence. Business letters during the time period were formal and proper and stayed along the conventional lines of distance and propriety that Victorian culture dictated. But the contents of love letters for both men and women used elaborately detailed emotional expressions. Lystra says “both sexes energetically articulated their emotional ties to each other and...expressed feelings with a rich variety of metaphors, a vivid array of adverbs and adjectives and emphasized the subjective ‘I.’ Frequently the letters established a context such as where they wrote and what the circumstances were.

A scene told in a letter from Herbert just six weeks before he and Joe were married conveys these Victorian writing characteristics. Prior to his letter, Herbert had visited Louisburg and Joe, her mother and Herbert had paid a visit to Joe’s grandmother. I believe, based on the

letter, that Joe and Herbert told the grandmother they were getting married and the grandmother voiced some objections or concerns. Also, based on the letters, Joe's grandmother was not in good health and they might have suspected she might not have long to live. When Herbert got back to Petersburg, he muses on his visit:

I have left you Josie, and am sitting in my office far away—Oh! How dreary it looks now. But my thoughts are all in the little white cottage and memory is gilding them with the same sunshine that played about your home when I bade you adieu. I wished to look back as I took my sad leave, but I almost feared I should display too much weakness; and the last objects which filled the faithful vision of remembrance are my own lover, surrounded by the familiar furniture of that little parlor in which cluster all of the sweetest associations of life, and your mother, standing at the door of the dining rooms.

Joe described her emotions most vividly, as her marriage date grew closer. About a month before the wedding she says,

“Mine is a trusting heart—do not suspect it. Oh! Do not. When you first came I knew that I would be yours. For with the thought of pledging myself unreservedly to you, there came a sense of security I never, never knew before. That same trust which I gave you then is yours now. There is no one else to whom I could give it. It has clung with a strange tenacity to yourself and should it now be torn from the object around which it has wound, it would shrink in fear from every other.”

I was especially surprised by the depth of emotions Herbert held toward his betrothed and the ways he articulated his range of feelings on paper. My stereotypes of the male gender in the nineteenth-century as being unemotional, reserved and stoic was challenged as I read and reread

his letters. I've found that scholars who study romantic letters from this time period have been surprised by the same ideas. "The range, depth and intensity of masculine emotional expression in love letters challenges any unqualified generations that nineteenth-century men were less emotional or less forthcoming about their feelings than nineteenth-century women. These men suggest ...masculine sex roles have been misunderstood" (Lystra 20).

When we left your grandmother's there was a scene. A sad one—though to me, such manifestations of the better feelings of the heart, come as Ossian's memories of the past, pleasant though mournful to the soul. To me they are sweet promises, filling the heart with hopeful assurance that the sordid selfishness of the world has not smothered every kindly feeling of heavenly source. I was prepared especially on that occasion to sympathize with the distress and to partake of their sorrows. I am never callous, I believe; perhaps not sufficiently so for the contact with a rough world, that would weigh down all the heart; but a parting scene that I had just left had already turned the chords of my feelings to this highest tension. I think how that it was particularly well that you and your Mother did not remain to witness our departure.

This chapter will present the letters as typical of the Victorian style of private letter writing. Victorians placed a high value on letter writing and especially love letter writing. These are formal, stilted exchanges but express the deepest emotion of the heart.

Chapter Two

Courtship

He Loves Me—He Loves Me Not—He Loves Me

In the fall of 1852, Miss Joe Alston was in an enviable position in life by anyone's standards. She was an only daughter in an old North Carolina family of good Colonial pedigree, and Southern landowners in the Upper South took great stock in family lineage. She lived in the rolling hills of western North Carolina, near Louisburg, in a locality known for its wealth, culture, refinement and generous hospitality.

It is true the law of entailment had been abolished for about half a century, so Joe, as a female, looked securely toward the future prospect of inheriting the large plantation on which she grew up. However, when she married, her wealth and property would be owned by her husband.

At 18, Joe had distinctive Alston features. Her eyes were clear blue; her hair thick and black. A widow's peak served to give her face a striking look, if not altogether beautiful. As a child, she was known to have emotional outbursts, and to show her temper when angered. But her mother, who doted on her, tamed and directed her strong spirit and directed her energies into appropriate channels for a Southern lady.

She had been educated at home by a governess from the North, as most upper class young girls were at that time. She attended a woman's college not far from home to "finish" her education. Music was her strongest interest. She was a pianist and had learned to play the guitar, a skill not many women of her generation pursued.

In every way, Joe would be a fine match for any of the eligible young men throughout the countryside who were of marrying age. And she was not in want of suitors. In her letters, she mentions a “certain someone who used to bring the rain and clouds with him”; obviously a past beau who wore out his welcome. Then there was “Mr. White, who has come to call again” and Captain Ruffin “who came to escort me to a large party in the country.”

One suitor captured her attention more than these men from her locale; Dr. John Herbert Claiborne from Petersburg, Virginia. Probably Joe had met Herbert at church or through family connections—the typical ways young people got acquainted and began to form exclusive relationships. In one letter, Joe mentioned “seeing you at church that night” as a cherished memory.

Herbert and Joe probably got to know one another through family connections. Herbert’s oldest sister, Mary Augusta, married John Thomas, Joe’s stepfather’s uncle. Joe refers to “talking with Sister Augusta” or being “paid a visit” by her in letters frequently. It is likely Herbert visited his sister frequently, and especially when he began his interest in Joe.

But admiring someone in a crowd at church or a family gathering was vastly different than pairing off in an exclusive relationship with a potential mate. Joe’s assessment of the 26-year-old doctor was that he “courted too hard.” She thought of him as bold and decisive, yet she noticed a vulnerable side and an “earnestness” when he talked of matters of the heart. He was forthright, yet tender, when he told her of his wishes to make her his bride.

She admired the way he expressed himself as he declared his love and fidelity for her and her alone. Joe referred to his proposal of marriage as his “handsome address,” declared to her one starry evening beside one of her favorite places, a lake on her family’s property. He spoke of

his dreams of “making the world a better place” as he pursued his profession or in daily life wherever “his sense of duty and honor should lead him.” In return, he only asked that she “love him,” in hopes that their lives together would be ones of “happiness, peace and contentment.” He spoke of someday “laying the richly merited rewards at her feet.”

