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In the Midst of Life we are in Death:  
Suicide Coverage in the South During the Civil War Era

By  
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Honors Thesis

Submitted to

Department of History  
University of Richmond  
Richmond, VA

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27 April 2015<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge my parents, Eric and Sarah Miller, and my sister Eliza for proofreading my work, and supporting me throughout the course my research. I would also like to acknowledge the undergraduate summer research fellowship for funding this thesis.

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## Introduction

The Civil War cast a shadow of despair over the divided nation as it left an estimated 620,000 men—roughly 2% of the population—dead on American soil, killed by American hands. Death and the Civil War are two subjects that are synonymous with one another; it is impossible to write on the war without commenting on its immense number of casualties. That said, relatively little is known about suicides behind the front lines.

And now with my latest writing and utterance, and with what will [be] near to my latest breath, I here repeat, & would willingly proclaim, my unmitigated hatred to Yankee rule—to all political, social and business connections with Yankees, & to the perfidious, malignant, & vile Yankee race.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately after writing these lines, only weeks after the end of the Civil War, Virginian Edmund Ruffin, a proud supporter of the Confederacy, lifted his rifle, placed the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Ruffin's death was the most famous suicide of the Civil War era, but it was far from the only one.

While the topic of suicide during the Civil War era has not been widely researched, a search of the digitized Richmond *Daily Dispatch* archive reveals many instances of people ending their lives. On February 26th 1861, Miss Jones, “who was ruined a short time since by a man named Braham, who had promised to marry her,” poisoned herself out of fear of bringing disgrace to her family.<sup>3</sup> One month earlier, the *Daily Dispatch* reported the suicide of William English. Titled “Tragedy in Alabama,” the article explained that after failing to pay off a \$60,000 debt, William English,

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Walther, *The Fire-Eaters*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 228.

<sup>3</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 26, 1861.

thinking himself and his family impoverished, murdered his children and cut his throat. The *Daily Dispatch* did not hesitate to report the gruesome details of English's suicide, noting that as his wife rushed forward to prevent his self-murder, he gently pushed her away and "made a lick at his throat, completely severing the jugular vein, and fell dead upon the floor, surrounded by the bleeding forms of his innocent children."<sup>4</sup>

Suicide reporting during the Civil War era is not only evident within the *Daily Dispatch*, but clear patterns can be seen within the newspapers of other Confederate states as well. A search of the word "suicide" in the *Chronicling America* website between 1850 and 1870 results in a clear trend. In 1850, the word suicide occurred 361 times in a variety of newspapers—both northern and southern. By 1860, this number increased to 1,176 occurrences, but it then dropped to as low as 558 during the war period. What is noteworthy, however, is that in the war's immediate aftermath—between 1866 and 1870—the appearance of the word "suicide" increased by the hundreds, jumping from 1,944 to as many as 2,656 occurrences. Clearly, these numbers show a pattern, suggesting that a possible suicide mania followed the war's conclusion. When one takes a look at the census mortality schedules, however, the number of national suicides only increased by a few hundred, with 993 recorded suicides in 1860 and 1,345 in 1870.

While newspaper reports cannot effectively prove that the Civil War sparked a suicide mania on the Confederate homefront, the progressive increase in suicide coverage and the sensationalism of the reports suggests that the war may have generated a national fascination with scandalous ways of dying. Further, because the Confederate homefront

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<sup>4</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, January 30, 1861.

served as the main stage for battlefield action, this raises the question as to whether this fascination with suicide was even more apparent in the South where death had become a factor of everyday life. Before delving into society's interest in immoral methods of dying, however, it is important to paint a clear picture of what historians have already discovered about the culture of death before, during and after the Civil War.

### ***Literature on Death and Suicide during the Civil War***

In the opening paragraph of *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust defines the relationship between mortality and the human condition:

Men and women approach death in ways shaped by history, by culture, by conditions that vary over time and across space. Even though 'we all have our dead,' and even though we all die, we do so differently from generation to generation and from place to place.<sup>5</sup>

According to Faust's painstakingly researched account of the Civil War's culture of death, death was not simply a fact of human life, but it was "work."<sup>6</sup> The work of death, incorporated both effort and impact; it involved the slaughter, suffering and devastation experienced by soldiers on the battlefield, as well as the duties of soldiers to fight, kill and die for their country. Faust takes her argument further in her assertion that the work of death also involved how Americans—both civilians and soldiers—understood the meaning of so much death and destruction. For nineteenth century Americans, dying was both a social and religious experience. To die well, and appropriately, was to die painlessly at home, surrounded by one's family, the Bible, and ideally with a moving last

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<sup>5</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Faust, xiv.

word and testament. However, this ideal manner of dying—which Faust terms the “Good Death”—could not withstand the secluded, violent, abrupt and anonymous death brought on by the Civil War. As both Union and Confederate soldiers met their fate on the battlefield, and were thus denied the traditional Good Death, the normal patterns of dying and mourning were disrupted; however, as Faust notes, Civil War Americans reconstructed the Good Death to fit a nation in the midst of political, social and economic catastrophe. To support her argument, Faust draws on a variety of sources including official government records, northern and southern newspapers, personal diaries and letters, and the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Faust also includes a rich collection of secondary sources to establish the historical context for the period, as well as quantitative data detailing the actual death statistics for the period. By drawing on this diverse collection of sources, Faust builds a qualitative history that analyzes the social impact of the war on the nation as a whole from a cultural and psychological perspective.

A similar approach is displayed within Mark S. Schantz’ *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death*. However, Schantz argues that, rather than the violence of the war resulting in a reconstruction of the Good Death, antebellum ideas about death and the afterlife helped Americans stomach the carnage they experienced between 1860 and 1865. To build his argument, Schantz draws on a variety of secondary sources on the culture of religion, death and the afterlife in antebellum America. The bulk of his research, however, is derived from literary sources. Like Faust, he relies heavily on 19<sup>th</sup> century sermons, eulogies, diaries and letters that include a variety of voices ranging from great leaders to everyday soldiers and civilians. Further, in his analysis of soldier psychology, Schantz uses Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge*



*of Courage* and Homer's *Iliad* to suggest that Civil War soldiers were "youthful and heroic warriors willing to accept the risks of death."<sup>7</sup> While *Red Badge of Courage* and the *Iliad* provide thorough descriptions of the nature of war and the soldier's mindset, neither source is applicable to the Civil War era. Stephen Crane was not born until 1871, nor did he have any military experience. It can be argued that Homer's descriptions of self-sacrifice and honor are values evident within the American culture of masculinity, but it is hard to apply the discourse of an Ancient Greek poet to the battlefield experiences of Union and Confederate soldiers. Schantz dedicates a great deal of his study to analyzing the antebellum discourse of death, which he displays through poetry published within the *Southern Literary Messenger*. According to Schantz, "the poetry of death provided an imaginative landscape in which Americans could learn the lessons of life and death," and through their depictions of heaven, poets soothed American fears of dying.<sup>8</sup> With this discourse of death as a dominant theme within antebellum poetry, by the time the war broke out soldiers were overcome with a spirit of calm resignation that allowed them to approach the possibility of death with the notion that a heavenly eternity of transcendent beauty awaited them beyond the grave and that, like the infamous warriors of Homer's epics, their heroic achievements would be cherished for eternity. Schantz' work, however, is about more than soldiers' romanticized notions of battlefield death. In fact, his study does little to make a connection between this notion of "calm resignation" and battlefield carnage. What Schantz does successfully through his analysis of death poetry and the literary culture of death, however, is show how people on

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<sup>7</sup> Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Schantz, 98.

the homefront coped with the violence and destruction of the Civil War. In his discussion of photography, Schantz asserts that this new innovation brought the horrors of the battlefield to the homefront; thus, Civil War photographs helped the American public—especially within the North—come to terms with the slaughter.<sup>9</sup> One cannot help but suspect that the sermons, poems and prose described by Schantz played similar roles. The value of this literature would have been felt not by those who died, but by the survivors who continued on into the postwar period.

Both *This Republic of Suffering* and *Awaiting the Heavenly Country* assert that during and in the years leading up to the Civil War, Americans had specific understandings of how to approach death and, in the case of survivors, deal with its consequences. Further, both works suggest that the American culture of death produced a universal idea of what the proper way to die involved. Death, however, is a broad concept. While Faust's reconstruction of the Good Death and Schantz's antebellum "calm resignation" allowed soldiers who approached the possibility of death, and civilians surrounded by the war's carnage to cope with a culture in chaos, one is left wondering how individuals who chose to end their lives and meet death by conscious decision fit into this picture.

The historiographical literature on suicide during the Civil War is limited, but the works that do exist provide an excellent collection of national and regional studies that point to trends during and after the war. Further, studies of suicide and the Civil War include both qualitative and quantitative histories. These two methods of analysis provide statistics and patterns in regard to gender, motive and cause, as well as specific

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<sup>9</sup> Schantz, 196.

case studies that provide a look into the psychology of suicide during this period. Lastly, the existing works on suicide offer explanations for how the Civil War not only affected the number of suicides committed each year, but how it influenced the way Americans—specifically within the South—understood suicide from a cultural perspective.

