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Documenting Women's Civil War Experiences in the Ohio Valley at the Filson

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Documenting Women's Civil War Experiences in the Ohio Valley at The Filson

The last issue of *Ohio Valley History* (summer 2013) offered a survey of a few of The Filson collections that highlight the lives of women and reveal their influence in the history of the region. This issue turns to collections that document women in the narrower scope of the Civil War. That bloody conflict continues to fascinate Americans, and the war dramatically affected the lives of women, who offered their insights and documented their experiences in the war for themselves and others. Women suffered through tragedies and exulted in triumphs along with men, often leaving a record from which future generations can learn about this momentous historical era.

Some of these records, such as the Cora Owens Hume diaries, are quite personal and provide unusual insight into the thoughts of a woman loyal to the Confederacy. Unmarried during the war, Owens discussed school, social events, and major gossip or rumors about wartime events and various governmental decisions. Describing life in Louisville during the war, Owens wrote about passing a long line of soldiers: "We met three companies of cavalry and 30 army wagons on our way to school, and three regiments passed after we got there, and all of their wagons." Owens feared these Union soldiers, adding,



Cora Owens Hume (b. 1848).
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Woman (Mary Belle Tucker) and her servant, likely a slave.

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Martha Buford Jones (1829-1866).
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“I was so afraid that they would stop here [at home] and give them trouble.” Owens’s anxiety about the presence of Union soldiers was so great she would not ride out alone for fear of meeting up with a soldier. In contrast, Owens wrote in glowing terms of her joy in Confederate victories throughout the war, and refused to accept as true newspaper reports of southern defeats. In the spring of 1863 she believed the Confederacy would take Louisville, writing, “Glorious, glorious, glorious, if we can whip the Yankees right good this time, I believe that our men will be here by the middle of June.” She became excited at the news that John Hunt Morgan had escaped from an Ohio jail, exclaiming, “Hurrah Hurrah Hurrah! I feel like I want to be somewhere that I can scream as loud as I can.

I think I will get into the cellar and then no Yankee can hear me. John Morgan and 6 of his men have escaped from prison. It would seem that my prayers have been answered!” Although she later attended school in Maryland and eventually traveled to Canada, Owens remained faithful to the Confederate cause.¹

Owens’s journal also offers a rare glimpse into the lives of the enslaved African American women in her household, and she noted several significant changes in her relationship with them as the war progressed. In much of her diary, Owens commented on the family’s slaves only when they were sick because it resulted in more work for her. Near the end of the war, two slaves, Ann and Fannie Owens, ran away, and the two oldest and most trusted slaves, Lettie and Minor Hawkins, attended Unionist meetings and began to talk of “emancipation” and “rights.” Cora Owens wrote in 1865 that “Many of the slaves think that they are going to heaven on the 4th of July, as that is the day the Lincolnites say they must demand wages for future labor.” Lettie and Minor Hawkins left the Owens’s service after Cora’s mother ordered them out. Cora’s journal indicates that her mother could not cope with the fact that former slaves had become her legal equals, and she would not pay them wages.²

While she did not share Owens’s enthusiasm for military matters, Amelia Bourne also kept a diary while attending Woodford Female Academy in Versailles, Kentucky, from 1862 to 1867. Bourne wrote about school matters, events, her thoughts, illnesses, the Civil War, and the weather. Later entries include recipes, addresses of correspondents, numerous poems and verses, and the occupants of bedrooms at her school. Overall, Bourne’s diary offers a rich account of the life of a young woman away at school, and somewhat on the fringe of the Civil War. Regardless of their affiliation or level of enthusiasm, women often had to tread carefully in the highly



Martha Buford Jones and child, possibly her daughter Lizzie.

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charged political climate of the Civil War. While attending a class on how to make bandages for Union soldiers held by the local “loyal ladies” group, Lucy Ann Tucker received an anonymous letter accusing her of spying for the Confederacy. In a subsequent letter to the instructor of the course, Dr. Flint, Tucker stated that she could no longer attend class meetings. Tucker noted that though she remained “loyal to her state,” she had been advised “to refrain from giving even the slightest cause of offence.”³ Women played many roles in the Civil War, but they often wisely chose to avoid political conflict.

