


**CIVIL WAR AMERICA**

Gary W. Gallagher, editor



# **The Divided Family in Civil War America**

*Amy Murrell Taylor*

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS | CHAPEL HILL

© 2005 The University of North Carolina Press  
All rights reserved

Designed by April Leidig-Higgins  
Set in Bulmer by Coppeline Book Services, Inc.  
Manufactured in the United States of America

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Taylor, Amy Murrell.

The divided family in Civil War America / Amy Murrell Taylor.

p. cm. — (Civil War America)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8078-2669-2 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. United States — History — Civil War, 1861-1865 — Social aspects. 2. Family — United States — History — 19th century. 3. United States — Social conditions — To 1865.

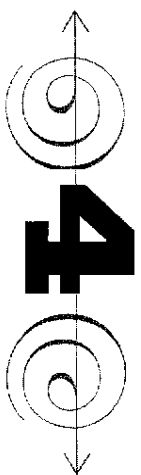
I. Title. II. Series.

EA68.G.R38 2005 973.7'1—dc22 2005010248

A portion of this work appeared earlier, in somewhat different form, as "Union Father, Rebel Son: Families and the Question of Civil War Loyalty," in *The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War*, ed. Joan Cashin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), and is reproduced here with permission.

09 08 07 06 05 5 4 3 2 1

**For my family**



## Border Crossing and the Treason of Family Ties

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD Martha Clay Davenport of Charlestown, Virginia, discovered by 1862 that having a divided family carried certain risks. A secessionist married to a Confederate soldier, Davenport did not like but accepted her Kentucky family's Union loyalties and continued to write regularly to the Clays, just as she had done before the war. Yet by March 1862 she came to realize that not everyone around her viewed her correspondence as innocently as she did, and so she decided to send shorter, less frequent letters in the future. "I am afraid to send a letter," Martha explained to her stepmother, "as I know it will be opened and perhaps myself arrested for treason."<sup>21</sup>

Davenport's fears were not misplaced, as government and military leaders on both sides came to view divided families with suspicion. Many of these families were divided by geography as well as by loyalty, living on opposite sides of the Union-Confederate border. That border, and the area surrounding it, witnessed some of the largest and bloodiest battles of the war, as both sides fought to protect their geographic boundaries and to resist incursions from the other side. The border was challenged, defended, and constantly under siege. Adding to the military hurdles were those geographically divided family members, like Davenport's, who tried to cross the lines by traveling or sending letters to their kin. In the eyes of Union and Confederate officials, such border crossing intruded on military operations and posed a significant problem—among other things, as a potential source of treason—and had to be stopped.

Military restrictions on the passage of people and information from one side to the other affected divided families from the beginning of the war. Neither government cut off contact entirely and selectively permitted some communication across the lines. Families had to obtain permission to travel or send

letters, and their requests were often denied. It became extremely difficult to mail letters or to visit relatives living in the opposing section, and, for many families, these obstacles were intolerable. They had, after all, relied heavily on letters and personal visits to share their opinions and feelings about the war and ultimately reinforce the ties that bound them as a family; personal communication, then, was crucial to the resolution of intrafamily conflicts. The absence of contact would only foster estrangement—and potentially sever their family ties for good. Few were willing to accept such an outcome, and they set out to challenge the travel and mail policies.

A vigorous debate ensued between geographically divided families and the Union and Confederate governments over the propriety of border crossing. The dispute centered on whether sending a letter or visiting a relative was inherently an act of treason—offering “aid and comfort” to the enemy—or whether such contact had no bearing on military concerns. The answer to this question depended on one’s view of family ties: were they private and personal? could they be separated from military affairs? This was a key issue, already considered within families, that now had serious implications for public policy. Families argued for the private—and thus, innocent—nature of their communications, whereas government officials, skeptical of claims that loyalty to a nation would not be compromised by domestic ties to the opposing side, increasingly guarded against the possibility that divided families might conspire to commit treason. Intersectional travel and mail thus put the interests of the nation against the interests of families. And divided families, despite their best efforts to keep their affairs private and contained, became a public problem.

### *Travel*

Travel always had been important in maintaining relationships among families separated by geography; with the insecurity of wartime, divided relatives grew desperate to see one another. Rumors and newspaper reports on the destruction of battle-plagued areas made people worry about the well-being of their kin. “We tremble for your safety and wish you were safely here amongst your friends with your family,” Samuel Halsey wrote in 1861, urging his son Joseph in northern Virginia to move his family north. “Here you would be safe from danger.”<sup>2</sup> Families implored their kin to leave their homes and cross the lines, as if there was relief in being able to see or personally guarantee the safety of a relative. When a brother and sister in Washington, D.C., lost both

parents to the war in 1862, Virginia relatives encouraged the siblings to visit them. The sister, in considering the offer, admitted to her brother that “every day of my life I see more closely the value of those close blood ties.”<sup>3</sup> There were other reasons for family members to travel, too. Some men and women desired to leave a boarding school, or an asylum, and return to family in the other section. In some cases health and medical care prompted a mother or father to go live with an adult child on the other side, but more commonly the need for financial support and subsistence drew family members across the lines.<sup>4</sup>

Permission to make these trips came in the form of a passport, or “pass,” issued by military authorities in the traveler’s home section. Beginning in 1861, according to similar Union and Confederate regulations, any individual desiring to cross the lines had to file a formal petition with either a provost marshal, the secretary of war, or initially in the Union, the secretary of state. The petition outlined in detail where the individual planned to travel, when, and for what reason. Officials then reviewed the application and, if it was acceptable, issued a slip of paper that the traveler would show to railroad conductors or military pickets along his or her route. The purpose of the pass system was to preclude “the passage of dangerous or disaffected persons,” as Confederate secretary of war James Seddon put it, or, more specifically, to prevent spying and smuggling. It also was meant to bolster the manpower of each army by guarding against desertion and the departure of able-bodied men evading conscription.<sup>5</sup> But at times petitioners felt that the system infringed on their freedom to travel, and to some white Southerners it was an insulting extension of travel restrictions ordinarily imposed only on African Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Those who sought to travel across the border despite these obstacles did not know how officials determined who was “dangerous,” and thus ineligible for a pass, and who was not. Not only did both the Union and Confederate governments fail to issue any specific guidelines for assessing the loyalty of petitioners, but also both left the decision largely up to the discretion of individual officials. The result was a haphazard and largely inefficient system, in which some officials required that petitioners take oaths of allegiance to prove their loyalty, whereas others did not; still others, recalled a frustrated Confederate War Department clerk, issued passes to anyone willing to pay the right price. Petitioners thus were left to guess about how to frame their application—and their case for loyalty—effectively.<sup>7</sup>

Petitions to the Union government, more so than to the Confederacy, have

survived and reveal what pass applicants believed the authorities wanted to hear.<sup>8</sup> In various ways they made cases for their patriotism and thus their intention never to use the pass to betray the Union. Some applicants made blanket statements such as “I am now and always have been devoted to the Union,” but typically they also provided letters from a prominent person or a known Unionist who vouched for their loyalty.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes this person was a newspaper editor or a politician—a mayor, city councilman, or congressman—or someone in a profession known for its integrity, such as a lawyer or a clergyman.<sup>10</sup> Others emphasized their kinship with a known patriot. In one of the more striking examples, a Baltimorean stated: “I am the son of the late Surgeon Henry Lee Heiskell (USA) also a grandson of J. Monroe, Ex-President of the United States. My God father Genl Winfield Scott will vouch for me.” A female applicant noted that “I am the widow of Col. Foulle who served in the United States Army, through the War of 1812,” without attesting to her own loyalty.<sup>11</sup> Both of these petitions implied that the applicant was loyal by association, that an ancestor or family member’s loyalty was enough to establish his or her own allegiance. Yet there was an inherent weakness in this argument, as revealed in the petition of a Washington, D.C., man writing on behalf of his mother, who wanted to travel South to be with her husband in Richmond, Virginia. To establish his mother’s loyalty, the man pointed out that her son-in-law was a soldier in the U.S. Marine Corps and had “shed his blood on the field of Manassas” for the Union. “Her relationship to this meritorious officer,” the man wrote, “will, I trust, plead in her behalf.” But what about her relationship to her husband in Virginia?<sup>12</sup>

Here was the basic problem that divided families faced when applying for a travel pass. How should applicants portray their relationship to Confederate family members while trying to convince officials of their indisputable loyalty to the Union? Most applicants did not hide the fact that visiting their Confederate families was the primary reason for their travel. Three-quarters of them explained that they desired either to care for a sick relative, provide companionship, or perform general family “maintenance,” as one Baltimore man put it.<sup>13</sup> In the applicants’ minds, it might not have been difficult to view this duty to family as disconnected from their loyalty to a nation. Many families had sought to erect a border between private and public affairs within the confines of their households or within their intimate conversations. How to make such a separation convincing to government officials who were looking for any evidence of disloyalty, however, was another question. How could they persuade the officials that crossing the geographic border between the

Union and the Confederacy was not a simultaneous crossing of the boundary between domestic and military spheres?