In *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States*, Richard Bell studies the culture of suicide in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction. Bell’s approach, however, differs from conventional studies of suicide. He does not count suicides, compare suicide rates, or investigate possible motives. Rather, Bell studies suicide as a lens through which one can understand the political and ideological issues about state authority and the will of individuals that the New Republic grappled with. According to Bell, from the end of the Revolution to the Civil War, suicide was a major theme in a range of public debates—about the corrupting influence of overtly romantic novels, about the right of paternalistic authorities to prevent the will of self-destructive individuals, about the construction of mental asylums, about the repercussions of the death penalty, about the dangers of wrong religion, and about the morality of slavery.<sup>10</sup> Suicide rhetoric was utilized by a variety of reformers—both conservative and radical—and the debate over the meaning of suicide, Bell asserts, was triggered by the conflict between social order and self-determination. To support his argument, Bell provides a balance of both primary and secondary sources. Because Bell’s work is a cultural study, he draws heavily on late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century newspapers, sermons and manuscripts. Bell’s sources, however, are not without fault. While his work is a cultural study of suicide within America as a whole, Bell’s

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012).

sources are largely drawn from New England, and the book barely examines suicide beyond the Northern states. Further, his study is heavily biased toward the voices of white males. Bell could strengthen his analysis by providing insight into how Americans in different regions viewed suicide, and by investigating the ways in which suicide was influenced by gender and race. Despite these criticisms, *We Shall Be No More* offers an insightful look into the cultural history of the early Republic and the ideological role suicide played within this context.

While suicide in the Civil War is a relatively uncovered topic, most general studies of suicide during the war are limited to soldiers. Diane Miller Sommerville's "A Burden Too Heavy To Bear: War Trauma, Suicide, and Confederate Soldiers," for instance, explores suicide amongst Confederate soldiers and the nature of mental illness in 19<sup>th</sup> century southern society from both a cultural and psychological perspective. According to Sommerville, "Asylum records, diaries and wartime newspapers reveal a virtual epidemic of emotional and psychiatric trauma among Confederate soldiers and veterans that manifested in a wide array of physiological and psychological symptoms."<sup>11</sup> While one of the most prominent psychological effects of war, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, was not diagnosed until after WWII, Sommerville argues that psychological disorders brought on by Confederate soldiers nevertheless played a role in the high number of suicides amongst soldiers and veterans.<sup>12</sup> Sommerville's work goes beyond

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<sup>11</sup> Diane M. Sommerville, "A Burden Too Heavy to Bear" War Trauma, Suicide and Confederate Soldiers." *Civil War History*, 59.4 (2013), 453-491.

<sup>12</sup> The development of modern warfare is linked to the diagnosis of PTSD. Researchers of the WWI and WWII eras attributed the condition to new weaponry; namely large-caliber artillery and explosives. The shell impact produced by this weaponry caused a psychological disruption within soldiers called "shell shock." At first this condition was linked to soldiers considered weak in character, but after these

the history of soldier psychology in her assessment of the war's cultural impact on the South. Sommerville asserts that the brutal nature of the war forced Confederates, both soldiers and civilians, to reconsider traditional notions of masculinity, courage and suicide. During the early stages of the war, masculine courage was synonymous with heroic action, bravery and "unflinching stoicism in the face of danger."<sup>13</sup> Courage in the face of battle determined one's manhood; however, for many young soldiers the prospect of facing enemy fire provoked fear and anxiety. The experience of the war, Sommerville argues, "chipped away at the pantheon of courage," and exposed a culture of cowardice amongst Confederate soldiers that evolved over the course of the war.<sup>14</sup> In addition to her focus on asylum records, diary entries and newspapers, Sommerville's article is supported by a diverse collection of secondary sources ranging from historiographical accounts of the war, studies on gender and culture in the South and sociological investigations of suicide and PTSD. Sommerville also draws evidence from beyond the Civil War era, comparing the war's psychological impact on Confederate soldiers to the experiences of soldiers during WWI, WWII and Vietnam. With each source carefully weaved throughout her argument, Sommerville reveals an immense degree of evidence dictating the emotional suffering and psychiatric trauma among Confederate soldiers and veterans, which ultimately led to a changed cultural perspective of suicide from cowardly to sympathetic. "A Burden Too Heavy To Bear" is, at its core, a qualitative history that draws on various case studies of soldiers who committed suicide, resulting in scholarship

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symptoms became more prevalent amongst WWII veterans, the military began to refer to the condition as "battle fatigue." The actual term "post-traumatic stress disorder" was not coined until the mid-1970's to describe the psychological torment of Vietnam veterans.

<sup>13</sup> Sommerville, 455.

<sup>14</sup> Sommerville, 455.

that is both engaging and entertaining. Sommerville, however, does not provide any statistics of suicide within the Confederate army. She mentions that Confederate suicides were not great in numbers, but it would potentially have been interesting to look into these numbers and assess whether any patterns emerged during or in the aftermath of the war.

In contrast to Sommerville's work, Jeffrey W. McClurken's *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia* analyzes the financial, physical and psychological impacts the Civil War placed on Confederate veterans and civilians in Pittsylvania County and Danville, Virginia from a quantitative perspective. While McClurken's study does not specifically explore suicide, his assessment of how the war affected veterans and their families—which includes economic, physical and psychological effects—paints a more thorough picture of the difficult conditions Southerners experienced during Reconstruction, and why for some Southerners, these conditions may have led to suicide. In his introduction McClurken presents what research historians have discovered on the topic of the Civil War's impact on Confederate veteran families in Virginia, and what new information he plans to bring to the table. McClurken notes that social and cultural historians have “described the difficult living and fighting conditions, debated the motivations of soldiers in enlisting, and catalogued the diseases, wounds, and deaths experienced.”<sup>15</sup> He also explains that historians have made clear that the war and emancipation significantly affected gender roles and relations and shaped a southern transition from a potentially multiracial household to a more exclusive white family. McClurken, however, builds off of this

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey W McClurken, *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 2.

previous scholarship and broadens his analysis of the war's impact going beyond soldiers and analyzing veteran families as a whole. First, he uses quantitative analysis—examining various military, service and census records, and then logging his findings into two databases, *The Soldier's Database* and *The Pittsylvania County Population Census*—to reveal the manner in which these families “turned to numerous sources of social assistance to rebuild themselves in the aftermath of the war.”<sup>16</sup> Second, through his analysis of personal letters and memoirs, McClurken dips into the realm of cultural history by capturing the voices of ordinary individuals and illustrating their reactions to the emotional and economic impacts of the Civil War. Though McClurken includes a touch of psychology, *Take Care of the Living* is essentially an economic history of Virginia between 1860 and 1870, and it is through the book's focus on quantitative analysis that McClurken reaches conclusions about how Virginia veterans fared collectively after the war, how they compared to nonmilitary families, and how isolated elements of their military experience, such as incurring injuries, made the challenges of holding a job and retaining property greater for them in the postwar years.

In contrast to McClurken's quantitative history, David Silkenat's *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina* analyzes the social impact of the Civil War from a cultural and psychological perspective. Silkenat's work focuses on symbolism—specifically the ways in which North Carolinians, both white and black, understood suicide, divorce and debt and how the war forced them to reevaluate the meaning of these issues. *Moments of Despair* is organized into three sections—each centered around either suicide, divorce or debt—that explore the moral sentiments and

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<sup>16</sup> McClurken, 3.

mutable views of black and white North Carolinians, and how these three issues “functioned as barometers of change reflecting the relationship between the individual and society.”<sup>17</sup> Each section is further divided into three chapters, which describe the way each incident was practiced and perceived by North Carolina blacks and whites before, during and after the war. Silkenat’s book possesses a larger time frame than the other works on Civil War suicide, ranging from 1820 to 1905. While some scholars may dispute whether this time frame actually falls within the Civil War era, this long-range view is necessary to see the full degree of change in regard to how North Carolinians interpreted suicide throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The sources Silkenat draws on to create this psychological and cultural study of Civil War era North Carolinians consist of personal narrative, local newspapers, individual diaries and census records. Like “A Burden Too Heavy To Bear,” *Moments of Despair* relies on case studies of individual figures to support Silkenat’s overall argument and to piece together a captivating narrative history. Silkenat heavily relies on North Carolina newspapers because they show “clear patterns about who committed suicide, why they chose to end their lives, and the methods they employed.”<sup>18</sup> What differentiates Silkenat’s work from McClurken’s, however, is the questionable collective data he derives from newspapers in regard to suicidal trends. While Silkenat admits himself that his study “does not attempt to enumerate how many North Carolinians took their own lives during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century or to calculate a suicide rate for this period,” the two tables that he does provide suggest that a trend did exist; in fact, Silkenat refers to the sudden

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<sup>17</sup> David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Silkenat, 31.



increase in suicide following the war's conclusion as a "suicide mania."<sup>19</sup> However, it is difficult to determine how many people actually committed suicide because the book does not provide these exact numbers. While Silkenat records a sudden rise in newspaper coverage of suicide, he admits, "It is hard to say whether this dramatic increase represents an actual change in the suicide rate or if there was simply a change in newspaper coverage."<sup>20</sup> While Silkenat's focus on attitudes toward suicide, divorce and debt rather than numerical trends allows him to make arguments about the larger changes in moral and cultural sentiments, this focus also results in a sense of uncertainty for the reader about what beyond attitudes had changed over the course of the eighty-five years that make up his study. In addition to analyzing primary sources to recreate the lives of past peoples, Silkenat draws on modern and contemporary "suicidologies" to understand—from a sociological and psychological perspective—why individuals chose to end their lives. Silkenat uses this approach to understand the Civil War's role in changing the frequency and meaning of suicide in North Carolina. First, in reference to Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Silkenat lays out the history of suicide as the "one true serious philosophical problem."<sup>21</sup> He then turns to Emile Durkheim's famous sociological study *Suicide* to explain how moral barometers develop in complex interplay with individual behavior. Durkheim's conclusion that "small changes in behavior or attitudes can institute an autocatalytic process that can quickly transform old moral sentiments and create new ones," lays the framework for Silkenat's overall argument: "the loss of the Civil War resulted in torrents of change that transformed not only the southern political

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<sup>19</sup> Silkenat, 221.

