

Dolly Lunt Burge and Society's View of Women in The Antebellum South

By Sanidia Oliver

During the Civil War, men left the management of their estates or plantations to their wives. Whether the men were away at war, or busy with politics and establishing a name for themselves by seeking to acquire prestige through business and social networking, wives became head of the household. From managing hundreds of slaves to overseeing the production of thousands of dollars' worth of cotton, these women carried the sole responsibility of managing a large estate. At the same time, however, society saw them as flighty, delicate and naive creatures who should not do anything but smile prettily and be the perfect hostess. In a time when womens' values were determined solely by their Cardinal Virtues,¹ Southern women often tread a thin line between their reputations, and fulfilling the rigorous requirements that was called upon them in a time which is often referred to as the Antebellum South. The real truth behind Plantation slave-owning women and what they accomplished is utterly baffling, the concepts they pondered and morals they struggled with such as slavery and some of their silent opposition to the Civil War were profound for their time taking into consideration their history and the fact that they were raised to think themselves of a much higher class than their slaves. The role that Southern women played in building the south are quite often overlooked by society today Many Southern woman who owned slaves before and during the Civil War displayed a great amount of in a time of adversity strength, integrity, and intellect. Dolly Lunt Burge, a widow during the Civil war shows evidence of sympathy

¹ Instructor Lillian Duck, Lecture March 16th 2006. Subtopic "Cardinal Virtues of a Woman"

and great compassion for her slaves. While many historians, scholars and today's society believe that most Southerners mistreated and tortured their slaves, this is woman who took on a more motherly attitude. Widows such as Dolly and others who took control of their men's holdings during the 1800's were not tittering maidens intolerant of getting a sunburn or dirt under their nails. Burge often labored in Gardens and smoke houses, and many times worked alongside her slaves and helped hide them when the Union army swept through and ravaged their land. In a time of deeply rooted racism and discord, Dolly maintained her unique morality. Although Burge was technically racist, she did not let her racism reflect negatively in the treatment of her slaves. Unlike the stereotype that many people harbor, in her journals, Burge never speaks of her slaves in a negative or violent manner, only patronizing and pitifully, if anything. Although this is not an acceptable way in today's society, it was a far advanced mentality in this period of time. More surprising is how she was able to look past Southern society's vast shortcomings to retain her adaptability and stoically accept the outcome of the war by putting it in Gods hands.

Stereotypically, Southern women were seen as delicate flowers which could do no harm. Society, then and now, often portrayed women as extremely domestic housewives who were as pure as the driven snow, were politically ignorant and were as religious as the disciples themselves. This is an enormous misconception that is obviously exemplified with Burge. Some of these characteristics were evident in her journal, however the common plantation mistress was usually logical, knowledgeable of current events and quite often had an expressive viewpoint of the war while using the bible to guide them in their everyday tasks.

Defenselessness played a large part in the misery of life for many women in the South. The very idea of a lady leaving her plantation alone at all, even to shop, was unheard of. The lands surrounding the safety of the home were often seen as dangerous. The women of the plantation were afforded every security as long as she stayed within the boundaries of her home. When off these boundaries, the women were open to runaway slave attacks, thieves and even vicious Indians further West.² Dolly however, was quite the opposite of this stereotype. It was necessary for her to leave the plantation to run errands that her husband was no longer around to do. *“Went up to Covington to-day to pay the confederate tax. Did not find the commissioners. Mid (a slave) drove me with Beck and the buggy. Got home about three o’clock. How very different is Covington from what it used to be!”*³ Dolly, although quite the lady, was not so much concerned with ruffians and Indians. She had responsibilities and was not about to let convention override them. However, she understood and proprietarily had her slaves Mid and Beck escort her in the buggy.

In a time where the Cardinal Virtues of a woman Purity, Piety, submission and domesticity⁴ were still modeled after, the Piety aspect was certainly first and foremost. Very religious, faithful women who went to church and read the bible regularly were encouraged to model their behavior after what was interpreted in the bible. In Dolly’s passages over a mere month, she brings up religion over fifteen times and uses it to explain many of her feelings and uncertainties. *“To-day will probably decide the fate of the confederacy. If Lincoln is reelected I think our fate is a hard one, but we are in the*

² Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress* (New York, Pantheon Books), p.g.9

³ *A Woman’s War Time Journal*; an account of the passage over Georgia’s Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 Primary Source # (Journal Entry November 15th, 1864)