Some applicants tackled this problem by reminding officials of popular domestic ideals. They argued that travel for family reasons was by its very nature insulated from the war. “The object of my visit is *purely* of a *private nature*,” explained William Bayne of Baltimore in a typical petition. Thus, Union officials could be assured that “I will not *aid* or *abet* the enemy in *any way*.” Bayne was applying for a pass to Virginia to search for his widowed sister-in-law, who had not been heard from in almost a year. Another man asserted that his prospective trip related solely to family “duty” and therefore was “acquainted by no motives detrimental to the public good.”<sup>14</sup> All of these petitioners were asking officials to stand by the idealized separation between public and private spheres. A family visit should be seen as inherently apolitical and would have no influence on the war around it.

The friend of another applicant, however, suggested why it might be difficult to make this distinction during a time of civil war. In 1863 George W. Cullum refused to support the request of Mary Wagner Faulkner, of Martinsburg, West Virginia, to visit her children in Virginia. According to Cullum, no one—not even his good friend Mrs. Faulkner—should be allowed to visit relatives on the enemy side. “It is hard for a mother to be separated from her children,” he acknowledged, “but if families divide and a part espouse the side of rebellion, it is hardly to be expected that the government will give aid and comfort to those who have forgotten their obligations to that government.” Cullum’s words, although polite on the surface, made a damning statement. He suggested that by visiting her children, Faulkner would provide “aid and comfort,” a phrase echoing the Constitution’s definition of disloyalty, and she would “help those who had forgotten their obligations,” a kind euphemism for traitors. In Cullum’s view, then, Faulkner’s proposed family trip would be inherently an act of treason. He asked his friend to think with her “head” and not with her “heart,” and to remember the “injury” that could be caused by “free intercourse with those in arms against us.” This was a sacrifice she must make in wartime, Cullum argued, conceding that “War is a harsh thing.”<sup>15</sup>

Most pass applicants naturally claimed that they could be trusted to act loyally while visiting their Confederate families. Many did so by focusing on the related question of character. In one case, three townsmen writing on behalf of a woman trying to go to Alabama could “vouch for her integrity.”<sup>16</sup> Another man declared that the applicant—a relative—was of “the highest respectability” and “may be implicitly confided in” not to endanger the Union.<sup>17</sup>

These statements implied that a principled individual could be trusted to *act* faithfully, even if, as officials would be inclined to suspect, he or she did not *think* in ways that were loyal to the Union. To some extent this was a smart strategy, as most civilian arrests in the Union were triggered by disloyal acts rather than by disloyal beliefs alone.<sup>18</sup> But given that the applicants for passes made these promises before they traveled, before they had the opportunity to act disloyally, such avowals likely carried little weight with government officials. Other prospective travelers tried to make a convincing case by turning it into a moral issue. A New Yorker writing on behalf of his cousin stated that her “religious principles” were too strong to permit her to divulge any information that would betray the Union.<sup>19</sup>

Numerous women apparently believed that being female would help them make the case for integrity. Eighty percent of the applications to Union authorities were from women, many of whom argued that their gender gave them a unique claim to being trustworthy: “I pledge as a lady to take nothing nor carry anything whatever with me,” wrote a Baltimore woman seeking a pass to see her husband in Virginia. Being a lady, or a “Lady” with a capital “L,” as one applicant made sure to emphasize, offered, in these writers’ view, a respectability that should be honored by Union officials. Some women grappled with the language to describe this unique female integrity: “My daughter & myself pledge our word & honor;” one woman attempting to visit her son began, “if it is a proper term to express the obligation of a female.” “Honor” was generally associated with men, but this woman argued that she could indeed promise to “carry no secret information.” Other individuals, particularly men writing on behalf of women, drew on other feminine stereotypes to justify a woman’s travel across the lines. One woman was described as “culturally ignorant” of the war and therefore incapable of betrayal; another was “too simple hearted to understand or communicate intelligence.” Female ignorance guaranteed that a woman would not participate in subversive activity, a notion reinforced by another woman with admitted Confederate loyalties. “I think inasmuch as ladies did not make this war,” this woman began her justification for a pass, “they are silly in the extreme to mix themselves up in it.” She vowed to abide by the idea that the public affairs of war were not a woman’s concern. (She even encouraged Secretary William H. Seward to “shoot up” those who assumed otherwise.)<sup>20</sup>

Yet professions of ladylike behavior or female ignorance cut against growing evidence that women were deeply involved in the conflict. Women did “mix themselves up” in the war’s intrigue, as historians Drew Gilpin Faust, Cath-

erine Clinton, and others have shown, to become some of the most successful spies and smugglers.<sup>21</sup> Newspapers across the divided nation reported cases of women smuggling goods and letters with the help of a pass, and some papers began to speculate that the pass system permitted women to slip through unnoticed. In early 1862 the *New York Tribune* reported that women’s applications for passes “quadrupled” just before a planned expedition by Union general Ambrose Burnside into Tennessee. Although female pass applicants were generally “well armed” with letters of endorsement from Union men, the *Tribune* acknowledged, “they are sure to present themselves in fullest force when the information they can carry will be most valuable to the rebels.”<sup>22</sup> Within days the *Tribune* announced that the Federal government had decided to stop issuing passes to women. The reason given was that “in nearly every instance” in which women received a pass, “letters and other documents have been concealed in their clothes.” Nothing in the Union records suggests that this change in policy actually occurred in 1862, although by 1864 General Henry Halleck informed a commander in the South that fewer passes were being issued because “we have a superabundance of female spies among us now.”<sup>23</sup>

Union officials were inclined to see the worst in almost every application that came before them and to doubt claims that a family visit was inherently innocent. Indeed, over ninety percent of the applications for which the Union government’s answer is clear were denied.<sup>24</sup> The standards governing why officials issued passes to some people and not to others are unclear, and it may be that there were no objective reasons for those decisions. In some cases having the right connections appears to have helped an applicant, but in others it did not. Sometimes it mattered whether the person would be traveling in the direction of a battle — and thus into danger — but, again, this was not always true.<sup>25</sup> Even disloyalty was not a clear-cut ground for rejection. It may not be surprising that Juliana Gardiner, of Staten Island, New York, was denied a pass in January 1862. Her application stated that she wanted to go to Virginia to visit her daughter, “who is in deep affliction and needs a mother’s attention & sympathy.” Her daughter was Julia Gardiner Tyler, the wife of former president John Tyler, who, the petition did not bother to state, had just died and left his wife a widow. But Julia Tyler was known in Washington, D.C., and Virginia circles for being an outspoken, even troublesome, secessionist. With this in mind, perhaps, the secretary of war wrote “Inexpedient” at the top of Juliana Gardiner’s application.<sup>26</sup> Yet in the same month Esther Tiffany, the sister of Baltimore’s Confederate-sympathizing mayor, George

W. Brown, apparently received a pass to visit her Southern family without much trouble.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Lincoln Case*

No doubt fueling the suspicion surrounding family members seeking passes was a widely publicized case involving President Abraham Lincoln and his family. In late 1863 and early 1864 Martha Todd White, a half sister of Mary Todd Lincoln and a loyal Confederate, visited Washington, D.C. Martha was fifteen years younger than Mary and, according to biographers, was not particularly close to the first lady. She had married a Southerner and during the war lived in Selma, Alabama, while her husband served in the Confederate navy. In late 1863 White traveled to Washington and then asked President Lincoln for a pass that would allow her to remain there for an extended period. It is unclear why White solicited help from the very man who commanded the forces opposing her husband's army (although bypassing the formal petitioning channels would certainly have been expedient). In her letter to Lincoln, she described her prolonged visit as a way to "recreat my health, to replenish my wardrobe, and to take for my own use articles not now obtained in the South." Her words seemed to be those of a war-worn woman who desired a temporary escape from the battle-scarred South. She was also careful to explain that only she would benefit from her stay, as it would rejuvenate "my" health and wardrobe and would result in items for "my own use." In other words, Martha White did not intend to use the visit to assist other Confederates. Lincoln approved the pass, and White remained in the North until at least February 1864.<sup>28</sup>