<sup>20</sup> Silkenat, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Silkenat, 2.

and economic order but also the ways in which southerners understood themselves and their place in society.”<sup>22</sup>

Durkheim’s study alone is not sufficient to forming hypotheses for Silkenat’s proposed “suicide mania.” Silkenat also relies heavily on modern psychological studies of suicide, which he asserts help to “discern patterns in the data that would not necessarily be apparent to contemporaries.”<sup>23</sup> For example, Silkenat argues that Civil War soldiers suffered a significant degree of psychological trauma. In order to discern why many of these soldiers chose to commit suicide, Silkenat turns to recent studies of PTSD. Silkenat draws connections between the experiences of Civil War suicidal veterans and Vietnam veterans who suffered from PTSD. As Silkenat notes, studies of more recent military conflicts indicate that three wartime factors contribute to PTSD cases: being wounded in combat, experience as a prisoner of war, and the length of military service. Silkenat then introduces a number of case studies that present the stories of North Carolinian veterans who suffered from one of these three factors and then chose to commit suicide thus suggesting that PTSD may have helped institute the “suicide mania” among white North Carolinians. In terms of suicide amongst nonveterans, Silkenat applies the sociological theory of “contagious suicide,” which consists of two notions: personal experience with suicide increases the likelihood of self-annihilation, and media reports of suicide inspire others to replicate the act.<sup>24</sup>

The overall goal of *Moments of Despair* is to develop a deeper understanding of the Civil War’s lasting personal and psychological impact through a qualitative analysis

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<sup>22</sup> Silkenat, 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Silkenat, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Silkenat, 59.

of North Carolinian society that—like McClurken’s and Sommerville’s studies—focuses not on major historical figures but ordinary individuals. Cultural history, a discipline that applies anthropological approaches to historical study, records and interprets past events involving human beings through social, cultural and political contexts. Silkenat adopts this approach to understand the “native mindsets” of North Carolinians before, during and after the war. By drawing on local newspaper reports, individual diaries and personal letters, in addition to basic background information he derives from census records, Silkenat’s work is more of an anthropological analysis of the way white and black North Carolinians understood and interpreted suicide, divorce and debt rather than basic historical study of the Civil War’s impact on the Confederate homefront. From this raw material, Silkenat crafts the framework of his study, which relies heavily on personal accounts and Silkenat’s own assumptions of what these individual accounts reveal about the culture of the two North Carolinian demographics. While McClurken presents numerical evidence to back up his assertions about how Virginians reacted to the war’s impact, Silkenat analyzes and interprets individual stories of suicide, divorce and debt, and—in the case of suicide—he draws on modern sociological and psychological studies in order to better understand and speculate as to how Civil War era North Carolinians saw the world.

*Take Care of the Living, Moments of Despair* and “A Burden Too Heavy To Bear” are not perfect accounts of the Civil War’s impact on the Confederate homefront. Like any historical study, the methods employed, sources analyzed, and assumptions made by McClurken, Silkenat and Sommerville are not necessarily valid. McClurken’s research does accomplish his overall goal: to gain a broader understanding of

Confederate veterans as a group and to identify larger trends in their postwar experiences such as their decision to look to the state for financial aid. Quantitative data, however, cannot easily provide a sense of the attitudes or personalities of past peoples. Combining this quantitative data with richer qualitative sources and a deeper examination of the postwar experiences of just a few veteran families within McClurken's databases would emphasize the humanity of these suffering survivors—creating more effective, sympathetic and engaging case studies. On the other hand, Silkenat's and Sommerville's focus on case studies, their personal assumptions and their lack of statistical evidence produces a sense of uncertainty within the reader. While McClurken's scientific approach presents the reader with a series of graphs, charts and tables that act as solid proof of his argument, Silkenat's and Sommerville's cultural investigation into Confederate attitudes toward suicide is dependent on whether or not the reader buys into their arguments. Regardless of the validity of their individual findings; however, *Moments of Despair* and "A Burden Too Heavy to Bear" are both engaging and entertaining. The individual case studies presented by Silkenat and Sommerville are thoroughly researched, detailed and the clear and concise manner of their writing holds the reader's interest. Lastly, all three studies raise unanswered questions about whether the war sparked a chronic depression on the Confederate homefront, and if the actual rate of suicide changed in the war's aftermath. *Take Care of the Living*, *Moments of Despair* and "A Burden Too Great to Bear" may not leave readers completely satisfied with the information both books present, but these holes simply offer new doors for historians to explore.

### *My Contribution to the Subject*

What historians have not yet investigated is the relationship between suicide and America's changed culture of death during the Civil War. My thesis will work to correct the attention historians have given to the Good Death and instead explore how Americans perceived immoral deaths. If Americans in the North and the South, according to some historians, were captivated with the ambition of dying well during the Civil War, is it possible that they were just as fascinated with less noble and frankly scandalous ways of dying? In other words, was society intrigued, or maybe even entertained by the idea of the Bad Death?

Lastly, the violent and dramatic language expressed within newspaper reports on suicide suggests that the roots of American sensationalism may have begun to sprout during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. While the era of sensationalism is typically associated with "Yellow Journalism" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some historians argue that sensational newspaper reporting actually began during the Civil War era, but most of the evidence used to support this theory is drawn from Northern newspapers.<sup>25</sup> The suicide coverage in Southern newspapers often focused on horrific details, and utilized words such as "barbarous," "horrible," "tragic," "extraordinary," and "unfortunate," which set a sensational tone for the remainder of the article. The degree of detail and the violent imagery found in some of the Southern newspapers is surprising given the importance of religion in the South and the conservative nature of the Victorian era. This suggests that

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<sup>25</sup> David B. Sachsman and David W. Bulla, *Sensationalism: Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Reporting*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

in addition to a changed culture of death, the war may have desensitized people to violent death in general, transforming suicide from a sinful act to parlor conversation.

The goal of this thesis is to illustrate the Civil War's impact off the battlefield—in regard to America's culture of death. The war was, in Abraham Lincoln's words, a "people's contest," and it was the homefront that suffered its cruelties.<sup>26</sup> In 1856, in describing the suicides of three different women, the *Daily Dispatch* wrote, "That in the midst of life we are in death."<sup>27</sup> Little did their readers know that five years later this poetic verse would become a national reality.

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<sup>26</sup> Faust, 137.

<sup>27</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, June 2, 1856.

## Chapter One: Suicides Recorded In The Federal Census

On the eve of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, “the empire for liberty he had bought from Napoleon was sufficient to absorb a hundred generations of America’s population growth.”<sup>28</sup> At the time, the United States was a small, trivial nation in the eyes of the European superpowers; however, by 1850 Americans were spilling over onto the Pacific coast and the United States’ population had surpassed that of Britain to become one of the most populous nations in the Western world. According to James McPherson, “Although the United States remained predominantly rural in this period, the urban population grew three times faster than the rural population from 1810 to 1860—marking the highest rate of urbanization in American history—and the non-agricultural labor force grew from 21 to 45 percent.”<sup>29</sup> This period of immense population growth before the Civil War can be explained by three factors: a declining birth rate; a reduced death rate, and an increase in immigration. From 1800 to 1850, the American birth rate declined by 23 percent as parents wanted to provide their children with a higher degree of nurture and education. Despite this change in the familial structure, the population continued to grow at a steady rate as the decreased birth rate was offset by an increase in immigration and a five percent decrease in the death rate.<sup>30</sup> By 1860, a year before Edmund Ruffin fired the first shot of the Civil War, the United States was at its height of population growth for the first half of the

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<sup>28</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 9.

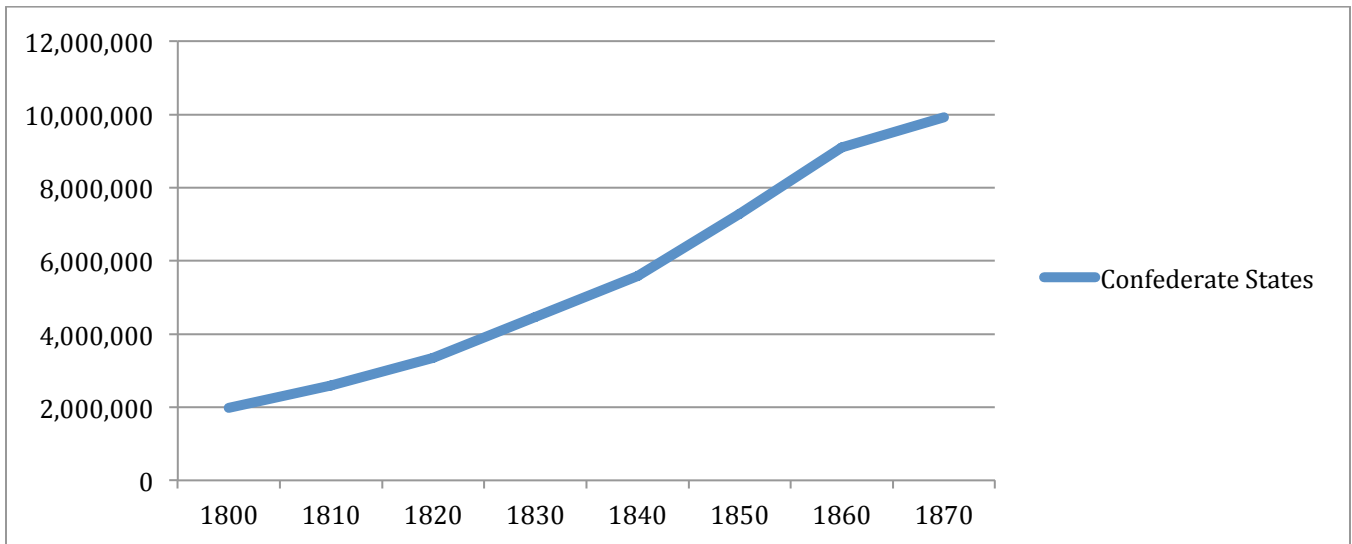
<sup>29</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 10.