⁴ Instructor Lillian Duck, Lecture March 16th 2006. Subtopic “Cardinal Virtues of a Woman

*hands of a merciful God, and if he sees that we are in the wrong, I trust that he will show it unto us.”*⁵ This shows that Burge, although a Southern white woman who was raised in a slave holding environment for all of her years, she clung to her faith in God to protect her with all of her might, and used it to keep an open mind to the outcome of the war. While Dolly was an extremely religious woman, there were wives of men who were oppressed under their husbands, and religion in this time only attributed to this fact. Jean Friedman brings up an argument in which religion often added to the oppressive atmosphere of living under men, yet having equal, if not more responsibilities. Instead of religion giving them hope and strength, it only reminded many that their position in life was destined to be prisoners to their husbands property. This property included slaves.⁶ So while Dolly did not particularly have to deal with the concept of oppression under a man in this journal since she was a widow, many women felt it was their duty to be submissive and domestic due to society’s biblical undertones. Young women were often raised to read fiction Christian literature and used it to model their own behavior. Fannie Page Hume, a young woman in the mid 1800’s read literature such as ‘Edith’s Ministry’ and ‘Kate Vinton or Sunshine’, and after doing so, she realized that being the perfect Christian woman was very trying indeed. In fact, she writes in her journal she even regrets having read it, for she mistakenly stumbles on the realization that it is quite difficult indeed to do everything she must to exemplify “Godliness.” With having that information, she cannot very well deny the knowledge, for God knows everything, and

⁵ Primary Source # *A Woman’s War Time Journal*; an account of the passage over Georgia’s Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 (Journal entry December 24th, 1865)

⁶ (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese *Within The Plantation Household Black and White Women in the Old South*, The University of North Carolina Press), 1988

she ends up being very frustrated indeed.⁷ The idea that women were showed how to act from a young age and had the bible to use as a reference is disconcerting, especially with the way the bible can be perceived by different people.

Domesticity encompassed many areas of a women's life. It included everything from baking pies, to hosting tea parties, to wearing all the proper petticoats and laces, big bonnets and freshly powdered faces. It is an amazingly huge misconception that plantation mistresses were simply housewives and knitted all day. They did all of the above and much, much more. Dolly was very concerned about her appearance when the soldiers were trying to gain admittance into her home. She wanted very much so to look presentable and unruffled as a women always should. *"Just as I got out of bed this morning Aunt Julia (a slave) called me to look down the road and see the soldiers. I peeped through the blinds, and there they were, sure enough, the Yankees-the blue coats! I was not dressed. The servant women came running in. "Mistress, they are coming! They are coming! They are riding into the lot! There are two coming up the steps!"*⁸ After the discovery of the soldiers, Dolly rushes to get into her attire and hurries downstairs to hasten breakfast. Burge mentions her clothing seven times from August to December. While appearance was important as far as company was concerned, Burge simply did not get much company and only brought up her attire when the soldiers began arriving. Domesticity did not just stop there. In addition to appearance, publications surrounding domesticity were very popular with women. In between the years 1784 and 1860 one hundred magazines revolving around with an emphasis on "women's interest" were

⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese Within The Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pg 270

⁸ Primary Source # A Woman's War Time Journal; an account of the passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 (Journal Entry August 2nd, 1864)

published. Domesticity was the main focal point of these publications.⁹ Instilled in the very foundations of even women authors there seemed to be no way out of the stereotypical ideals of a southern white woman who owned slaves. Even women brave enough to venture out and write for the public were filled with sentiments of submissive and domestic behavior. Intelligence was not something that was sought after during this time, although many women dared think outside of the box, they were often times shunned from society for doing it.

Logic and intelligence was a necessity when it came to Southern Plantation mistresses. When the men left the entire management of their estates to their wives, they did so out of necessity. In a few simple words, a man writes to his wife that he expects her to completely take care of everything in his stead, including finances and the home.¹⁰ Dolly, however recently widowed, was forced to run an entire the plantation with dozens of slaves. Her daily tasks were insurmountable. Caught in the middle of a war she still seemed to keep her wits about her and logically prepare for the oncoming attack. *“Am I not in the hands of the merciful God who has promised to take care of the widow and orphan? Sent off two of my mules into the night. Mr. Ward and Frank (a slave) took them away and hid them. In the morning took a barrel of salt, which had cost me two hundred dollars, into one of the black women’s gardens, out a paper over it and then on the top of that leached ashes. Fixed it on a board as a leach tub, daubing it with ashes. Had some few pieces of meat taken from my smoke-house carried to the Old Place and hidden under some fodder. Bid them hide the wagon and gear and then go on plowing. Went to*

⁹ Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress (New York, Pantheon Books), pg 11

¹⁰ Ibid pg 29

*packing up mine and Sadai's clothes. I fear that we shall be homeless"*¹¹ Here, Dolly clearly has a firm grasp of what needs to be done and executes it in a efficient and intelligent manner.