White's journey to Washington and her extended stay in Union territory excited little comment in the press. Her return trip to Alabama, however, sparked a publishing frenzy, starting with Confederate newspapers. On March 2, 1864, the *Daily Richmond Examiner* described White's trip home from Washington. In just a few sentences it noted that she had been allowed to bring back only one item from the North—a uniform that she intended to give to "a very dear friend of hers" who was fighting for the Confederacy. The uniform made it safely to the South and a few days later revealed itself to be worth more than originally thought. "All the buttons were found to be composed of gold coin," the *Examiner* reported, as a series of gold pieces had been set in the wooden buttons and "covered with Confederate cloth." Altogether the gold was said to be worth between thirty and forty thousand dollars. The paper

applauded White's smuggling caper as "a remarkable instance of woman's ingenuity."<sup>29</sup> This was indeed a remarkable story, although several aspects were questionable: How could White have been allowed to bring into the South what was obviously a Confederate uniform? Where did she get it, and where did she obtain the gold? The article did not answer these questions, nor did it reveal who had come upon this bit of information or who had made it available to the *Examiner*. Alarmed, Union newspapers from St. Louis to Chicago to New York picked up the story and reprinted it over the next two months.<sup>30</sup>

At first glance this account did not differ substantially from others published about the divided Todd family during the war. Newspaper editors were fascinated by the fact that the Union's first lady had three halfbrothers in the Confederate army and four half sisters who openly supported the Confederacy.<sup>31</sup> The Todds not only dramatized the nation at war—the "house divided,"<sup>32</sup> in the words of Abraham Lincoln himself—but also raised questions about the loyalties of the Union's first family. Did Abraham and Mary Lincoln harbor any secret, potentially subversive allegiances to Mary's Confederate relatives and thus to the Confederacy? The press, especially Northern papers, kept close tabs on the movements of the Todd family, documenting the military service of Mary's halfbrothers and brothers-in-law, as well as the travels of her stepmother and half sisters between their home state of Kentucky and states farther south.<sup>33</sup> The stories often carried hints of suspicion about what those traveling Todds might do, or what they might induce the Lincolns to do, and in the account of Martha White's gold smuggling many papers found confirmation for their fears. Whispers about the Lincolns' complicity in the incident—especially the president's—followed the story as it traveled from paper to paper and erupted into a full-blown scandal.

By the 1860s scandals involving national politicians and members of their family, particularly the women, were nothing new. Thomas Jefferson and Sal-lie Hemings, Alexander Hamilton and Maria Reynolds, Andrew Jackson and Rachel Donelson all found their intimate lives subjected to the scrutiny of journalists concerned with the private lives of their leaders.<sup>34</sup> But what was different about the Martha Todd White affair was that it did not involve sex or a woman's virtue. It involved politics—a woman's politics—and a woman's potential to induce a man to act against his political inclinations. Did this Southern woman influence the Union president to be her accomplice and thus to act disloyally? This question had a powerful impact in the spring of 1864, dramatizing for a wider audience the same issue—family loyalty versus

national loyalty—that other border-crossing families grappled with in their applications for passes. It also resonated with other press accounts of wives who induced their husbands to resign from military service.<sup>34</sup> The imagination of the Union press ran wild with this story, and for a brief time Martha Todd White became the most talked about Southern white woman in Northern newspapers.<sup>35</sup>

Each paper characterized White differently. To the *Daily Richmond Examiner* she was an ingenious patriot, but to Union editors, who agreed that her patriotism was strong, she was also a devious woman. One of the first Northern papers to publish her story was the *New York Tribune*, which, after several weeks of investigation, reluctantly concluded that “the chuckling of the Rebel press . . . was founded in truth.”<sup>36</sup> It is stated in best-informed circles, “the paper reported in March 1864, that White had indeed crossed the lines with ‘Rebel uniforms and buttons of gold’ and thus had outsmarted Union military officials. The *Tribune* called for an inquiry into the affair and titled its story, ‘Aid and Comfort for the Enemy;’ indirectly accusing the Lincoln administration of treason.<sup>36</sup> The next day Washington, D.C.’s *National Intelligencer*, also a pro-Union paper, placed blame squarely on Lincoln himself: after suggesting that the clothing she carried was a “rebel general’s” uniform, it pointed out that White “was sent through . . . by a special pass from the President.”<sup>37</sup> The pass was indeed “special” and perhaps indulgent on Lincoln’s part, given how difficult it had become for the average Union citizen to obtain one.

Was this favoritism toward Martha Todd White merely a gesture of family loyalty, with no further meaning attached? Lincoln may have thought so, but because it occurred during the stormy electoral season of 1864, members of the Northern press were inclined to be skeptical. *Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, an outspoken Republican (and abolitionist) critic of Lincoln, had long argued that the president was not aggressive enough in suppressing the rebellion and abolishing slavery. Now the Martha White story appeared to connect Lincoln to an act of subversion against the Union and, on a small scale, dramatized what Greeley had feared would result from Lincoln’s wartime policies—the Union’s collapse at the hands of a designing South. Publicizing this story, and thus casting aspersions on Lincoln’s loyalty, might open the door to a different Republican presidential candidate in 1864 (something Greeley had already been seeking behind the scenes). It may not have mattered to newspaper editors how solid the evidence was of White’s smuggling, for her action was consistent with other rumors and reports about Lincoln and

his wife’s family and friends in the South. Throughout the war Lincoln had been willing to bestow favors on Southerners with whom he was personally connected. He previously had issued passes to another Todd sister, Emile Todd Helm, as well as to his wife’s stepmother, Elizabeth Todd, for their own visits to Washington, D.C. Moreover, his published papers contain numerous orders to Union commanders to allow a friend to cross the lines or to retrieve furniture taken by Union soldiers—despite the government’s reluctance to grant such privileges to others.<sup>38</sup>

Martha White’s story thus touched a nerve in Northern electoral politics in 1864, and press depictions of her became proxies for Lincoln himself, consuming editors’ commentaries on the president’s politics.<sup>39</sup> White next emerged as the innocent victim of a Confederate prank in a story first printed on April 2. The *New York Herald*, a Democratic paper, stepped up to challenge the *Tribune* by publishing a letter from someone called “Veritas.” “The [*Tribune*] article does not contain one word of truth,” the appropriately named Veritas wrote, explaining that an investigation had turned up another Southern newspaper containing the exact same story—but one dated two weeks *before* White ever returned to Alabama. The entire story apparently was the clever invention of a Confederate journalist. Under the headline, “Mrs. Lincoln’s Sister,” the *Herald*’s story defused questions about smuggling and treason and returned White to the less politically charged position of Todd sister.<sup>40</sup> There may indeed have been “truth” to the *Herald*’s account, but this paper also had its own reasons for publishing the story. Although it was a Democratic paper, the editor, James Gordon Bennett, generally supported Lincoln during the war and defended him against attacks by mutual rivals such as Republican Horace Greeley. Bennett later endorsed Lincoln in the 1864 presidential race and received a diplomatic appointment in return. In the meantime, he cast Martha White as an innocent in the story, thereby vindicating the president from charges of disloyalty.<sup>41</sup>

The *Herald*’s explanation did not end the suspicion, however, as a much less innocent Martha Todd White reappeared a few days later. Journalists who were “peace Democrats” (or copperheads), Lincoln’s most vocal critics to the other extreme, published still more new details about White’s behavior. “The facts,” according to the *New York World*, “are even worse” than originally reported. Without question, White “was a rebel spy and sympathizer.” Not only did she carry a uniform through the lines, but also her trunks were full of “all kinds of contraband goods,” such as medicine, newspapers, and letters. Even worse, when General Benjamin Butler, the commander at Fortress



Monroe where White crossed the lines, asked to inspect her trunks, White showed in his face an order from President Lincoln exempting her from the customary inspections that accompanied passes and exclaimed, “I defy you to touch them.” The *World* found White’s impudence distasteful, but equally objectionable was the president’s role in “giving aid and comfort to the enemy.” It was bad enough to give White a pass, as reported before, but to take the additional step of exempting her from inspection was far worse. This made Lincoln more than a passive accomplice—he was now her devious partner, giving White outright permission to smuggle. The Union “is thus betrayed in the very White House,” the *World* concluded, calling for the president’s impeachment.<sup>42</sup>

Copperhead papers relished the opportunity to accuse the president of treason. These Democrats, with their calls for compromise during the war, often found themselves accused of disloyalty by Republicans. Now they turned the tables. But in the telling of this story, they also gave Martha White a great deal of influence over her brother-in-law, the president of the United States, which was more unusual for the time. Would any readers, beyond the most ardent Lincoln haters, really believe that a woman could persuade a male relative—the *president*, no less—to permit her to smuggle and thus to act in ways that countered his political inclinations? It was, as we have seen, a common expectation among mid-nineteenth-century Americans that women would follow the partisan loyalties of their male kin, who, in turn, were to represent their interests in the political arena.<sup>43</sup> But the *Daily Missouri Republican*, another Democratic paper (despite its name), responded, under the headline “Disloyal Relations,” that maybe it was time for readers to reconsider their assumptions about women and politics. Since it was customary to “judge a man disloyal because his father, son, brother or cousin may be a secessionist,” the paper wrote, “we don’t see why the rule . . . should not have a universal application.” In other words, a woman’s partisan loyalty was no different than a man’s: it was not necessarily weaker or more deferential but could, in fact, influence the men around her—in this case, a presidential brother-in-law.<sup>44</sup>