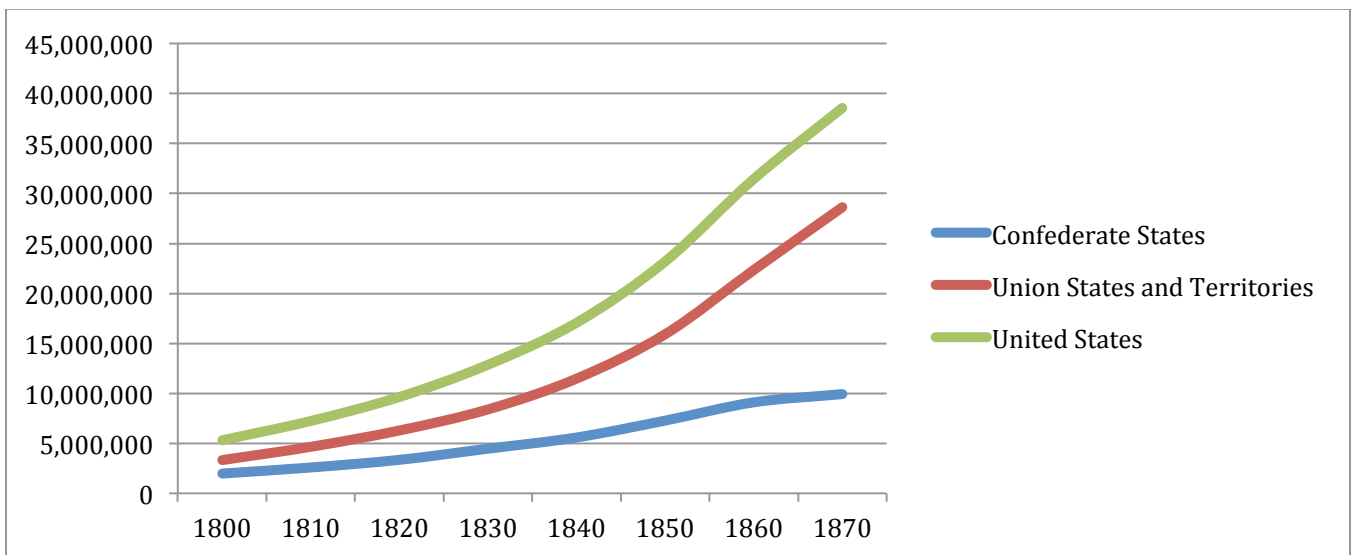
century; however, the Civil War era brought a dramatic decrease in the growth rate, particularly in the Confederate South.<sup>31</sup> See Figure 1.

***The United States Census: Population Decline After The Civil War***

**Figure 1. Population Growth in Confederate States, 1800-1870.<sup>32</sup>**



**Figure 2. Population Growth in United States, 1800-1870.**



<sup>31</sup> When I use the words “Confederate” and “Union” throughout the paper I am referring to the states that either would show or did show their allegiance to either the Confederacy or the Union during the Civil War.

<sup>32</sup> The data presented in each graph was collected from Ancestry.com.



An analysis of census statistics indicates a decreased rate of population growth between 1860 and 1870. In 1860, 31,443,321 people inhabited the United States, and up until this point the country experienced a steady growth rate of about 35% for the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If the population continued to grow at this rate for the next ten years, the population would be just over 42 million people in 1870; however, according to census numbers, the population was 38,558,371, meaning that the growth rate slowed to 22.6%. The separation of the Union states from the Confederate states reveals a more dramatic population decrease within the Confederacy. See Figure 2. As the center of a growing commercial and manufacturing economy, the North experienced a dramatic influx of people into urban areas during the 19<sup>th</sup> century while the South maintained a more moderate growth rate of 30%. In the aftermath of the war population growth in the North decreased slightly, but the Southern population growth rate dropped to nine percent—a dramatic decline that can be attributed to the war’s social and economic impact on the Confederacy.

Confederate veteran families, Jeffrey McClurken explains, were severely affected by the “human impact of the Civil War.”<sup>33</sup> He argues that as wartime debts led to an increase in the proportion of landless veteran farming households from 41% in 1860 to 58% in 1870; many veterans were forced to work on other people’s land, move to another state, or in the case of disabled veterans—which in some communities was at least a third of the veteran population—search for employment outside the sphere of manual labor. The impact of the war on veteran families was not merely financial, but emotional and psychological. McClurken asserts, “Soldiers and their families were affected

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<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey W. McClurken, *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 1.

psychologically by their physical separation during the war, by physical weakening or disabilities, by the Confederate loss of the war, by the end of slavery, by the postwar economic chaos, and, perhaps most seriously, by the deaths of so many for whom they cared so deeply.”<sup>34</sup> Confederate families faced a number of obstacles in reconstructing their lives such as widows’ struggle to provide for their children without a husband, relatives’ attempt to care for family members with psychological disorders brought on by wartime experiences and the difficult transition returning soldiers faced in readjusting to civilian life—a task that was even more burdensome for Confederate soldiers who had to “cope with losing the war and all that that loss entailed (including emancipation and economic difficulties).”<sup>35</sup> According to David Silkenat, the Civil War also placed a strain on marriages as husbands were separated from wives for months at a time, resulting in a dramatic increase in divorce rates in the immediate aftermath of the war. Between 1866 and 1870, North Carolina alone experienced a “divorce crisis” when twenty couples divorced in five counties, a significant number compared to the one divorce granted between 1861 and 1865.<sup>36</sup> Silkenat argues that the social stigma surrounding divorce diminished after the Civil War as more and more couples began to terminate their marriages. Between the lengthy separation of couples during the war period, the higher ratio of women to men in the postwar South, the increase of the divorce rate combined with the declining birth rate of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is likely that, along with the dramatically high death toll of the war, these factors can be attributed to the decreased growth rate between 1860 and 1870. With the severe emotional and psychological

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<sup>34</sup> McClurken, *Take Care of the Living*, 49.

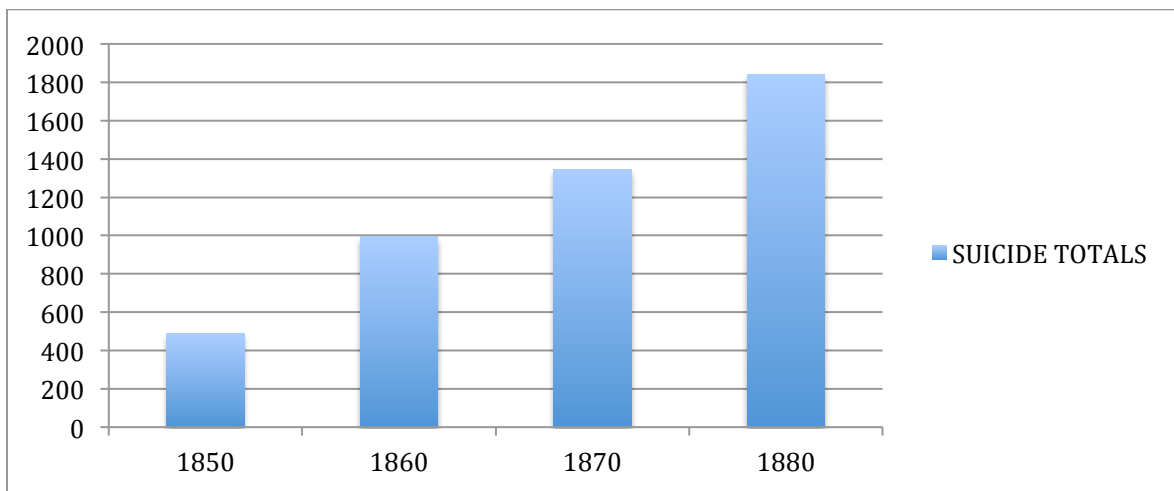
<sup>35</sup> McClurken, *Take Care of the Living*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 103.

