General Ulysses S. Grant minced no words with his wife, Julia, when he described his charge to save the Union. He made it quite clear that Julia was his ray of sunshine in an otherwise bleak war. He was also painfully aware of his responsibility to his country, because in many ways he was the last hope for Union victory. Because of this heavy burden and serious duty, he reminded Julia to “be cheerful and try to encourage me.” This request marked the tenor of the marital relationship of Ulysses and Julia Grant during the Civil War. Encouragement meant more than being a sideline cheerleader; Julia participated in activities usually relegated to her husband, which, under regular circumstances, would have been understood as inappropriate. However, in her quest to maintain normalcy and consistent family ties during the Civil War, more fluid gender roles and activities preserved the family structure and redefined domesticity and duty.

Julia created a role for herself driven by her marriage oath, her love for her children, and a complex version of patriotism. Raised in the border state of Missouri, she grew up in a family of slave owners. Vostral

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Remember me to all in Galena. Kiss the children for me and a hundred for yourself. You must not let your tongue get the better of you. You should be cheerful and try to encourage me. I have a task of no trifling moment and want all the encouragement possible. Remember that my success will depend a great deal upon myself and that the safety of the country, to some extent, and my reputation and that of our children greatly depends upon my acts.

—Ulysses S. Grant, 1861

by Sharra Vostral
Dent, held a reputation as an opinionated and outspoken Southern sympathizer, often ranting in downtown St. Louis about his individual right to hold property, including slaves. Into her adulthood, her social circles included Southerners, Confederate sympathizers, and slaveholders. Julia did not escape her Southern roots, but instead used this identity as a foundation for her heightened role as family caretaker. Julia expanded her role as a patriotic wife and mother by depending upon slave labor during the Civil War. Her house servants, and especially her nurse and maid Jule, who even traveled with her, allowed Julia freedom from chores and housework and provided her the luxury of pursuing her children’s best interests and indulging Grant’s requests for visits during the war. The irony of Grant fighting to end the institution of slavery while Julia relied upon its very existence seems selectively forgotten. However, using the slave laborers not only allowed Julia to redefine her wartime responsibilities but also provided Grant many opportunities to meet her along their moveable home front.

Many biographers of Ulysses S. Grant have argued that Julia’s most important role during the war was to prevent Grant from drinking, thus keeping him sober and lucid. Colonel John Rawlins, the aide assigned to Grant during part of his command, felt personally responsible for preventing him from binge drinking and “spared” when she arrived for her visits. Certainly Grant’s habit, both real and rumored, held serious consequences for a Union victory. Yet, by sensationalizing Grant’s drinking and applauding his tempering influence, we diminish Julia’s critical role in managing family matters. Julia Dent Grant understood the benefits that family structure provided to her husband’s well-being and state of mind. For Julia, meeting her children’s educational needs, visiting the general on the front, and managing their property amounted to acts of patriotism. She willingly assumed these tremendous responsibilities, not as an extension of political rights, but as insurance of the family’s status quo. She traveled extensively, donned the persona of property agent, managed the farm, and practiced informal diplomacy, all in the name of securing the family’s well-being, thus easing the burden placed upon her husband.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Julia had not yet realized her role. In an early effort to offer services to her country, she attended ladies’ meetings and sewing circles to contribute to the “great national struggle.” Admitting to a lady manager at a sewing circle that she could “knit a little,” Julia received needles and “yarn enough to make a pair of socks.” To her chagrin, the socks were required by the end of the week, and her skills insufficient to complete the task. In her memoirs she reflected:

I had to confess to her [the lady manager] that I did not even know how to begin them and that I feared that the war would be over before I could possibly finish them. She then gave me the sleeve of a double gown which I did finish, but I never attended the sewing meetings again. As my husband had already offered his sword and his services to his country, I felt it to be my duty to give all my care to his little ones, which I faithfully did.