All of these beautiful declarations of love were expressed between Herbert and Joe through a series of 88 love letters between October 1852 and May 1853. To better understand how their relationship grew from an initial acquaintance to admiration and love and finally to marriage, it’s important to place their romance in the context of Victorian America.

When a modern reader looks at the first eight or ten letters, he or she wonders if this couple is engaged or not. Phrases from Joe such as, “*your proposition has been an awful puzzle to my brain*” or Herbert countering with, “*The people are at great fault here to know whether I am going to be married. Can’t you put them right?*” cause us to wonder what is going on. Most people of today who fall in love and contemplate marriage tell others about the personal areas of their lives—sometimes to close acquaintances and sometimes to anyone who will listen. In contemporary society, we are used to television gossip shows, magazines with news of the private lives of celebrities on the front covers, and an Internet to expand our privacy as far as we would like.

The social interactions of people living during the Victorian era in America were the polar opposite of the ways men and woman relate romantically to each other today. Nineteenth-century American social interaction must be understood along a public-private continuum. It was expected of the well-bred Victorian man or woman to be controlled, not overly expressive and reserved in public and to show a rich array of emotions and self-revelation in private. The domain of romantic love, sex and any intimate communication fell on the extreme end of privacy. “Since the public-

private dichotomy was the very foundation of genteel Victorian culture in America, it was the compass that oriented individuals in courtship and marriage...as well as on the street and in the counting house” (Lystra 17).

Etiquette books of the time taught a complex series of adjustments in gesture, tone, style and substance when communicating to different audiences or in different social settings. “These adjustments of expression...involved the extreme separation of public and private life” (Lystra 17).

It is impossible to understand Herbert and Joe as individuals or to extract meaning from their love letters without understanding the value they placed on keeping intimate matters in the realm of privacy.

Victorians designated the street and office as a place of rigid control, the parlor as middle ground and the “inner sanctum of the home as the locus of freedom and the open heart”(Lystra 18). Letters corresponded to this rule: business letters were formal and unemotional; letters to distant relatives and acquaintances filled the middle ground, but love letters were deemed the place for exclusive self-revelation.

Herbert had asked Joe to write to him after he gave her his “handsome address” as a proposal of marriage. Joe, who was a well-bred young woman sensed she was about to embark on a new path if she were to determine if the love Herbert expressed was real.

Joe’s central question about this wonderfully maddening, knock-you-off-your-feet juncture in her young life was, “How do I know he really loves me? How can I trust he means what he says?”Indeed, it is every girl’s question regardless of the century, locale, or station in life.

In nineteenth-century America, young people were making their own decisions about whom to marry. Gone were the days of parents choosing a mate for their sons or daughters to increase the family's wealth or land-holdings. Chaperoning of couples when they were spending alone was going out of practice, even in the more socially conservative South. It was respectable, by the early 1800s for young lovers to spend time alone in the countryside or to be left alone in the parlor or separate place in the house. In one letter, Joe chronicles the "greenest spots in [her] memory's waste" of her courtship experience. "The darkened parlor at Jarrett's Hotel and our morning walk at Old Point" are times spent with Herbert alone.

At the same time, parental controls decreased in importance and most parents did not oversee the blossoming love relationships of their children (D'Emilio 75). Family members could offer opinions and advice about suitable partners, but it was understood in the culture of the day that the choice was the young person's prerogative to make.

Objections toward Herbert as a potential marriage partner surfaced from Joe's grandmother, Anna Thomas. Obviously, Joe had visited her grandmother and had sought her advice about marriage. Anna wrote to Joe after reflecting on their visit and the all-important question:

Yes, my dear Joe, the considerations of making a vow, the consummation for life, is a critical moment, the moment upon which your happiness in life is supreme....The gentleman alluded to, his deportment heretofore, would allow of some objection; yet he may have reform, still I think one that has been a little inclined to dissipation, their true character for manhood is not sufficiently developed, at this tender age, to form a correct estimate of what the man will be.

Even though her grandmother expressed reservations about Herbert's character and his inclination to "dissipation," nevertheless, in the end, Joe makes her own decision.

Likewise, Joe's stepfather, Mr. Thomas, as he is always referred to in the letters, voiced objections about Herbert. After expressing strong doubts about Herbert's health and saying that Herbert's active medical practice would put "too great a strain on him," Mr. Thomas added, "I could never entertain any feelings of cordiality towards [Herbert] and it is useless to conceal the fact." Such strong disapproval weighed heavily on both Herbert and Joe. But it did not change the course of their growing love.

On the contrary, objections may have spurred them toward strengthening their commitment to foster romantic love. One reason they continued their romantic relationship was because of a shift during the nineteenth century in the value placed on romantic love as a basis for a lasting marital relationship. "By 1830, romantic love was fast becoming the necessary condition for marriage in the American middle class. While the ratio of those who married for love versus those who did not can never be determined with certainty, even strong suggests that...the 'heart' played an increasingly larger role in mating as the century progressed" (Lystra 28).

The ideal of romantic love flourished during Joe's time and she wanted the assurance that romantic attachment was genuine in any man she hoped to marry. A woman contemplating marriage during the 1800s needed to consider several factors before approaching the altar. First, the marriage needed to last a lifetime since divorce was looked down upon among proper Victorian society. A woman's standing in the community and her identity socially were tied to the man she married. It would be the wife's place to identify with her husband's career,

involvement in local or national affairs, and his reputation and character among his peers. Her sense of stability and happiness depended on her husband. Finally, women had little means of independent financial support during this time period, so it was imperative that women found a mate to rely upon for financial well-being.

These factors brought Joe's choice of finding a desirable marriage partner into sharper focus. More than likely, being caught between the excitement of romantic love and the realities of sustaining a lifetime of monogamy filled Joe and Herbert's courtship with periods of ecstatic highs and anxious lows.

Enter a practiced routine into the drama of romantic relationships in Victorian America known as courtship testing. This ritual was a distinguishing characteristic of nineteenth-century romance. "Middle-class courtship usually featured at least one dramatic emotional crisis, usually precipitated by the nineteenth-century woman as a test of her potential husband's profession of love....Both men and women relied upon courtship testing to gauge their partner's emotional commitment"(157).