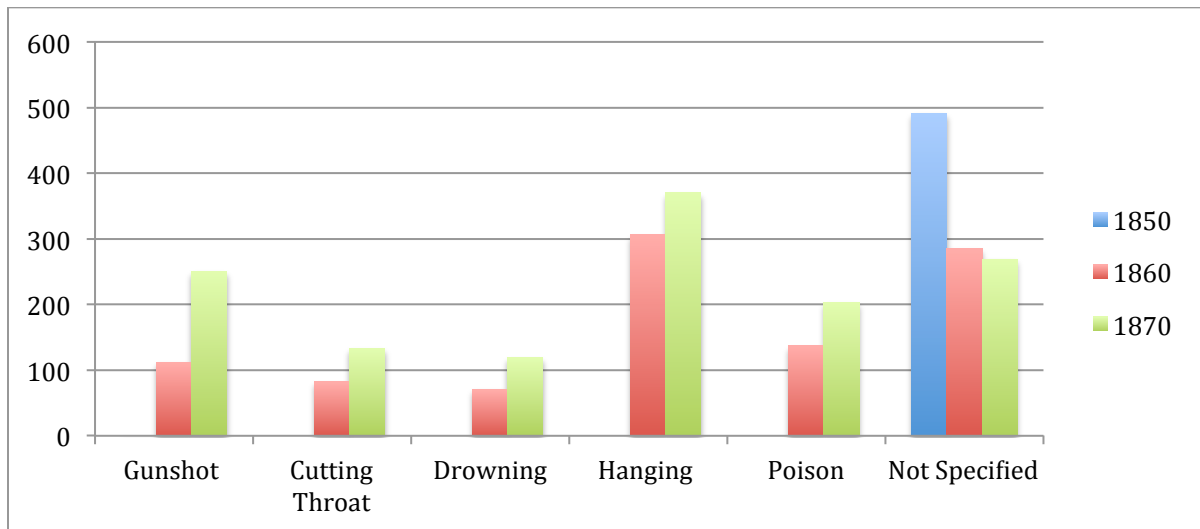
impact the Civil War placed on the Confederacy, one would assume that the suicide rate would have increased. But what is noteworthy is that the Census Mortality Schedules indicate the opposite. The Mortality Schedules reveal that the suicide rate was higher in 1850, slowed during the Civil War era, and then gradually increased after 1870.

***U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules: Suicides***

**Figure 3. Suicides reported in United States Census, 1850-1870.**

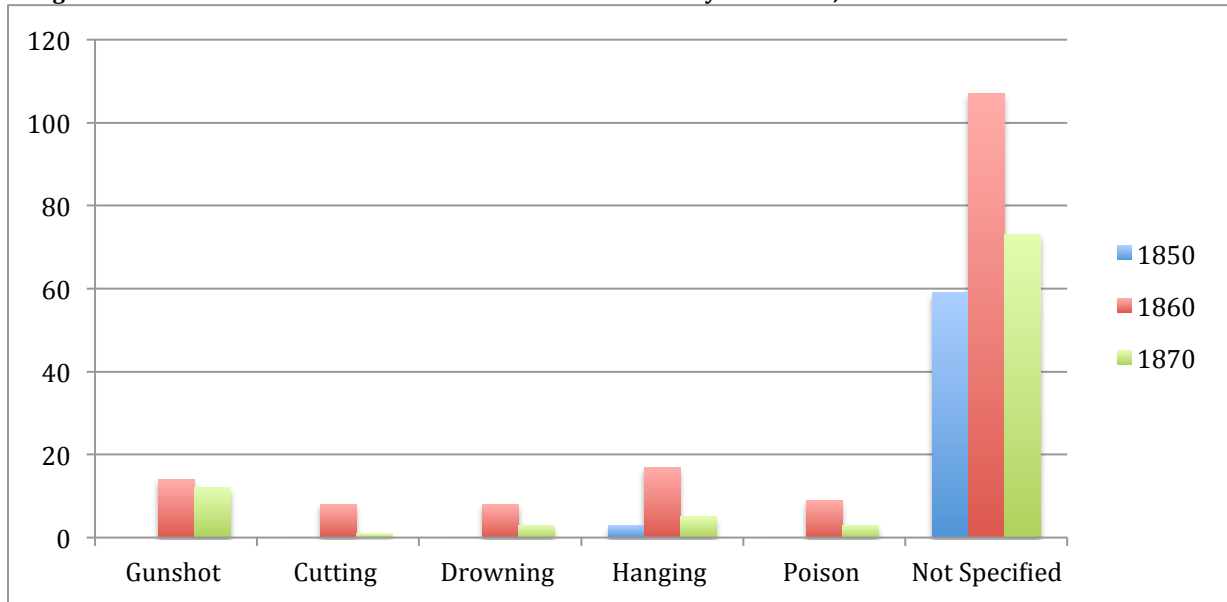


**Figure 4. Means of Suicide, 1850-1870.**



Upon first glance, the Mortality Schedules reveal a gradual increase in suicide between 1850 and 1870. In 1850 the Mortality Schedules recorded 491 suicides; however, over the following decades these numbers increased to 993 in 1860, 1,345 in 1870 and 1,841 in 1880. See Figure 3. Further, the Mortality Schedules divide each suicide by method including suicide by gunshot, cutting throat, drowning, hanging, poison and not specified. The 1850 census reported nearly every suicide as “not specified;” but by 1860 the census delineated more methods. The most common method of ending one’s life was hanging, with 306 suicides in 1860 and 370 in 1870. Suicide by gunshot was the next most common method of self-immolation, with 112 suicides in 1860 and 251 in 1870. See Figure 4. An initial glance reveals a gradual increase among each method. When compared to the population schedule, suicide by cutting throat, drowning and poisoning are aligned with the growth rate. For example, suicides by cutting increased from 82 incidents to 111, which is exactly what is statistically predicted when the growth rate is taken into account. Suicide by gunshot, however, surpasses the general growth rate. As noted earlier, the national growth rate between 1860 and 1870 was 22.6%. If the suicide rate was simply reflective of the growth rate, the number of suicides by gunshot would be approximately 151 in 1870. Rather, it stood at 251—100 more cases than the predicted value. Suicide by gunshot is not the only method that fluctuated from the growth rate. The predicted value for suicide by hanging in 1870 was 413, but the actual value is 348, meaning that, on a national scale, 21% fewer people hanged themselves than statistically predicted.

**Figure 5. Confederate Suicide Methods in U.S. Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1880.**



While the different methods of suicide within the nation as a whole remains consistent with the growth rate—with the exception of suicide by gunshot and hanging—when the Confederate states are isolated a dramatic decrease in each method is evident in 1870. The population growth rate for the Confederate states between 1860 and 1870 was nine percent; therefore, if the suicides were consistent with this rate of growth then the predicted values for 1870 would have increased by a small margin. Rather, each method decreases at the end of the decade. Suicide by cutting results in eight fewer cases than statistically predicted, drowning results in six fewer cases and poison results in seven fewer cases. While there are more gunshot suicide cases than statistically predicted within the nation as a whole, there are three fewer cases in the Confederate states in 1870. Hanging, however, results in a decrease that mirrors the national scale—with 14 fewer cases than the predicted value. Overall, the Mortality Schedules clearly indicated a decrease in southern suicides after the Civil War; however, this finding contradicts Silkenat’s argument that a suicide mania followed the war.

**Table 1. Confederate Suicides Reported in Mortality Schedules, 1860-1870.**

STATE	1850	1860	1870	1880
ALABAMA	6	14	3	11
GEORGIA	13	27	11	23
MISSISSIPPI	--	7	2	--
VIRGINIA/WVA	12	18	19	19
TENNESSEE	4	29	--	30
TEXAS	1	22	35	45
FLORIDA	--	1	8	--
LOUISIANA	7	16	10	29
NORTH CAROLINA	16	21	6	14
SOUTH CAROLINA	3	9	4	15
ARKANSAS	--	3	5	6

Through an analysis of North Carolina newspapers, Silkenat contends that a suicide mania took place after the war as a result of PTSD and “contagious suicide” ignited by an increase in newspaper reporting. The statistics found within the Mortality Schedules contradict his argument—revealing that suicide, not only North Carolina, but all of the southern states actually decreased in 1870 (See Table 1). This contradiction brings into question the reliability of census statistics versus newspaper reports in assessing the suicide rate. In an essay on the census mortality statistics, Irving Fisher wrote that, “In no department has the census failed more signally than in the statistics of mortality.”<sup>37</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century census data is typically flawed due to under enumeration, over enumeration and misreporting.<sup>38</sup> These errors lead to inaccurate population totals, which ultimately “affect the analysis of birth, death, marriage and migration.”<sup>39</sup> Though census data cannot be used as an accurate source, the next chapter assesses the reliability of

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<sup>37</sup> Irving Fisher, “Mortality Statistics of the United States Census,” *Publications of the American Economic Association*, No. 2 (March, 1899): 121.

<sup>38</sup> Richard H. Steckel, “The Quality of Census Data for Historical Inquiry: A Research Agenda,” *Social Science History*, 15, No. 4 (Winter, 1991): 580.

<sup>39</sup> Steckel, “The Quality of Census Data for Historical Inquiry,” 581.

newspapers in studying suicide. Suicide reports not only in North Carolina, but in most of the Confederate states, increased both before and after the Civil War, suggesting that either a suicide mania *did* take place or that Southerners were simply interested in reading about self-murder, establishing a suicide mania defined by cultural fascination rather than literal death.