Although a seemingly innocent and self-effacing comment regarding her poor knitting skills, the statement identified a fundamental belief concerning her womanly role and patriotic duty during the war. For other civic-minded women, volunteer work with the sanitary commission or local sewing circle constituted a sufficient contribution to the Civil War effort. However, Julia exempted herself from such mundane duties because she was no ordinary private’s wife. In 1861, Ulysses S. Grant was colonel of the Twenty-first Illinois Volunteer Regiment and within a short two years was commissioned major general of the regular army. By March 1864,
he was promoted to command of all federal armies. Julia's responsibilities grew with Grant's promotions, and the maintenance of her family, including her husband, four children, and father, became more than just daily routine. For Julia, maintaining her family held the utmost national importance, because family stability promoted peace of mind for Grant, directly affecting his decisions, and therefore the security of the Union. For Julia, constant support and affirmation of her husband equated to patriotic duty.

Previous separations from the family during his early military career revealed Julia's healing influence upon his melancholy. Upon their 1844 engagement, Ulysses Grant was immediately called to duty in the war with Mexico. Married in 1848, Julia moved with him to army posts in Detroit, Michigan, and Sackets Harbor, New York. His 1852 transfer to Columbia Barracks (later renamed Fort Vancouver), Washington, and finally Fort Humboldt, California, proved one of his greatest trials; lonely and isolated, he wrote to Julia: "You do not know how forsaken I feel here." That, coupled with the fact he had never met his newborn son, Ulysses Jr., led Grant to resign from the military in 1854.

The difficulties Grant experienced made it painfully obvious to Julia that she would need to take a proactive role during his voluntary tour of duty during the Civil War. Grant's initial letters home at the outset of the war were similar in tone to those written during his assignment in the Pacific Northwest. He desired reunion, expressed concern about home matters, and longed for his kisses to be delivered to the children. Keenly aware of the separation from his family, he found that the war infringed upon even the simple act of writing a letter, an already dissatisfying format of communication. Writing from Camp Yates, Illinois, in the summer of 1861, he regretted that "this is a very poor letter but I have not written scarcely a single sentence without interruption." Conscientious of his limitations, he noted again, "It is impossible for me to write one sentence without interruption and necessarily my letter must be disconnected and uninteresting. From resent indications there will be but little chance for me to take any more leave of absence to go home." However appealing a quick visit might have been, military demands took precedence. Separations from his family seemed particularly acute at holidays, and his wistful tenor indicated the power they had to affect his emotions. He reminded Julia that "this is my forty second birth day. Getting old am I not? — I received a very short letter from you this evening scratched off in a very great hurry as if you had something much more pleasing if not more important to do than to write to me. I'll excuse you though." Chastising her for hasty correspondence, he made his sentiments clear. Interrupted and quickly penned notes were insufficient in maintaining good marriage bonds.

There was no mistaking his desire to see Julia and the children; however, the burden usually fell upon her to bring them together. In an 1863 letter from Rocky Springs, Mississippi, he reminded her: "I have before told you to start to join me as soon as you hear of the Army being in Vicksburg [Mississippi]. I do not know what I may be called on for next, supposing that I am successful here, but you can at least join me until I am compelled to..."
go elsewhere." His appeal for reunion was strong, wielding much influence upon Julia's decisions.

Although she sought to satisfy his requests, balancing his desires with the best interests of the children was not so easy. She made multiple choices about rearing the family, which included remaining at their St. Louis home, better known as White Haven; later lodging with Grant's relatives in Covington, Kentucky; placing the boys in boarding school; and sending the boys to encampments to spend time with their father. By making these types of decisions, Julia assumed the family's welfare and promoted Grant's peace of mind. She believed this ensured his good decision making and promoted the cause of the Union.