In contrast, Martha Buford Jones, wife of Confederate Major Willis Field Jones, supported the Confederate cause much more actively. Jones provided bandages and clothing to Confederate prisoners of war, and even housed a soldier delirious with typhoid fever. The Jones Family Papers discuss activities on their Edgewood Farm near Versailles, Kentucky, family news, friends, the southern cause in the Civil War, Major Jones’s life in the Confederate Army, and the

distressing home situation caused by his absence. In her diaries dating from 1860 to 1864, Martha Jones recorded the weather, the health of family and friends, family and social life, farm operations, the treatment of slaves, horse racing, the Civil War, and her separation from her husband.⁴

Sometimes women found themselves in the middle of battles. Rebecca Ewing and her fiancé, Henry Watterson, corresponded throughout the war, and in one letter Ewing offered a harrowing description of what was likely the Battle of Chattanooga:

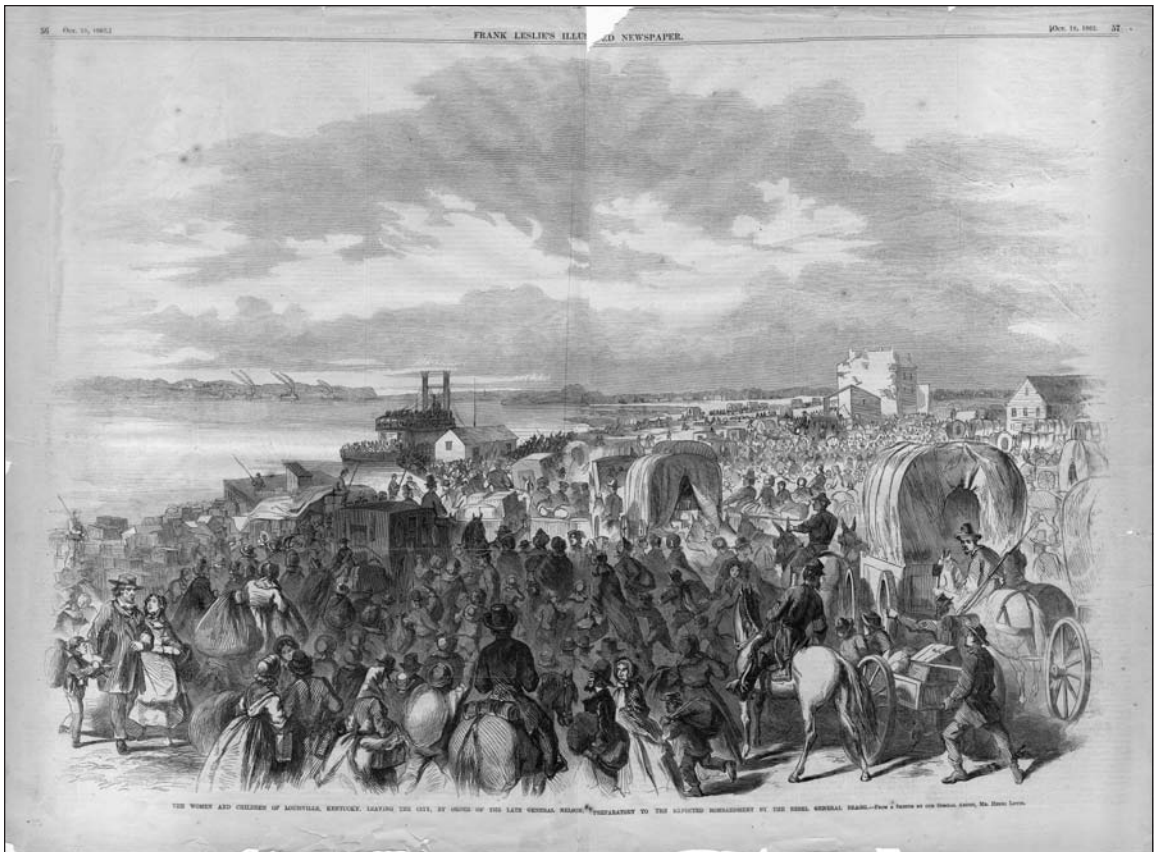
After passing the morning in the cellar, from which position we could hear distinctly the explosions of the shells around us, and the crackling, hissing noise of the burning houses in the neighborhood, we left our place of retreat and went up into the cross-hall where we lay with fifty women + children on the floor until the firing of the pickets ceased. The balls came so thick and fast against the house that it sounded like hail striking against glass. Shall I ever in this world forget my feelings, when night came on. Could I only have been in your arms and breathed out my life before the morn, which we fully believed would be heralded by a renewal of the agonizing boom of cannon.⁵

Ewing and Watterson continued to correspond through the war, although most of Ewing's letters did not describe situations so fraught with peril.