Politics and women were like oil and water. It was unbecoming for a lady to speak of such things as the state of their country, and what they thought of the president and the war altogether. Most times, they were either laughed at by the men and whispered about behind closed doors by the women. In a letter to a confidant an unknown women speaks bluntly about a mutual friend. She speaks of how the women is scandalous in her dealings with politics and men, much rather would hold company with gentlemen and is well knowledgeable of politics and government. She also goes into with horrified description of how this women takes no pleasure in gardening and household work. Next, comes the attack on her person. The unknown assailant goes as far to say something went wrong at birth to make this women have an interest in manly affairs.¹² This women is obviously gossiping about an acquaintance and is actually degrading her and her ideals. She implies that this woman will never find a husband the way she is going. Burge had held no regard whatsoever about conventionally taboo topics. She voiced her opinions in her journal quite vividly. *"and it is strange, passing strange, that the all powerful Yankee nation with the whole world to back them, their ports open, their armies filled with soldiers from all nations, should at last take the poor negro to help them out against this little Confederacy which was to have been brought back into the*

¹¹ Primary Source #3 A Woman's War Time Journal; an account of the passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 (Journal entry November 18th, 1864)

¹² Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress (New York, Pantheon Books), pg 181

*union in sixty days time!*¹³ This small entry alone shows that although Burge did not agree with having her “negroes” fight for a cause that they should have (in retrospect) been fighting for, she still has a firm grasp on what was going on and was able to form an intelligent opinion. It must be remembered, that Burge thought that she was doing the right thing in “protecting” her negroes from those who would want them taken away, and in this particular case, her servants did want to stay with their mistress.

Relationships between slaves and their mistresses were quite complicated. There are two severe opposites of how women took to overseeing the slaves and daily work. The mistress could be the slaves best friend, or in many cases their worst enemy. As previously noted, many times women felt that the chore of overlooking the slaves was one that was ordained. Some were very bitter and, and throughout the years because increasingly cruel, often times taking it out on the unfortunate slaves. Dolly, although a white woman in the South who owned slaves, she seemed to have an rather large heart. She treated her slaves with respect, and more so like family, although subconsciously evidence from the passages shows physiologically deeply imbedded racism. When Dolly refers to her slaves she often times says Aunt and makes pet names for the younger children. Names such as Mid, Nute, Frank, Elbert and quite often refers to the many young men around the plantation simply as “her boys” She does this out of respect and a sort of understanding and bonds are built between her and her “negroes” In fact, when her slaves are faced with the option of freedom, they choose to stay with their mistress.

“Alas! Little did I think while trying to save my house from plunder and fire that they were forcing my boys from home at the point of the bayonet. One, Newton, jumped into

¹³ Primary Source #3 *A Woman’s War Time Journal*; an account of the passage over Georgia’s Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 (November 19th, 1864)

*bed in his cabin and declared himself sick. Another crawled under the floor,-a lame boy he was, but they pulled him out, placed him on a horse and drove him off. Mid, poor Mid! The lat I saw of him, a man had him going around the garden, looking as I thought for me sheep, as he was my shepherd. Hack came crying to me, the big tears coursing down his cheeks, saying they were making him go. I said: "Stay in my room" But a man followed in, cursing him and threatening to shoot him if he did not go; so poor Jack had to yield"*¹⁴ She then continues on retelling the stories of how her faithful and loyal slaves or "boys" did everything they could to stay with her. She frequently mentions her slaves throughout her passages and defends them righteously in her way of thinking. *"My poor boys! My poor boys! What unknown trials are before you! How you have clung to your mistress and assisted her in every way that you knew. Never have I corrected them; a word was sufficient. Never have they known want of any kind. Their parents are with me, and how sadly they lament the loss of their boys. Their cabins are riffled of ever valuable, the soldiers swearing that their Sunday clothes were the white people's, and they never had money to get such things as they had."*¹⁵ This really tells a lot about the relationships some slaves had with their mistresses. The idea of racism can be a complicated thing indeed. Although we all harbor our own biases and some, racist tendencies, one must understand that in this time, southern women were raised to hold themselves much higher than a negro. They were white, the negroes, were quite obviously black and slaves. When one is not presented with the opportunity to question these ideals, one simply continues on to live in utter ignorance. And ignorance is bliss, they say. However, Burge amazingly