Simply deciding where to set up a household along the moveable home front required careful consideration. Although the St. Louis farm remained their home, locating other domiciles more convenient to Grant's campaigns kept the family together. Julia shouldered this responsibility, and Grant encouraged her. In 1864, while he directed the creation of a supply depot at City Point, Virginia, he suggested to Julia that "if you can locate yourself comfortably and get the children in good schools Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] will be as good a place as any for our permanent home." He lamented his absence from home, but conceded that this was merely a temporary arrangement. He apologized, saying, "I regret that I cannot at home to arrange your commencement for you. But my position is one that must be filled by myself whilst the War lasts." Both recognized her house hunting as a short-term necessity, and Julia expressed relief and gratitude when "gentlemen of Philadelphia" deeded a house on Chestnut Street to them, thus relinquishing her from the unpleasant business of contract negotiations.

Grant, too, was pleased with this happy gift and told Julia so. "I think you had as well arrange to move into your new house [in Philadelphia] at once and get Missy and Jess at good schools. Leave the boys where they are. They have been changed from one school to another often enough." In fact, the new house raised the recurring problem of how to school the four children: Fred, Ulysses Jr., Nellie, and Jesse. Grant repeatedly inquired about the children's learning. "How have Buck [Ulysses Jr.] and Missy [Nellie] progressed with their German? I think you should begin to send those to board in a German family until he learns to speak the language. What does he say to the arrangement?" Apologetically, Julia had quite a time managing her youngest son, for she broached Jesse's stubbornness with Grant in their correspondence. Grant assuredly stated, "As to Jesse refusing to go to school I think you will have to show him that you are boss. How does he expect ever to write letters to his Pa, or get to be aide de camp if he does not go to school and learn to write? He will go I know. He was only joking when he said he would not." Maintaining her authority in the face of Jesse's protestations proved to be difficult while Grant was away, and she clearly relied upon Grant's firm hand to reinforce her role as disciplinarian.

Discussions about the boys' education recurred in many of their letters. Julia expressed concerns about the quality of education that the boys received and whether or not they should pursue alternative options. The administrators at the school in Burlington, New Jersey, pressured her to enroll her sons as boarders, which they argued would improve the boys' chances of being admitted into college. This worried Julia, since she wanted them to live at home. Grant thoughtfully responded to Julia's concerns: "Your letter speaking of the new embarrassment which has arisen in not being able to send the boys to College without having them board away from home has just reached me." He reassured her that he would visit the principal in person, most likely to convince him to allow the boy to enroll as day students. "A school does not commence until the beginning of next month it will not be necessary for me to write to the principle about it as I shall try to slip up there for a day and see him in person." Although Julia managed much of their daily affairs, she held limited authority. In this instance, Julia was not a sufficient stand-in for a father. Grant possessed not only male privilege, but also status of rank, which could be wielded to influence the principal to concede to their desires. However difficult it may have been to squeeze this meeting into a general's schedule, ignoring this appointment would have caused anxiety, potentially spilling over into military responsibilities and the management of an efficient war campaign.

For all of her concern about education, the necessity of the children visiting their father sometimes superseded formal educational needs. Julia believed it to be tremendously important to keep her sons in physical contact with their father. At the outset of the war, Julia suggested that their eldest son, eleven-year-old Fred, accom-
pany his father to training camp with the Twenty-first Illinois. In retrospect, she noted, “I think it was a tender thought for my beloved husband that prompted this suggestion, as well as a desire to gratify the importunings and pleadings [of] our boy Fred.” When Grant was ordered to Missouri, he wrote Julia indicating that he would send Fred home. “We may have some fighting to do, and he is too young to have the exposure of camp life.” Julia protested, reasoning, “Alexander was not older when he accompanied Philip. Do keep him with you.” Fred nonetheless returned home. Wanting to ameliorate this seemingly radical notion of sending her child to the war front, she appealed to readers of her memoirs, “You must not forget, though, that these regiments were only called out for three months, and I considered it a pleasant summer outing for both of them.”