This view of Martha Todd White might have been believable to readers. There were plenty of other rumors circulating in the North, as seen in cases of divided marriages, about women luring the men in their families from one loyalty to another. Many Americans viewed women in divided families—not just wives, but mothers, sisters, and aunts, too—with suspicion: they might use their familial position to influence or undermine the loyalties of their men. So why not suspect Martha White of doing the same?<sup>45</sup> Another aspect

of the latest Martha White portrayal might also have resonated with readers: her unladylike and spiteful partisanship. White showed her pass in Benjamin Butler’s face and spoke rudely—a familiar scenario, especially for Butler, who had already had well-documented confrontations with the women of New Orleans. White embodied what historian Nina Silber has called “the northern myth of the rebel girl,” the belief in an “angry, defiant southern woman” that helped diminish sympathy for Southern women and encourage their treatment as legitimate targets of warfare.<sup>46</sup> White herself had offered additional reasons to be viewed as an ardent “rebel girl.” In 1863 Northern papers reported that she had presented a Confederate flag to a gunboat in Mobile, Alabama. Later the Washington, D.C., rumor mill contended that she had been obnoxious in expressing her rebel sentiments at a local hotel while visiting Washington.<sup>47</sup>

This image of an assertive, spiteful sister-in-law had serious ramifications for the president. His reputation had become intertwined with Martha White’s: as her portrait shifted from devoted patriot to unladylike and dangerous spy, so too did Lincoln’s deteriorate from ineffectiveness to outright treason. Newspaper editors equated the president’s private loyalty to his sister-in-law with public loyalty to the Confederacy, holding Lincoln and his wife’s family to the same standards as other border-crossing families. The administrator’s strict pass system did not distinguish between family and national loyalty or between private and public life, and neither did the newspapers when they wrote of White’s trip. But in Lincoln’s case, the overabundance of partisan bickering, not to mention outright fiction, surrounding the articles gave the president some room to extricate himself from the scandal. Naturally in an election year, as each account served the interests of different partisan groups, Lincoln felt compelled to respond. (He may have been encouraged by the fact that average citizens had begun asking him whether the accounts were true.)<sup>48</sup> Lincoln dispatched his secretary, John Nicolay, to investigate and rewrite the story.

The articles had granted Martha White a great deal of political agency, and that was the very point Nicolay set out to challenge. The president was “not conscious” of having given White any “extraordinary privileges,” Nicolay wrote in an initial letter of inquiry to Benjamin Butler, and thus he had not been influenced by her to facilitate any smuggling. But the secretary needed more evidence and turned his attention to White’s behavior. “Did she use the language alleged?” Nicolay asked, concerned with whether White had indeed acted as a defiant Confederate woman. Responding the next day, Butler re-

futed many changes in the articles. He pointed out, for example, that White's bags had in fact been inspected and that the only items found were "bridal presents," which he determined were "of no possible use to the Southern army." Throughout his letter to Nicolay, Butler referred to White as a "lady" and noted that her behavior was not "different from the usual courteous and ladylike deportment" he had observed by other women with passes. Martha White was not an assertive Confederate partisan, in Butler's view, but instead a perfectly deferential lady (meaning one who did not overtly challenge men's political loyalties).<sup>49</sup> This was just what Nicolay wanted to hear. He quickly drafted Butler's response as an editorial and sent it to Horace Greeley for publication in the *New York Tribune*. Frustrated by how his Democratic rivals had distorted his original report, Greeley printed Nicolay's editorial the next day under the headline, "The Story about Mrs. White."<sup>50</sup>

The president himself never publicly refuted the stories but, with Nicolay's help, guided the newspapers' gossip mechanisms to work in his favor. ("The latest *Tribune* version referred only vaguely to its source as the "highest authority.") Nicolay later told Butler that "the whole canard was too silly and trivial to merit an official contradiction," but that this clarification was certainly "due and proper."<sup>51</sup> Yet his statement belies how seriously the administration did take this story. Lincoln had to depoliticize Martha Todd White, to recast her as an innocent lady rather than a strong Confederate partisan, to protect his own reputation. The new version of the story suggested that the president and his sister-in-law could have a personal, familial relationship without any impact on his political loyalties—an argument that was similar to the one made by families seeking travel passes. Lincoln's, though, was more successful: the whispers and stories about Martha White stopped with the *Tribune* editorial.<sup>52</sup>

So what really happened during Martha White's trip? Her original letter to Lincoln asking for a pass claims that she needed time in the North for rejuvenation and shopping, an assertion substantiated by a friend in a letter to Lincoln during the press firestorm. Angered and determined to do "justice" to White by assuring the president that the story was "absurdly false," Mrs. S. B. French wrote that "Mrs. White was too feeble to go out of the house for ten days before she left this city." The only items she carried with her from the North were "vials of medicine" to care for her (unnamed) medical condition. White, in French's view, was weak and innocent. She concluded that "we are all convinced the report sprang from some political enemy to injure

you." French appears to have been right in this judgment, but her letter also reveals another complication: that White likely never visited the Lincolns during her trip and therefore required her friend to reassure her family of her motives. This fact, coupled with the need for John Nicolay to investigate her behavior, suggests that the Lincolns may have harbored some suspicion of their relative and did not trust her to act so innocently. A year later White herself gave them reason to suspect her willingness to exploit familial connections, when she asked the president for special permission to bring thirty thousand bales of cotton out of the South in order to sell it.<sup>53</sup>

Lincoln's personal encounter with all the public suspicion of border-crossing families did nothing to change his administration's policy on the issuance of passes. Applications continued to be rejected at a high rate, and, in response, divided families grew bolder and sought illegal means of crossing the border. One petitioner revealed as much in his pass application when he threatened to travel one of "several routes" to reach the South "clandestinely" if he did not receive a pass. He did not.<sup>54</sup> Underground routes were widely known by people in the border region, especially by those whose families had lived there for decades and knew the terrain. In their papers these men and women reveal many different methods for crossing the lines secretly, including sneaking through wooded areas, lying to Federal pickets, forging passes, or, in the case of Warner Underwood, a U.S. congressman, waving a piece of paper in the faces of guards that looked like a pass but was not.<sup>55</sup> It was impossible for military authorities to guard the entire border, but covert travel still required great care to avoid detection. When Maria McGregor Smith left her home near Richmond in 1864 to live with her father in Washington, D.C., she gave her two children a dose of "paregoric" to help them sleep (and not make noise) while their boat made a middle-of-the-night trip across a fourteen-mile stretch of the Potomac River into Maryland.<sup>56</sup>

Networks of residents of the border states mobilized to help families that were desperate to cross the border. For instance, Millie Halsey, of Culpeper County, Virginia, the mother of two young daughters and the wife of Confederate army captain Joseph Halsey, stumbled on a "sudden and unexpected" opportunity to send her children to live with her husband's family in New Jersey. In Halsey's view, it was essential that her daughters leave home, as Union troops were camped on their property and their food supply was dwindling. It was simply not safe there anymore. In the summer of 1864 she got word that "Old Mr. Smith," a man on crutches, was heading toward the

Washington, D.C., border. She quickly paid the man, a total stranger, \$160 to take her daughters and their friend, Miss Holmead, with him to Warrenton, Virginia. Once in Warrenton, the girls donned outfits and accessories provided by their mother to make them look like market women. With Miss Holmead they crossed the border and headed toward Holmead's sister-in-law's house in the city, where they then telegraphed their uncle in New Jersey. To help them along the way, Halsey had given them \$35 in gold and \$20 in state currency.<sup>57</sup>

It all happened so fast that Millie did not inform her husband of the plan until after their daughters had left. Joseph was furious, and his reaction reveals some of the reasons why other divided families might not have crossed the border illegally. After receiving his wife's letter informing him of the trip, Joseph fired back a reply enumerating everything he thought was wrong with her decision. First, as the girls' father, he was upset that he had not been consulted first; he could not believe that Millie had allowed two young girls to travel three hundred miles near battlefields and into the "enemy's country." This risked their safety, especially as they were guided most of the way by strangers. He chastised his wife for "throwing your children out as beggars" on other people's charity, which not only threatened their "family pride," but also subjected them to dangerous people. "What if [they were] betrayed in Washington & forced to take the oath," he demanded. Even worse, their departure put him in an "embarrassing position" in Virginia. A Northerner by birth, he was already suspected of disloyalty to the Confederacy, "and here goes the report that two of my daughters have been sent to Yankeeedom to live & be educated."<sup>58</sup>

Upset by her husband's reaction, Millie defended her own loyalty to the Confederacy: "The step I took was conceived in patriotism being the only way I *could invade and weaken* the enemy." Millie did not explain how this was possible, nor did she make it clear how she differentiated the "enemy" from Joseph's family. Millie probably knew that such a distinction was difficult in wartime; had she applied for a pass, Union officials might have agreed with her husband's inclusion of their family in the "enemy's country." The overlap of these terms—enemy and family—and the unwillingness of government officials to distinguish between them led many other families to abandon travel to the North and to channel their energy toward other means of communication.<sup>59</sup>

