

Battling Memory from Memphis:

Elizabeth Avery Meriwether as Guardian of the Lost Cause

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Like today, as the implications of the Confederate flag and public war memorials are fiercely debated, Americans at the turn of the twentieth century also struggled to find meaning in the Civil War. Facing a battle-torn landscape, the loss of one fourth of its men of military age, and the destruction of its slave-based economy, the white South searched to justify its catastrophic defeat and quickly adopted Lost Cause interpretations of the war. In this essay, the Lost Cause refers to an interpretation of the Civil War, promoted through postwar literature and memorialization activities celebrating Confederate memory, which allowed ex-Confederates to cope with their staggering losses and to rationalize their cause and its failure.¹ First articulated at the funeral services and grave decorations of fallen Confederate soldiers, the Lost Cause rests on conceptions of a romanticized antebellum Southern society, chivalrous to its cultured women and benevolent to its contented slaves, predestined to lose to the vast numbers and superior resources of the industrialized North. Lost Cause proponents also laud the nobility and bravery of the Confederate soldier, praising the uncommon courage of the common soldier and deifying prominent generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. With regards to secession, moreover, Southerners frequently offer Constitutional justifications for their actions, arguing that

¹ Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4.

state sovereignty included the right to secede from the federal union and that the Confederacy embodied American republican democracy.²

Leading the mourning rituals for the Confederate dead, Southern white women were instrumental in the enshrinement of the Lost Cause in Southern – and American – consciousness. After all, women first casually organized during the war in order to bury their fallen soldiers; following the war, these early organizations gave rise to the Ladies' Memorial Associations, which worked in the South to erect monuments honoring Confederate soldiers.³ Politically disenfranchised and unable to fully participate in the economic transformation of the New South, white Southern women had less incentive to answer the call for national reconciliation than their male counterparts; therefore, they had more reason to celebrate sectional differences. Excluded from the brotherhood of arms shared between Union and Confederate veterans, moreover, they could not commiserate across the Mason-Dixon over the hardships of battle. In fact, as white Southern women had watched their homes burned and provisions ravaged by Union troops, they generally did not appreciate the manly, martial courage of the enemy in the same way that their men could and did. Instead, white Southern women considered themselves the keepers of

² This essay draws on numerous discussions of the Lost Cause ideology, including but not limited to, Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead but not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Alan Nolan, "The Anatomy of the Myth" in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, ed. Gary Gallagher and Alan Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 200), 11-34; Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Nina Silber, *Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³ For further discussion on the origins and practices of Memorial Day, see David W. Blight, "Decoration Days" in *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 64-97; Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 42-3; Caroline Janey, *Burying the Dead but not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 43-68.

Confederate memory and defenders of the Lost Cause.⁴ One such self-fashioned guardian of Confederate memory was Elizabeth Avery Meriwether of Memphis and St. Louis. Reflecting upon postwar Southern attitudes toward Northerners in her 1916 memoir, Meriwether, as a Confederate wife and Lost Cause proponent, writes,

I fear in those dark days just after the close of the war, hate was a feeling that came into many a Southern woman's breast. The Southern men were too busy trying to retrieve their fallen fortunes, but the women – they had more time to brood over the wrongs that had been done them, they had not had the excitement of battle to sustain them, they suffered even more than their husbands and sons and brothers. For these reasons, or perhaps just because women are less forgiving than men, it took the women of the South a long time before they were able to feel kindly toward their conquerors. To this day I cannot truthfully say I love a Yankee, but my dear husband who fought for years in the Confederate army, seemed to feel no bitterness in his heart, not even in the years immediately following Lee's surrender. Were he living now, more than fifty years after Appomattox, he would probably be as kindly and as just in his estimate of a northern, as of a southern, soldier. I cannot feel that way...⁵

For Meriwether, then, the different wartime and postwar experiences of white Southern men and women accounted for the discrepancy in their receptions of national reconciliation and for their varying levels of commitment to the Lost Cause. Luckily, in addition to her celebrated memoir, Meriwether left behind a thorough and diverse written legacy which permits the examination of one Southern woman's relationship with Confederate memory. A slave-owner, Confederate wife, devoted mother, and personal friend of Jefferson Davis, Meriwether was also a novelist, suffragist, temperance activist, and prominent Progressive Era figure in Memphis and St. Louis.

⁴ For further discussion on the role of white Southern women in Civil War memorialization movements, see Janney, *Burying the Dead by not the Past and Remembering the Civil War*; Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 127-144. For more on gender roles in the nineteenth-century South, see LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender, Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995). White Southern women were very cognizant that they were fighting a battle over memory in the mid-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. For more on this phenomenon, see Sarah E. Gardner, *Blood & Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1866-1937* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁵ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years, 1824-1916* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1958), 150.

Straddling her commitment to the Old South and the past it represents while also looking to the future of the reunited nation and working to advance progressive reforms, Meriwether is an interesting case study. But even though she was a complex national figure with eclectic passions, Meriwether strongly identified with her region and asserted herself as a defender of the Lost Cause and guardian of Confederate memory. In part, then, this essay aims to investigate how she characterizes and defends Confederate memory, ultimately arguing that Meriwether defends Confederate memory by portraying the South as the final stronghold for fundamental American convictions. Namely, Meriwether contests that the Confederates fought to protect the democratic principles of the founding generation while Northerners veered into imperialism, and that Confederates continue to respect the existing racial hierarchy while Northerners violate this natural order. Along with establishing Meriwether's interpretation of the Confederate legacy, this essay aims to explore the role of white Southern women in maintaining said legacy. According to Meriwether, their role as guardians of Confederate memory demanded that white Southern women both celebrate their antebellum society and preach the Lost Cause to their children, while hoisting themselves into the political sphere of men to counteract the consequences of Reconstruction. Essentially, this essay will also explore the ways in which Meriwether's promotion of the Lost Cause and her advocacy of women's rights intersect. Although this essay is framed around a detailed biographical sketch of Meriwether, it is not a mere retelling of her long and notable life; instead, by examining her life and works, this essay will investigate Meriwether's own interpretations of the war and Reconstruction while also exploring her vision for white Southern women as guardians of Confederate memory and redeemers of a racialized American democratic tradition.

Born on January 19, 1824, Elizabeth Avery Meriwether lived her first eleven years in Bolivar, a town in Hardeman County, Tennessee.⁶ Her father, Nathan Avery, had migrated in his youth from his Quaker home in New Lebanon, New York, to West Tennessee, where he earned a living as a physician. In 1818, Nathan Avery married Meriwether's mother, Rebecca Rivers, the daughter of a wealthy Virginia planter who came from a line in which "the men were all brave and the women all chaste."⁷ Upon her marriage to Avery, Rebecca Rivers inherited several slaves from her father.⁸ In fact, Meriwether fondly recalls the old slave woman "Aunt Sally," who helped care for the family's several young children.⁹ During her formative years, then, Meriwether experienced the antebellum dependence on slaves in a very personal way. In 1835, the Avery family left their four-room log cabin and "good deal of ground" in Bolivar and settled in Memphis, Tennessee, where Meriwether was to remain for nearly fifty years.¹⁰

⁶ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years, 1824-1916* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1958), 4. The following biographical sketch relies heavily on Meriwether's memoir. Although the memoir was recorded at the end of Meriwether's life and several decades after most of the events she describes, many of these events have been substantiated by genealogical sources, the Meriwether Family Papers of the Mississippi Valley Collection at the University of Memphis Ned McWherter Library (henceforth cited as Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM), and contemporary news sources. See Kathleen Christine Berkeley, "'An Advocate for Her Sex': Feminism and Conservatism in the Post-Civil War South," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 390; Edwin G. Frank, "The Meriwethers of Memphis and St. Louis", MA thesis, University of Memphis, 1999.

⁷ Richard Henry Greene, et al., eds., *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, Vol. 37 (New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 1906), 48; Meriwether, *Recollections*, 5. According to Greene, Nathan Avery was born on May 8, 1792 and settled in Tennessee around 1817, where he married Rebecca Rivers on October 18, 1818.

⁸ Ninth U.S. Census Manuscript schedules (1870), Memphis, Tennessee, Ward 5; Meriwether, *Recollections*, 20. According to Meriwether, when her maternal grandfather, Thomas Rivers, relocated to West Tennessee from Virginia, "he was considered a rich man, that is he had some seventy five or eighty slaves and a large plantation."

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6; Micki McElya, "Commemorating the Color Line: The National Mammy Monument Controversy of the 1920s," in *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory*, ed. Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 203-219. Explaining Aunt Sally's position in the family, Meriwether reflects, "in the South all good old negro women were called 'Aunt.' We children loved Aunt Sally; she was good to us." The "black-mammy" became a much-lauded figure in the Lost Cause movement. She was nurturing and kind to her white children and proof that good relations could exist between blacks and whites so long as blacks knew their place in the social hierarchy. On a different note, Meriwether only mentions five siblings – her older brother Tom, older sister Laura, and younger sisters Rebecca, Amanda, and Estelle. According to Greene, however, Meriwether had an additional younger sister. Of the seven Avery siblings, only four survived into adulthood. See Greene, *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, 48.

¹⁰ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 4,14.

In Memphis, the Avery children received their formal educations. Tom, the family's firstborn child and only son, studied law and the three sisters attended a private academy for girls.¹¹ After her parents' deaths in 1846 and 1847, Meriwether and her siblings struggled to provide for themselves, even relying on the scant hired wages of their slave in order to purchase rations of sweet potatoes and cornmeal.¹² Much to Tom's initial chagrin, who, as a man, believed it was "his sacred duty" to provide for the women of his family, Meriwether and her two younger sisters bolstered the household income by opening a small school in their dining room as their brother embarked on his career as a lawyer and politician.¹³ Ever the supportive sister, Meriwether assisted Tom in his successful campaign for Circuit Clerk of the Criminal Court of Shelby County, launching his political career that would eventually allow him to represent Tennessee on a national stage in the antebellum House of Representatives.¹⁴

In 1852, Elizabeth Avery Meriwether married Minor Meriwether, beginning a marriage that stretched nearly sixty years and produced three sons.¹⁵ In her memoir, Meriwether attributes their decades of marital bliss to the equity of their partnership – the two agreed that half of the real estate Minor accumulated, as well as half of his stocks and bonds, would be deeded to Elizabeth Avery Meriwether. Reflecting on this arrangement six years after Minor's death,

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Ibid., 35.