Allowing her sons to remain with Grant helped create the moveable home front, but their departure stripped away this sense of continuity. When his youngest son, Jesse, chose to stay with him at City Point and then suddenly changed his mind, deciding to leave with his mother instead, Grant felt a bit rebuffed. He redirected his disappointment by teasing Jesse, asking, “Is Jess sorry he run off and left his pa the way he did? I thought he was going to be a brave boy and stay with me and ride Jeff Davis. Ask if Jeff ain’t a bully horse.” Grant masked his regret that the family had again been separated, using humor to assuage Jesse’s guilt, and possibly his own. On an earlier visit to Corinth, Mississippi, Grant also lamented the family’s departure. “We all miss you and the children very much. Without Jess to stauk through the office it seems as if something is missing.” Clearly, his son helped ground him, create a pleasant diversion from the demands of war, and change the pace from the overwhelming responsibility that he felt. And it was Julia who clung to the goal of family stability and the creation of the most normal life possible under the strained circumstances.

Julia allowed their oldest son, Fred, to remain with Grant during the 1863 Vicksburg campaign. Grant boasted: “Fred and I have just returned from a trip fifteen miles up the river where we had quite a horseback ride. He enjoys himself finely and I doubt not will receive as much permanent advantage by being with me for a few months as if at school.” Few other twelve-year-olds were offered such a privilege, and Fred seemed to agree that there was an advantage to life lived as a soldier instead of as a student. Fred constantly sought adventure. Although Grant
deposited him in the safekeeping of an orderly, Fred used trickery and escaped to the action of the siege. Fearing punishment, Fred hid from his father’s gaze, slipping behind trees and shrubs when he spotted the general.

Dangers of battle seemed preferable to following orders, and his adventure included a bullet grazing his leg, Confederates nearly capturing him, and marching alongside troops who were hungry from lack of rations. The experience left an indelible mark upon him, and regardless of Fred’s trepidation about his father, Grant seemed to think him heartier for the wear. In his memoirs, Grant commented, “My son accompanied me throughout the campaign and siege, and caused no anxiety either to me or to his mother, who was at home. He looked out for himself and was in every battle of the campaign. His age, then not quite thirteen, enabled him to take in all he saw, and to retain a recollection of it that would not be possible in more mature years.” Learning life skills such as resourcefulness, cleverness, and autonomy was worth the experience, and Julia seemed to concur.

Sometimes Grant imposed separations. Writing from Savannah, Tennessee, in 1862, he regretted that “it will be impossible for you to join me at present. There are constantly ladies coming up here to see their husbands and consequently destroying the efficiency of the army until I have determined to publish an order entirely excluding females from our lines. This is unsatisfactory and necessary.” He needed to establish order and discipline, and a visit from Julia would set a poor and hypocritical example. However, this order was short lived, and Julia knew that Grant welcomed her whenever possible. Even the queries of First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln left Julia undaunted. Julia noted that “she [Mrs. Lincoln] thought ladies were not allowed in camp, to which I replied, smiling, ‘General Grant is much opposed to their being present, but when I wanted to come I wrote him a nice, coaxing letter, and permission was always granted.’”

However, Mary Lincoln’s perception about the wisdom of allowing ladies in camp raises an important point about safety and the danger that the family was constantly exposed to in the quest for togetherness. The threat of permanent separation through death never surfaced during their correspondence, and in fact, Grant rationalized the trips as salubrious. He desired Julia’s presence at Vicksburg and noted, “You may come down on the Tigris if you wish and pay me a visit to return on the same boat ... I want you to bring the children along. It is very pleasant now and the trip down here and back will do you good.” Here, he rationalized the mutual benefits of the visit and seemed to underplay battlefront dangers.

