

The American History Series

Southern Women

Black and White in the Old South

Sally G. McMillen



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DAVIDSON COLLEGE

Southern Women

Black and White

in the Old South

HARLAN DAVIDSON, INC.
WHEELING, ILLINOIS 60090-6000

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McMillen, Sally Gregory, 1944—

Southern women : Black and white in the Old South / Sally G. McMillen.
p. cm.—(The American history series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-88295-881-X

1. Women—Southern States—History—19th century. 2. Afro-American women—Southern States—History—19th century. 3. Women—Southern States—Social conditions. I. Title. II. Series.

HQ1438.A13M36 1992

305.4'0975—dc20

91-26068

CIP

Cover illustration: Southern women, photographed around 1860.
Courtesy of The Western Reserve Historical Society.

Book design: Roger Eggers

Manufactured in the United States of America
98 BC 3

FOREWORD

Every generation writes its own history for the reason that it sees the past in the foreshortened perspective of its own experience. This has surely been true of the writing of American history. The practical aim of our historiography is to give us a more informed sense of where we are going by helping us understand the road we took in getting where we are. As the nature and dimensions of American life are changing, so too are the themes of our historical writing. Today's scholars are hard at work reconsidering every major aspect of the nation's past: its politics, diplomacy, economy, society, recreation, mores and values, as well as status, ethnic, race, sexual, and family relations. The lists of series titles that appear at the back of this book will show at once that our historians are ever broadening the range of their studies.

The aim of this series is to offer our readers a survey of what today's historians are saying about the central themes and aspects of the American past. To do this, we have invited to write for the series scholars who have made notable contributions to the respective fields in which they are working. Drawing on primary and secondary materials, each volume presents a factual and narrative account of its particular subject, one that affords readers a basis for perceiving its larger dimensions and importance. Conscious that readers respond to the closeness and immediacy of a subject, each of our au-

thors seeks to restore the past as an actual present, to revive it as a living reality. The individuals and groups who figure in the pages of our books appear as real people who once were looking for survival and fulfillment. Aware that historical subjects are often matters of controversy, our authors present their own findings and conclusions. Each volume closes with an extensive critical essay on the writings of the major authorities on its particular theme.

The books in this series are designed for use in both basic and advanced courses in American history, on the undergraduate and graduate levels. Such a series has a particular value these days, when the format of American history courses is being altered to accommodate a greater diversity of reading materials. The series offers a number of distinct advantages. It extends the dimensions of regular course work. Going well beyond the confines of the textbook, it makes clear that the study of our past is, more than the student might otherwise understand, at once complex, profound, and absorbing. It presents that past as a subject of continuing interest and fresh investigation. The work of experts in their respective fields, the series, moreover, puts at the disposal of the reader the rich findings of historical inquiry. It invites the reader to join, in major fields of research, those who are pondering anew the central themes and aspects of our past. And it reminds the reader that in each successive generation of the ever-changing American adventure, men and women and children were attempting, as we are now, to live their lives and to make their way.

John Hope Franklin
A. S. Eisenstadt

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Having attended college before women's history courses became integrated into the curriculum, I am very pleased to be able to teach such classes now. It is equally rewarding to witness the scholarly attention focused on southern women. Historians recognize that black and white women living in the antebellum South experienced a life that differed from their counterparts in the North and West. During the past twenty years, extensive research has begun to reveal the fascinating texture of southern women's lives. The advisory editors for Harlan Davidson, Inc. deserve thanks for perceiving the importance of these women by including them in their American History Series.

This volume could not exist without the excellent scholarship that preceded it. I wish to thank the scores of historians whose published writings on southern women made this effort possible. Also central to this study are the diaries, letters, reminiscences, and oral histories of antebellum southern women which provided valuable personal insights into their lives.

Individuals deserving special acknowledgment include Catherine Clinton, Suzanne Lebsock, and A. S. Eisenstadt for their insightful and helpful editorial comments, as well as the Harlan Davidson staff, including Maureen Gilgore Hewitt and Michael Kendrick. I am grateful to my colleague, Ralph Levering, for encouraging me to undertake this project. And I

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thank my most supportive and critical audience, Bruce, Blair, and Carrie, who read this manuscript word for word, offered important suggestions, challenged interpretations, and patiently endured the tensions created by a historian in the process of writing.