### *Intersectional Mail*

Correspondence between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings and cousins, had traditionally maintained a lifeline among families, bringing news of life changes, of marriages or children born, as well as expressions of love and kinship. Wartime offered no exception, as letters became for many families a surrogate for the intimacy they had enjoyed in peacetime.<sup>60</sup> A New Jersey woman urged her brother in Virginia to write because "I need your loving sympathy now more than ever before in all my life."<sup>61</sup> At this tumultuous time family members wanted support and love; even where anger or estrangement existed, they longed for reassurance that their relatives were alive and well on the other side of the lines. The words of a family member could be an enormous source of relief. To her sister in Washington, D.C., a Roanoke, Virginia, woman wrote: "I cannot express the feelings of delight which filled my heart at the sight of your beloved handwriting yesterday."<sup>62</sup>

Like travelers, however, letter writers confronted official barriers while trying to maintain contact. Not long after the South seceded, both governments moved to prevent mail from crossing the lines. First, Union postmaster general Montgomery Blair ordered that all postal communications with the seceded states (except western Virginia) be discontinued after May 28, 1861. Any letter sent to the North from the South, even if it contained a U.S. stamp, was to be sent to the Union's dead letter office. On June 1 the Confederacy weighed in with its own restrictions, establishing a separate postal service to carry mail only within Confederate lines. For a time these policies created confusion, as residents of both sections did not know whether they would be able to get a letter across the lines, and mail accumulated in border-state post offices. Some people continued to send mail through private express companies, such as the Adams Express Company and the American Letter Express Company, that operated along the North-South mail lines from Washington to Richmond and Louisville to Nashville. But even these routes were discontinued on August 10, 1861, when President Lincoln ordered the arrest of anyone carrying mail across the lines via private express. This directive marked the establishment of what became popularly known as the "paper blockade."<sup>63</sup>

Wartime postal policies mirrored the restrictions on travel by preventing the contact of individuals on opposite sides of the lines. Even though mail was inherently limited in the kind of sedition it could transmit, with small envelopes binding a letter's content, authorities recognized that the written

word could convey dangerous secrets. Yet, as with travel, the two governments also recognized the need for some contact between individuals North and South, that most friends and families would want to maintain communication. Accordingly, in 1861 officials on both sides adopted a policy akin to the pass system that allowed for the selective transmission of letters on “flag-of-truce” boats sailing between Maryland and Virginia through Fortress Monroe. Anyone on either side could send a letter via flag of truce as long as it conformed to three standards: (1) it contained both Union and Confederate stamps to cover the cost of postage on both sides, (2) the writer’s name was signed in full, and (3) it did not exceed one page and related only to “family and domestic affairs.” Any letter that failed to meet these criteria was either returned to the sender, forwarded to a dead letter office, or used as evidence in arresting an individual for disloyalty. Packages were unacceptable.<sup>64</sup>

The flag-of-truce mail policy created a time-consuming postal inspection system that remained in place for the duration of the war. Union and Confederate postal authorities carefully monitored the mail that came through their offices and employed postal clerks for the sole purpose of reading every letter to look for anything suspicious. This was a laborious task, as thousands of letters circulated daily; to accomplish it, postal officials employed more clerks than ever before. (Union authorities even considered hiring “citizen detectives” to assist the postal clerks.) The one-page restriction on length was intended to expedite the clerks’ work, but occasionally sympathetic inspectors accepted longer letters. As a result, it could take anywhere from a few weeks to almost a year for a letter to cross the lines. Many letters never made it to their destinations after being rejected by censors. The uncertainty of whether a letter would successfully cross the lines prompted one Union man to say that he wrote “with the same feeling which a sailor has when he seals up something in a bottle & throws it overboard.”<sup>65</sup>

Even more guesswork surrounded the acceptability of a letter’s content. “Write no military matters or I shall not get your letters,” was how one Confederate woman explained the guidelines to her Union sister in 1863. Sallie Knott, of Jefferson City, Missouri, told her mother-in-law: “There is much to tell in the way of rumors & war news. . . . but I would be *traitor* to tell you anything, as you are not exactly a *friendly power*.” Others simply warned their kin to self-censor their correspondence, deleting mention of “public affairs” or anything “derogatory of President Abraham Lincoln.”<sup>66</sup> All of these writers were correct—some surviving letters rejected by Union and Confederate postal clerks reveal that references to politics and the military were consid-

ered in violation of the “family and domestic” rule. (Union authorities asked a Baltimore man who referred to Lincoln as a “vulgar dictator” to be more “respectful” in his letters.)<sup>67</sup> The two governments, in a departure from their travel pass policies, initially appeared to consider “family and domestic” letters innocent by nature and easily distinguishable from all others. But they failed to define what they meant by “family and domestic,” assuming perhaps that this arena was self-evident, focusing on the household or the idealized “woman’s sphere.” The fact that some letter writers bothered to advise their families on acceptable content, however, suggests that “family and domestic” content was not self-evident at all.<sup>68</sup>

Few people knew where postal clerks drew the boundary around domestic life in this civil war, and the uncertainty only grew as the majority of flag-of-truce letters wound up in the dead letter office. This was especially true in cases where there was mention of hardships suffered in the war. To write of losses incurred in battle was on one level a domestic matter, particularly when it involved the destruction of a home or the death of a family member. But on another level, such information implicitly referred to the actions of the enemy, which made it a military or political matter. A Kentucky woman grappled with this difficulty when writing to her sister in 1862. She wanted to recount the recent “outrages” committed near her home but refrained from doing so because of her “fear” of being arrested. Thus she would not “particularize” on her hard times because “such news . . . is now contraband.” This woman was aware of the danger of describing her privations, so by simply alluding to them she updated her sister on her welfare without offending the censors. Her letter made it through the lines.<sup>69</sup> Other subjects such as slavery and a soldier’s death required similar care in distinguishing domestic from political and military news.

Uncase about the content of flag-of-truce letters was compounded by the knowledge that a stranger would be reading personal mail—an act of “villainy,” in the words of one Kentucky woman. Virginian George Bedinger stopped himself from commenting on the war in a letter to his sister because “a cod-fish eater may inspect this.” (Bedinger did not direct his insult to anyone in particular, and perhaps for this reason the censors allowed his letter to pass.) Matthew Page Andrews of Richmond preferred to mock the censors’ work in a letter to his mother in western Virginia. While complaining about the postal restrictions, Andrews wrote a general family letter on a 14” x 17” sheet of paper with the words “The Rebel News Sheet” scrawled at the top. Nothing in its content was objectionable, and the letter passed inspection.

Other people were simply uncomfortable with censorship. As one Confederate woman told her Union father, "I have a very great dislike to my letters being read by strangers."<sup>70</sup>

A letter might also be read by the general public if a postal clerk sent it to a local newspaper. Throughout the war mail on ostensibly "domestic" subjects made its way from post offices into newspapers, excerpted under headlines such as "From a Sister in Augusta to Her Brother in New York." A letter from a Richmond woman named "Mary" to her sister in Kentucky appeared in the Democratic *New York Herald* under the banner headline, "Important from Rebeldom," detailing the death of relatives, her lack of food, and general unhappiness in Richmond society. The *Herald* prefaced the account by calling it an "intelligent and reliable source" on the "mournful condition of affairs in the South," suggesting that domestic letters indeed could be of military or political significance. Such firsthand descriptions of wartime problems could offer military authorities a unique glimpse of the enemy's situation, as well as influence public opinion at home.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, perhaps, Union officials took steps early in the war to prevent similar letters from being used against them. An 1861 order required Confederate prisoners incarcerated in the North to include the following statement in all of their letters: "It is my express desire that the contents of this letter or any part of it will not be put in such a situation as to be published in any newspaper."<sup>72</sup>

A Union woman in St. Louis spoke for many when she declared it an "awful thing . . . to have a private letter published." But the publication of these letters, as well as the postal inspection system itself, was more than merely unpleasant. These actions threatened the wall of privacy that was supposed to surround mid-nineteenth-century families, protecting them from the intrusion of politics, war, and other public affairs and ensuring stability and happiness in their personal lives. Privacy assumed an even more important meaning during the war, as we have seen, but when families found themselves divided along Unionist and Confederate lines, the rupture allowed government officials and newspaper editors unprecedented access to their private lives. This transgression—a rude violation in the minds of many—prompted divided families to protect the privacy promised by their domestic ideals.<sup>73</sup>