Perhaps he realized keeping the family in perfect safety was impossible. The basic tenet of travel during the war necessarily left them vulnerable to harm. In addition, Grant’s success as a Union general brought celebrity, and with that he and his family felt a loss of anonymity. Suddenly, the children were in the limelight, and to vigilantes they held political value for ransom. Emma Dent Casey, Julia’s sister, recalled a kidnapping attempt of the oldest son, Fred, who was visiting her home near Caseyville, Kentucky. Julia and the other children remained in Cairo, Illinois, as Grant embarked on the Vicksburg campaign. Although guerrillas or irregular Confederate soldiers did not bother Emma and her husband James, the son of Union officer Ulysses S. Grant created a spectacle. After being approached by two disheveled and suspicious Confederate officers who inquired about “the boys” whereabouts, Emma quickly relocated Fred, boarding him on a coal boat and sending him down the river to Cairo. Emma lamented, “There is no doubt, of course, that they were looking for Fred, and had they found him they would certainly have dealt his father a hard blow. It is mere speculation to consider what effect this might have had on the cause of the Union.”
Of course, kidnapping threats and attempts on their lives did not end with the war. After Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Virginia, they traveled to Washington, D.C., where Grant took part in cabinet meetings and both indulged in victory celebrations. By week's end, Julia was anxious to get back to the children, then attending school in Burlington, New Jersey, and made her intentions clear to her husband. He met with President Abraham Lincoln during the morning, Julia's request fresh in his mind. During the conversation, Lincoln invited Ulysses and Julia to Ford's Theatre that night for a performance of *Our American Cousin*. Grant declined, his excuse being that he was leaving town. By the end of the war, Mary Todd Lincoln wore on the nerves of both Grant and Julia, and neither was anxious to join her in another social outing. Perhaps the children provided an excellent excuse to decline the engagement. Regardless, Grant held genuine desires to reunite with his family and see his children. Spurred on by Julia, he traveled to meet the family in New Jersey, possibly saving himself from the bullets of John Wilkes Booth.

Because of Julia's efforts to hold the family together, she became intertwined with Grant and his decision-making and military responsibilities. Beyond attending to her family, Julia made Grant's business her own business, whether that be acting as courier, paying off debt on the farm, or engaging in informal diplomacy on the battlefront. However, she did not view the extension of her duties as liberating, although her activities certainly pressed the envelope of acceptable behavior. Julia simply acted-carrying out requests, making decisions, and voicing her opinions in the promotion of her family's interests.

One of her more important roles was to manage the extensive landholdings that Grant farmed for the family and for his father-in-law, Colonel Dent. Unable to attend to fiscal matters personally, Grant relied on Julia to serve as agent and executor of the estate in his absence. Grant sent specific instructions to her about Hardscrabble, the cabin that he built, and leasing it to their tenant Joseph A. White. "Try and collect your money from Mr. White," Grant urged, for "if that is not paid I will have to close on him which I do not wish to do during the continuance of the War." This would be both unkind and difficult, and Grant preferred to give White the benefit of the doubt. However, between another tenant referred to as "Old Man Rush" who failed to pay his rent on White Haven, the central home of their extended properties, and...
Joseph A. White, who paid nothing even after Julia’s requests, the task of serving as money collector proved to be bothersome for Julia. When White requested a letter of introduction from Grant in order to travel to Helena, Montana, and set up business there, Grant felt put upon. Grant noted with an ironic edge, “It would be a grand idea for me to introduce persons of doubtful loyalty into our frontier post!” For Julia, he asked her to hold in confidence his sentiments and only acknowledge to White his disapproval concerning the overdue rent. Joseph White proved to be nothing but a headache. Further complicating matters was Grant’s intent to rent out two of the three houses located on the White Haven property, consolidating debt, acquiring acreage, and protecting Colonel Dent’s land from repossession. Unfortunately for both Grant and Julia, family business would not be settled quickly. Besides the lengthy litigation and entanglement with White, questions of legal ownership plagued the efficient management of White Haven. In clear and precise terms, Grant directed Julia to ownership of the land. If he desires this have this deed recorded. Also get the deed for 40 acres where your brother is and have it recorded. Grant noted with an ironic edge, “It would be a grand idea for me to introduce persons of doubtful loyalty into our frontier post!”

For Julia, acting as her husband’s mouthpiece was not a choice but a duty required in his absence. Trying to ease this burden, Grant made accommodations for every contingency and coached Julia concerning land deals and negotiations. In regard to purchasing land from her brother, he proposed, “If John Dent wants to go to California you may offer him $1600 for 40 acres adjoining the 60 acres. If he desires this have this deed recorded also before you leave.”