¹⁴ A Woman's War Time Journal; an account of the passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897) (Journal Entry November 19th 1864)

¹⁵ Ibid.

rises above the potentially dangerous racist tendencies and settles into a not so harmful understanding that although she held the position as their mistress, she at the same dealt them respect, and kindness. In reference to her seeing her slaves as fond pets or in a lower station, it is said in the kindest way. Given Burge's history and circumstances of being widowed and having to take complete and utter control of a sizable plantation, she had a mature outlook of her position. Often times, the mistress would intercede on the slaves behalf to lessen the punishment the master would inflict on them. This was duly noted by the slaves, and they did everything they could to keep the mistress happy such as being extremely nice to them. Wives and daughters of plantations would many times defend the slaves, and beg the men of the households not to whip them.¹⁶ Would slaves rather stay enslaved with their mistresses rather than experience freedom?

In many cases, slaves wanted their freedom. A mean mistress could very well be the worst possible situation a slave would have to endure. As mentioned before, when these women were faced with the idea of having to care for these slaves the rest of their lives, it happened so that sometimes they simply had no hearts. A bitter mistress could be ten fold worse than any man.¹⁷ Some slaves had a very hard time with their mistresses, and many women were even more cruel then men. They felt a burden was being placed on them, a punishment, if you will that they had to endure. Dolly, even shows her racist tendencies at times by the way she refers to them, it is more comparable to a well loved dog or treasured valuable. *"Jeff Davis wanted to put them in his army, but they should not fight for him, but for the union. No, Indeed no! They are not friends to the slave. We have*

¹⁶ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese Within The Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988,) pg. 56

¹⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese Within The Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pg. 95

*never made the poor, cowardly negro fight...*¹⁸ It is true, that even Dolly Lunt Burge, a very compassionate and caring woman who sincerely loved her slaves did harbor racist ideas. She did not see them as racist, but in fact they were. This shows that racism is not something that people are completely aware of. It is a cultural idea imbedded in people and knowledge is the only thing that can enlighten them of the truth. When Dolly Lunt Burge was confronted with the question of slavery and its moral dilemmas, she was forced to question her very way of life. The way she handled it was with great wisdom and understanding. *"I have never bought or sold slaves and I have tried to make life easy and pleasant for those that have bequeathed me by the dead. I have never ceased to work. Many a Northern housekeeper has a much easier time than a southern matron with her hundred negroes."*¹⁹ Burge, when presented with the idea of slavery and its implications, puts serious thought into, and ultimately defends her position valiantly.

Women had mixed feelings about the war and slavery. They had strong ties to their community and culture, yet held negative opinions about the causes of the war. Often times they were torn between their morals and did their best to deal with them. Dolly, however had a very simple answer to it all. Leave it in God's hands. She believed that while some slaves were mistreated and abused, hers were not and she had a very amicable relationship with them, yet she ultimately wanted the best for them. *"I have never felt that slavery was altogether right, for it is abused by men, and I have often heard Mr. Burge say that if he could see that it was sinful for him to own slaves, if he felt that it was wrong he would take them where he could free them. He would not sin for his*

¹⁸ A Woman's War Time Journal; an account of the passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 Primary Source # (Journal Entry November 19th, 1864)

¹⁹ Ibid.,

*right hand. The purest and holiest men have owned them, and I can see nothing in the scriptures which forbids it.*²⁰ This shows much intellect for a woman who was raised in the south, married a plantation owner and lived through a time where the North and South were involved in the most bloody and violent war that the young country had ever experienced. She analyzes the main reasons why the North and South are at odds and simplifies it into very easy to understand language. The animosity throughout Dolly's entries towards the North and their army are evident, for she mentions this over ten times in her journal. *"Sherman himself and a greater portion of his army passed my house that day. All day, as the sad moments rolled on, were they passing not only in front of my house, but from behind; they tore down my garden palings, made a road through my back-yard and lot field, driving their stock and riding through, tearing down my fences and desolating my home-wantonly doing it when there was no necessity for it. Such a day, if I ever live to the age of Methuselah, may God spare me from ever seeing again!"*²¹ She does not do this based on the fact that she wishes slavery would abstain, but for the simple fact of how terribly they ravaged the South and completely adapted guerilla warfare in order for them to accomplish their goals.