¹³ Ibid., 18, 36.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37-40; "Rep. William Avery," Govtrack.us, accessed April 5, 2015, https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/william_avery/400998; "Avery, William Tecumseh," in *Bibliographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971): 534. Elizabeth's brother, William Tecumseh "Tom" Avery, was a Democratic representative from Tennessee in the U.S. House for two terms (1857-1861). In her memoir, Elizabeth records how she accompanied Tom to a gathering put on by the local workingman's Union of Memphis. At the event, she charms Tom's political enemy into promising that he would support her brother. Evidently, Elizabeth was successful – Tom won the election and his former political enemy eventually proposed marriage to Elizabeth.

¹⁵ According to Meriwether in her memoir, she married Minor Meriwether in January of 1850. Other sources, however, indicate that the marriage took place on January 5, 1852. See *Who Was Who in America, V. I, 1897-1942* (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Co., 1942), 831; Nelson Heath Meriwether, *The Meriwethers and Their Connections* (Columbia, MO: The Aircraft Press), 139. Minor Meriwether died on June 6, 1910 (Meriwether, *Recollections*, 224).

Meriwether writes, “I think this perfect trust did much to smoothe the way and make our long married life a happy one wholly devoid of contentions and quarrels.”¹⁶ Not only did Meriwether enjoy a degree of financial independence rare for a nineteenth century woman, she also pseudonymously wrote articles promoting women’s rights in local newspapers. Luckily, she preserved clippings of these published pieces in scrapbooks for her children and grandchildren, annotating articles written by others, initialing her own work, and leaving behind her thoughts on some of the most pressing issues of the day. Clearly, she recognized the importance of preserving her written legacy for future generations and assumed her role as guardian of memory even before the onset of the war. In one letter to the editor of the *Union and American* dated December 3, 1858, for example, Meriwether as “Mahala Jane” writes,

I really think since men are proved, by their own admission, mentally and morally so utterly unworthy of high places, it is time the affairs of the Government be placed in *our* hands. According to Mr. Prentice, matters are so bad now, they can’t be worse, and they might be better, and *would* be if those rascals at Washington would quit and let us take the reins awhile.¹⁷

Here, Meriwether directly questions the patriarchal order, promoting the right of women to participate in their government and foreshadowing her women’s rights and suffrage work in the postbellum years. Meriwether, then, boldly – albeit pseudonymously – expressed her views to the public before the Civil War, illustrating that “her feminism was confirmed by, not born of, her wartime experiences.”¹⁸ But even though she moonlighted as an anonymous activist, Meriwether was primarily a contented housewife in the years leading up to the Civil War,

¹⁶ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 42-43.

¹⁷ “Elizabeth Aver Meriwether, Scrapbook, 1871 [24],” in box 2, folder 3, of the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM. This passage comes from a published letter exchange between “Mahala Cross” and her sister “Belle Cross” – both written by Elizabeth. Although their tone may be lighthearted and exaggerated, the letters nevertheless indicate Elizabeth’s strong views on the importance of women’s rights.

¹⁸ Frank, “The Meriwethers,” 22.

managing the household and later recalling that its members “were all as happy as birds” before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter.¹⁹

For his part, Minor earned a living as a civil engineer before the war, designing tunnels and working on the railroad construction through the Cumberland Mountains.²⁰ Although he was a technocrat by training and profession, Minor Meriwether – like his wife’s mother – hailed from the Old South plantation tradition; his father, Garrett Meriwether, “owned a large plantation and a number of negro slaves, and for that day was deemed rich.” Garrett Meriwether, however, preached abolition in his native Kentucky as early as the 1840s, and endorsed the colonization of Liberia by freed American slaves.²¹ Upon Garrett Meriwether’s unexpected death, Minor carried out his father’s wishes and sold enough land to purchase his slaves’ passage to Liberia.²² Like her husband and his family, Elizabeth Avery Meriwether claimed to oppose slavery on principle. But her professed moral objections did not prevent her from accepting the human gift of a slave girl from her brother. Explaining her position in her memoir, Meriwether writes,

I did not believe in slavery; on principle I was as opposed to it as Minor. But I considered the times and country in which we were living; it was difficult, if not impossible, to hire a white maid – and I thoroughly agreed with my brother that I did not wish to do domestic drudgery if there was a way to get it done by a servant.²³

¹⁹ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43. It is important to note that although he rejected slavery, Garrett Meriwether “did not approve of setting [his slaves] free in America; he urged that they could never be equal to Whites, either socially or intellectually, and that consequently friction if not disaster, would result from permitting them to live in America as freemen.” Garrett Meriwether obviously did not believe that blacks and whites were equals.

²² *Ibid.*, 45-46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 46.

True to the ideal of the refined Southern lady – an important character in the Lost Cause ideology – Meriwether relied on slave labor to exempt herself from household chores.²⁴ The Meriwethers came to own two more slaves by the dawn of the Civil War.²⁵

Still, like many Tennesseans at the beginning of the conflict, Minor Meriwether initially opposed secession and “when the movement to quit the Union was defeated by this decisive vote [in the Tennessee Legislature] Minor was delighted and thought the trouble ended.”²⁶ But when Tennessee ultimately seceded, Minor Meriwether remained loyal to his home state and enlisted in the Confederate Army, serving as a lieutenant general in the Engineering Corps and eventually earning the rank of colonel and leading the Iron Commission in command of Confederate railroads.²⁷

With her husband off fighting, Meriwether remained in Memphis with her two young sons during the early months of the war, experiencing the Union occupation of the city which commenced on June 6, 1862.²⁸ From July 21 to November 26, 1862, General Sherman governed the city and under his orders, Union troops confiscated Meriwether’s Memphis property on the basis of her Confederate affiliation.²⁹ Then, on September 27, 1862, Sherman

²⁴ Janey, *Burying the Dead But Not the Past*, 55. For further discussion of Southern womanhood and the image of the Southern lady see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 51, 57. One of the slaves, Henry, fought alongside Minor through the war.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58. For more on the secession of Tennessee, see J. Reuben Sheeler, “Secession and the Unionist Revolt,” in *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 2 (Apr., 1944): 175-185.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 126; Robert Black, *The Railroads of the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 206.

²⁸ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War in the West: The Civil War from the Mississippi to the Mountains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 60.

²⁹ Wesley Mood, *Demon of the Lost Cause: Sherman and Civil War History* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2011), 14. Again, Elizabeth Meriwether had land in her own name; Sherman argued, however, that since her

issued an order calling for the expulsion of ten Confederate families should guerillas fire upon another Union boat along the Mississippi.³⁰ Consequently, when Confederate troops again attacked Union boats, Meriwether was one of the first banished Memphians.³¹ Several months pregnant and traveling with her two young sons on a mule-drawn wagon, Meriwether faced hunger and uncertainty during her southward retreat to Columbus, Mississippi, where she gave birth to her third son in a stranger's house.³² Perpetuating the Confederate legacy, Meriwether named her baby son Lee, after the fabled Southern general.³³ During the rest of the war, Meriwether traveled around Alabama and Mississippi, struggling to feed her children by any means.³⁴ At one point in Tuscaloosa, for example, Meriwether entered a creative writing contest for a newspaper called the *Sunday Mississippian*, penning a short story and winning the \$500 first prize. She based the fictional story, entitled "Story of a Refugee," on her own banishment from Memphis and travels through the war-torn South.³⁵

Throughout the war, moreover, Meriwether continued her pseudonymous writing career from her antebellum life, crafting opinion pieces for various Confederate newspapers and

husband was in the Confederate Army, Elizabeth Meriwether's property was open for Union confiscation (Meriwether, *Recollections*, 74).

³⁰ Buck T. Foster, *Sherman's Mississippi Campaign* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 178. This was Special Order No. 254.

³¹ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 75. In a letter to her son Lee (included in her memoir), Elizabeth Meriwether describes the events leading up to her banishment from Memphis: "The Yankees captured Memphis and General Sherman, the city's military commander, published a proclamation seven weeks ago, saying he would banish the wives of ten Confederate officers if the 'Rebels' didn't stop shooting at his gunboats on the Mississippi river. Of course our brave solders kept on shooting Yankee gunboats whenever they could, so Sherman drew up a list of ten Memphis women to be banished. I was on that list." (Meriwether, *Recollections*, 82)

³² Elizabeth and Minor Meriwether's children were Avery Meriwether (b. July 15, 1857, d. July 22, 1883), Rivers Blythe Meriwether (b. July 26, 1859, d. 1893), and (Minor) Lee Meriwether (b. Dec. 25, 1862, d. Mar. 12, 1966). See Nelson Heath Meriwether, *The Meriwethers*, 139-141.

³³ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 103. In her memoir, Meriwether boasts that she can "testify now after nearly fifty-four years that he has ever been a good son and proved worthy of the great name he bears."

³⁴ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 101, 115, 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 118; Frank, "The Meriwethers," 43. "Story of a Refugee" only remains in partial form, therefore, it will not be discussed again in this essay.

including these printed pieces in her scrapbooks for her descendants.³⁶ In many of these articles, she urges Southern men to fight for, and Southern women to support, the Confederate cause. Moreover, these articles reveal that she espoused several tenets of the Lost Cause before the cause was actually lost; that is, before Lee's April 1865 surrender at Appomattox and before the Meriwethers' return to Memphis. Because Meriwether's thoughts and opinions throughout the war illuminate her postwar writings and advocacy of a certain, shiny remembrance of the Confederacy, they deserve attention. After all, the war forced Meriwether to cope with "the sudden change in [her] fortunes, the change from a happy wife with her husband by her side to love and protect her, to a wife and her husband off at War, often surrounded by enemies, fleeing before them, two babies to look after," and impacted the way she thought about her country and her allegiances.³⁷ By closely examining her wartime experiences and her understanding of the conflict as it unfolded around her, Meriwether's formative relationship with the Lost Cause comes into focus, suggesting that the rhetoric of defeat brandished by white Southerners after the war in fact originated in the early years of the conflict. At the same time, Meriwether delegates important wartime roles to her female compatriots, illustrating her conviction that women can operate in larger, public spheres and, by extension, contribute to the American democratic system allegedly defended by the South.