Grant and Julia’s family business rarely seemed to be settled. Julia took her role as trustee and real estate agent very seriously, for she knew that her efficient charge of duties would unburden her husband and foster his sense of security about the family. Julia made it a priority to be apprised and knowledgeable concerning his military duties as well, so much so that she sometimes overstepped her bounds. Staying with Grant at City Point during the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, (June 1864–April 2, 1865), Julia wielded her influence upon some of Grant’s military decisions. While Grant was sleeping late one morning, a young woman with a baby approached Julia, wanting to gain access to Grant. Explaining that her husband was to be shot that day at noon, she begged that the decision be reconsidered, since the charges of her husband’s desertion were entirely her own fault. She wanted him to meet their newborn child, and for this he was to be punished by death. Julia, feeling sympathy for this woman, intervened on her behalf and appealed to Grant, only to be denied. Julia disregarded this dismissal and allowed the woman to speak personally to the general. Reluctantly, he pardoned the soldier. He commented, “I’m sure I did wrong. I’ve no
doubt I have pardoned a bounty jumper who ought to have been hanged.”

Julia’s presence and influence received the attention of other commanders, too. James Longstreet, a Confederate general, recounted in his memoirs an idea hatched amongst the leaders to include Julia and his wife in negotiations suspending hostilities. Union commander major general Edward O. C. Ord made the unusual suggestion that terms of peace be secured through social visits between Julia and Louise Longstreet, longtime friends. Longstreet recalled that the idea included General Grant and General Robert E. Lee discussing terms of surrender, while “my wife, who was an old acquaintance and a friend of Mrs. Grant in their girlhood days, should go into the Union lines and visit Mrs. Grant with as many Confederate officers as might choose to be with her.” According to the plan, “[t]hen Mrs. Grant would return the call under escort of Union officers and visit Richmond; that while General Lee and General Grant were arranging for better feeling between the armies, they could be aided by intercourse between the ladies and officers until terms honorable to both sides could be found.” This plan that placed Julia in such a pivotal position appeared to have national consequences for the country. It must have stroked her ego and affirmed her self-styled role as patriotic wife, for in her memoirs, Julia revealed her immense disappointment that the meeting was not allowed to take place.

Julia embraced this role as informal diplomat and noted, “On more than one occasion, I petitioned the General with hospitable intent to invite Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln down to visit the army.” She lamented “[t]he general would always reply to my request: ‘If President Lincoln wishes to come down, he will not wait to be asked. It is not my place to invite him.’” Julia, however, thought otherwise. She believed that Lincoln did not want to appear to be meddling with army affairs, or to be undermining Grant’s military authority. She was right. Julia, ever the diplomat, learned from Captain Robert Lincoln and her network of informal correspondence that the president and the first lady would indeed enjoy a visit if they knew that they were not intruding. A telegraphed invitation from Grant received an affirmative reply, and the Lincolns met the Grants at City Point. This sort of political hobnobbing certainly allayed any doubts of the respect the president and the general held for one another’s positions, and it helped keep Grant in good political stead.

As Julia created her own important position of politico, agent, and diplomat, while still parenting at home and on the front, she affirmed her commitment to her husband and patriotism to her country. However, Julia failed to see a great irony involved. She redefined her role in terms of service to the general, but her very patriotism was contingent upon the service of slave laborers, those very slaves her husband fought to free.
Julia could in no way function or fulfill any of her daily tasks without the service of her slaves, and her version of patriotism relied upon their enslavement, counter to her husband’s goals.

At the onset of the war, perhaps her dependence upon the slaves caused her hesitancy in quickly traveling to the front. She remarked, “He wrote me many times, urging me to visit him there, which I, at length, with much timidity, decided to do. He desired the children to accompany me. This wish it was that deterred me in the first place, I thinking it such an undertaking to go with four children.” Of course traveling with four small children was difficult, tiresome, and “such an undertaking.”

