

Richmond Speaks: Voices from the Home Front



Thank you for visiting the Richmond Civil War Visitor Center at the Tredegar Iron Works. The following is a transcript of the "Voices from the Home Front" in the order that they appear in the exhibit. For your convenience, we have duplicated the recorded passages below and included a short biography of each of these eyewitnesses to Civil War Richmond.

Judith McGuire, a refugee in Richmond writes in her diary during the Seven Days battles:

June 27th. Last night our streets were thronged until a late hour to catch the last accounts from couriers and spectators returning from the field. A bulletin assured me of the safety of some of those most dear to me; but the sickening sight of ambulances bringing in the wounded met my eye at every turn. The President, and many others, were on the surrounding hills during the fight. The calmness of the people during the progress of the battle was marvelous. The balloons of the enemy hovering over the battle-field could be distinctly seen and the sounds of musketry was distinctly heard. Almost every tall house was covered with human beings; and after nightfall the commanding hills from the President's house to the Alms-House were covered, like a vast amphitheater, with men, women and children, witnessing the grand display of fireworks — beautiful, yet awful.

--Judith Brockenbrough McGuire: Born 1813 in Richmond, her family owned "Westwood" plantation in Hanover County, which still stands. Her husband was a prominent Episcopal rector, and Mrs. McGuire operated a school in Essex County for some years after the war.

J. B. Jones, a clerk in the Confederate Government, keeps track of daily events:

July 3rd. There are fifty hospitals in the city, fast filling with the sick and wounded. I have seen men in my offices and walking in the streets, whose arms have been amputated within the last three days. The realization of a great victory seems to give them strength.

July 6th. Thousands of fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters of the wounded are arriving in the city to attend their suffering relations, and to recover the remains of those who were slain.

July 9th. Lee has turned the tide, and I shall not be surprised if we have a long career of successes.

July 17th. The people are too jubilant, I fear, over our recent successes near the city. A great many skulkers from the army are seen daily in the streets, and it is said there are 3000 men here subject to conscript duty, who have not been enrolled. The business of purchasing substitutes is prevailing alarmingly.

--John Beauchamp Jones: A clerk in the War Department in Richmond, Jones was a native of Baltimore, Maryland, and too old to bear arms during the war. He had extensive experience as a newspaperman, and had published four books in the prewar years. His wartime diary is a document famous for its insight into governmental affairs in wartime Richmond. He died in New Jersey in 1866.

Voices from the Home Front continued

Sallie Brock Putnam remembers working in the Confederate Treasury:

Hundreds of intelligent and deserving women of the South by the existence of the war, or other misfortunes, had been so reduced in the means of living as to be compelled to earn a support. The Treasury Note bureau in which the greatest number of women were employed, was under the supervision of experienced and gentlemanly clerks; and no place in the Confederate Capital was more interesting or attractive than that where these fair operatives were engaged in signing and numbering Confederate bills. The employment of female clerks extended to every branch of business connected to the government. The experiment of placing women in government clerkships proved eminently successful and grew to be extremely popular...

--Sallie Brock Putnam: A native Virginian and an ardent believer in the traditions of the "Old South," Sallie moved from Madison County to Richmond in 1858. She was 33 years old when her state seceded. From her home near Libby Prison, Putnam witnessed the unsettling wartime transformation of Richmond. A move to New York in 1867 brought her success in the literary field, with writings largely based on her experiences between 1861 and 1865.

Judith McGuire writes of the difficult winter of 1863:

February 13th. I sent over to market this morning for partridges and eggs, and gave 75 cents a piece for the one and \$1.50 per dozen for the other. I am afraid that our currency is rapidly depreciating, and the time is approaching when, as in the old Revolution, a man had to give \$300 for a breakfast.

April 2nd. We were shocked to hear of the riot which occurred in Richmond today. A mob, principally of women, appeared in the streets, attacking the stores. The military was called out, the Governor dispersed them from one part of the town, telling them that unless they disappeared in five minutes, the soldiers should fire among them.