## Chapter Two: Suicides Recorded In Newspapers

The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined by a rapid growth in newspaper reporting. According to David N. Sachsman and David W. Bulla, “The growth of newspapers in America was the direct result of the increases in a largely literate population and was fueled by the expansion of advertising that came as a result of the development of manufacturing,” as well as enormous changes in technology.<sup>40</sup> In addition to an increased rate of population growth—as noted in the previous chapter, literacy was also extraordinarily high throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which provided a larger audience for newspapers. The literacy rate in the Northern states in 1800 was around 75 percent, and it increased to roughly 90 percent by 1840. The Southern states also saw an increase in literacy during this period from about 60 to 81 percent. By 1870, the national literacy rate, despite the recent emancipation of millions of illiterate African-Americans, was up to roughly 80 percent.<sup>41</sup> At the turn of the century, there were about two hundred newspapers in the United States. These newspapers were largely politically-oriented weeklies, which were read by elite members of society who could afford to purchase a subscription. The 1830s, however, saw the rise of the penny press, which greatly increased the number of newspapers being produced. In 1833 there were approximately 1,200 newspapers, and by 1860, there were over 3,000. The penny press newspapers were cheap and sold on the street, thus creating a larger demographic of newspaper readers—from upper class citizens to the average middle class person.

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<sup>40</sup> David B. Sachsman and David W. Bulla, *Sensationalism: Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Reporting*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013), xviii.

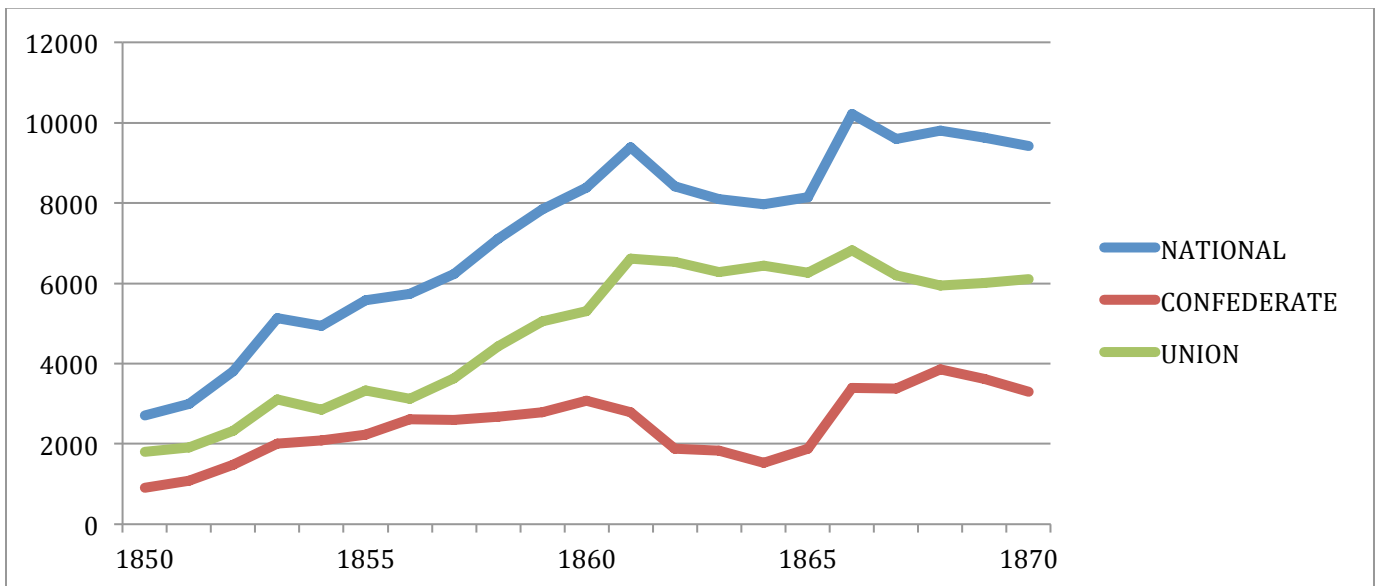
<sup>41</sup> Sachsman and Bulla, *Sensationalism*, xviii.



Moreover, “rather than giving readers long, boring accounts of politics or other affairs,” Sachsman and Bulla noted, “these papers contained juicy gossip of the time”—which included the unusual, the scandalous and the bloody.

### *United States Newspaper Growth*

**Figure 6. Newspaper Growth in the United States, 1850-1870 By Location of States During Civil War<sup>42</sup>**



An analysis of newspaper statistics indicates a decrease in the number of newspapers in circulation between 1860 and 1870. See Figure 6. Between 1850 and 1860, the United States experienced exponential growth in newspaper production in what would be the Union and Confederate states. The total number of newspapers in circulation leaped from 2,707 in 1850 to 8,392 by 1860—signifying that the rate of newspaper production grew by approximately 310%. This dramatic increase in newspaper production was not restricted to the North or the South; indeed, in the South the increase was 420% and in the North 295%. However, during the decade of the Civil

<sup>42</sup> The information presented in each graph was collected from the Library of Congress archives at [chroniclingamerica.com](http://chroniclingamerica.com).

War there was a dramatic decrease in newspaper growth. In 1865 there were 244 fewer newspapers in circulation than in 1860. Additionally, by 1870, the 9,413 newspapers in the nation represented only a mere 12% increase for the 1860s. This decrease is especially prevalent in the Confederate states. For example, between 1860 and 1865 Tennessee newspapers dropped from 1,110 to 471, Virginia newspapers from 361 to 261, Louisiana from 1,021 to 360, and North Carolina from 342 to 89. The only Confederate state that experienced an increase in newspapers was South Carolina, which grew from 212 to 654 from 1860 to 1865. While the growth rate of newspaper production after the war does not compare to the antebellum period, the Confederate states did experience a general increase in the number of newspapers in circulation—which is likely the result of reconstruction in the South, and it may in part be the rise of African-American publications. By 1870 Tennessee had 841 more newspapers in circulation than in 1865, Louisiana 364 more, South Carolina 312 more, and North Carolina 41 more. The only state that did not experience an increase in newspapers was Virginia—whose total dropped from 261 to 120.

The dramatic decrease in the number of newspapers in the Confederate states surely is attributed to the war. The decrease in Virginia newspapers, for example, was caused by the demise of the Richmond *Daily Dispatch*. The *Daily Dispatch* was one of four dailies printed in Richmond and in 1860 it had a circulation equal to that of its three capital city rivals combined. While the *Daily Dispatch* was an enormously popular periodical of the antebellum and Civil War periods, its publication ceased temporarily in 1865 when its offices were destroyed by the city's devastating evacuation fire. The *Daily Dispatch* was widely read throughout the city because of its focus on such sensational

topics as crime and accidents.<sup>43</sup> According to Bulla and Sachman, *Daily Dispatch* publisher J. A. Cowardin and editor Church R. Pleasants were more interested in reporting not simply local news, but entertaining “oddities” that would catch the reader’s attention.<sup>44</sup> During its years of circulation, the *Daily Dispatch* reported on various sensational topics including murder, robbery, accidents and suicide. In 1860, the *Daily Dispatch* released 309 newspapers. These newspapers contained 177 references to suicide—115 of which were placed on the front page. While the *Daily Dispatch* cannot be used to assess the degree of suicide reporting after the war, other Confederate newspapers—especially those in Tennessee and South Carolina—indicate an increase in suicide reporting after the Civil War. See Figure 3. Before delving into the sensational nature of these articles, however, it is critical to determine the reliability of Confederate newspapers in measuring the actual rate of suicide between 1860 and 1870.

### ***Newspapers: Suicide***

There are a number of instances, throughout both the wartime period and reconstruction, in which Confederate newspapers reported an apparent “suicide mania” within the United States. In the summer of 1868 the South Carolina *Daily Phoenix* reported the emergence of a “suicide mania” in the United States: “If there has been a dearth of murder, or other startling crimes, of late, it seems that the tendency to suicide amounts to almost a mania. There has been an average of one a day, for a month, reported by the health staticians.”<sup>45</sup> That same summer the Tennessee *Athens Post*

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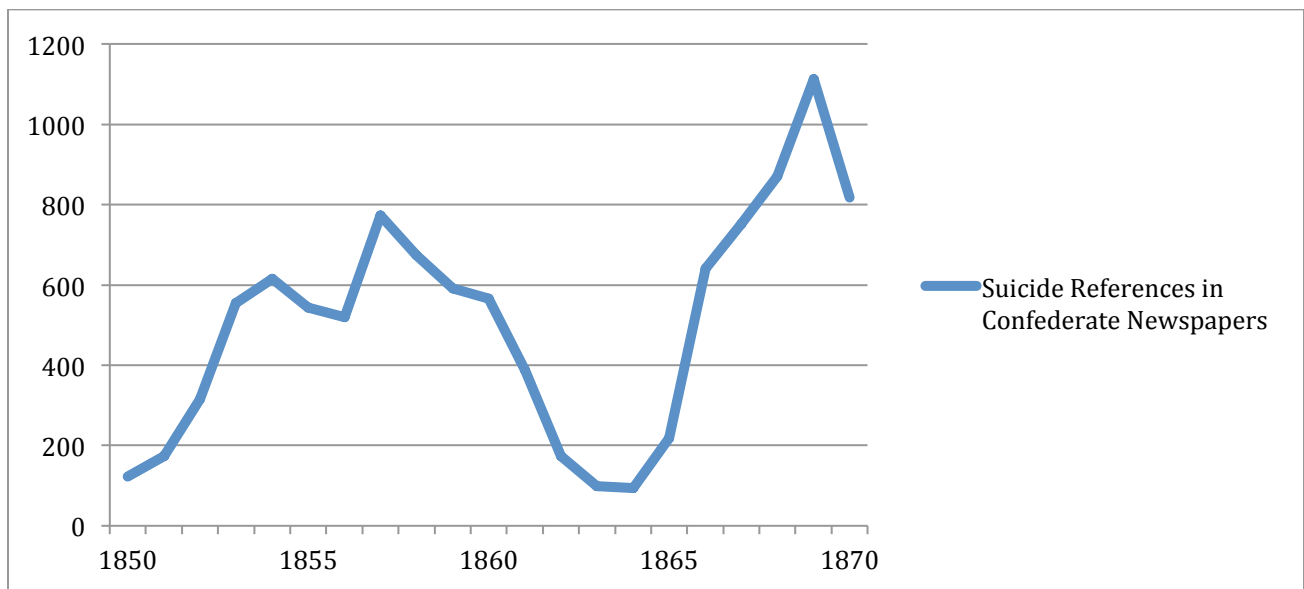
<sup>43</sup> Sachsman and Bulla, *Sensationalism*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Sachsman and Bulla, *Sensationalism*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> *The Daily Phoenix*, June 12, 1868.