³⁶ There are three scrapbooks in the Meriwether family collection at the University of Memphis Library. In most of her wartime articles, Meriwether writes under a pseudonym; however, she went through her scrapbooks and penciled in her initials ("EAM") under the articles she had written. It can be reasonably inferred that these articles were indeed written by Meriwether because she referenced her own experiences in a few of these articles. For example, in a *Sunday Mississippian* article titled "Diplomacy," written from Spring Hill, Tennessee on December 21, 1864, Meriwether anonymously writes, "Who but a mother, robbed of property, home, everything save life and honor – driven forth to wander with her children, friendless, moneyless, husband, brothers, every male relative in the army – who more than she appreciates the beauty, the music, the ineffable sweetness of that little word. Peace?" Later in that same article, she claims that her "five and seven year old boys are serving their apprenticeship in war;" in 1864, Avery and Rivers Meriwether would have been seven and five years old respectively.

³⁷ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 59.

As previously mentioned, Meriwether remained in Memphis through the first six months of the Union occupation of that city, until she fled southward with her children upon General Sherman's orders. Minor, on the other hand, entered the war in October 1861 as a major and chief engineer under Major General Leonidas Polk.³⁸ Initially, Meriwether discouraged her husband's enlistment, admitting in her memoir that "I knew little of battles. I had a vague idea that when thousands of men stood off and shot at you with pistols and rifles and cannon there was little chance of your coming home alive, and so I entreated Minor not to go."³⁹ But by February 23, 1862, Meriwether held a very different opinion about the urgency of fighting. On this date, approximately three months before Union ships captured Memphis, a local paper published one of Meriwether's articles, "A Southern Woman's Opinion of the Crisis," written under the pseudonym, "Wife of a Soldier."⁴⁰ In the article, published shortly after Confederate surrenders at Fort Donelson and Fort Henry, Meriwether agitates for additional reinforcements in Columbus, Kentucky, where Minor is stationed.⁴¹ Attempting to spur the men of Memphis into action, Meriwether writes,

I am told there are men in our midst whom the late disasters have disheartened and discouraged. If there be any such, send them to us, the women of Memphis.

³⁸ Myron J. Smith, Jr., "Minor Meriwether," in *Civil War Biographies from the Western Waters: 956 Confederate and Union Naval and Military Personnel, Contractors, Politicians, Officials, Steamboat Pilots and Others* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 163.

³⁹ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 58.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, "A Southern Woman's Opinion on the Crisis," clipping from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether Scrapbook, dated February 23, 1862, box 2, folder 3, Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM. This article was written in response to the fall of Fort Donelson. Because she addresses her article to the "Editors Appeal," it is reasonable to infer that the article was published in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*. Next to this article in her scrapbook, Meriwether included a handwritten note to her sons: "My pets, when your mother wrote this, it was expected that Columbus would be attacked any day, your father was there, & many people of Memphis believed we were whipped, & a few months would end the scene, by Jeff Davis flying to Europe for refuge. Moreover these persons after asserted, 'It would be the best governed country in the world. We had many Unionists then. They understand Yankee nature a little better now.'"

⁴¹ *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including the Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Vol. VII (Boston: Cadet Armory, 1908), 126-127. For more on the battles of Fort Donelson and Fort Henry, see Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

We will point them to the dark days of the first revolution, to the days of Valley Forge, when our band of patriots were famished, and frozen, and sick, yet *not* disheartened – to the days when every seaport city was in the hands of the enemy, and defeat on defeat had fallen on us, but *not* overwhelming us.⁴²

Here, Meriwether clearly draws the connection between the Confederate cause and the revolution of the American colonists in the previous century. Like the first American revolutionaries, the Confederates fought against a larger, better equipped force and suffered several consecutive defeats; the Grey Tennesseans were in the midst of a similar experience when Meriwether wrote this article. Notably, Meriwether identifies with the American revolutionaries, referring to “our band of patriots” and observing that defeat had not overwhelmed “us.” By aligning the Confederate cause with the plight of the mid-eighteenth century Americans, Meriwether joins a chorus of Southern voices who clamored to establish themselves in this American tradition of righteous and successful revolutions. For instance, on July 4, 1861, a Louisiana newspaper proclaimed, “The Confederate States of 1861 are acting over again the history of the American Revolution of 1776. To them, therefore, belongs the most sacred right of property in the memories of Independence Day, as the loyal inheritors of its principles and its glories.”⁴³ Confederates like Meriwether, then, frequently portrayed themselves as the true heirs to the principles of the founding generation.⁴⁴

Throughout her other wartime articles, this intentional attempt to associate the Confederate cause with the American Revolution repeatedly resurfaces. For instance, in that same 1862 article, Meriwether professes that the Confederate father “fights for the birthright of

⁴² Meriwether, “Southern Woman’s Opinion.”

⁴³ Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, with Documents, Narratives, Illustrative Incidents, Poetry, etc.* (New York, 1861-1868), II, 252 (documents).

⁴⁴ For more on this phenomenon, see Genovese, *The Southern Tradition*; George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

his children, for their godlike inheritance of freedom.”⁴⁵ Highly conscious of their language, Southerners oftentimes employed buzzwords like “freedom,” “independence,” “rights,” and “contract,” in an effort to evoke eighteenth-century fears of tyranny.⁴⁶ If the democratic South fights for freedom, according to Meriwether, then the tyrannical North fights to suppress this legacy of the Founding Fathers. In response to a critique of her first article, Meriwether observes that the Northerners “have always made the largest professions of freedom, always set up the hugest cry about liberty of any people on the face of the green earth.” But for the last quarter of a century, the North has been abusing the name of freedom by “pouring out torrents of crocodile tears over the vassalage of the black race, a race born and bred in bondage a race, not reduced to ignorance and degradation, not made inferior by its white masters, but created so by the Almighty for his own wise purposes.” Certain Northerners in the antebellum years, then, had tried to disrupt the natural racial hierarchy by agitating for the freedom of an innately inferior people. Now, however, Northerners wrongfully imprison Confederate sympathizers and refuse to concede the legitimacy of Southern secession. As follows, “the North has given the lie to all her professions of freedom. She has bound on her brow the infamous name of Hypocrite. The nations of the world look on her with scorn and contempt, the true lovers of liberty loathe her. She has cast aside the cloak of virtue, and stands hideous in her naked deformity.”⁴⁷ In short, Meriwether argues that by attacking the divinely-sanctioned institution of slavery and by attempting to “enslave thirteen sovereign States,” the North repudiates her past association with the values of American democracy.

⁴⁵ Meriwether, “Southern Woman’s Opinion.”

⁴⁶ Rable, *The Confederate Republic*, 47.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

But the first blocked passage also exhibits another important aspect of Meriwether's wartime experience – that she began to conceptualize women's role in the crisis as keepers of Confederate memory. Or, more generally as in this case, as keepers of revolutionary memory. After all, she advises the Confederate men to call on their women for encouragement. Later in the same article, Meriwether references Frederick the Great's successful defense of Prussia against the powers of Western Europe, equating this impossible triumph to the condition of the Confederacy. Combined with her rallying call to the men of Memphis, Meriwether's self-proclaimed role as depository of historical memory allows her to claim authority as the motivator of Confederate troops. Early in the conflict, Meriwether realized that Southern white women would act as guardians of the Lost Cause and, as part of their duty in this role, these women must teach the Confederate legacy to their children. Again, there is continuity between the Revolutionary and Civil War eras. In the dawning years of the United States, women were expected to embrace Republican motherhood – their most important responsibility was to educate their children in the proper practices of civic virtue, in order for the youth to live as contributing citizens in the newly-formed democratic nation.⁴⁸ Confederate women likewise taught their children their own narratives of the war in order to perpetuate customs of the Old South and to come to terms with “the extremely un-American experience of defeat.”⁴⁹ As Meriwether warns her Northern adversaries,

⁴⁸ For a discussion of Republican motherhood, see Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective,” in *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2, Special Issue: An American Enlightenment, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Summer, 1976): 187-205, accessed February 3, 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712349>; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980). In her dissertation, Emily Walker Cook locates Meriwether in a similar position – that of a Victorian “moral mother.” Cook essentially argues that Meriwether justified her later public activism with her moral superiority as a woman. See Emily Walker Cook, “Elizabeth Avery Meriwether: Moral Mother as Radical Reformer,” MA thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1991.

⁴⁹ Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 3.

You may slay the eight millions of men, now arrayed against you, but there are as many boys growing up to whom their mothers will teach an eternal hatred of the murderers of their fathers, the invaders of their homes, the polluters of their country's soil. In time these boys will be men, and the sons of southern mothers are not born for bondage. The day of reckoning will come.⁵⁰

During the war, then, Meriwether developed an understanding of herself as protector of the Confederate legacy; she worked to bestow this inheritance on her three sons.

Besides acting as keepers of memory, women could assume roles outside of their domestic sphere. Frustrated by the lack of enthusiasm to support the Confederate troops at Columbus, Kentucky, Meriwether calls on the women of Memphis to relieve the battered regiment at Columbus, writing,

I know it is presumed the limit of a woman's business is bounded by her own house; but in times like these...it may be conceded to our sex the right to think a little, and possibly to speak a little...Are there not men enough in our country to drive back the invader? If there are not, for God's sake let the Governor call out the mothers of the South to defend their children and their homes from desecration. Women have proven brave soldiers before today, and can do it again, if need be.⁵¹

Soldiery and citizenship had long been linked and continued to be associated long after the Civil War. In the wake of the Spanish-American War, for instance, women nurses were praised for their aid in medical camps, but they were not awarded the vote because their nursing duties were not considered equal to the physical fighting of men.⁵² In fact, one common argument employed against female suffrage through the early twentieth century was that women could not act as soldiers and therefore, could not supply the physical force that their vote would represent.

