

“We Cannot Live by Bread Alone,” Women and Public Administration in Confederate
Georgia: Class War within a Civil War, 1860-1865

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

in Public Administration

in the Department of Political Science
of the College of Arts and Sciences

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

Women living in Civil War Georgia faced the daunting task of surviving on the home front while their husbands, brothers, and fathers waged a “rich man’s war” on distant fields. Countless letters from desperate women requesting aid or the return of their sons, husbands, and brothers to tend fields and protect their homes poured into mail rooms in the governor’s office, local administrators’ offices, and the Confederate president’s office. Laws were passed to restrict the amount of cotton grown by planters, as more food was needed to feed Georgia’s soldiers and families at home, but to no avail. Local governments reacted as best they could in relieving hunger, but widespread hoarding, speculation, and questionable practices broke down any sense of public administration in the state. Class distinctions were never felt as sharply as when letters went unanswered and the war continued to drain precious resources from home.

Through the twenty slave law and purchases of exemptions and substitutes, most plantation owners avoided going to war. Men from poor families unable to afford a substitute were conscripted into the army, and thus were unable to tend their farms. While planters and their families had ample supplies of corn and cotton waiting to be sold to speculators and the Confederate government, poor white women reported corruption and unfair practices of aid distribution. Consequently, these women resorted to prostitution, rioting, and theft in order to obtain food and yarn for their hungry children. Women looted stores in Savannah, Columbus, Atlanta, Augusta, Macon, and Milledgeville. Even smaller Georgia towns such as Thomasville, Valdosta, Forsyth, Marietta, Cartersville, and Colquitt saw women stealing cotton or rioting for food.

Based on contemporary newspapers, letters to the governor, court documents, official records, and manuscript collections, this dissertation will explore the desperate times of Georgia's lower class women and factors in public administration, or lack thereof, which led so many women to desperate acts.

Do not include this in actual document. Source: Adapted from a thesis completed in 1999 at VSU as part of the requirements for the MA in History.