Self-censorship offered one means of shielding private thoughts and news from the eyes of strangers. Writers simply omitted "gossip" and other intimate news, waiting until the war was over to share information freely again. "I could give you a nice little dish of family gossip," a Tennessee man wrote to his wife in 1862, "but in these times what is intended for the eyes of one person alone

has to pass the inspection of those for whom it was not intended."<sup>74</sup> It was potentially embarrassing for this man to air his family's affairs, as he had no way of knowing how the information might spread. Similarly, a Baltimore man would not express his feelings of affection to his mother because the gesture was "not agreeable to have subjected to the inspection of a stranger."<sup>75</sup> At the same time, though, stripping family letters of interesting news frustrated the relatives who received them. "Why on earth didn't you say something to me I wanted to hear," Josephine Owen, a Confederate, demanded of her sister Jennet Tavener, who resided in Union territory and had written a bland letter. "Give me a description [*sic*] of all your doings all day till you go to bed so that I can imagine I have spent the day with you."<sup>76</sup>

Other correspondents set out to deceive the inspectors. "Hold the blank part of my 'flag of truce' letters to the fire," a Kentucky man instructed in a letter secretly delivered to his parents by a friend, "for I'll write in milk." (Unable to obtain milk, a Tennessean in Fort Delaware prison opted to write in "onion juice" instead.)<sup>77</sup> Some people asked family members to write their letters on the inside margins of newspapers, which, they thought, were more apt to escape the censor's notice. A Missouri man told relatives to direct his letters to his wife, implying that as a woman she was less likely to have her correspondence scrutinized. (The records of intercepted letters, however, suggest that women were not immune from postal inspection.)<sup>78</sup> Sometimes the deception merely involved a more careful parsing of words—a Virginia woman, for example, asked her brother in the Union army to describe his movements "individually," rather than referring to his regiment as a whole. "Surely there is nothing imprudent in such details," she concluded.<sup>79</sup> All of these ploys pushed the boundaries of postal rules and sometimes violated them. In 1863 the *Daily Richmond Examiner* instructed readers to "never append their signatures to their letters" when writing to someone in the North. Initials or a "private mark" would suffice and, if a letter did not pass inspection, would protect the sender from Union retaliation. But this tactic probably achieved only limited success, given that Union policy explicitly required a full signature.<sup>80</sup>

Each of these strategies tried to regain the privacy that families had lost to wartime postal policies. With milk, cryptic writing, or other methods, people could redraw private boundaries around their letters while insulating themselves from charges of disloyalty or treason. At the same time, these were also attempts to outsmart postal authorities who, many believed, were overzealous and too eager to read other people's mail. Indeed, there is evidence

that postal censors occasionally reveled in their task. In Lexington, Kentucky, Henrietta Morgan, the mother of Confederate cavalryman John Hunt Morgan, was forced to endure the humiliating (and unusual) experience of having a Union officer visit her house and read aloud excerpts from her son's letters.<sup>81</sup> Despite such incidents, some citizens accepted the loss of privacy as a patriotic necessity. A letter "may be opened and its lines scanned by the curious eyes of some post office official," a Virginia woman wrote to a sister in Vermont, but "I care not. I am willing to put up with even that inconvenience for the good of any country."<sup>82</sup>

Privacy was not the only issue at stake in the mail censorship system. Also in question were the basic freedoms to which Northerners and Southerners alike felt they were entitled. "When freedom of correspondence between friends & members of the same family, even those most nearly related, ceases to be a right, and becomes a privilege," Confederate soldier Thomas Hall told his Union father in 1862, "it may not cease to be a pleasure to receive letters—it certainly is no longer one to write them." Hall, who was writing from a Union prison, invoked the language of constitutional rights to suggest that the current postal policies were violating his "freedom of correspondence." Many other people avoided the flag-of-truce system altogether.<sup>83</sup>

A more dramatic alternative to ensure privacy was to smuggle mail across the lines through secret—and illegal—routes. One option involved conveying letters on blockade-running ships that traveled to Nassau, Bahamas, and transferred mail to British ships. More common, however, was the more informal and discreet system of stashing letters in the belongings of anyone traveling across the lines, either secretly or with a pass. Divided families seized on this option and created what became a widespread underground mail system that crisscrossed the border states. Letters sometimes changed hands several times and followed circuitous routes: for instance, a letter from Virginia might travel west into Kentucky before heading back east to a family member in Washington, D.C.<sup>84</sup> Use of these routes, which could take as much time and certainly more effort than the flag-of-truce system, was desirable because it allowed families the privacy to write freely and fully about their lives during the war. For this reason, family members were constantly on the lookout for word of a secret route. A Virginia man promised his cousin in Washington that "I shall most gladly avail myself of every channel that seems to offer a reasonable prospect for the interchange of letters between us."<sup>85</sup>

Letters that survived the journey across the lines described the smuggling process. Writers often sealed their letters in two envelopes—the inside ad-

dressed to the recipient; the outside, to whoever was to carry the letter. The carrier would then take the letter across the lines, tear off the outside envelope, and either deliver the letter personally or drop it in the mail. Considering the risks involved, it was remarkably easy to find someone willing to transport letters. In some cases sympathetic military or postal officials helped families send letters, either by looking the other way or by knowingly forwarding them across the lines. In Missouri, the Southern-sympathetic Knights of the Golden Circle managed to have some of its members appointed to key positions in post offices and steamboats to facilitate the flow of illegal mail. Prominent figures, such as ministers, state legislators, and in one case a British consul, also smuggled mail across the lines.<sup>86</sup> Their reputation for integrity and loyalty shielded them from suspicion; at the same time, their official positions could give them access to useful mail channels. When Jeb Stuart, one of the Confederacy's most celebrated cavalry officers, heard via the "underground R.R." that his mother-in-law, a Unionist living in Baltimore, was longing to hear of his wife's welfare, he devised the following plan. "If you will write a small letter [and] put it in a *small* envelope," Stuart wrote his wife, "I can have it put under your Ma's breakfast plate. . . & she will never know who brought it." The willingness of men like Stuart to smuggle mail—not unlike President Lincoln's tendency to issue passes to his own family—indicates that a gap could exist between an official's professional and personal approaches to border crossing.<sup>87</sup>

Also called on to carry mail were individuals who were above suspicion based on their position as noncombatants. Among them, according to military officials, were enslaved African Americans. In one instance, Captain B. P. Wells of the 2nd Michigan Cavalry reported the capture of a "black boy" who had been observed "crossing and recrossing" the Tennessee River carrying "rebel mail."<sup>88</sup> The letters' authors were perhaps aware that slaves often had experience with underground travel. Such cases, however, likely diminished over the course of the war, as increasing numbers of African Americans seized the opportunity to escape from the writers of rebel mail. More significant were the efforts of white women, who may have hoped that by virtue of their gender they would not be suspected. Stories abound of women stuffing letters in the folds of their skirts or even in the curls of their hair. One woman baked letters inside a cake.<sup>89</sup>

In fact, white women became the focus of investigations into mail smuggling. In 1862 the *New York Tribune* reported that the practice had become a widespread problem and attributed it largely to "female agency."<sup>90</sup> Military

officials across the border states, already concerned about women's travel, concentrated on the activities of women. "I find that a large number of women have been actively concerned in both secret correspondence and in carrying on the business of collecting and distributing rebel letters," reported F. A. Dick, the provost marshal of St. Louis, in 1863. Most of these women were "wealthy and wield a great influence"—among them, the wives of judges, a senator, and several Confederate officers—and were doing everything they could "to keep disloyalty alive." Dick advised that they be exiled to the South as a consequence of their activities.<sup>91</sup> A number of other border-state women were arrested and imprisoned for allegedly smuggling mail, and sometimes they had indeed carried valuable secrets across the lines.<sup>92</sup> Most notorious was Rose O'Neal Greenhow, the widow of a prominent Washington, D.C., attorney and friend of various Union officials, who was apprehended in August 1861 for conveying letters that may have led to the Union army's failure at the First Battle of Manassas. At the time of her arrest Greenhow was found tearing up mail and throwing it into a fire.<sup>93</sup>

Union officials were especially vigilant in their investigation of mail smuggling. "I have ordered the parties guilty of conveying these papers to be held as spies," wrote John McNeil, a Union brigadier general in Springfield, Missouri, in July 1863, after discovering a cache of smuggled mail. McNeil gave no indication that he had actually read the letters in question nor did he know for sure that the smugglers had seditious motives. But his quickness to condemn and punish mail smugglers as "spies" was not unique. Union authorities were determined to stop the spread of illicit mail, and they did so by restricting the issuance of travel passes, learning the aliases and other tactics of the smugglers, and taking rumors of smuggling seriously. In Lexington, Kentucky, for example, the news of a smallpox outbreak was considered evidence of mail smuggling; a similar outbreak had occurred in Richmond, and officials speculated that the virus had spread to Lexington via smuggled mail. Union authorities also targeted popular smuggling routes, such as the Potomac River between Maryland and Virginia, where an estimated six hundred letters passed daily.<sup>94</sup> Here investigators cracked two popular smuggling rings in 1863 after interviewing the slaves of men who had devised an intricate system of flag and light signals to help boatloads of mail cross the river undetected.<sup>95</sup>