Essentially, women could not vote to enact governmental policy because they could not fight to

⁵⁰ Meriwether, "Another Appeal."

⁵¹ Meriwether, "Southern Woman's Opinion."

⁵² Kristin L. Hoganson, "The Spanish-American War and the Martial Idea of Citizenship," in *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale Press, 1998), 107-132.

protect these policies.⁵³ By suggesting that women could join in the fighting if the men of Memphis refused, however, Meriwether implies that women could function as full-fledged citizens in Southern – and by extension – American society. In short, just as she worked to justify the Confederate cause by associating Southerners with the American revolutionaries of 1776, during the war, Meriwether also tried to elevate the status of women to citizens by assigning them the role of protector of Confederate and American legacies and by implying that they could fulfill all of their duties as fully enfranchised citizens.

After the war, both Meriwether and her husband returned to Memphis where they reconstructed their home and lives under federal Reconstruction policies. As Union troops, Freedmen's Bureau officials, and other Northerners swarmed the city, elite Memphians worked to regain confiscated properties and rebuild antebellum fortunes.⁵⁴ This was true for the Meriwethers. Minor began practicing law after the war and submitted a fiscal plan to relieve Memphis of the debt it incurred during Reconstruction.⁵⁵ And after President Andrew Johnson pardoned her brother Tom for his service in the Confederate Army, Meriwether embarked on a several days' journey to Washington, attempting to recover ownership of the Memphis property which General Sherman had confiscated during his wartime governorship.⁵⁶ Receiving an unfriendly and futile interview with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Meriwether returned to

⁵³ For a discussion of the physical force argument in early twentieth century Great Britain, see *Official Reports 5th Series Parliamentary Debates: Commons XXXVI* (Mar 25 – Apr 12, 1912), cols 615–732. In the words of Parliament Member MacCullum Scott, offered in 1912, “The argument against Woman Suffrage which has always impressed me most is the physical force argument. First, the only stable force of government is the one which secures that the balance of political power is in the same hands as the balance of physical force. Secondly, by counting heads you secure a rough approximate index as to where government or policy has the physical force of the country behind it. In the last place, women as physical force units are not equal to men. Therefore if you include women when you are counting heads, the result is not reliable as an index of the physical force in the country...By giving votes to women you are destroying the value of a General Election.”

⁵⁴ Berkeley, “An Advocate for Her Sex,” 396.

⁵⁵ Myron J. Smith, *Civil War Biographies from the Western Waters*, 163.

⁵⁶ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 169. Minor Meriwether believed that President Johnson had pardoned Avery because they had served in the House together before the war.

Memphis frustrated and even further disillusioned with the federal government. Decades later, Meriwether recorded in her memoir that “the period of ‘Reconstruction’ ... more properly should be called ‘Destruction’ – for this law destroyed the homes and happiness of the South to an extent not caused even by the Federal armies in a hundred great battles.”⁵⁷

Adding to Meriwether’s Reconstruction Era frustrations, the racial demographics of Memphis had shifted remarkably – between 1860 and mid-1865, the black population increased from 3,000 to around 20,000.⁵⁸ In her memoir, Meriwether remarked upon the change, writing, “The people of Memphis stood the insolence of the Blacks for a while; for a while delicate white women were elbowed off the sidewalks into the muddy streets by coarse Negro men – then something happened, something which is known in History as the ‘Memphis Riots.’”⁵⁹ As Meriwether alludes to in this passage, on May 1, 1866, racial tensions erupted into three days of violence, during which an armed white mob rampaged the black community, resulting in forty-six black, and two white, deaths. Known as the Memphis Riots, the event was so brutal that it prompted a Congressional investigation.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Meriwether commented positively on the massacre, noting in her memoir that “One good result of the ‘Memphis Riot and Massacres,’ was the improved behavior of the negroes. White men and women were no longer pushed into the streets; white women no longer needed to fear to go about the city alone.”⁶¹ In the same spirit, Meriwether sewed her husband’s white robe and, according to family lore, allowed the

⁵⁷ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 186.

⁵⁸ James Gilbert Ryan, “The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction,” in *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 3 (Jul., 1977): 244, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716953>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁰ Ryan, “The Memphis Riots of 1866,” 243; *Memphis Riots and Massacres – Report of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, 1866.

⁶¹ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 168.

nascent Ku Klux Klan under Nathan Bedford Forrest to meet in her kitchen.⁶² Without a doubt, Meriwether avidly supported the existing racial hierarchy, even asserting in her memoir that “the work of the Ku Klux Klan was done in a patriotic spirit for patriotic purposes,” and using the same language in which she described Confederate soldiers during the war.⁶³

For the remainder of her ninety-two years, Meriwether divided her time and ink between advocating for women’s rights and suffrage and defending the Old South and Confederate memory. As in her wartime newspaper articles, these two passions sometimes converged. In January 1872, for instance, Meriwether began writing, editing, and publishing her own newspaper called the *Tablet*, which, according to historian Martha Wedell, “she intended as a vehicle to express and publicize women’s issues.”⁶⁴ True to this sentiment, Meriwether envisions in the paper’s first issue that “woman’s ideas will fill our columns, woman’s thoughts will find vent through this vehicle.”⁶⁵ But she also hoped that her paper would deliver a uniquely Southern perspective to its readership. After all, as Meriwether also ponders in the first issue, “the South is not destitute of Genius, but to make it a power in the world it must be constantly cultivated; in order to be cultivated there must be facilities for its outflow.”⁶⁶ The *Tablet* would

⁶² According to family lore, when the Klan members asked Meriwether for her views on their terrorist methods, she responded, “It may work. Negroes are very superstitious. They may become too scared to vote; then when you are allowed to vote you can elect intelligent men to tax you and make the laws that govern you. But when will women have the right to vote? I have been taught to believe that taxation without representation is tyranny.” (Lee Meriwether, “My Mother” in Elizabeth Meriwether, *Recollections of Ninety-Two Years, 1824-1916* ((Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1958), vi.)

⁶³ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 193.

⁶⁴ Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 23.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, “The God-Speed Given Us,” *The Tablet* I, January 27, 1872, box 3 in the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, “To Our Readers,” *The Tablet* I, January 27, 1872, box 3 in the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

briefly serve as one such facility, even counting the first family of the Confederacy among its subscribers.⁶⁷

Only two issues of the *Tablet* have been preserved, but both very strongly uphold the Lost Cause and substantiate the important role of white Southern women in maintaining this particular understanding of the South. In the very first issue, Meriwether admits, “the truth is the South has no literature. She is unrepresented among the nations of the world, because her thoughts, her feelings, her aims and aspirations are unwritten and unknown.”⁶⁸ Meriwether hopes that her paper will provide a voice to downtrodden ex-Confederates because, as she brazenly claims, the Confederacy’s lack of literature contributed to its downfall. In an especially illuminating passage, Meriwether writes,

During her struggle for Freedom had the South possessed a literature of her own the result might have been different from what it is. The South had no army of paid and trained writers, no thousands of magazines, no ten thousand pictorial papers to represent *her* side of the quarrel. Though the million tongues of the North continually clanged out the North’s tale of grievances, its violent invectives, its passionate accusations, *our* people were unheard, the South was dumb. The North had the ear and the eyes of Europe. Europe was the judge and heard only one side argued. No wonder Europe decided us to be in the wrong. Europe was made to believe we were a nation of savages fighting for the mean right of holding slaves. That principle of Freedom, that main pillar in the temple of Liberty, *States Rights*, for which the South bravely battled for four years, was studiously hidden from the eyes of the world. It is not strange the world’s sympathy and moral support was given to our conquerors. The North blazoned on its banners the burning motto, *Freedom* – banners sent down to float over conquered and enslaved States; while our banners, bright with the proud legend, *States Rights*, the North daubed over with the black ensigns of slavery and held

⁶⁷ Jefferson Davis, Memphis, Tennessee, to Elizabeth Meriwether, Memphis, Tennessee, 17 February 1872, box 1, folder 4 in the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM. Evidently, the Meriwethers and the Davis’ were friends and neighbors in Memphis in the years following the war, and Jefferson Davis wrote several letters to Elizabeth from 1872-1876. See box 1, folders 4-7 of the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, “To Our Readers,” *The Tablet* I, January 27, 1872, box 3 in the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

them up to the eyes of Europe and the unthinking people in the North as symbols of the principle we fought for.⁶⁹

Here, Meriwether offers an unconventional view on the common cry that the South's inferior numbers of men and inadequate supplies doomed her to defeat against the well-equipped and very populous North. Not only did the Confederates lack the men and arms to compete with the North, they also commanded a much smaller media presence in Europe, allowing their enemies to slander them and their cause on an international level. Moreover, the Confederate cause, according to Meriwether, was states' rights, not slavery. Bedazzled by Northern propagandists, Meriwether rationalized, the European powers understandably refused to aid the allegedly savage Southern slaveholders. According to Meriwether's reality, states' rights, and not slavery, provoked the war.

Continuing her insistence that states' rights sparked the conflict, Meriwether juxtaposes her definitions of a heretic and a rebel in a subsequent issue of her paper. "A heretic," according to Meriwether, "is a man or woman who thinks for himself, or herself, on religious matters." Similarly, she claims that, "A rebel – according to the American definition – is a man who, acting on his own judgment and feelings, sided with his own State instead of any other man's State." Meriwether then argues that at one point in time, heretics were ostracized by their societies and punished by institutions of organized religion. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, "Nobody now ever thinks of a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Quaker, a Campbellite or a Baptist as a heretic." Instead, the former heretics of the middle ages have gained followers and established themselves as founders of legitimate religious sects. Just as history has cleared the names and reputations of heretics, Meriwether predicts that "the time is rapidly coming when the word rebel will have no more force in the political world, than the word heretic has in the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

religious.” As she had done in her pseudonymous wartime articles, Meriwether justifies the Confederate cause by locating its struggle in a larger history and by associating the South with other oppressed, righteous historical figures. Meriwether’s reliance on historical examples in her rhetorical defenses of the Confederacy speaks to her self-appointed role as guardian of memory. Not only does Meriwether seek to protect and propagate Confederate memory, she does so by constructing other historical narratives that illustrate the virtuous cause of the underdog. Moreover, in this same 1872 article, Meriwether argues that the North fought against democracy and regressed “to the old monarchical theory of the divine right of government, and talked the old kingly talk about the sin of rebellion.”⁷⁰ Over thirty years later in her first major nonfiction work, Meriwether will expand upon this theory, claiming that, spurred by a hatred for democracy, the monarchical, imperial North fought a war against the democratic, slaveholding South.