Burge's open mindedness to the Union soldiers expressed understanding and compassion that is unfathomable to many today. It was hard to have goodwill to the men from the North who destroyed her life's work, yet she befriended an officer and parted him as good friends would. *"He felt for me, and I give him and several others the characters of gentlemen. I don't believe they would have women and children had they*

²⁰ A Woman's War Time Journal; an account of the passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 Primary Source # (Journal Entry November 8th, 1864)

²¹ Ibid., November 19th, 1864

had their own way. He seemed surprised that I had not laid away in my house, flour and other provisions. I did not suppose I could secure them there, more than where I usually kept them, for in last summers raid houses were thoroughly searched. In parting with him; I parted as with a friend."²² Dolly really impresses us all with her incredible ability to differentiate between good, and evil. She does not simply lump everyone into the same category as many southerners did. As far as women supporting their men in war, they did what was patriotic. Even if they did not completely agree with what was going on.

Southern women in this time were often stuck between a rock and a hard spot. They had their allegiances to the South, the hard ways of life and simple, yet strong ideals. One woman was ashamed of her countrymen and morally found it inexcusable, even disgusting, the greed and corrupt motives for the war. Yet her strong ties to the South brought along with it duty for her countrymen. She labored alongside the confederate officers bedsides at nursing camps and even went as far as making uniforms for the rebel soldiers. Against all of her beliefs she did this, for the simple fact that she incredible amounts of loyalty and devotion.²³ No matter how these wives or women in the south felt, they had no choice but to support "the Cause". To refuse to do so would result in being labeled a traitor or a turncoat, and they themselves would not be able to live with the fact that they abandoned their country, their culture and their way of life.

In doing a modern study today surrounding stereotypes of women in the South the results were sadly to say, not surprising. Taking the opinions of twenty students and asking a total of five questions each. Question 1: Do you agree or disagree that Southern

²² A Woman's War Time Journal; an account of the passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman Army on the March to sea, as recorded in the diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt. (Mrs. Thomas Burge 1817-1897 Primary Source # (Journal Entry November 19th, 1864)

²³ Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress (New York, Pantheon Books), pg 196

plantation mistresses mistreated and or abused their slaves on a regular basis? Seventeen students answered yes, while two replied with no and one did not have an answer.

Question 2: Do you believe that Southern plantation women were racist in the respect that they would not acknowledge their slaves as human beings but as animals or a lower species? All answered yes to this question. Question 3: Do you believe that Southern women merely dictated to their slaves in what to do or rather worked alongside them and interacted on a hands on basis? Fifteen answered that the women dictated, four answered work beside them and one again, did not have an answer. Question 4: Do you believe that any significant amount of slaves had respect for their mistresses or hated them or disliked them immensely? Eighteen answered Hated them and two answered disliked them.

Question 5: From a scale of one to ten, if a slave was offered freedom from the union army, how much would they want to go? All answered ten. In conclusion, the question of where did you attain the information used in taking this survey? Answers ranged from movies, to text books to media. Stereotypes in Southern women are prevalent in today's society. It is comfortable for modern Western Civilization to believe that the atrocities dealt in the antebellum south were due to ignorance, stupidity and selfish means, rather than analyzing that maybe society and the way of Southern life simply was brought on from several hundreds of years of cultural racism and yes, ignorance.

Dolly was an extraordinary woman that documented her experience with the war with precision, gusto, and talent. She completely shatter the stereotypes that people associated Southern women with and reveals what is really like to be a slave owning woman living day to day, and making fairly good income. She handles a vicious war that

completely demolishes the South with insight and intelligence. The way that Burge treated her slaves is not reflective to what many people may think today. She gave them respect, and treated them with the utmost dignity. Her slaves loved her, and refused to leave in a time where freedom was being offered to them. That, alone speaks volumes. The concepts she applies to daily life include religion, however she does not let religion become a scapegoat for the South, and she essentially throws her hands up to God for him to decide what is right. Although all of her ideas are not perfect, she does the best in utilizing what she has and surprisingly takes a fairly objectionable viewpoint. Dolly Lunt Burge and her journals during this time open up a whole new world that many are unbeknownst to. She left a legacy that contradicts most every text book and mindset of many Americans due to media and common knowledge. She truly is an inspiration to those scholars who are seeking the truth, no matter how hidden it may be. Dolly Lunt Burge continues to be an aspiration, and a hope for mankind's inadequacies even after death.