It was typical for men to test, but they often tested less intensely and less resolutely than woman. It is interesting to note that Herbert initiates the sparring, in the form of a test, to gauge how Joe reacts to his obvious enjoyment of beautiful women and to the irresistible habit he has of flirting with them. At the start of their letter-writing relationship, they write:

Herbert: *I reached home in full time to attend Miss Georgia's wedding and made my entrée between 10 and 11 o'clock. The party was a magnificent affair. Beauty and brilliance flashed their dazzling charms before me, and rich jewels and bright eyes sparkled to tempt me. But for*

the memory of the “girl I left behind me” where would have been my good resolutions to flirt no more? I did not speak a word of love, scarcely.

Joe: *And so Miss Georgia’s wedding was, you acknowledge, a strong temptation to forsake your good resolutions. But where is the harm of a little innocent flirtation?*

Herbert: *Early in the evening I approached a sunny, fair-haired beauty from Richmond, and so forcibly did she remind me of my own bright love that I could not keep from saying one or two sweet things softly. Will you forgive me under the circumstances?*

Joe: *Why ask my forgiveness for those sweet words of love you softly said to “the sunny fair-haired girl from Richmond,” and why preface it by saying she so forcibly reminded you of your own love that you could not help it? Had her charms fallen unheeded and unfelt, I might have deemed all future efforts to please unavailing, if the effort should ever meet with the appreciation it merits.*

Joe cooled off Herbert’s braggadocios teasing with unflappable responses, which showed her maturity and proved she could pass his tests. It also proved she *wanted* to pass his tests.

Typically, women threw large and small obstacles in the path of the male to measure the depth and intensity of his romantic love (157). In the midst of bantering back and forth, Joe presents a test in the form of an obstacle to marrying Herbert.

O! ‘Tis so hard to think of leaving my happy home and friends for a stranger’s land. My heart has known but one object around which to twine its earliest and latest affections—my mother—and is it not almost a ruthless hand that would sever those sacred ties of nature? My bosom would indeed have to own a sovereign love to heal the wound that parting from her would

make. I often fear were I to become your wife, the thought of leaving her, so sad and lonely, would make me not the cheerful, agreeable companion you imagine.

Herbert's response to this test is to disclose his own fears, thereby setting up a new test, which asks in effect, "Can you handle my own sense of doubt, too?" Herbert writes:

You say that you sometimes fear that if you were to leave your mother sad and lonely and come off to this land of strangers that you would not be so happy and cheerful as I might wish you. And I occasionally have my fears too—that you might be disappointed in me—that you might not find me all that my too-partial friends would represent me.

The ritual of courtship testing qualified as the grounds needed for Joe to answer her question, "How do I know he truly loves me?" This elaborate pattern of "testing" and "passing the test" and "retesting" fortified their relationship throughout their courtship period.

Not only for Joe and Herbert, but for Victorian society as a whole, this ritualized courtship testing filled several needs. "While the individuals involved seemed only partially aware of their own complicity, the tests of courtship formed such a consistent pattern that they cannot be explained as mere coincidence"(166).

Testing helped to develop a couple's romantic attachment. "This was beneficial to the entire social order for in strengthening romantic bonds, courtship testing contributed to the stability of companionate marriage" (156). Since women often set more vigorous courtship tests than men, Victorian courtship functioned especially to intensify men's romantic attachment to women. "This was advantageous to women who, often without other means of support, relied upon the sentimental ties they forged with men"(158).

At a time when parental controls in the choosing of a mate had been moved to the background, and divorce was still frowned upon by polite society, courtship testing served as a way to cement the commitment of both parties as they entered into marriage.

What was the process of courtship testing? As with Herbert and Joe, emotional testing usually began early in the relationship and often reached a crescendo after an apparent commitment, such as an engagement (166). Sometime during the Christmas season of 1862, Joe said “yes” to Herbert’s proposal of marriage. An understanding had been reached and their letters after January 1863 began to refer to each other as “my betrothed.” But Herbert had left it up to Joe to set the date of their wedding. Over the course of the next few months, he pressed her for a decisive date, backed off, apologized, agreed not to mention it, mentioned again that it was her decision, and finally dropped his prodding for a time. This gave Joe the time to test Herbert once more until she had the assurance that he loved her and would stay attached to her for a lifetime. The test came about five weeks before their wedding when Joe wrote about the citizens of Louisburg being entertained for three days by a visiting speaker and a “great champion of the temperance reformation.” She shares her zeal for the Sons of Temperance (1) and confesses that Herbert has gently reproached her because she has not been confident in Herbert’s commitment to this cause. She writes,

Before I knew you, I even went so far as to say that to none but a true Son of Temperance would I pledge my hand and heart. You have tested and proved the strength of my determination. It is my ambition to see you towering in morals sublimely above the level of your fellow man and I could not now conceive of anything that would send a thrill of deeper joy and gratitude thro’ my bosom than to see your name and influence given to that noble order, not for a short time but forever. It is not drunkenness which I think is so much to be dreaded, for everyone hates the

term. But it is the insinuating influence of fashionable wine—drinking and it is this which I would not have you countenance.

It was almost as if Joe was “rechecking”—to use the language of the heart—the soundness of her choice to marry a man who was not a Son of Temperance. She was also testing the strength of betrothed’s love.

Herbert’s prompt reply is full of tension caused by Joe’s request for abstinence. It is best to include his response in its entirety in order to convey his deep feelings, not only about drinking, but about his relationship with Joe.