The mere fact, however, that Meriwether devoted an entire article to defend the word “rebel” speaks to her efforts to portray the eleven Confederate states as the true heirs to the struggle and triumph of the thirteen American colonies. Throughout her 1916 memoir, Meriwether also defends the term “rebel.” For instance, Meriwether records that during the Civil War, a Union steamboat containing Confederate prisoners of war landed in Memphis. Overjoyed, she and her two young sons ran to the dock to see her brother Tom, who was a prisoner aboard the ship. The Union captain gruffly referred to Meriwether as a rebel, to which she replied, “Captain, you ought not to be too hard on Rebels. Remember that Washington was a rebel.”⁷¹ Similarly, in an 1863 letter included in the memoir and addressed to her then infant son

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, “Heretics and Rebels,” *The Tablet* I, no. 2, February 3, 1872, box 3 in the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

⁷¹ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 71.

Lee, Meriwether explains, “Gen. Sherman called your father a ‘Rebel’ and he is a rebel, like Washington was a rebel when he fought for the independence of his country. When you are a big man you must be a rebel, too, if the Yankees are still invading the South, killing our soldiers and burning our homes.”⁷² Ultimately, Meriwether convinced Lee that “rebel” wields patriotic connotations; in a 1951 letter addressed to the readers of his mother’s memoir, Lee defines “rebels” as “Southern patriots who were fighting for their country’s independence. The patriots of course continued in every way they could to repel the armies that came from the North to burn Southern homes and kill Southern men and inflict hardships upon Southern women and their babies.”⁷³ By this definition, not only does Lee Meriwether exonerate all negative implications of the word “rebel,” but he also successfully demonizes Union soldiers and their cause. The Confederates, for their part, fought for the honor and protection of their families.

From Lee’s 1951 letter, it is clear that his mother succeeded in her mission as guardian of Confederate memory – Meriwether imprinted on her son the righteousness of the Confederate “rebels.” In another article in the *Tablet*, Meriwether criticizes Confederate General Richard S. Ewell, who expressed feelings of patriotism which extended over the entire, politically reunited nation.⁷⁴ In contrast to Southern white men like Ewell, Meriwether explains,

Being only a woman, we claim the right to talk exactly as it suits us. Women have the children of the country to look after. Our boys are growing up; their fathers, dead and living, are accused by the United States Government of crime – of treason and rebellion, Shall we shut our mouths, and let the boys of the South grow up in the belief that their father’s slain in battle, or living in political bondage, were base traitors? Let men make what pretenses they please to a

⁷² Meriwether, *Recollections*, 82.

⁷³ Lee Meriwether, “Note by the author’s son, Lee Meriwether,” in Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years, 1824-1916* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1958), 80.

⁷⁴ A native Virginian, Richard S. Ewell attained the status of lieutenant general in the Confederate army. He fought at several major battles, including Gettysburg. For more on Ewell, see Paul D. Casdorph, *Confederate General R.S. Ewell: Robert E. Lee’s Hesitant Commander* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

patriotism that ‘compasses the continent; ours shall only compass the States that love us, and the boys we bear and nourish on the blood of our hearts shall think with us. Their love shall be our love – their patriotism shall be our patriotism; and should I please heaven to take from us the father of our own boys before our own head is laid in the sod, future generations shall read on his tombstone the truthful record: Here rests a patriot, whom the United States Government called traitor.’⁷⁵

This passage clearly articulates both Meriwether’s commitment to passing on the Confederate memory to future generations, and her Lost Cause interpretation of this memory. Namely, Meriwether ardently hopes to instill a sense of pride in future generations of Southern men by portraying their forefathers as the true defenders of American values of freedom, even if these forefathers did keep people in bondage and did unsuccessfully attempt to leave the union. Moreover, this responsibility to perpetuate the Lost Cause falls on white Southern women like Meriwether who determine the upbringing of their children. Meriwether, once again, follows in the tradition of Republican motherhood.

Through her wartime articles and through the *Tablet*, Meriwether clearly establishes herself and her fellow Southern white women as the guardians of Confederate memory. Moreover, she elucidates her interpretation of this memory – that the Confederates fought a brave war in defense of states’ rights and in defense of their homeland. Considering their noble motivations, the Confederates were the true heirs to the democratic principles of the Revolutionary generation and by extension, the women who defended the Confederate cause also defended the spirit of American democracy. Although the newspaper itself was short-lived,

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, clipping about General R.S. Ewell, *The Tablet* I, no. 2, February 3, 1872, box 3 in the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

Meriwether continued her public activism, now attaching her name and face to her various causes.⁷⁶

In 1873, for instance, she became embroiled in a controversy over pay inequality of Memphis schoolteachers, arguing that the school board should have female representatives and that pay should be based on merit, not sex.⁷⁷ Although Meriwether and the Memphis City school teachers failed to secure “equal pay for equal work,” Meriwether continued her outspoken support of women’s rights in the Bluff City. Crucially, her support of women’s rights intersected with her support of the entrenched racial hierarchy of her society. Specifically, she vehemently criticized the fact that white women could not vote whereas, after the 1870 ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, black men were *de jure* enfranchised. Responding to a speech delivered by Wendell Phillips at Harvard College, in which he evidently criticized black codes in the South, Meriwether wrote in the *Memphis Avalanche* that “Negroes are not taxed without representation; women are. Negroes have a voice in the elections of their rulers; women have not. Negroes may fill any office in the gift of the people; women may not fill the humblest.”⁷⁸ Meriwether crystallized these views in an open letter to Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont,

⁷⁶ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 203-204. Elizabeth admits that she gave up the paper because writing, editing, and publishing it, along with her other household duties, was too taxing on her health. In her own words, Meriwether “found the work of being editor, contributor and publisher, all in one, too arduous for [her] health and strength” (*Recollections*, 204). She maintains, however, that the *Tablet* was financially stable while she ran it; the paper only went under after she had sold it to a publishing house.

⁷⁷ Berkeley, “An Advocate for Her Sex,” 401. There was an influx of women looking for work in the postwar South and many became school teachers. In Memphis, as most other places in the country, women received lower wages than men for similar work. (Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *Memphis Appeal*, February 2, 1873.)

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, clipping from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether Scrapbook, box 2, folder 5, Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM. For further discussion of the tensions between her progressive-era reform activism and her acceptance of racial paternalism, see Sara Faith Casey, “Elizabeth Avery Meriwether: One Southern Woman’s Life of Contradictions,” Senior Honors Thesis, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. 2007.

which was then published in a local newspaper.⁷⁹ Railing against the injustice of black male suffrage while widespread support for white female suffrage lagged behind, Meriwether caustically notes,

We are told that in your own state of Vermont, as well as in all of the other states of New England, there are many thousand more women than men. All of these many thousands are bulldozed from the polls by the small minority of men. If it is a hardship for the male negro to be bulldozed from the polls in the South, is it not an equal hardship for the white women of New England to be bulldozed from the polls in New England?

If the majority rule is a basic principle of this government, can you give one good reason why this principle should not prevail in Vermont and Massachusetts as well as in Carolina and Mississippi? Do you honestly, in your secret heart, consider it a greater crime for a Southern white minority to suppress a black majority of voters than it is for a minority of men in New England to suppress the majority of women?

Are the white women of New England less fitted for the ballot than the negro men of the South?

Do you honestly believe that the women of New England, the mothers, the sisters, the wives, the daughters of your statesmen, your poets, your philanthropists, and philosophers – the women who heir the centuries of their ancestors' struggle upward toward a higher civilization – are *these* women less worthy to share in the councils of the state than the male blacks so recently sprung from the ignorance of Africa?⁸⁰

This letter illuminates a number of themes in Meriwether's postwar rhetoric. For one, Meriwether clearly insists upon the inferiority of African-Americans who were "so recently sprung from the ignorance of Africa." By granting white women the franchise, they could counteract this primitive black vote and potentially reverse the evils of Reconstruction. Moreover, Meriwether once again accuses the North of failing to maintain American democratic values. But Meriwether's wartime accusation has slightly morphed – now, in addition to

⁷⁹ George F. Edmunds was a U.S. Senator from Vermont from 1866 until he resigned in 1891. He supported federal protection of black male suffrage. For more on Senator Edmunds life and career, see Selig Alder, "The Senatorial Career of George Franklin Edmunds, 1866-1891," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1934.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, "An Open Letter to Senator Edmunds," clipping from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether Scrapbook, box 2, folder 5 of the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

suppressing the South, the North is undemocratic by allowing the “minority of men in New England to suppress the majority of women.” White women, then, suffer in their dire, disenfranchised state while black men are free to enjoy the privileges of American democracy. In an attempt to rectify this perceived injustice, Meriwether boldly imitated Susan B. Anthony, ceremoniously casting a vote in a local election.⁸¹ Unlike Anthony, Meriwether was not arrested for her display, although in her memoir she admits that the election officials probably destroyed her ballot.⁸²

Continuing her outspoken support of women’s suffrage through the 1870s and 1880s, Meriwether eventually attracted the attention of Northern suffragists, among them Isabella Beecher Hooker.⁸³ In a letter addressed to Meriwether on January 24, 1874, Hooker writes, “I am very desirous you should go to Washington with your talk – I know how good & effective it must be in & of itself – but I know as well that we women have got to make our appeals in person whenever & wherever we can.”⁸⁴ Although Meriwether did not make it to Washington in

⁸¹ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 205. In her memoir, Elizabeth records that she voted in a local election in 1872. She claims to have preserved in her 1871 scrapbook a certificate from the Register’s Office of the Fifth Ward in Memphis, allowing her to vote in any election in 1872. This certificate, however, is no longer in her scrapbook. In a letter to the readership of his mother’s memoir, Lee Meriwether claims that his mother casted a ballot for Samuel Tilden in the presidential election of 1876 (Lee Meriwether, “My Mother,” vi). A June 8, 1910 *Memphis Daily Appeal* article in memory of Minor Meriwether, however, relates that Elizabeth voted in a local election sometime after 1870. This suggests to me that Elizabeth’s account was truthful. For more on this issue, see Frank, “The Meriwethers,” 54.