Finally, it is to my mother, Elizabeth Gregory, and late father, Ted Gregory, that I dedicate this book. They encouraged me to treasure the ongoing process of learning and to embrace hard work. Above all, they made possible an excellent education that encouraged me to look at the world and always ask "Why?"

Sally G. McMillen
Davidson, N.C.

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INTRODUCTION

An Overview of the South and Southern Women

“I find by daily experience I am of a hardier mold than I had the most distant idea,” wrote Priscilla Bailey of North Carolina in 1824. This recognition of feminine strength in the context of a demanding life could have been uttered by any black or white woman living in the antebellum South. Southern women would have understood Priscilla’s statement, for most of them, whatever their status or color, endured difficult and exhausting lives. They devoted themselves to families and work, sacrificing and struggling, and made enormous contributions to the region. Southern women were, indeed, of a “hardier mold.”

Unfortunately women who lived in the Old South remain victims of myth or exaggeration. Slave and free black southern women have been portrayed as matriarchal or profligate; white women as delicate, submissive, and idle. Farm women have been ignored because their records are so few. Myths for too long have prevented an accurate assessment of southern women’s contributions, sacrifices, hardships, joys, and most important, their individuality.

Understanding how southern women lived is becoming an easier task as historians discover the records of their lives. Women's history has received serious scholarly attention only since the early 1970s, for scholars prior to that time long assumed that events defined and participated in by men were all that counted. To their thinking, history comprised a series of wars, treaties, political events, and economic crises. But with the more recent emphasis on social history, scholars have been able to disclose a hidden past, providing rich details about average citizens and neglected groups like African Americans, women, and immigrants. An understanding of how these groups functioned, how they were affected by historical events, and how they effected history provides new insights into our past.

The history of southern women has come into its own as well. It is essential that the tale of these women be told. Social historians recognize that their experiences varied significantly depending on race, class, region, and time period. Until recently, historical research on American women has focused on New England or urban women, consequently ignoring important regional differences. The South embodied unique American experiences. Because antebellum southern women lived in a society in which females were expected to be submissive and hardworking, they have seemed almost invisible to researchers. They participated in fewer public reforms than their northern counterparts, and thus their endeavors were less apparent. Few antebellum southern white heroines matched the achievements of northern activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Women from the South who attracted public notice such as Harriet Tubman, Mary Boykin Chesnut, and the Grimké sisters were rare. Most of the region's women lived in relative obscurity, devoted to their immediate family and other kin.

Still, it is apparent that the changes that swept the South in the decades before the Civil War affected black and white women. Antebellum southern white women benefited from new laws that made it easier to obtain a divorce and hold

property. Education was extended to tens of thousands of southern white girls and a few free blacks, who flocked to academies. Privileged women found new avenues to assert their own authority in small but important ways through charity and church work. Obstetrical changes begun in Europe and in the North also affected southern women, as male doctors took charge of deliveries and health problems associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing.

A thorough study of white women in the South requires an examination of new sources and a fresh look at old ones. At first glance, females scarcely seem visible. State legislative manuals, public decrees, or market statistics do not record their deeds. Yet their words and accounts of their activities can be found in myriad sources. The most fruitful of these are the diaries, journals, and letters found in manuscript libraries and historical societies throughout the South. Educated southern women were anything but silent when it came to their private world and revealed their thoughts in letters, journals, or oral histories. Family Bibles, gravestones, newspapers, census records, wills and contracts, marriage records, divorce proceedings, church testimonies, archaeological findings, clothing and artifacts, medical accounts, architectural remnants, and school histories all provide additional important clues.

Understanding the lives of illiterate or poor farm women proves more difficult. But historians gradually are uncovering their lives through careful studies of manuscript censuses, county and church records, archaeological remains, travelers' accounts, and oral histories. This is a field ripe for exciting research.