Dear Josie,

You thought well that a message from you would bring me solace and relief amid my perplexing duties. Wearily did I wait your letter. Gladly did I welcome it. Its perusal did not excite feelings of unalloyed satisfaction thoroughly. I was filled with joy when I learned from it that she, who thought it a happy lot to be my “destined bride,” was remembering me with love; and I felt that in “withering thoughts” could ever mar her peace, that sprung from any evidences of “disappointment written on my brow.” I was gratified too when I learned it to be your noble ambition that I should “tower in moral sublimity” above the level of my fellows; and I feel that you would always bestow your sympathy to cheer and your smile to encourage in the arduous labor which I often follow; and which, I had hoped, were not altogether prompted by the selfish motives of the world, nor entirely imbued in their spirit, with the groveling impulses that guide and govern the majority of mankind. I was pained though, at a request, which led me to fear that your mind was not at rest in reference to the stability of all of my principles, and that you sometimes dreaded—for me—supercution of a habit, which would debase me with the beasts and

sink me into ruin. My views in reference to the matter to which I refer, I took an early opportunity to apprise you of, and my habits I gave so honest and candid history of, that most of persons would have thought I was entering into very uncalled-for minutiae. I did so however because I was aware of your opinions; and because I would not have wedded you to deceive you—no—not for my right arm. I told you that I had been a member of the order of Sons' of Temperance, but that I had left it because advised by Physicians attending me to drink wine daily—and because while my judgment approve of the prescription I was unwilling to follow it as a Son. I told you that now it was not my daily habit, but that I occasionally drink wine at parties; or even brandy when conscious that my conditions called for such a stimulant. I am not in the habit of indulging in any stimulating drink for the love of it—but use it wherever I think it of service.

I consider the use of spirits pernicious—even in the physical effects—to the majority of men, but called for as a medicine by some constitutions, and under certain conditions of the body. When carried to excess it is an evil, and an evil only. Destroying for the individual body and mind and soul—and casting over communities blight and desolation and death. As a social indulgence it is not unattended with danger for as a habit it will grow on a person. Drunkenness however I believe to be a disease as much as madness, and but too often an incurable one. Social indulgence may set this in the predisposition and for this reason too should be eschewed. Every institution or society which has for its object the removal of the temptation has my warmest approbation and good wishes. I would also have my voice and my influence known as exerted in their favor. Of the feasibility of the measures used by certain societies to procure the desires of ardent spirits altogether, I have not time to speak now. I have been often disheartened of late to see the failure which has attended many of them. This is not the reason though I am

not attached to some of them. The reason is I have to resort to the use of spirits sometimes as a medicine and cannot do so under the stringency of their pledges without giving offence to someone. But for that, I could forget the use of wine as a fashionable liquor. As long as I am not a member of some temperance society, I am expected to do this when in fashionable company. Marrying will exempt me from being placed in such situations often. I am ready to attribute to you the kindest motives only in making such a request and will assure you that I have not esteemed it a light matter. I most sincerely regret that you ever made such a request though, as I cannot promise to grant it. Whatever pain my refusal may give you, you will suffer not less than I. I had hoped never to have refused you anything. It especially afflicts me that my first denial was to such a wish. Were I to make you such a promise now I should feel bound forever to fulfill it. I am not prepared to take this vow.

Though you once said you would never wed any but a true Son of Temperance, yet your present engagement leads me to believe that you would not make this a requirement. You know me now and at this point in my life. I suppose you have no lingering doubts in any other. If so—speak—I would not wed you—as I have often told you—merely because you have pledged me your heart. The day of my hope shall be gone when you tell me to forget you; but let it sink in eternal sights were I to bring one pang to your heart by binding you to a man whom you knew not when you gave him your vows. I have told you more of myself than perhaps you thought quite necessary—perhaps not. I know that you will be disappointed in some things yet. God did not make me perfect and I have done but little to better his work. Would I worthier of you—in your worship and purity. I have even told you that I was not. Believe me it was no idle speech. I await a letter from you with no little anxiety. I can write nothing more now. I have not time to read what I have written. I fear until you write me to come on my final visit. I do not accuse you

of indecision—nor of anything that is not good. If you please, answer this letter soon. I am anxious to hear what you have further to say on the subject which has filled it. I thought it was over with, but we had better talk of it now than too late. Goodbye and God bless is my prayer forever.

Your best friend,

Jno. Herbert Claiborne

Herbert's response followed a conventional pattern of the Victorian courtship testing ritual. Response to the test took three different forms: Attack the obstacle directly; propose ways to surmount the obstacles to love in the immediate future; or step aside, accept the existence of the obstacle and admit it blocked the relationship (Lystra 177). In this case, Herbert accepted Joe's preference that he not drink "fashionable wine" and agreed to end the engagement if she could not accept his physical condition and viewpoints. Herbert pleaded his case and then waited, nervously, for Joe's response. It came two days later.

Did my last letter imply a want of confidence in you? Little do you know of what this heart has pledged you if you once doubt it. Mine is a trusting heart—do not suspect it. Oh! Do not. When you first came I knew that I would be yours. For with the thought of pledging myself unreservedly to you, there came a sense of security I never, never knew before. That same trust which I gave you then, is yours now. There is no one else to whom I could give it. It has clung with a strange tenacity to yourself, and should it now be torn from the object around which it has wound would shrink in fear from every other.

I made the request I did because I wished you to evince your disapprobation of anything like intemperance by uniting with so good an order, but since you do not, I am yours the same. I pledged myself to you when I knew your sentiments. They have not changed, neither have I.

And so the two lovers connect and reconnect, tightening their bonds. Herbert and Joe consistently measured their love and found their attachment increased dramatically through the course of their courtship. Testing served a powerful purpose to create a deeper bond of love between them for a number of reasons. “It spurred self-disclosure and mutual introspection. Courtship testing demanded action, compelling belief through participation in the minor exchanges of denial and affirmation, as well as the major melodramas” (179).

As couples tested each others’ devotion and loyalty to their upcoming union in marriage, their individual responses to tests revealed more and more about themselves. Self-disclosure was equal to testing as an important courtship ritual in Victorian American. As both parties became more intimate, they made a concentrated effort to get to know the others’ true self. “Courting couples pressured each other to greater self-awareness and self-definition in their effort to know someone else as they sought to know themselves” (38). In Joe and Herbert’s case, letters were their primary vehicle for getting to know the other person since distance separated them most of the time.

But self-disclosure was not always of a positive nature. It was common in love letters to expose one’s own faults, flaws and negative perceptions of self. In fact, criticism of one’s own character and behavior was a significant part of nineteenth-century courtship. This practice became a hallmark of Victorian dating relationships and is a pattern seen repeatedly in Herbert and Joe’s love letters. The ritual went something like this: One party makes a negative estimation of his or her personal qualities; this self-criticism generates a positive response.