Union officials may have been tougher in their enforcement of mail smuggling than their Confederate counterparts. Despite the fact that the Confederacy's mail policies were similar to those of the Federal government, few reports appear in newspapers of Confederate arrests for illicit mail, and it

is likely, given the South's disadvantage in manpower and other resources, that mail enforcement was not a priority for the Confederacy. In fact, some Confederates found it advantageous to look the other way—and even support—underground mail. J. B. Jones, a War Department clerk, noted in his memoirs that some individuals who smuggled mail out of the Confederacy received "special" passes specifically for that purpose. The hope was that these smugglers would return with Northern newspapers and other information about the enemy.<sup>96</sup>

Individuals involved in mail smuggling still took precautions to avoid arrest by either side, however. Letter writers often chose their carriers very carefully, preferring delay over sending mail through a hasty and perhaps dangerous channel. "I have not had an opportunity which I was satisfied with" was the reason one man gave for not writing to his relative sooner. "In these times no communication is safe."<sup>97</sup> He and others waited for someone they knew they could trust to deliver their letters, or for a time when the planned route of travel seemed safest. In the meantime, writers often kept letters open and added new information periodically until they found the right opportunity to send them; as a result, letters that made it through the lines often read like small diaries, covering a month or two at a time. Men and women who did the carrying protected themselves, too—in some cases by instituting the very system of censorship that letter writers tried to avoid. One Richmond man told his son that he could not seal his letter before sending it because the carrier wanted to inspect it first for anything that "might give him trouble." "Very few now take letters unless they are sent open," he explained. Other carriers purposely did *not* inspect the letters so they could proclaim their ignorance of the contents if arrested.<sup>98</sup>

That so many people risked arrest for the sake of a letter indicates how powerful was the desire for private communication. Yet a closer look at the content of these "private" letters reveals that something very public often prompted the need for secrecy. Some individuals felt it was their duty to educate family members about the war around them and to counter perceived misinformation. Southerners in particular expressed frustration with the reports—or "telling humbug," in the words of one woman—that their Northern relatives read in Northern newspapers. "Don't believe anything you see in the newspaper," Matthew Andrews of Richmond advised his mother. "It is all the Northern version of affairs." Letter writing, then, filled a need to correct a perceived bias of the press. Proctor Knott, a Confederate in Jefferson City, Missouri, regularly sent his version of events to his mother in Kentucky. Calling her

newspapers “subservient to abolition fanaticism,” Knott concluded in one letter that she “cannot get a syllable of truth” about the war in Missouri. He was especially concerned about a recent report in Kentucky’s Union papers that many Confederate Missourians had died in a skirmish with Federal troops. In reality, Knott claimed, only two Confederates were killed, whereas the Union lost more than sixty men. He urged his mother to rely on his account “as being true or as near the exact truth as can be arrived.”<sup>99</sup>

At the same time, conveying the “truth” could also involve purely domestic matters. People wrote letters to correct misinformation about the health and well-being of their kinsmen. Border-state families often looked to newspapers for reports on the injury or death of a relative in battle, but such reports were unreliable: for example, the name of a family member appearing on a casualty list might actually refer to someone else, or the information might be totally inaccurate to begin with.<sup>100</sup> People frequently did not want to believe reports in the newspaper and sought clarification. When Mary Ellet of Washington, D.C., read that a “Brig. Gen. Baldwin” had been captured at Vicksburg, she wondered if it was her cousin John Baldwin of Staunton, Virginia, who had been appointed a brigadier general in the Confederate army. Ellet wrote to her brother in the Union army and asked him to find out “who this General Baldwin is.” “Make every enquiry in your power,” she begged him.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Kentuckian Brutus Clay feared that his son had been killed after seeing his name in newspaper accounts of the Battle of Chickamunga in 1863. Fortunately for Clay, a friend in Richmond wrote him not long after to confirm that the newspapers were wrong—Clay’s son was alive.<sup>102</sup> If the friend’s letter had not crossed the lines, Clay would have been left in the dark, like so many other families, and grieved needlessly. The desire to convey the “truth” about the fate of family members thus provided a strong incentive to send letters across the lines despite the risk of arrest.

#### *Advertisements*

The frustrating limits on travel and mail compelled some families to employ yet another alternative for crossing the border: communicating with family and friends through newspaper advertisements. On May 27, 1864, the following ad appeared in the *Richmond Enquirer*:

Edward C. Huntley, Richmond, Va. — Folks all well; no news from Kate; Aunt Sarah dead; money in bank for you, Holmes, Executor; I am keeping hotel at Catskill. Have started twice to see you; couldn’t get there. Heard from you some time ago, and answered per directions. Let us hear from you again. JACK.

The writer, a New Yorker identified only as “Jack,” paid two dollars to place his ad in the *New York Daily News*, knowing it would then be reprinted by the Richmond paper and read by his Confederate relatives. This might seem to have been an unlikely medium for writing to family, as it was both public and impersonal, but Jack only followed the lead of many other men and women trying to contact family members across the Union-Confederate border. “Lost all my children to yellow fever. Kate and I are well,” a Confederate soldier informed his Union brother in a similar ad. “Dear Brother. I am well, but have been severely wounded twice,” wrote a Confederate soldier in another. “Father and brother William died during the siege of Vicksburg. . . . Would like to hear from you.” The authors of these notices thought that they had found a reliable means of communicating with distant kin in the face of strict military regulations on travel and mail.<sup>103</sup>

It is unclear what first prompted these ads, which originated in the *New York Daily News* on December 4, 1863. But within a month the *Richmond Enquirer* began publishing the New York paper’s ads and soliciting similar notices from Southern families. The *Daily News*, in turn, reprinted the *Enquirer*’s ads and thus began a reciprocal arrangement between the two newspapers that resulted in the publication of over two thousand family advertisements in 1864. The notices comprised both direct communications to relatives and open appeals to readers for information on a particular family. Few readers could have ignored such appeals; some issues contained over one hundred ads covering five columns and over a page of newspaper space. The ads helped a wide range of families, including prisoners of war temporarily separated from their relatives at home, but at least one-third were placed by families residing permanently on opposite sides of the lines.<sup>104</sup>

These ads offered what families could not get from any other mail system—reliability. “None of your or our truce letters came to hand,” one writer reported in an ad directed to a relative in Norfolk, Virginia. “Continue them, however, but use personals when certainty is required.”<sup>105</sup> While flag-of-truce letters could take anywhere from a few weeks to a year to reach their destination and smuggled letters might be seized, personal ads were printed in



full in a timely manner, as the newspapers promised to publish every ad for which they received payment. If a relative wanted to inform a family member of something as important as a death, he or she was better served doing so in an ad rather than waiting months for a flag-of-truce letter to be delivered. Moreover, families could also anticipate a quick response to the ads. In less than a week, for example, a woman in New York had placed an ad for her Richmond father and received his reply.<sup>105</sup>

Placing an ad in a newspaper, which could be read by thousands of people, might seem an odd choice for families anxious to protect their privacy. But writers of ads found ways of shielding their intimate lives from public exposure. Many withheld their emotions from the text of their ads. They may have been constrained, in part, by an eight-line limit imposed by the newspaper editors, as well as the two-dollar charge, but even those who did share feelings often obscured their identities by withholding their names. One notice read: "To T. M. A. Sherwood, Virginia. . . . I was delighted with your personal. It relieved me of a weight of anxiety—such cheering news of you all. . . . T. G. L." A woman wrote: "To E. M. . . . Your letter of the 6th instant received yesterday. It gave us great joy. . . . Mother."<sup>107</sup> It would take a great deal of knowledge about these families for a reader to figure out exactly who was involved. Some writers referred to individuals in their ads only as "father" or "brother," an uncertain strategy given the large number of fathers and brothers who might read the paper. Indeed, the desire to obscure an individual's identity may have rendered some ads useless. The following is all that appeared in one space: "To S. S. H. — Your mother and sisters are well, and desire to hear from you."<sup>108</sup> Without an address or a signature it is questionable whether the right "S. S. H." found this ad. Still, through the use of careful language, family members at least attempted to make the public medium of advertising private.