For too long, the history of slavery has focused solely on the male experience. It is apparent, however, that females experienced slavery differently from bondmen. Remarkable work has been conducted on the records of slave women, much of it based on oral histories collected during the Depression of the 1930s. Slave narratives by those who escaped to the North and archaeological findings add other perspectives. Observations by adventurous northerners or Europeans who trav-

eled southward to observe the region's "peculiar institution" as well as plantation accounts and slave trade records provide still more commentary on slave life. Though in many respects the experiences of southern black and white women varied significantly, they shared many similarities as well.

Though the region was populated by a variety of peoples, including Indians and increasing numbers of immigrants, the focus of this study is on black and white women. To this time, relatively little research has been devoted to the lives of Indian and immigrant women in the South. However, as scholars continue to unearth new facts about native Americans and foreigners, the picture will grow richer and more varied.

This study examines black and white women from 1800 to the commencement of the Civil War in 1861. Although women nationwide shared similar experiences as laborers, mothers, and wives, each region created unique hardships and opportunities. For females living in the antebellum South, these contrasts were especially pronounced. In order to understand their particular situation, an overview of the region will help put their lives in context.

Slavery was the most distinctive characteristic of the Old South. Northern states had gradually outlawed slavery after the American Revolution, and only a few slaves were to be found in the North after the 1820s. Slavery was not profitable there, since that region's economic success was not based on a plantation economy or cash crops. A growing merchant class and a nascent industrial sector pushed the North in a different direction economically during the early antebellum period. Reform and modernization came with that development.

Neither mercantilism nor industry much affected the southern states during the antebellum period; their economies were essentially agrarian. By 1860, only 4.4 percent of southerners lived in urban areas, in contrast to approximately 20 percent in the nation overall. Blessed with fertile soil and a temperate climate that were conducive to growing cash crops, the South naturally remained a rural society based on agri-

culture. Its earliest colonial settlements had an agrarian identity. The Chesapeake's initial settlers discovered the tobacco leaf grown by native Indians. It took little time for the cultivation of this plant to consume the energies of this society. At one point, early colonists became so obsessed with profits that laws were enacted to force them to grow food in order to avoid starvation. Throughout the colonial period, southern farmers discovered other profitable crops and products including indigo, rice, naval stores, sugar cane, and cotton.

Such crops demanded an enormous amount of fertile land as well as access to transportation and a huge labor supply. Coastal lowlands and river areas were highly desirable for growing crops. The need for land forced southerners to spread out their farms and plantations, far from neighbors or community. As the population expanded, soil became depleted and opportunities narrowed. So southerners pushed westward, opening new frontier areas to farming. With the discovery of the cotton gin in 1793 and the gradual removal of Indians from the deep South by the 1820s and 1830s, southerners moved farther west, where cheap land and economic opportunities beckoned. The necessity for land precluded the formation of large cities, except along the coast or on inland transportation routes. Charleston, New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah, and Memphis became centers for shipping cotton and other products. But none of these cities rivaled the bustling northern ports of New York, Philadelphia, or Boston. Few southern towns had populations greater than 2,500 people before the Civil War. If the antebellum South could be defined by anything resembling a community, it was the ubiquitous rural village or the plantation establishment, not the city.

Desperately needing workers to raise their cash crop, white colonial settlers tried unsuccessfully to force native Americans to work. Soon they turned to the large supply of white male and female indentured servants from Europe. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, the supply of servants decreased. Southerners observed the successful results of African slavery throughout the Caribbean and Latin America and grad-

ually turned to blacks for laborers. Because they desired to own these servants and their offspring for life, the need to pass special laws to enforce a slave system was not lost on southern landowners. By the mid-eighteenth century, slavery and the plantation system were firmly in place. By 1860 nearly four million slaves were living in perpetual bondage and facing a life of oppression and hardship that brought economic rewards to slave owners but none to slaves. Planters, who had invested their wealth in slaves, considered them property, often to be treated no better than farm animals. Slaves could be bought, rented, and sold at will.