Herbert writes, “*Oh, I feel a more endearing attachment to you than ever, and a firmer trust and confidence in your love, and—shall I write it?—an increasing and afflicting sense of my utter unworthiness of one so pure and so true.*” Joe responds with greater devotion to

Herbert. After receiving your last letter, *“Then I believed you really wished to hear from me. Because my reason tells me ‘twould be absurd for a man, with urgent professional engagements to leave them four distinct times and come one hundred and ten miles, when there was no other attraction than his sweetheart.”*

As their wedding day approached, more examples of realistic, yet negative, self-images were written about in the hopes of nourishing love, but also as a means to test it. Joe writes about two weeks before the wedding,

“Yes, that even which I have ever anticipated as far away in the future is almost at hand and a life of responsibility now lies before me. I fear to view it—so little prepared am I for it. Many, many allowances you will have to make and must forbearance call into exercise. Remember you are going to marry an only child—a highly honored, but I will not say a spoiled one entirely.”

Herbert’s response? *“I do not fear that the “humored ways” of a petted child will be a source of annoyance, but I do fear occasionally that I shall not be as well calculated to make her happy as she is to make me so. I can only promise you my best efforts Josie and may God grant them effectual.”*

Joe and Herbert seemed to favor full and sometimes negative self-disclosure because of a fear of disappointing each other in their future marriage. Couples engaged in negative self-disclosure to help ensure less marital discord later on. By assessing a prospective mate’s emotional commitment through negative self-images and testing, Victorian lovers hoped to establish a more realistic picture of their after marriage.

The severest trial of their engagement came about ten days before their wedding date. Joe and her mother made final wedding plans which included holding the wedding ceremony in the parlor of “The White Cottage.” Herbert agreed to these plans, but with certain conditions. *“The arrangement we last made still stands, not changed,”* wrote Joe. *“Ma still hopes that we may stay here, but I tell her on what conditions and those conditions must not be made known to Pa. Whatever he does must be voluntarily done.”*

Louise’s desire to have the ceremony take place at her home was motivated by a wish to send her only daughter away in a proper fashion. Mixed into this wish were Joe’s feelings about leaving her mother “sad and lonely.” So Joe wanted to please her mother and fulfill what she perceived as her mother’s only last wish before she would be married.

Herbert expressed empathy to this mother-daughter bond and wanted to accept the strong feelings they had for each other. He writes,

I was, and have been, no little disturbed by your mother’s unhappiness. I know how deep her love must be for an only child, and for such an one, and I cannot be surprised that she should feel sad at the prospect of giving up the pleasure of her constant and sweet society. But all things might have been more pleasant than they are, and I can scarcely avoid regret sometimes that I have had any agency in breaking up the peace. I know that you might have married, not only more in accordance with Mr. Thomas’ views, but perhaps someone who, while he could have offered more of all things desirable than I shall bring, would have secured to your Mother the happiness of having her daughter always near her. I fear this thought has often passed through her mind also.

The “conditions” must have been along the lines of a reconciliation by Joe’s stepfather to Herbert. Herbert was uncomfortable being married in the *“house of a man who had [insulted] me and who had avoided me by always leaving home when he expected me, but no one else that has heard of the case has been astonished.”*

Joe's stepfather had never given full approval of Herbert as a suitable husband for Joe.

The crux of the conflict is seen in this statement by Herbert to Joe.

In reply to me when I said I hope there would be no unkindness between us he did say that he hoped so too, but in the same breath assured me that he could never entertain any feelings of cordiality towards me and said that it was useless to conceal the fact—that he wished he did not feel as he did, but he did and couldn't help it.

So Herbert must have set a "condition" that he would be married at the Thomas home only if Mr. Thomas would make steps to reconcile their differences.

We get further glimpses of the two men's conflict through other letters. Mr. Thomas expressed concern to Joe about Herbert's health. Earlier, Herbert had written that a doctor had examined his lungs and found him in good health overall. Frequently Herbert wrote about suffering with severe headaches and eye strains, so difficult that his pain interfered with his work. Regularly, through letters, Joe implored him to tell her when he was sick and wrote she looked forward to sharing his life both in sickness and in health.

Herbert tried to take the middle ground and postpone any conflict until after he is married. He writes:

I will get along with your Pa the best that I can, though present appearances promise no gratifications to anybody from that source. The less dealing he and I have with each other hereafter the better it will be for both parties, I presume.

How was this conflict resolved? Herbert conceded. Joe wrote to Herbert in tears. Her stepfather must have been unwilling to recognize Herbert's feelings of uneasiness or wounded pride and insisted the wedding take place in his home. Herbert says, "*Among the last things that memory shall blot out of my mind, shall be the cause of your present unhappiness. Could I trace*

this matter to any action of mine father culpable than I sought to win you to my fortune, my present trouble would be too much to bear.”

Joe must have been in the position of asking Herbert to back down from his principles. It seems to be their most painful test to date, but they resolve it.

If your heart will have rest Josie, in welcoming me to the home of your mother I cannot withhold from you that one prospect of joy. From Mr. Thomas I have received no evidence that he conceded anything. You state that you have. I trust my honor to your keeping as soon we must share that with every other earthly interest and concern. I do not doubt your affection for me. Oh no! I cannot conceive of what else can be sustaining you in the near prospect of nuptials promising so little gratification other than to the two whole hearts I hope will be wedded.

They *were* wedded—on evening of May 3, 1853 in the Thomas’ front parlor. The couple spent a week in Louisburg at The White Cottage, then went to Petersburg and Roslin to be received by Herbert’s family. Two weeks later, they took a honeymoon trip to New York, where Herbert also attended a medical convention.

Through the highs and lows of what appeared on the surface to be an ordinary courtship experience becomes a fortifying experience for a Victorian southern couple. By testing and checking their romantic feelings and be slowly disclosing more and more of their romantic selves, they are better prepared to meet the challenges of married life. Joe would face the additional adjustments of living in a new city among, as she puts it, “strangers.” New in-laws, new friends and a new home would surely challenge her. And both Joe and Herbert would need every bit of courage and strength to weather the sweeping political and cultural upheaval the next few years would bring.