Her father, too, knew of her dependence upon the slaves, but warned her about haphazard traveling with them. Before the war, Julia commented that “Papa was not willing they should go with me to Galena, saying the place might not suit us after all, and if I took them they would, of course, be free, ‘and you know, sister, you cannot do without servants’” (emphasis added). However, she admitted, “When I visited the General during the war, I nearly always had Julia with me as a nurse.” Julia, or Jule as they called her, traveled with Julia Grant and Jesse to Corinth and served as a domestic servant while there. According to Ishbel Ross, an early biographer of Julia Dent Grant, Jule ran away from Julia at Jackson, Mississippi, much to Grant’s relief. Grant supposedly forbade any attempt to bring her back. Julia, however, failed to recount this in her own memoirs, but instead noted that Jule was nearly captured at Holly Springs, Mississippi.

Her very reliance and dependence on slavery caused skepticism and undermined her authenticity as a Union patriot. To white Southern women whom she met, her very breeding as a Southerner belied her Union sentiments. During Grant’s second Vicksburg campaign (1863), and in St. Louis with her three youngest children and her father at their home Wish-ton-Wish, Julia felt her loyalty challenged throughout the long summer. She detailed conversations with St. Louis neighbors who told her, “It is right for you to say you are Union, Julia, but we know better, my child; it is not in human nature for you to be anything but Southern.” They even taunted her with gossip about sending mail to the South from various places, knowing that Julia would not report this illegal activity to the authorities. They judged her actions and stated, “We know how you have been brought up and an oath would not be more binding than the sanctity of your roof.” Clearly, her authenticity as a Union patriot was at question, for she reified her identity as a Southern woman by socializing with Confederates and bringing Jule to the front, behind enemy lines.

Her loyalty to the Union was challenged a second time. Traveling to Holly Springs with Jesse and Jule, Julia, in order to be near Grant, lodged in a home occupied by Confederate women. As they were so polite and hospitable, Julia nearly forgot that she was in the enemy’s camp. Lulled by a sense of familiarity, Julia let down her guard and the women tested her allegiance. They invited her to listen to some “rebel war songs,” and Julia was both
curious and disgusted. She vowed to never listen to their songs again, and she was flustered that the women assumed she would like to join their Confederate bandwagon. When asked if she were a Southerner, Julia replied in the negative. Walking the tightrope of a Union sympathizer in a slave state, Julia added, “I am from the West. Missouri is my native state.” Unconvinced, her hostess emphasized, “Yes, we know, but Missouri is a Southern state. Surely, you are Southern in feeling and principle.” Because the Southern women questioned Julia, they challenged the very essence of her duty, and she was offended.

Julia expressed no qualms about employing slave laborers during the war and regretted their absence from the farm while she was there in 1864. She commented, “Our colored people had all left [White Haven], but their places were readily filled by German and French men and women, who were most excellent substitutes.” However, she noted that “we had a great deal of company, and then it was we missed the old family servants.” That was the first time we felt that there was trouble in entertaining, much as we enjoyed it.” There was more to just entertaining, however. The very act of hosting entailed a sort of reciprocal obligation to community and cemented her station among the Southern gentry, even as she claimed Union patriotism. To question the authenticity, patriotism, and loyalty of Julia Dent Grant undermined the contradictory role she created for herself: a Southern, pro-Union patriot. She clung to the socially acceptable roles of mother and wife, yet acted in ways that expanded these duties and responsibilities to incorporate those once filled by her husband. This was not to undermine Grant’s authority, but merely to support his greater obligations during the war. Using slave labor was for Julia a form of patriotism, for she needed it to perform her duties as wife and mother. She rationalized the use of slaves in the name of supporting the general, and therefore the very existence of the Union. Julia’s wartime experience and her use of slave labor is a rich and complex story. How we choose to remember it is crucial, for it reveals the ways we have come to simplify ideas about race, gender, and identity within contemporary American society.

References


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