⁸² Regardless, Meriwether later told her son, Lee, that “Counting my ballot is not important; what is important is to focus public attention on the monstrous injustice, as well as stupidity, of including educated women with felons and lunatics as persons denied the right of suffrage.” (Lee Meriwether, “My Mother,” vi). For more on Meriwether’s racial arguments in favor of women’s suffrage, see Sally Sartain Hermsdorfer, “For ‘The Cultured Mothers of the Land’: Racist Imagery in the Old South Fiction of Tennessee Suffragist,” in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* LVI, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 183-195.

⁸³ A prominent Northeastern suffragist in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Isabella Beecher Hooker (1822-1907) was the half-sister of famed orator Henry Ward Beecher and author Harriet Beecher Stowe. For more on Isabella Beecher Hooker, see Susan Campbell, *Tempest-Tossed: The Spirit of Isabella Beecher Hooker* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

⁸⁴ Isabella Beecher Hooker, Hartford, Connecticut to Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, Memphis, Tennessee, 24 January 1874, in box 1, folder 21, Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

1874, she would later travel to Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan to participate in their state suffrage campaigns.⁸⁵

But in Memphis, Meriwether made history as the first woman in the city – and possibly also in the state of Tennessee – to publicly advocate for woman’s suffrage when she rented the Memphis Theater on May 5, 1876, in order to “tell the people why [she] deemed it unwise and unjust to rank women politically with convicts, lunatics, and Indians.”⁸⁶ Her speech, entitled “The Spirit of English and American Law as it Relates to Woman,” was warmly received by the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, which observed that “a good audience and certainly a respectable one” attended the lecture; the paper also lauded Meriwether as “a worthy advocate in defense of her sex. We suppose she shall continue in the lecture field.”⁸⁷ Following this inaugural lecture, Meriwether admits in a private letter to her two eldest sons, that “I had no idea I would meet with so much approval.”⁸⁸

Continuing on her much publicized activist trajectory, Meriwether committed to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) sometime between 1873 and 1876.⁸⁹ She also presented at the Republican, Democratic, and Prohibition presidential conventions in 1880.⁹⁰ Furthermore, in 1880 and 1881, Meriwether, the former slaveholder, worked alongside suffrage movement leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and antebellum abolitionist, Susan B. Anthony, on a lecture tour of New England, agitating for a federal suffrage

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida H. Harper (ed.), *The History of Woman Suffrage* (6 vols.; Rochester and New York: Susan B. Anthony, 1881-1922), III, 175.

⁸⁶ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 18; Grace Elizabeth Prescott, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Memphis: Its Place in the State, Sectional and National Movements,” in *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 18 (1964): 88.

⁸⁷ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 6 May, 1876.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether to Avery and Rivers Meriwether, 15 May, 1876, in box 1, folder 51 of the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

⁸⁹ Berkeley, “An Advocate for Her Sex,” 403.

⁹⁰ Prescott, “The Woman’s Suffrage Movement in Memphis,” 90.

amendment.⁹¹ It is important to note, moreover, that not all Southern suffragists were in favor of a federal suffrage amendment. Louisiana native Kate Gordon, for instance, resigned as the corresponding secretary of NAWSA because the organization advocated for a federal suffrage amendment. Gordon reasoned that a federal amendment would require federal enforcement, which would threaten Jim Crow laws. Instead, Gordon established the Southern States Woman Suffrage Conference (SSWSC) in 1913, which exclusively fought for state suffrage laws even at the detriment of federal suffrage law activism. It is interesting, then, that Meriwether joined NAWSA and supported a federal amendment, suggesting that she prioritized women's suffrage over the possibility of federal intervention in Southern affairs.⁹²

Clearly, Meriwether kept busy in those first postbellum years in Memphis. She became one of the most prominent Southern suffragists and battled relentlessly for the rights of women in her city and in her country. But she also boasted a blossoming fiction career, writing prolifically in the 1870s and 1880s and creating the Southern literature that she herself had called for in the *Tablet*. Her first novel, – and her first published fictional piece since “Story of a Refugee” – *The Master of Red Leaf*, presents several tenets of the Lost Cause. In fact, “its strong Southern tone prevented its finding a Northern publisher,” forcing Meriwether to submit her manuscript to a publishing house in London.⁹³ Briefly, Meriwether's debut novel tells the story of Hester Stanhope, a young Northerner who leaves her sleepy New England town to work as a

⁹¹Prescott, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Memphis,” 90; Berkeley, ““An Advocate for Her Sex,””403-4.

⁹²Elna C. Green, “The Rest of the Story: Kate Gordon and the Opposition to the Nineteenth Amendment in the South,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 171-189, accessed on April 14, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4232938>. For further discussion of Meriwether's role in the national and Tennessee suffrage movements, see Anastatia Sims, “‘Power that Pray’ and ‘Powers that Prey’: Tennessee and the Fight for Woman Suffrage,” in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* L, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 203-225.

⁹³ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 211. In her memoir, Meriwether claims that she wrote *The Master of Red Leaf* in 1872; however, the first edition that can be found was published by the London-based Samuel Tinsley and Company in 1879.

governess on a Louisiana plantation on the eve of the Civil War. Although she does tutor the plantation's two school-age children, Hester had really been sent down south by her zealous abolitionist pastor so that she could incite a revolt amongst her employers' slaves. Imbued with abolitionist spirit at the beginning of the novel, Hester easily loses sight of her secret mission upon her arrival at the Red Leaf plantation, where she finally encounters slavery firsthand and begins to doubt its immorality. She is further blinded by her unrequited love for the young, handsome plantation master who epitomizes the Southern gentleman.⁹⁴ By the end of the novel, Hester seriously questions her previous abolitionist stance, musing, "Were the slaveholders' right? Were these black children of Africa yet too undeveloped to accept the civilization of the day?"⁹⁵ Eventually, Hester comes to appreciate the beauty of Southern civilization in contrast to the drudgery of her New England life. She also recognizes the great hypocrisy of the North – although they righteously rail against African enslavement, Northerners oppress their very own women. In fact, Hester believes that the living conditions of New England women are inferior to those of Southern slaves, internally bemoaning, "Alas! what woman does not know there are slaveries more soul-crushing than the Southern negroes suffered!"⁹⁶ The work expounds upon other aspects of the Lost Cause; among them, that the South fought the war over states' rights, that the South was vastly outnumbered from the start, and that Southern slaves were content with their condition and rejected opportunities for freedom. In 1910, Meriwether, using the pseudonym of Hannah Parting, released and published a reworking of this novel under the title *The Sowing of Swords; or, the Soul of the 'Sixties*.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ For a discussion of gender roles in *The Master of Red Leaf*, see Casey, "Life of Contradictions," 23-46.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *The Master of Red Leaf, Vol. I* (London: Samuel Tinsley and Co., 1879), 150.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether [pseud: Hannah Parting], *The Sowing of Swords; or, the Soul of the 'Sixties* (New York and Washington: The Neal Publishing Company, 1910). Except for changes in the characters' names and a

In closer examination of her debut novel, Meriwether argues that the South rested on democratic principles, such as state sovereignty, while the North used her superior strength to punish her Confederate brethren. Usurping the narrative voice of New Englander Hester, Meriwether writes in the first part of the book,

The very basic principle of democracy, argued these blinded [Southern] men, was that a people had the right to elect their own rules and frame their own laws. This right the South had exercised. For the North to attempt coercion would be to go back to the old monarchic spirit, in which George III had warred on the colonies, and against which our forefathers had fought so bravely.

I read and listened to such arguments, and I laughed in my heart at the lesson I knew these men would learn from the inexorable logic of *Might*. The North was twenty million strong, the South but six; was the great and mighty North to be hindered of its purpose by a “principle”? Was it to let the South go free when it knew it had but to stretch forth its strong hand and drag her back under the stars and stripes?⁹⁸

In this excerpt, Hester relays one of the arguments that Meriwether herself had used in her wartime articles and in the postwar *Tablet*; namely, that the South fought on behalf of the true American political tradition while the North wrongfully employed its superior numbers and resources to quash the Confederate fight for freedom. In fact, she even references the Revolutionary War, insinuating that Lincoln rules in the tradition of King George III of England. Notably, although Hester is written as a voice from New England, she does not deny the righteousness of the Southern cause nor does she attempt to portray the ignoble Northern prerogative in a positive light. Much later in the book and after months of exposure to Southern civilization, Hester presents these Southern arguments as her own, theorizing,

The Union has done the work it was expected to do, viz., commanded the respect of foreign countries, and shown itself able to sustain Republican principles. The danger now menacing those principles comes not from without, but lies in her

few different subplots, this is the exact same (passage for passage) book as *The Master of Red Leaf*. As such, it will not be discussed further. Also, the pseudonym “Hannah Parting” is the name of the narrator in the 1910 novel.