(1) The Sons of Temperance was a brotherhood of men who promoted the temperance movement and mutual support. It began spreading rapidly during the 1840s throughout the United States and parts of Canada. The organization had a highly restricted membership. In order to become a member (called a "brother"), a man had to be nominated by an existing brother. Three other brothers would then investigate his life to determine if they thought he was worthy of membership. (Wikipedia).

Chapter Three Summary

Childbirth

Pregnancy

Four months after her wedding day, Joe boards a train to visit her childhood home in North Carolina. Hints emerge about her being pregnant when Herbert writes his first letter to her.

“I saw you put out your hand from the window the morning you started, after the train was under way, and I knew it was to catch a last glimpse of your husband, wasn’t it? But tell me how did you get along the day you left and how many times did you puke? Out of the car window? I have not told your Sister Anna yet and will not until you are willing. But Joe, it is known here. I mean your situation.”

Once she is back in North Carolina, Joe takes her share of good-natured teasing. In her first letter to Herbert, she writes, “

Aunt Anna has not yet found me out that I know of, but the other evening as I walked in at Grandma’s, Edwin exclaimed, “Cousin Joe don’t look like herself. She’s so fat.” Very observing boy he is.”

It was characteristic of Victorians to keep their pregnancies private for as long as they could and it was considered ill-bred to discuss pregnancy outside of an immediate circle of family members and close relatives. When a woman’s pregnancy began to show, the typical term of description was that she was “going into confinement,” after which time she would appear in public until after delivery.

This chapter will look at Victorian society in relation to childbearing practices, contraception and the beliefs women typically held about childbearing. What were labor and

delivery like for women of this time period and what was the typical childbirth experience? Did women use midwives or doctors? Did they typically deliver at home or in hospitals?

Stillbirth

Joe's pregnancy did not end happily and we discover her first son was stillborn. To make matters more precarious, Joe came close to death, also. Was Herbert with her during delivery as her doctor? What was her condition and how did she live through her first delivery?

Parts of this chapter will discuss the heartbreak of childbirth and the dangers the labor and delivery experience involved. Through letters and Joe and Herbert's experiences with childbirth and grief, the reader will re-live this sad time during Joe and Herbert's first year of marriage.

Here is a glimpse.

***Herbert:** You will be right envious of her [friend, Mary White] I fear should she have a nice baby. Don't you want one? You must not have one soon.*

***Joe:** You say you are afraid I will envy Mary if she has a nice baby and lightly ask if I do not want one. You unconsciously touch a tender chord when you speak so. My (crossed out to our) dear little boy occupies more of his mother's thoughts than perhaps you think. A place too in my affections was his little form, strange so it may seem. I never see an infant with its interesting helplessness without thinking of the happiness I am certain of as being in store for me.*

Chapter Four Summary

Relationships In A Slave Society

In the decade of the 1850s, Petersburg had a unique population. It was the third largest city in Virginia with a population of about 16,000. Of this populace, half were white and half were black. Of the nearly 8,000 negro citizens, about half were slaves and the other half were free. Some historians have said that the demographic mix of Petersburg came as close as any Southern city to demographic makeup of cities in the North.

This carefully constructed chapter will look at the relationships of this mix of people in the city of Petersburg at the time Joe and Herbert built their pre-war lives there. It will particularly explore Joe's relationship with the women and men who were slaves in the Claiborne household. Some of the women have been living in the same household with her all her life: for instance, she mentions Fanny and Aunt Rachel frequently in her letters. Other relationships to be explored are the men, women and children she becomes associated with after marriage.

A rich tapestry of experiences about slave life is included in the body of letters during this time. An interesting picture emerges of life in the Claiborne household in regards to the give and take that happened in this type of household.

For example, during their first year of marriage, Herbert purchases and brings several slaves from Louisburg to live with them in Petersburg. Two in particular, Thomas and Fanny, fall in love and are married. Their wedding ceremony complete with a parade of carriages down the central street in Petersburg is written up in the local newspaper. Much to Joe's dismay, Herbert agrees to allow the wedding reception to take place in their home. Through these

experiences, Joe's qualities of patience, confidence, and ability to convey respect are challenged. We see a different side of Joe as she learns to manage a household.

These unique relationships change during Joe's lifetime as the institution of slavery is uprooted in the South. Letters during this period of her life trace Joe and Herbert's changing perceptions about slavery as an institution. Their personal relationships with the men and women who serve them are challenged. This chapter will answer questions such as, what happened to their slaves after the war. Did they leave or stay? How was Joe's life altered with the breakup of the slave society in which she grew up?

Chapter Five Summary

Seeds of Secession

Will not some leading mind shine out from the darkness and confusion of the present and give mould and character to the sentiments of the people? A Christian Cromwell might do noble work now for the people are wandering guidelessly, starlessly, almost hopeless down to destruction.

*Joe to Herbert at Virginia's Secession Convention
March 6, 1861*

This chapter opens in January of 1860 during the exciting times leading up to the beginning of the Civil War. This time period's collection of letters is from Joe as a mother of three young children in Petersburg and Herbert who is attending the Virginia House of Delegates' Special session on Secession in Richmond. The letters give an insider's look at Petersburg's citizenry and experiences during the months leading to Virginia's secession.

Readers will understand the Claibornes' viewpoints about the national and statewide political turmoil. Were they divided in their opinions with each other and/or with other family members? How did their slaves react? Herbert considers moving the family to Montgomery, Alabama. Why? How does Joe feel about a move at this time, with three small children and another one on the way?

This chapter portrays Joe as maturing politically and beginning to claim her own views and beliefs as she grows into womanhood. She was interested in the peoples', as opposed to government leadership's viewpoint regarding secession. Research will explore women's roles and activities in Petersburg during this prewar time period.

This chapter will end with Petersburg's regiments, along with Herbert, boarding a train for Norfolk, Virginia with the Confederate Army. How does Joe's pregnancy and confinement affect her participation in the community's fervor about the Confederacy?