But this language raised the suspicion of some Union officials. In late 1864, after the ads had appeared for one year, Union secretary of war Edwin M. Stanton called on his department's Bureau of Military Justice to investigate the ad exchange and report back on its propriety. It is unclear what prompted his request, but on January 20, 1865, Judge Advocate General (and former postmaster general) Joseph Holt sent him an extensive analysis of the ads and recommended the immediate termination of personal advertising. Holt argued that the ads were first and foremost a "deliberate evasion and open defiance" of existing Union regulations on communication across the lines. The newspapers had created this system without government permission and

had provided individuals with a form of intersectional contact unregulated by military authorities. For this "violation of the laws of war," Holt blamed both the families who wrote the notices and the newspapers that published them. The families, he declared, had acted in a "most deliberate and criminal nature," since they had most likely resorted to ads when their letters failed inspection by the flag-of-truce censors.<sup>109</sup>

Judge Holt pointed to the families' efforts to conceal their private lives as evidence that the ads were vehicles of illicit aid and comfort between families. He pointed to the use of initials, "fictitious names or designations," and "eccentric language" as clear indications that something "improper" lurked beneath the ads. In Holt's view, rather than an innocent attempt to maintain privacy, the careful use of language in the ads was an indication of something illicit. As corroborating evidence, he pointed to places where writers discussed how to convey money and supplies from one relative to another. One objectionable ad featured a son in a Confederate regiment near Richmond asking his father in the North for one hundred dollars because he was "very much in need of money." In other notices, writers offered instructions on where to pick up payments of money, advice on investments, and news that a package of clothing and provisions would soon make its way across the lines. These ads themselves did not transmit the money or goods directly but appeared to help make possible such transfers via separate—and illegal—routes. And that, Holt maintained, was reason enough to end the ads: they were a vehicle for conveying treasonous "aid" to the enemy.<sup>110</sup>

More disturbing to Holt was the exchange of "comfort," or what he termed "expressions of personal sympathy and encouragement," apparent throughout the ads: "I am so glad to hear you are improving." "Am truly glad you are all well." "I am so distressed about you all." "My heart is aching to see your children." Such sentiments, all written by Unionists to Confederates, were troublesome because they implied support for Confederate family members and "have a very great effect in inducing them to persevere in their disloyal and traitorous purposes." Holt had a personal appreciation of the meaning of divided family ties, as he himself was a member of a divided Kentucky family and had a Confederate brother. But his own experience did not stop—and even may have encouraged—his vigorous prosecution of disloyal activity in the Union, earning him a reputation as a zealous pursuer of traitors and spies. With regard to the advertisements, he was unrelenting in his view that an "impassable barrier" needed to be constructed between divided families. Not only should the ads be pulled, he argued, but also the entire flag-of-truce

system should be eliminated (it never was). "Shut out from all communion with those to whom they were bound by ties of kindred and friendship," the Confederates would become "far sooner discouraged in the vain but desperate struggle in which they have engaged." Secretary Stanton agreed and ordered the *New York Daily News* to pull the ads on January 22, 1865.<sup>111</sup>

Virtually no type of family correspondence was acceptable to Judge Holt, even if the letters or newspaper ads showed no intent to subvert the national cause. The very act of communicating was dangerous. In this view, Holt was not alone. Other Union officials such as Secretary Stanton, the postal clerks who rejected flag-of-truce letters, and the investigators who arrested smugglers all appear to have grown convinced over time that "family and domestic" concerns were less innocent than their policies first assumed. To communicate with a family member on the opposing side was to write to the enemy. Federal government officials did not, as the families themselves had done, distinguish between a person's private identity as a family member and their public identity as a Unionist or Confederate. The two were one and the same.

The *Daily News* complied with Stanton's order but not without lashing back at Union officials. In an editorial published a few days after pulling the ads, the paper called the directive "one of the worst phases of the despotism that sways at Washington." It speculated that the Lincoln administration was acting on a grudge it had held against the *Daily News* from the beginning of the war. The paper was headed by the strongly Democratic and anti-Lincoln Benjamin Wood, a member of Congress who made a name for himself by denouncing the war and the use of force against the Confederacy. Back in the summer of 1861, after it had published a series of highly critical articles, the Union government denied the *Daily News* postal privileges, which forced the paper to suspend operations for eighteen months. The order to terminate ads was only the latest in an ongoing effort of the Lincoln administration to stifle its critics in the press, the *Daily News* declared, this time in direct retaliation for a recent series criticizing the Union's treatment of Confederate prisoners. The paper vowed to fight to get the ads reinstated and to remain a "watchful sentinel" against the tyranny of Lincoln's government.<sup>112</sup>

A subsequent series of articles shifted the focus toward what the *Daily News* believed was Washington's inhumane attack on American families. The paper dismissed the notion that the family ads in any way transmitted illicit information and pointed out that the system was in keeping with the flag-of-truce in the limits on length and the public inspection of the contents. The

paper defended its own motives as simply to provide a "means of family communication." In an editorial entitled "Warring on Women and Families," the *Daily News* called Secretary Stanton's order to suppress the ads "a wanton outrage on the ties which still connect brother and sister, mother and son, though they may be separated by the boundaries which divide the Northern and Southern States." To illustrate this point, the writer related the story of a woman who had reportedly gone to the newspaper's office to inquire about placing an ad for her son in the South. On hearing that personals were now illegal, the woman "burst into tears," anguished that another channel of communication had been cut off. Evidently, the paper concluded, the War Department regarded "a mother's affection as treason."<sup>113</sup>

The *Daily News* printed other testimony from a variety of citizens and other newspapers that demonstrated the Federal government's "cold-blooded cruelty" against families. As far away as England, the *London Times* criticized the Lincoln administration for seeing "reason in these affectionate letters." Closer to home, a reader from Jersey City, New Jersey, wrote a letter to the editor to express his "pain" and "anger" at the suppression of the personals. One couple he knew had news from their daughter in the South for the first time in three years after she had inserted an ad. Another reader, who signed himself "A Foreigner," informed the editor that the ads had been "relieving" amid "all the sickening horrors of this fearful war." He called on Union officials to recognize that personal feelings among families still existed on both sides of the war's divide. An article published in the *Richmond Whig*, and subsequently reprinted in the *New York Daily News*, used similar language, contending that the ads had helped to "mitigate some of the horrors of civil war." Still, despite the "mission of philanthropy" behind the paper's efforts, the *Richmond Enquirer* told its readers on February 8, 1865, that it was "useless" to continue placing ads.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, no more personal advertisements appeared in either of these papers for the duration of the war.

THE AD CONTROVERSY marked the most drastic break between divided families and the Union and Confederate governments over the propriety of crossing the border. On one side were the judge advocate general and Union officials, who all saw treason in a family's desire to maintain contact through the personals. On the other side were the families and the newspapers defending them, which claimed to see only humanity in the proliferation of personal ads. A similar polarization surrounded inter-sectional travel and mail. Officials

regulating pass applications believed that individuals were traveling to see an “enemy,” whereas the petitioners themselves argued that they wished to make innocent trips to visit kin. Similarly, mail censors tended to see political or military significance in what was often to families only of domestic interest. In each of these contexts divided families were viewed in contrasting ways: either too treasonous to cross the border or too insulated from the war to influence its progress.

The disparity between these two views continued throughout the war, reflecting a fundamental disagreement about the relationship between family and military affairs, private and public life. Families fought an uphill battle, as they had within their own households, to maintain their privacy and the distinction between family life and the public world of war. U.S. government officials, on the other hand, collapsed that distinction and saw only disloyalty and treason in the actions of these families. Union policymakers thus took an unconventional stand that challenged popular ideals about the separate spheres of home and world. Although their reason for doing so was to stop the spread of sedition in wartime, their ability to do so testifies to how fluid such boundaries may have always been in the minds of midcentury Americans. Union, and to a lesser extent Confederate, leaders easily implicated divided families in the public battle of war. And, as we will see, fiction writers joined them in finding a larger significance in the private experiences of divided families.



## Border Dramas and the Divided Family in the Popular Imagination

THE PRIVATE ORDEALS of divided families captured the attention of popular fiction writers almost as soon as the Civil War erupted. In 1862 Delphine P. Baker, a Union woman living in Illinois, published *Solan; or, The Rebellion of '61: A Domestic and Political Tragedy*, the tale of two fictional characters — one a daughter of Abraham Lincoln, the other a son of Jefferson Davis. The two are in love and want to marry but are thwarted temporarily while their fathers confront one another in war. This leads to both “domestic” and “political” tragedy, as the domestic bliss of the lovers becomes fatally intertwined with the wartime politics around them.<sup>1</sup>

Baker’s story depicts the experience of men and women who are torn between their family and national loyalty. Yet the author also finds in these families something larger and more significant for the warring nation. The political divide between the fathers, the two figureheads of the Union and the Confederacy, ideally should have been clear-cut, Baker suggests, but instead is challenged by the competing social bonds of the son and the daughter. A vigorous effort on the part of both presidents is necessary to keep their intertwined domestic lives from subverting their political divide. And in that effort Baker dramatizes a question that consumed individual families, government officials, and the nation as a whole: Could a definitive and secure boundary be drawn between the Union and the Confederacy? Or did deeper attachments hold people together across the sectional border, even in the middle of a civil war?

Other midcentury writers joined Baker in examining this question of Civil War loyalty. The authors, both male and female, soldier and civilian, Union