reported, “The mania for suicide seems to be rather on the increase. The great majority of cases are on account of disappointed love; some before marriage but by much the greater number after.”<sup>46</sup> Two years earlier in the summer of 1866 *The Nashville Daily Union* warned, “The mania for suicide appears to be on the increase everywhere. We have been called on to record several in this city, recently, and our exchanges are full of them.”<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 7. References to Suicide in Confederate State Newspapers, 1850-1870**



The unreliability of suicide statistics during the antebellum and Civil War eras makes it difficult to determine whether Confederate newspapers’ perceptions of a suicide mania reflected a real phenomenon or merely an increased awareness of suicide.<sup>48</sup> David Silkenat found in his analysis of North Carolina newspapers that between 1840 and 1893,

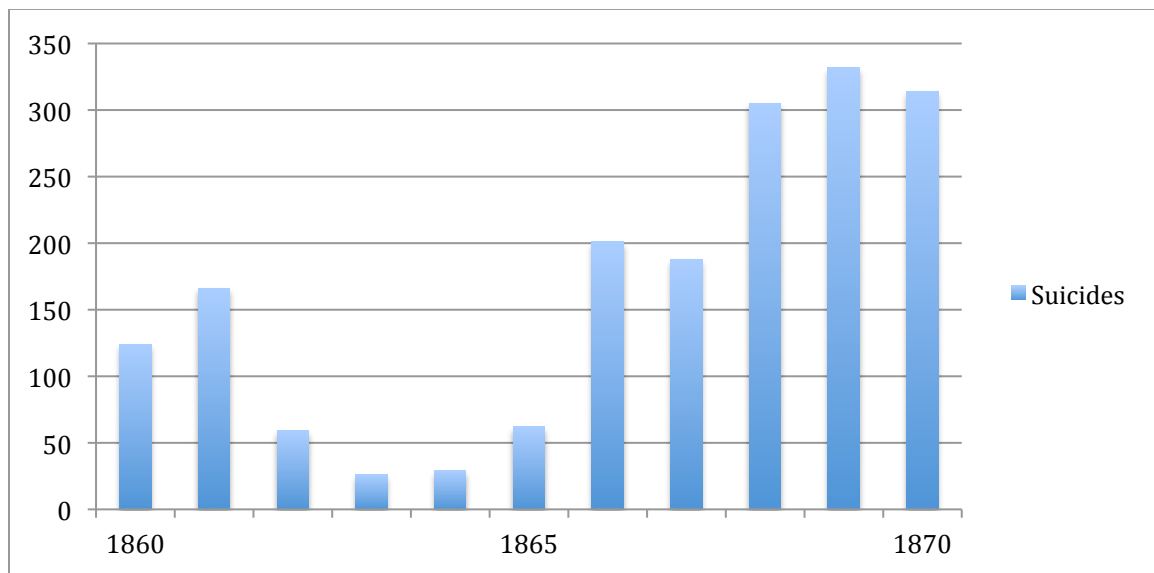
<sup>46</sup> *Athens Post*, August 7, 1868.

<sup>47</sup> *The Nashville Daily Union*, May 3, 1866.

<sup>48</sup> David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 28.

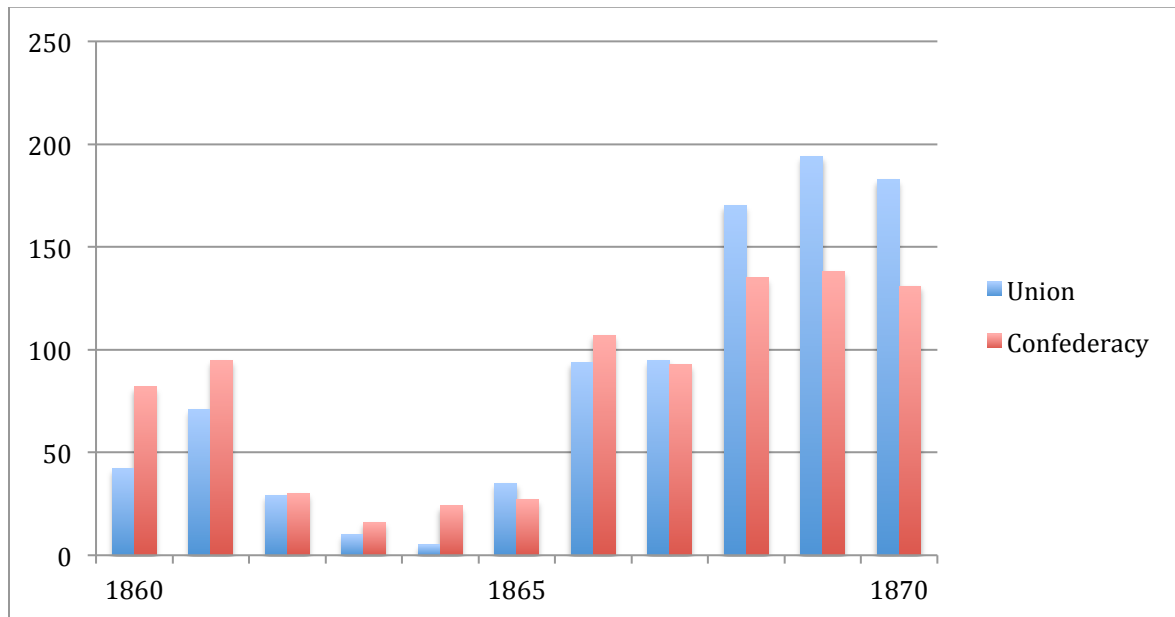
suicide became dramatically more visible in white public discourse.<sup>49</sup> As Figure 7 indicates, the initial postwar years experienced an increase in reports on, discussions of, and references to suicide in Confederate newspapers. The antebellum period also experienced a gradual increase in references to suicide in Confederate newspapers with 122 references in 1850 and 566 in 1860. The actual wartime period resulted in a sudden decrease in suicide discourse dropping to only 218 references in 1865. See Figure 7. This drop is likely associated with the fact that there were fewer newspapers in circulation during the war. The gradual increases in suicide reporting during the 1850s and throughout reconstruction, however, suggest two theories: a suicide mania *did* take place or suicide became a topic of national interest. In order to determine which explanation is correct, it is necessary to isolate the individual suicides reported by Confederate newspapers.

**Figure 8. Suicides Reported in Confederate State Newspapers, 1860-1870**



<sup>49</sup> Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 28.

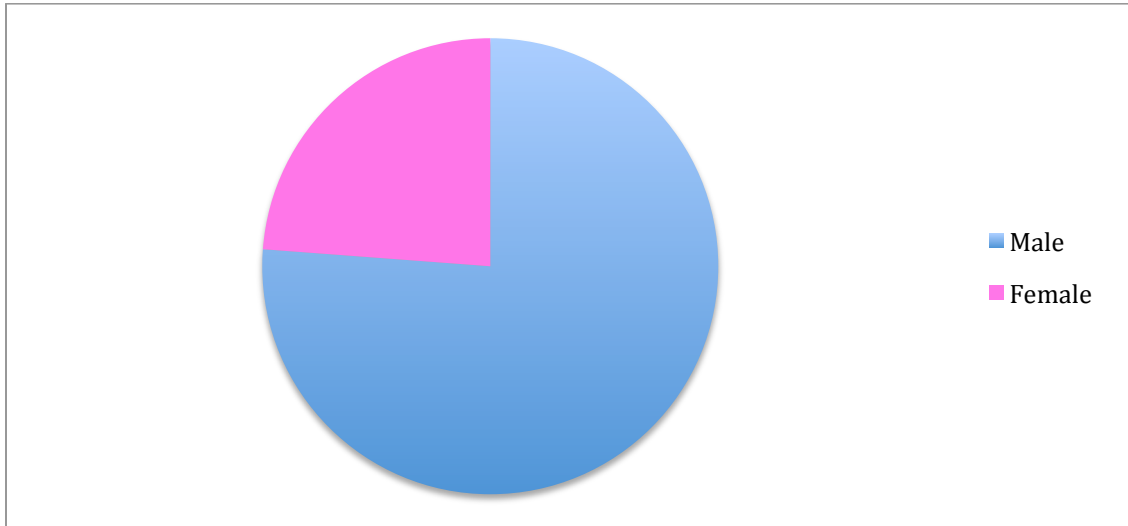
**Figure 9. Confederate and Union Suicides Reported in Confederate Newspapers, 1860-1870.**