It is the first time that such a thing has ever darkened the annals of Richmond. I fear that the poor suffer very much.

Voices from the Home Front continued

Phoebe Yates Pember writes a letter from Chimborazo hospital:

Of the fashionable world I can tell you nothing. I am living out at Chimborazo Hospital in a white-washed board house through the planks of which I can see the stars and the snow too. At all hours of the day and night you can see me around the wards with a bowl or a cup in my hand, and I never see a human being but the sick.

I sometimes wonder if I am the same person who was afraid to look at a dead person, for I have no timidity and hardly any sensibility left.

After the battle of Fredericksburg I stood by and saw men's fingers and arms cut off and held the brandy to their lips washing the wounds myself...

--Phoebe Yates Pember: Made famous by her 1865 memoir of hospital life, and her inclusion in a series of U. S. postage stamps, Pember was 37 years old when the war started. Her husband died in July 1861, leaving her unoccupied and restless. She came to Chimborazo Hospital to volunteer as a matron in December 1862. After the war she traveled extensively, and lived until 1913.

As an old man, George Lewis remembers his experiences as a six-year-old boy living in one of Richmond's black neighborhoods, when the city fell to the Union army:

We lived on Grace Street near First. On the morning of April 3rd, there was so much noise and so much excitement that my mother took me out of bed and started with me out of the house. Just as we left the porch, three or four Yankee soldiers with guns on their shoulders stopped us, and told my mother that they wanted her to cook breakfast for them.

I never shall forget the look that came across my mother's face, but she turned around, took me in her arms, and returned to our house. I was frightened and hid behind the kitchen door. After they had finished eating the cakes and fish, they got up from the table and they paid my mother for her food and for the trouble. These were Negro troops! They asked her the way to some place; she told them, and they were gone.

--George Lewis: Born in 1859 in Richmond. Both his parents were free blacks, and his father hired out boats on the James River to earn a living. After the war George attended a Freedman's Bureau school designed to educate children of ex-slaves. In 1878, he became a teacher in Henrico County. Lewis graduated from Howard Law School in 1888, and practiced in Richmond.

Voices from the Home Front continued

Fourteen-year-old Frances Caldern de la Barca Hunt writes in her diary:

April 3rd. All Cary St. is burnt and Main is on fire, it is spreading rapidly; almost every minute Flory and I run out to the gate to see if the yankees are coming...

April 4th. The yankees are behaving very well considering it is them... the negro soldiers are walking about as free as white soldiers. The negroes of Richmond are delighted. We have no school now and don't know when we will have any...

April 10th. I went round to Mrs. Hughes this morning and there I heard the dreadful news that General Lee had surrendered and then they told me that we were going to have Peace in a very short time. I was pleased but yet I was sad.

April 12th. Papa is talking about taking us down to see the ruins after dinner if it does not rain.

--Frances Caldern de la Barca Hunt: This 14-year-old girl was a shocked eyewitness to the fire that struck downtown Richmond on April 3, 1865. Her family survived the ordeal, but moved from the devastated city less than three weeks later.

Thomas Morris Chester, the only black correspondent for a major daily, writes from Richmond:

April 9th. The day before yesterday there was a grand jubilee in the African Church, the largest building in the city where Jefferson Davis had frequently convened the conspirators to plot and execute treason. The colored people turned out in full force; every seat was taken up and all standing room was occupied; the windows were thronged, and hundreds were outside....

It should be remembered that no colored man had ever in that church, though belonging to that oppressed people, dared to speak to the people from the pulpit. Chaplain Stevens was the first to ascend...

April 10th. Nothing can exceed the rejoicings of the negroes since the occupation of this city. They declare that they cannot realize the change; though they have long prayed for it, yet it seems impossible that it has come. Old men and women weep and shout for joy, and praise God for their deliverance through means of the Union army....

--Thomas Morris Chester: Born 1834 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He attended Allegheny Institute near Pittsburgh. In the 1850's Chester emigrated to Liberia and taught school. He became the first and only black newspaper correspondent (for the Philadelphia Press) during the war. He died in 1892.