Chapter Six Summary

Separated By War

Joe and Herbert lived apart during the war at two different times. The first time was at the beginning of the war from April 1861 to May 1862.

In April 1861, Herbert left Petersburg amid great cheering and fanfare to serve as a surgeon with the Petersburg regiment defending the Navy Yard near Norfolk, Virginia. Joe, six months pregnant with their fourth child, stayed in Petersburg initially, and then with the help of her servants, loaded up a wagon with three children and headed for Louisburg. Letters convey an inside look at troubles with their slaves in Petersburg and how to adjust their home life and financial situation to face the realities of war. Family and home life during war are brought into focus.

In 1862, Herbert was assigned the duty in Petersburg of setting up and administrating four hospitals for the Confederate Army. The family is again under one roof for the middle period of the Civil War. Through Herbert's memoirs and other records and resident's diaries life during this time will be portrayed.

Petersburg was evacuated in June of 1863 because the Union army was advancing to surround Richmond and the Petersburg area. Joe and the children once again left for Louisburg, thinking they would be home in about six weeks. The six weeks turned into a siege of the city lasting almost a year. Herbert stayed in Petersburg and took command of the hospitals there. He wrote to Joe nearly every day and she wrote to him, also, but her letters did not survive. We get another good picture of life during wartime from his letters to her and understand her home front situation better through the way in which he answers her questions. A portrayal of the hardships and deprivation of the Civil will be portrayed in this chapter.

Chapter Seven Summary

Surrender

At the time the war ended in April of 1865, Joe and her four children had boarded with a gentleman and his family in Louisburg for the past two years. Three months earlier, Herbert has taken leave from his post as Head Surgeon for Confederate Hospitals for a visit with his family. No doubt, Herbert must have recognized the deterioration of the Confederate army and would have judged General Lee and the army could not hold on much longer. Herbert's sense of duty and honor would have taken him back to Petersburg and to his responsibilities to the Confederacy.

But how did Joe, as an ardent Confederate initially, feel about the loss of the war and the Confederacy? How did she react to the upheaval of their intact family, the loss of her home and community and having her happiness and sense of peace taken from her? These issues will be explored in this chapter.

When Herbert returned safely to Petersburg after his visit, he picked up his habit of writing letters daily. The strain of separation from the family and a sense of hopelessness seem to have taken its toll on them both. Herbert writes on March 9th, 1865:

“The morning I left you were in tears over the fire. I had a cheerless and disagreeable ride to Franklin with the roads rough and the winds cold....I had time to think—of how you looked—and how the children, happy little things ran out to tell me goodbye again, laughing and chattering as if I were just going downtown—and of how little they would know or feel of my absence even should I never come back again...and of your Ma standing on the steps and kissing me and saying Gold bless you...and of my choking down my feelings and making believe it was

all a very small matter and then thinking of you again—and whether you had stopped crying and how you looked then....”

Neither Joe nor Herbert had lost their sense of confiding in each other, a skill that would continue to fortify them in the days ahead.

Anxiety, mixed with a sense of anticipation and dread, must have filled the minds of every Southerner on the home front as the final days of the Civil War approached. Joe would have heard rumors of fighting and rumors of surrender during the first week in April. She may or may not have heard that Petersburg was evacuated on April 2, seven days before General Robert E. Lee’s official surrender to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox. She would not have known of Herbert’s whereabouts for about two weeks.

Then Joe heard from him; a short note written hurriedly with a shaky hand.

*Prisoner 's Camp-near genl. Griffin's HdQtrs
April 12, 1865*

My Dear Wife:

I am a prisoner of war captured on Sunday morning about eight. I have lost everything—even knapsack & canteen. Since the 2nd of April when Petersburg was evacuated have seen sights. Hope to have opportunity of writing or telling all someday.

Genl. Lee's army capitulated (what was left of it) on the 10th but the officers retaining their Baggage & horses; but as I was captured the day before, I cannot save anything. I hope to be removed & paroled in a day or two. I write this in hope to send it by some paroled man or officer to Louisburg. They are passing our camp all day. Saw Charles the day before I was captured. I think he went up with the army. I was at the head of the column, had unsaddled my horse & was asleep the reason I was taken. No one knew that any army was near—but I can't write more—love to all & kisses to the little ones. Can say nothing of prospects future or otherwise.

*Your devoted Husband,
J.H. Claiborne.*

Two days after the surrender, Herbert was paroled and walked, at first with two of his assistant surgeons, and then alone, from near Appomattox to Louisburg. He showed up where they boarded in the mid-afternoon; hungry, gaunt, penniless and ragged.

This experience was a turning point for Joe, I believe. At this time she must have looked into her past—married to a successful doctor, well-respected and liked among his peers, a politician and leader in his community, and a man who had done his best to give her everything she wanted. But living in the present told a different story. Herbert had lost it all—invested their money in a Confederacy that had collapsed, sacrificed his time and profession to years spent in a now-futile war and jeopardized his already precarious health. And what did the future hold? It was unfathomable on a personal family level and unforeseeable on a national level.

Joe must have resolved to not know defeat and to pick herself and her family up, dust themselves off, and build again. She packed up her belongings and the children and, with her father-in-law, Gregory Claiborne, went by wagon to Roslin.

The letters Joe wrote from Roslin to Herbert in Petersburg reflect her tenacity, strength and courage. She fought Herbert's doubts and discouragement every step of the way. She uses strong language with Herbert, stronger than in any of her letters prior to the war. She fights to bring the family together under one roof, no matter how impoverished Herbert says they are. She is insistent on giving her children a good education and writes with determination about their futures.

This chapter will portray Joe as a woman with strength of character who has an unwillingness to accept defeat.

Chapter Eight Summary

Starting Over: Reconstruction

This chapter will show a change and growth in Joe: she emerges from her war experience with an inner strength displaying tenacity, courage, hope and faith in the future. Letters during this time period represent the last group of letters we have between the couple. Joe's tone in the letters are forceful, directive and resolute. Here is a sample from some of the letters that tell this story of hope after defeat.