⁹⁸ Meriwether, *The Master of Red Leaf*, Vol. I, 184-185.

own breast. The strong centralised power that rose up and conquered the South, is, in fact and reality, of the same nature as the monarchical powers of Europe; and the intense loyalty felt for the UNION is of the same nature as the loyalty of the old world's people for their monarchs.⁹⁹

Meriwether, then, cleverly claims Northern support for the Southern cause by her choice of narrator.¹⁰⁰

Despite her views on the nature of the Union, Hester goes on to criticize the South's desire for political freedom while the region holds four million African slaves in bondage. Yet throughout the novel, Hester attests to the benevolence of slavery, realizing that she cannot instigate a slave rebellion because the slaves are so comfortable with their position in society. Early in her stay at the Red Leaf plantation, Hester notes, "it seemed to me so marvelous that these negroes did not rise and shake off their chains. Not only in this parish, but in many others, the slaves were as a hundred to one white person. What prevented them from making the attempt? They were lapped in a slothful contentment."¹⁰¹ Moreover, although Hester never completely renounces her abolitionist stance, she also never acknowledges blacks as her equals. Instead, she argues that whites are culturally superior and capable of navigating modern society because they have been civilized for millennia. Comparing herself to the slave One-eyed Sampson, for instance, Hester marvels, "In the inscrutable workings of Destiny, how strange that *my* fate should be linked to this horrible black's! – *I*, heir to the thousand years of religion and civilization our race had known; *he*, heir to all savagery and sensuality his savage people had lived in for five thousand years."¹⁰² After more interactions with the slaves, Hester even admits

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *The Master of Red Leaf, Vol. III* (London, Samuel Tinsley & Co., 1879), 43-44.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this literary strategy, see Casey, "Life of Contradictions," 70.

¹⁰¹ Meriwether, *The Master of Red Leaf, Vol. I*, 110.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 155.

that, “a doubt darted into my mind as to the brotherhood of the black and the white races.”¹⁰³

Although she is an ardent abolitionist, then, Hester does not question the existence and importance of a natural racial hierarchy. In short, Meriwether depicts a democratic South, a monarchical North, a benevolent institution of slavery, and an innate racial order, plainly offering her version of the Lost Cause in her debut novel.

Interestingly, Meriwether also portrays a woman as the hope for the perpetuation of the Southern culture. At the very end of the novel, one of the plantation master’s female cousins, Clara Devaseur, escapes the fighting with her new husband and her two young cousins.¹⁰⁴ Clara’s husband is a former lieutenant in the Union army who has come to appreciate the noble plight of the Southern people and has repudiated his previous Northern affiliation in order to marry a Southern woman. The new refugee family heads southward on a steamboat with two house slaves, carrying on their way of life and presumably instilling Confederate memory in the children.¹⁰⁵

After *The Master of Red Leaf*, Elizabeth wrote several other fictional works from Memphis.¹⁰⁶ Her 1877 play *The Ku Klux Klan; or, the Carpet-bagger from New Orleans* depicts life in the Crescent City during Reconstruction. In this work, the Southern heroine Polly Plucky struggles to avoid the advances of Northern carpetbagger Oily Unctuous, whose benefaction would raise her family out of desperate poverty. Along a second and more symbolic plotline, the Widow Secesh tries to reel in her unreconstructed son, KuKlux, whose habit of “blowin’ his

¹⁰³ Meriwether, *The Master of Red Leaf*, Vol. III, 66.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰⁵ For further explanation on this interpretation, see Casey, “Life of Contradictions,” 40-46.

¹⁰⁶ Among her other works of fiction are a play, *The Devil’s Dance* (1886), and novels, *Black and White* and *My First and Last Love*, but these works are beyond the scope of this essay.

nose” upsets the Republicans and instigates chaos in the city.¹⁰⁷ Written while Meriwether experienced Reconstruction in Memphis and set during Reconstruction in New Orleans, the play further illuminates Meriwether’s views of the era. Evidenced by her postwar women’s suffrage rhetoric and by description of Reconstruction in her memoir, Meriwether emphatically objected to black male suffrage. For instance, in her memoir, Meriwether records that “under the malign influence of these self-seeking carpet baggers the poor, ignorant negroes made but a sorry use of the franchise thrust upon them. The white men of the South, the men of brains and property, the men with a long line of cultured, civilized ancestry were forbidden either to vote or to hold public office.”¹⁰⁸ Her 1877 play repeats similar themes. Black men blindly follow the disreputable Northern politicians, while Confederate veterans like Polly Plucky’s father struggle to feed their families. Essentially, the play presents the possibility for disaster when undemocratic Northerner politicians disrupt the racial hierarchy and join forces with gullible black voting men in order to oppress honorable Southerners. But Meriwether also contends that black women likewise suffered when their husbands achieved the franchise. For instance, former slave and current pie vendor Dinah expresses disapproval with her husband’s newly granted right. In an aside, Dinah laments,

Dat ar ole Mas Lincum, he done sot de nigger men free, an tuck no notice
whatsomever of de nigger ‘oomans. Dars Sam [her husband] – Lor! how dat
nigger done got de big head – a votin’ an a votin’. Dis chile don’t see no sense in
dat ar way, no how. It aint far, Lor! Ole master in Secesh times, would’nt done
no sich – Secesh Masters, specially de rale fust quality, allus ruther favored der
nigger ‘oomans ‘en nebber did low de nigger men to beat ‘em, and ‘buse ‘em ‘an
take away der money what dey worked for demselves, but dat Mas Lincum, --
Lor!¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *The Ku Klux Klan; or, the Carpet-bagger in New Orleans* (Memphis: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1877).

¹⁰⁸ Meriwether, *Recollections*, 187.

¹⁰⁹ Meriwether, *The Ku Klux Klan*, 18.

Here, Dinah contends that white masters were able to provide for black slave women better than their own recently freed husbands could. Through Dinah's voice, Meriwether romanticizes the benevolence of the institution of slavery and criticizes Reconstruction policies which placed black men in positions of authority which they were, in her estimation, incapable of responsibly commanding. Even though she is a black Southern woman, then, Dinah is also a guardian of the Lost Cause and supports the antebellum society.

In the middle of her fiction career, Meriwether left Memphis. Following the 1878 and 1879 Yellow Fever epidemics and son Avery's unexpected 1883 death, the Meriwethers resettled in St. Louis in 1883.¹¹⁰ Luckily, the couple was already somewhat familiar with their new home city – they had served as Memphis' only two delegates to the national convention of suffragists, which had convened in St. Louis in May of 1879.¹¹¹ In St. Louis, Meriwether continued her career as a women's rights activist, hosting meetings for the West End branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) after its formation in 1885. Like many other progressive reformers, Meriwether stressed the connection between alcohol and domestic abuse; her participation in the temperance movement was an extension of her women's rights activism. As part of her involvement in the W.C.T.U., Meriwether drafted a petition to Missouri Governor John S. Marmaduke, fighting on behalf of a black woman who was condemned to be hanged for murder. Sadie Hays, the accused, evidently committed murder while under the influence of alcohol. In this petition to Marmaduke, Meriwether describes Hays as “only an ignorant negro

¹¹⁰ Frank, “The Meriwethers”, 68-69. From her personal correspondence in the late 1870s, it appears that Elizabeth, Avery, and Rivers escaped to St. Louis during the 1879 Yellow Fever outbreak; Minor and Lee remained in Memphis. In a letter from Minor to Elizabeth on January 13, 1879, Minor teases, “A letter from Avery today says you sit in your room over the fire & mope with the blues, and do not go out enough. If you do not quit this, I shall blow up the whole business & bring you all back to Memphis & let you die of Yellow fever. What business have you getting blue? It is a mean, nasty, hateful Yankee color & you ought to be ashamed of it – though I know it is your Yankee blood cropping out.” See Box 1, folder 52 of the Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

¹¹¹ Prescott, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Memphis,” 89.

woman. We have no right to expect of her more wisdom in the use of this maddening poison than our legislators exhibit when they license its sale throughout the city and country.”¹¹²

Supportive of the racial hierarchy as always, Meriwether and her fellow temperance activists took it upon themselves to defend this innately inferior African American. Moreover, Meriwether argues that Hays would not only be “tried by a jury of her political and social superiors, and sentenced by a judge who is her sovereign by the accident of sex, but this very jury and judge, by their votes, licensed the sale of the poison which maddened Sadie Hays and made her a murderer.”¹¹³ This petition, then, belies both Meriwether’s support for the racial hierarchy and her exasperation at the politically powerless position of women. The West End W.C.T.U. successfully commuted Hays’ sentence.¹¹⁴

Another organization that Meriwether joined in St. Louis was the Southern Women’s Historical Society. In fact, Meriwether served as its president, stating in an interview with the *St. Louis Republic* that the object of the society

...is to keep the truth before the public, and correct the errors that are made with regard to the causes of the war. And another object of our society is to teach our children the truth regarding that series of battles. We don’t want to have them taught in the schools that their parents and grandparents were rebels. We want them to understand the situation as we understand it, and as it really was.¹¹⁵

In short, this society of ladies worked to guard and transmit the Lost Cause to the next generation. The society came into the national spotlight in 1894, after it avidly endorsed Confederate private-turned-reverend Robert C. Cave’s dedication speech at the Richmond

¹¹² Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, “West End W.C.T.U.,” clipping from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether Scrapbook, box 2, folder 4, Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Casey, “Life of Contradictions,” 20. For more on Meriwether’s involvement in the temperance movement, see Elaine Frantz Parson, *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 152-6.

¹¹⁵ *Confederate Veteran* 2, no. 7 (July, 1984): 217.

Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in the Virginia capital. Cave violated the unspoken rule that Civil War monument dedications around the turn of the twentieth century should celebrate national reconciliation; instead, Cave delivered a pro-Confederate speech which many Northern newspapers touted as inflammatory and highly offensive. Specifically, to his audience of ex-Confederates, Cave proclaimed that the Southern "cause was just; that the men who took up arms in [the South's] defense were patriots."¹¹⁶ Cave, then, used the same language that Meriwether did throughout the wartime articles and in the *Tablet* – by intentionally using the word "patriots," Cave also aligned the Confederates with the original American revolutionaries. Echoing Hester Stanhope's narrative voice, Cave insisted that although the South lost the war, "brute force cannot settle questions of right and wrong." The power of "Might", then, may have settled the issue of war, but it did not settle the Constitutional or moral questions of the crisis.¹¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, given Meriwether's and Cave's shared views, Meriwether and her organization jumped to Cave's defense after the unfavorable Northern reaction to his oration, releasing a resolution of thanks to Cave and of support for Confederate righteousness in the Civil War. In this resolution, the Southern Women's Historical Society enumerated an eight-point justification of the Confederate cause:

1. That wars of conquest are per se wrong.
2. That wars of defense are always right.
3. That from the first to the last day of the war the North fought a war of conquest.
4. That from the first to the last day of the war the South fought a war of defense.
5. That the South from the first was eager for peace – prayed for peace.
6. That the North's answer to her prayer was the arming of 2,772,408 men to hurl on the South, to kill, desolate and conquer.