Women who did not become directly involved in battle often suffered the heartbreak of losing loved ones. In response, women offered consolation to one another, as did Susan Preston Grigsby's aunt after Grigsby lost two of her children:

God in his mysterious providence has seen fit to afflict you most severely in robbing you of your two sweet little children, or rather, in taking them to Heaven and to himself, which he had a right to do, as he had only lent them to you. I hope by this time dear Alfred and little Ashley are out of danger. It is a hard trial for you to bear my dear Susan, but in your bereavement don't "charge God foolishly" but remember that the "Judge of all the Earth must do right" whatever we may think, and I know how hard it would be to bear such a bereavement even with the support and acquaintance of your husband, but O how hard to bear it all alone.⁶

This tragic letter forms part of the Grigsby Family Papers, which contain numerous pre-Civil War letters between the women of the family detailing plantation life, and often mentioning slaves and their activities. The collection also contains considerable correspondence between Susan Grigsby (the bereaved mother above) and her husband, John Warren Grigsby, as well as other friends and relatives.



Women and children fleeing the city of Louisville, Kentucky, in expectation of a bombardment by Confederate General Braxton Bragg, 1862.

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All of these collections tell the story of the great changes brought to women's lives by the Civil War. For researchers who wish to examine the lives of women over a longer time period to understand how the Civil War might have changed their lives, The Filson holds the Johnston Family Papers, which contain correspondence between Rosa Duncan Johnston and her husband, William Preston Johnston, a Confederate soldier and educator. In their letters, the couple discussed wartime conditions and William's imprisonment and exile. The Bullitt-Chenoweth Family Papers also offer a picture of women's wartime experiences and of life at the family estate of Oxmoor during the occupancy of William C. Bullitt, his wife Mildred Ann Fry Bullitt, and their children. The Clark-Strater-Watson Family Papers include correspondence between the Kentucky and Canadian branches of the Clark family that discuss Canadian life, the Fenian movement, a Canadian opinion of abolition and slavery, possible union with the United States, the Civil War, and political and economic conditions in both countries. The bulk of the collection consists of correspondence between Jessie Clark Strater Watson, her husbands, William Strater and Alexander M. Watson, and her son, Edward Strater. These letters chronicle the activities, lives, and personal relationships of an affluent, socially active Louisville family. Finally, the Winston-Jones

Family Papers document the Winston family, who came to Kentucky between 1820 and 1840, and the Jones family, who came to Union County, Kentucky, between 1830 and 1840. These papers include correspondence from members of both families between 1822 and 1889, and concern family matters, family relationships and problems, business and professional ventures of various family members, and the families' involvement in the Gold Rush and Civil War. While these collections do not focus solely on the Civil War, they offer researchers the opportunity to compare the activities of these women during the conflict and peacetime.

The Civil War was a pivotal event in the history of the United States, dramatically altering the lives of many individuals. This essay offers a brief glimpse of some of the collections The Filson holds that document how women's lives changed, and how they altered the world around them. From Cora Owens's fiery passion for the Confederacy to Susan Grigsby's sorrow over the loss of her children, these collections reveal the wide range of women's Civil War experiences. The Filson works to collect and preserve these stories, and makes these records available to researchers.

Eric Willey
Associate Curator

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- 1 Cora Owens Hume Journal, vol. 1:8, 12, 42, 134, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville (hereafter FHS).
 - 2 Owens Hume Journal, vol. 2:36, 42, 135-36, 140, FHS.
 - 3 Amelia Bourne Diary; Anonymous to Lucy Ann Tucker, and Lucy Ann Tucker to Dr. Flint, both Sept. 20, 1862, Tucker Family Papers, all in FHS.
 - 4 Jones Family Papers, FHS.
 - 5 Rebecca Ewing to Henry Watterson, Oct. 30, 1863, Henry Watterson Papers, FHS.
 - 6 Susan Hart Fishback to Susan Grigsby, Oct. 2, 1862, Grigsby Family Papers, FHS.