The summer after the surrender found the couple still living in separate places. Joe and her four children lived with Herbert's family on their plantation, Roslin, in Brunswick County. Herbert took a room in Petersburg and tried to establish his medical practice again. It was rough going for Herbert—the citizenry had little money with which to pay a doctor for services and he wrote of a sense of hopelessness about the future and described life now as “a bauble.”

In a letter dated July 1, 1865, Joe is forthright in her hopes that Herbert will start a partnership with a medical colleague and turns the subject to their marriage partnership:

I feel very hopeful of the prospect of a co-partnership with Dr. Lewis and feel very much obliged to him for the kind offer. Say as much to him for me and tell him, too, that I hope he will find you as agreeable as you will be useful. This has been my experience for twelve years past and I only hope to resume our co-partnership early in October.

Then, speaking of the old office Joe says, “*our dissolution was by consent for a time, during the exigencies and emergencies of the war, that Providence permitting, we shall take the long path together in October, hoping it may indeed be a long one, and may never again be interrupted.*”

Up until this point, Joe had never expressed herself in such strong terms. She expresses a change when she wrote a week later.

... I never was so interested for your success before. Napoleon says master don't look like he used to; from which I fear you are depressed or at the least not seeming happy. How can I make you so? What can I do to cheer you? If I could only be with you, maybe I should make you very happy sometimes, and then the children are alternatively so sweet and so sharp, so good, and so bad, that they would afford you, when at home, an endless variety of diversions.

Joe laments about a niece who is getting married and must work in order to pay for a wedding wardrobe.

But she wishes to teach in the meantime for money to purchase her wedding wardrobe. Well, well! There are hard times to pitch into—the state matrimonial and both parties without any money, but then they have so much company in their poverty—and really it is much better than beginning again after twelve years of married life with an investment in love of four children and all to be supported and educated in genteel style.

She remains positive and genuine as she keeps encouraging Herbert about the future:

I pray God for you continually; I cannot do more for your comfort until we once more have a home together; and then I fear our finest events will be such a tax upon you that you will not find the pleasures you wish to. Do let us be glad to prove our love and lighten each others' duties with smiles; slow to disapprove; thankful that God has spared us to each other and to our children through such unnumbered perils. Certain we are that each carries to his work a faithful heart and an honest purpose; then let us try to make as much happiness as possible for each other; resolved that we will not yield to sorrow or misfortune.

In a letter dated July 22, 1865, Joe is adamant and decisive about that she will take charge of their children's education. She is her most firm she has been to date, and shows a iron resolve to not "turn over" the education of the children to someone else:

In reference to Mrs. Pann's educating Lou, I have much to say, and would profit talking to writing about it. In the first place, I would like to express to her my grateful appreciation of such a kindness at such a time. But I cannot and will not yield my child's education to another than myself unless it be to someone of my own choosing. Should I acquiesce, I would be yielding my judgment for all time....Again, it is an obligation I do not choose to be under to anybody. Surely DOCTOR, with our combined exertions, we shall be able to give our children educations! At any rate, I do not wish for anyone else to do it for them, unless it be after we proved ourselves unable. I write to know your opinions in this matter. You have mine."

Letters during this time reveal a change in Joe. She demonstrates leadership for the first time in her relationship with her husband and in educating her children. She bolsters her defeated husband and presses Herbert to help find a way to bring the family back under one roof. She faces the poverty and wants to look toward a better day with hope.

Epilogue

Joe died in Petersburg in the cold of winter on February 3, 1869, four years after the war ended. She was 39 years old. Two years earlier, she had given birth to her fifth child, Elizabeth Weldon Claiborne, who is my great grandmother.

The cause of Joe's death is unclear at present. I will need to research further by looking at court records in Petersburg, visiting additional archives or viewing records in Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, where she is buried.

Joe's tombstone reads, "Here lies sleeping where the weary are at rest—Sarah Joseph Alston, wife of Dr. John Herbert Claiborne." The marker is simple in comparison with her husband's which is a towering obelisk.

Is there any special meaning attached to remembering her as weary and that she was finally at rest? Did her strength and hope for building a future wear out? Did she give up or keep fighting until the end? Did she grow weary at the end of her life yet retained the inner strength that the experience of living through gave her?

I have a few educated guesses about how she died. Letters at the time offer a few clues.

In July of 1865, Joe mentions that her hair is falling out. *"What must I do with my hair? It comes out continually until I have very little left, and fear I shall have none. Please tell me something. The beef marrow certainly does not suit it."* Hair loss is a symptom of stress and wear and tear on the body. It appears Joe was showing symptoms of being distressed during the months after the war.

Later, Joe received a letter from a childhood girlfriend on August 30, 1868. This friend speaks of Joe's returning home without the benefit of mineral water and clean mountain air. She writes about Joe's "hour of affliction" and speaks in religious terms of "the hope of seeing our

loved ones in the mansions purposed by our Savior” someday. When reading this letter, it sounds as if Joe realized she was gravely ill and did not expect to recover. Joe lived through the fall of that year and through Christmas. But it was her last.

Tuberculosis, then called consumption, were a common cause of death in the nineteenth century and tend to run in our family. Several of her grandchildren would die in the early twentieth-century of tuberculosis before a vaccine was discovered. So, Joe could have lost her life to the degenerating disease of consumption.

This theory is supported by a letter from Joe’s mother to Herbert dated in 1867. Louise asks Herbert to tell Joe about the letter and then says that she has heard of a doctor in North Carolina who has had remarkable success treating “Joe’s condition.”

It is possible Joe died in childbirth. She had been through difficult deliveries before and lost her firstborn. Joe’s health was precarious after that birth when she was just 20 years old. Throughout Joe’s married life, she had given birth every two years, except during the war years. The year 1867, she gave birth to a healthy girl. We have no letters to tell us about that experience. Did she die two years later in childbirth? If so, there could be a baby’s grave or records of a stillbirth.

Finally, as one of my professors, Anthony Grooms, said, “She could have died of a broken heart.” The Civil War was brutal on the psyche, the physical stamina and the “heart” of those who lived through it. Possibly experiencing the trauma of war, the stress of coping with loss and experiences of poverty took its toll. Possibly all three factors contributed to the early death of Joe Alston Claiborne.

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