¹¹⁶ R.A. Brock, ed., *Southern Historical Society Papers* 22 (Richmond: Southern Historical Society, 1894): 336-80.

¹¹⁷ For further discussion of Cave's speech, its reception, and similar incidents during an era of arguably shallow sentiments of national reconciliation, see Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 186-96.

7. That at no time did the South have half (if she had one-third) as many men to meet these merciless invaders.
8. That in its four years' efforts to conquer the South, the North used the enormous sum of \$2,714,000,000.¹¹⁸

These points elucidate common tenets of the Lost Cause; namely, that the South was right because she merely defended her land and that the North deployed her superior numbers and resources in order to brutally suppress the Southern patriots. Like Cave's speech, Meriwether's defense elicited negative responses from the Northern press. One newspaper published an article entitled "Silly St. Louis Ex-Rebel Dames," which scathingly disparaged Meriwether's association in the wake of this Richmond memorial controversy. This article begins,

A lot of ex-rebel dames in St. Louis, known in the aggregate as the "Southern Woman's Historical Society," have declared over their tea caddies in favor of Cave, the sensational preacher of that city who recently made an egregiously silly spectacle of himself at the Richmond Confederate monument unveiling. These simple old grandmothers, with an assurance which would be ridiculous were it not for the conventional reverence one must have for age, have deliberately come forward and stated in a manifesto to the world just what the war was and what the respective sides were fighting for. It is a singular document even for old women or for old Southern women. It knocks logic into a cocked hat and tears facts to tatters, while their womanly emotions rampage round in a very riot of anarchy. It is what might have been expected of old women in St. Louis who are never more than half awake...Having broken their own silence with a characteristic outburst of garrulity, the old ladies further promulgated the following declaration and then went off to sleep again after adjusting their caps and frills...¹¹⁹

Portraying Meriwether and her fellow society ladies as antiquated and removed from the realities of the present day, the author of this article implies that, by the late nineteenth century, most Americans, including Southerners, had come to terms with the Confederate defeat. But the

¹¹⁸ "Southern Women Speak Out: Policies of Northern People Bitterly Condemned," clipping from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether Scrapbook, box 2, folder 5, UMV, UM.

¹¹⁹ "Silly St. Louis Ex-Rebel Dames," clipping from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether Scrapbook, box 2, folder 5, UMV, UM.

above passage is also significant because its author admits that the association's resolution was extraordinary "even for old women or for old Southern women," suggesting that old women – and especially old Southern women – were best suited for the compulsive preservation of the past. This was, of course, a role Meriwether had proudly assigned herself.

Next to an article in her scrapbook about the negative Northern reception of Cave's speech, Meriwether explains to her descendants that "The great war Yanks made over Dr Cave's speech & over my resolutions about it, were the real cause which set me at work on my book 'Facts & Falsehoods a book of which I am proud, & which I believe will live long after I am in the grave.'" Published in 1904 under the pseudonym George Edmonds, *Facts and Falsehoods Concerning the War on the South, 1861-1865* was Meriwether's only major work of nonfiction beside her memoir. True to her position as guardian of Confederate memory, Meriwether aimed the textbook at Southern schoolchildren and "future historians of the South," presenting her interpretations of the Civil War and of Abraham Lincoln's character and presidency.¹²⁰ It concisely fleshes out the tenets of the Lost Cause which Meriwether accepted and vigorously worked to disseminate.

Repeating the same themes that she had been preaching since at least 1862, Meriwether fiercely argues that the South fought for the democratic legacy of the American legacy and that young Southerners must learn this Lost Cause version of events. In the first part of the book, Meriwether attacks the character of Lincoln, contending that the Republican Party decided to apotheosize him after his death so that they could claim that they had followed a noble leader in their fight for a noble cause. In reality, according to Meriwether, a few imperialists in the

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether [pseud.: George Edmonds], "To the People of the South," in *Facts and Falsehoods Concerning the War on the South, 1861-1865* (Memphis: A.R. Taylor & Co., 1904).

Republican Party beguiled Lincoln, inducing him to endorse the “imperial idea that secession is a monstrous political crime, to punish which war was inaugurated and the whole Southland drenched in blood.”¹²¹ Much later in the book, Meriwether clarifies her stance on the imperialistic nature of the North in contrast to the democratic nature of the South, writing,

The seven years’ war which severed the seceded Colonies from British rule was an open, undisguised fight between Monarchy and Democracy. The four years’ war between the Southern and Northern States was a fight between the same old enemies, Monarchy and Democracy, though the astute Republican party, while heart and soul Imperialistic, concealed and covered up that principle under loud declarations of Freedom and blatant professions of humanitarianism.¹²²

In 1904, then, nearly forty years after Appomattox, Meriwether maintained her defining Lost Cause argument: the South, defender of democracy, was the true heir to fundamental American beliefs about government. The North, not the South, had changed – had morphed into an un-American, imperialistic, monarchial union, which repudiated the heritage of the Founding Fathers by attacking honorable Southerners.

In fact, as Meriwether argues, the North had recognized the Constitutional right for a state to secede from the Union up until Fort Sumter. Citing the Hartford Convention of 1814-1815, during which New England Federalists convened to discuss the possibility of the secession of certain New England states, Meriwether writes, “these Federalists, as was their offspring, the Republican party, were strong States’ rights advocates up to the hour the war began at Fort Sumter. Then they made a sudden summersault, and declared States’ rights and secession unpardonable crimes resulting from leprosy of the mind as foul as leprosy of the body.”¹²³ In a subsequent passage, Meriwether describes the Republicans as “these old disunionists under their

¹²¹ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether [pseud.: George Edmonds], *Facts and Falsehoods Concerning the War on the South, 1861-1865* (Memphis: A.R. Taylor & Co., 1904), 6.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

new name took up the fight on the three objects of New England's hate – Democracy, the Union and the South – exactly where the Federals had ceased their open fight in 1815.”¹²⁴ Briefly, the North – not the South – had fatally altered its democratic philosophy, resulting in a terrible, bloody war.

In the final chapter of this book, Meriwether offers another explanation for Northern behavior. Out of its intense hatred of the South, the North “sprung an insanity of love” for African-Americans. By enfranchising black men and even, as Meriwether implicates, by promoting miscegenation, the North had violated the American racial hierarchy. Even more importantly, nature and God have sanctioned this hierarchy. As Meriwether explains,

It is known to all that the Creator has implanted in the very atoms of the human being, as well as in the being of animals, certain instincts for the preservation of life and the perpetuity of the race. Among these instincts is that of kinship. Our affections first go out to our parents, our children, our relatives. Next they go out to the people of our own country, our own color and blood. The white race loves white people more than it does the yellow, the red, or the black... This is the law of kinship. Any reverse of this law is perversion – perversion is a species of insanity.¹²⁵

Just as the North had perverted and rejected democracy, the North also perverted and accepted the black man as the white man's equal. In both respects, Meriwether posits, the South had not changed and remained true to fundamental American convictions.

During her ninety-second year, Meriwether embarked on her final literary endeavor, recording her memories for her sole surviving son Lee and her grandchildren. Soon after completing this project, Meriwether passed away in her St. Louis residence on November 4,

¹²⁴ Ibid., 132.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 265-6.

1916.¹²⁶ In an obituary article announcing her funeral arrangements, a local newspaper noted, “For more than 60 years Mrs. Meriwether contributed steadily to the leading newspapers and periodicals of the United States. She devoted her literary activities almost exclusively to the portrayal of old Southern life that is passing away, and her books are considered important additions to this field of literature.”¹²⁷ Upon her death, evidently, Meriwether had rightfully earned her reputation as guardian of Confederate memory. Forty years later, Lee Meriwether released his mother’s memoir, *Recollections of 92 Years, 1824-1916*, to the Tennessee Historical Commission for publication.¹²⁸

Elizabeth Avery Meriwether lived a long, active life. A prominent figure in Progressive Era Memphis and St. Louis, Meriwether identified as a Southern woman, dedicated to the celebration of the Confederate past and the Lost Cause. Ironically, this Confederate legacy and sectional pride was quintessentially American. According to Meriwether’s version of the Lost Cause, the South seceded from the United States in order to preserve the fundamental convictions of the nation, including the democratic principles of the founding generation and the natural racial hierarchy. As an ex-Confederate, culturally Southern woman, then, Meriwether identified as a true American. Accordingly, in an effort to instill sectional – and therefore American – pride in future generations of Southerners, Meriwether wrote prolifically in defense of the Confederate war effort and of her region’s civilization. Meriwether was merely one voice – albeit a loud one – in the chorus of white Southern women who celebrated the Lost Cause in the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries.

¹²⁶ Frank, “The Meriwethers,” 83.

¹²⁷ “Mrs. Minor Meriwether’s Funeral To Be To-Day,” clipping from “Miscellaneous clippings” folder, box 1, folder 65, Meriwether Family Papers, MVC, UM.

¹²⁸ Berkeley, “An Advocate for Her Sex,” 406.

Even today, echoes of the Lost Cause still resonate throughout the South and the entire nation. For instance, Americans still debate the significance of the Confederate battle flag. Opponents of the flag argue that it represents “segregation, white supremacy, and racism,”¹²⁹ while its supporters claim it honors the heritage of the American South. Whether the flag represents white Southern heritage or racial hatred, South Carolina recently removed the Confederate flag from statehouse grounds near her Capitol building, marking the end of a contested fifty-four year display and attesting to the divisions that still lace our memories of the Civil War. But the very fact that this debate over the meaning of Confederate symbols still thrives one hundred and fifty years after the political death of the Confederacy testifies to the success of white Southern women like Meriwether in propagating their versions of antebellum Southern society and the Civil War. Unmistakably, white Southern men lost the battle of arms when they surrendered at Appomattox, but if Americans are still debating the meaning of Confederate symbols, Meriwether and her female comrades arguably won the battle of memory.

¹²⁹ Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York City, New York: Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing, 2007), 353.