With the end of the external slave trade in 1808, slave owners became more conscious of their slaves' needs while at the same time restricting their freedom further. Compared to the slaves' situation during the colonial period, food, shelter, and work limitations improved, but new laws also forbade slaves from learning to read or from moving about freely, and it became harder for whites to manumit, or free, a slave. Marked by their color and condition, slaves were the lowest class in the South, and any degree of African heritage identified one legally as black in nearly all southern states. In order to insure slave productivity and prevent rebellion, slave owners maintained control of the region by exercising their political and military power. Slave uprisings, such as Nat Turner's rebellion, merely led to more restrictive slave codes that by the 1830s were in place throughout the South.

For white women, the rural composition of the South meant that the majority spent their lives in relative isolation, living on small farms or plantations. The region lacked the institutions and social interaction available in urban areas to middle-class northern women. With few towns or cities, the South had fewer cultural offerings, fewer opportunities for the development of female bonding and sisterhood, less social interaction, and fewer churches and charitable activities than were available in the Northeast. Home remained the center of southern women's lives. As most southern spokesmen saw it,

stability was something to celebrate, and the region became identified with conservatism and a reluctance to change.

Slave women on small farms experienced similar isolation. However, slightly more than half the slave population lived on farms with more than twenty slaves; and a quarter of all slaves lived on plantations with at least fifty slaves. Thus, a good number of black women benefited from a strong sense of community. A large plantation comprised a community of several families, with opportunities for socializing, visiting, working, and attending church together. In the face of enormous hardships and lack of freedom, slave women often enjoyed a stronger, more immediate sense of community and greater opportunity for female bonding than did southern white women.

Despite slavery's considerable presence in the region, it is important to remember that the majority of southern whites did not even belong to the slaveowning class. On the eve of the Civil War, only 6 percent of all southerners even qualified as planters (those with twenty or more slaves), and the region contained two times as many women who were slaves as it did white women who belonged to families that owned at least one slave. Scholars know far less about the six million southerners who owned no slaves than they know about plantation and slave women.

The plantation system was anything but moribund by 1860. The 1850 federal census showed that ten of the twelve wealthiest counties in the nation were located in the South; ten years later the South could boast of having all twelve. The South marketed 75 percent of all American exports by the late antebellum period. South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond crowed that "cotton is king," and there was truth to his assertion. The region's wealth depended on cotton. What this wealth, or potential wealth, meant to women depended on their race and class. For elite white women who benefited from their husband's wealth (or whose large dowries made such wealth possible), plantation life was often isolated and lonely. Women had charge of most domestic responsibilities.

They publicly accepted the region's institutions and its patriarchal structure. As historian Anne Firor Scott argues, white women may have complained quietly, but at the same time they enjoyed their status. They worked hard or, in rare cases, enjoyed the privilege of having others perform the drudgery.

Yeomen farm wives (who might or might not have been slave owners) worked most of their lives. They often lived among poor farmers and herdspeople like themselves, shared their labor, bartered their goods, and lived and died in relative obscurity. How actively they supported slavery and how directly the system affected them is difficult to assess since records are few. But there is some validity to the perception that yeomen farm wives were not deeply troubled by slavery's existence up to the Civil War. Most southern whites aspired to be slave owners. Also, the presence of slaves and free blacks allowed poor farmers to perceive that, despite their lowly status, they were not at the bottom of the social scale.

For slave women, the southern economy required of them unrelenting work under constant supervision. They had to watch others benefit from their productivity. Theirs was a life defined and controlled by whites. It meant knowing that freedom was a white prerogative; that beloved family members always were vulnerable to sale; and that sexual abuse was an ever-present possibility. An owner or overseer could use the whip for the slightest infraction of rules. Slave women performed triple duty as laborers, wives, and mothers, responsible to both their owners and their own families. Some historians feel that slave women suffered more than male slaves due to their childbearing and work responsibilities. Historian Deborah White concludes that southern black women were the most vulnerable of all Americans during the antebellum period: they were blacks in a white nation; women in a society ruled by men; and slaves in a world of the free.

Antebellum southern society has been described as patriarchal, a system in which men had ultimate control over public and private matters. Much about antebellum America also could be described as patriarchal to some degree, for white