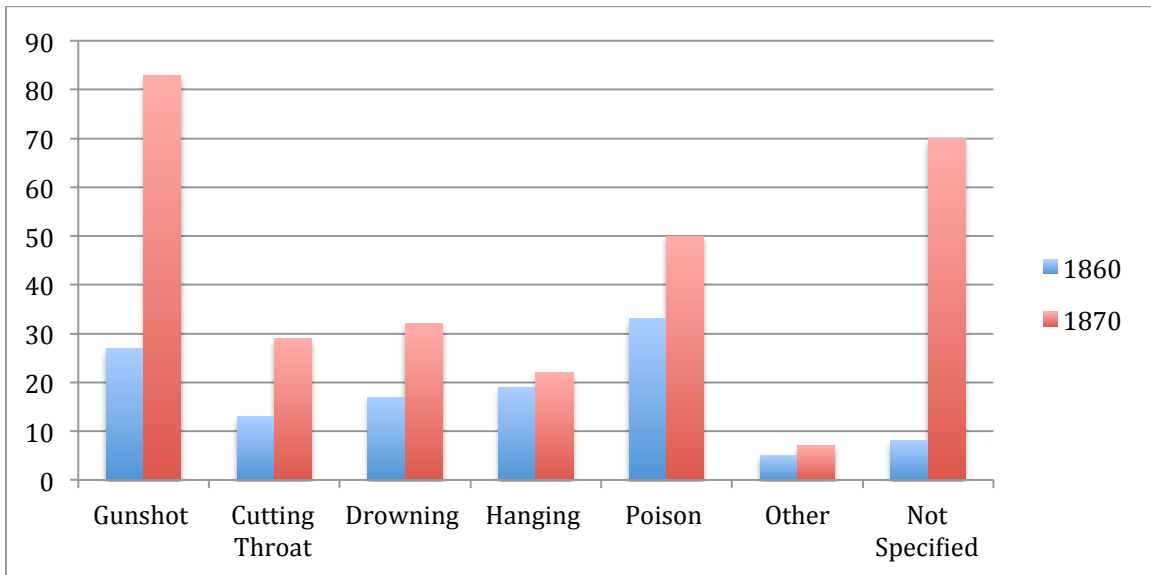
In terms of actual suicides—including attempted suicides—Confederate newspapers indicated a rapid decrease in suicide during the wartime period, which was then followed by a sudden increase in suicide after 1865. In 1860, Confederate newspapers reported 124 individual suicides throughout the country. By 1870, this number increased to 314 suicides. What is noteworthy is the increase in suicides after the war. Between 1865 and 1870, suicides reported in Confederate newspapers increased by 406%, exceeding the overall growth rate of Confederate newspapers circulating after the war. Further, Union and Confederate state suicides were fairly equal throughout the decade. See Figure 9. Of all the suicides reported in Confederate newspapers, 51% were Union suicides and 49% were Confederate suicides. Between 1865 and 1870, reports of Union suicides surpassed that of Confederate suicides with 140 additional reports. See Figure 10. Upon first glance Figure 7 seems to justify Confederate newspaper claims of a “suicide mania” following the Civil War. This increase, however, was not so much attributed to an actual suicide phenomenon, but simply the nature of newspaper reporting

during the era, which was much more focused on covering sensational topics than accurately recording every individual suicide.

**Figure 10. Suicide by Gender in Confederate Newspapers.**



**Figure 11. Methods of Suicide in Confederate Newspapers, 1860-1870.**



While newspaper accounts did not provide a full record of suicide during the Civil War era, they did provide meaningful insight into the social profile of suicide.<sup>50</sup> Newspapers are valuable sources in assessing regional, racial and gender patterns for suicide victims, as well as the nature of the suicide and the life of the victim. From 1860 to 1870, the majority of suicides—as reported in Confederate newspapers—were male, with a total of 76% for the entire decade. See Figure 10. The average suicide reported in Confederate newspapers mirrors that of the census—a white man aged 43 to 44 years old. Approximately half of the suicide articles offered some indication of the social status of the victim. Most male victims were described as “prominent citizens,” “citizens of influence and distinction” and “well-to-do farmers.” For example, the *Daily Dispatch* described former Sheriff Captain David F. Hoy, who shot himself in 1864, as an “old and well-known citizen of Petersburg.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, *The Daily Phoenix* reported that E. G. Buffum, “an old and prominent American journalist and author,” poisoned himself in 1867.<sup>52</sup> That same year *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* described the suicide of William Simms, “a well known and highly respectable citizen.”<sup>53</sup>

The average female suicide was a white woman between the ages of 17 and 24—a much younger age range than the average female recorded in the Mortality Schedules. The young age range of female suicides does not necessarily indicate that only young women committed suicide during the Civil War era, but that Confederate newspaper publishers felt inclined to report these deaths due to the romantic context that often surrounded them. For all of the female suicides reported between 1860 and 1870, 40%

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<sup>50</sup> Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, July 8, 1864.

<sup>52</sup> *The Daily Phoenix*, December 27, 1867.

<sup>53</sup> *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, April 29, 1867.



were described as resulting from “disappointed love” or “domestic troubles.” For example, in 1869 the *Clarksville Chronicle* reported that a young girl threw herself under a railroad train after her parents refused to allow her to marry a young man to whom she was attached. The report notes, “A letter was found in the pocket of her dress, directed to her lover, bidding him an affectionate good-bye.”<sup>54</sup> In 1870, *The Fairfield Herald* reported a similar suicide. After a quarrel with her father over her request to marry her lover, Lucinda North, aged sixteen, threw herself under a train, tearing her to pieces to the point where “the only way she was identified was by her hat and shawl.”<sup>55</sup> Likewise, in 1867 *The Newberry Herald* reported that Miss Mary Hackett “discharged the contents of a loaded shot-gun into her head. Cause, disappointment in love.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1860, almost all Confederate newspapers reported the method that suicide victims used to end their lives. See Figure 11. Approximately one-fourth chose poison for the deed, followed by gunshot (22%), hanging (15%), drowning (14%) and cutting throat (11%). Of all the suicides reported in newspapers for that year, only eight did not specify method. By 1870, however, 24% of all suicides did not specify method. The number of suicides by gunshot more than tripled with 56 additional reports; therefore, similar to the census, newspaper statistics suggest an increase in suicide by gunshot after the Civil War. The increase in unspecified suicides suggests a changed cultural attitude. Although newspaper editors never failed to indicate when someone committed suicide in a particularly spectacular or bloody way, these types of gruesome reports were much more prevalent during the antebellum period. As suicide reporting became more

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<sup>54</sup> *Clarksville Chronicle*, February 5, 1869.

<sup>55</sup> *The Fairfield Herald*, March 30, 1870.

<sup>56</sup> *The Newberry Herald*, July 24, 1867.

common after the Civil War, Silkenat claims, “suicide articles tended to devote less attention to the method employed and more attention to describing the life of the individual who committed the act. The graphic descriptions that characterized antebellum suicide articles gave way to more balanced accounts that focused on the overall narrative arc of the deceased’s life rather than exclusively on its final downward spiral.”<sup>57</sup> In addition to focusing less on gory details, newspapers began to provide more detailed accounts of *why* individuals committed suicide rather than *how*. Suicide victims killed themselves for a variety of reasons, including insanity, poor health, family problems and financial problems. These causes were recurring themes in suicide reports before, during and after the Civil War. Where these three periods differ, however, was in the sensational nature of suicide reports. The next chapter provides a qualitative analysis of the content of suicide reports in Confederate newspapers and how the country’s changed perception of death, spurred by the Civil War, transformed suicide reporting from gruesome, sensational stories to sympathetic obituaries of the deceased’s life.

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<sup>57</sup> Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 34.

### Chapter Three: The Nature of Suicide Reports In Newspapers

On January 28, 1860, the *Daily Dispatch* reported the particularly gruesome suicide of a teenage boy.

A few mornings ago, the engineer of a train on the Troy and Greenbush Railroad, N.Y., saw a boy lying upon the track with his face downward. The engineer sounded the whistle, put on the brakes, and reversed the engines, but the person did not stir, and it was impossible to stop the train before it came upon him. Of course he was instantly killed, and mangled in the most shocking manner. The head was completely crushed to a jelly, from a point above the mouth, and presented a horrible spectacle of mutilation. The left arm was broken at the middle of the hand and between the shoulder and the elbow, and the right arm severed just below the shoulder. The body was taken up and carried to Troy and an inquest [was] held. The stomach was in a very healthy condition, and exhibited no signs of liquor. The body was recognized by persons who saw it to be that of Edward Campton, the son of a laboring man in the employ of Mr. Murphy, brewer. He was about 15 years of age. It appears that he ran away from home about four weeks ago, and had not been seen by any of his friends meanwhile. The probabilities are that the boy had become desperate and perhaps destitute, and that sooner than return to his home, he resorted to an awful expedient of committing suicide to end his troubles.<sup>58</sup>

The sensationalistic details displayed in the *Daily Dispatch's* description of Edward Campton's death were typical of many suicide reports in antebellum newspapers. Americans growing up between 1800 and 1860 straddled two eras. The United States was characterized by early death, rampant epidemics, and dramatically high mortality rates, but the nation also experienced major public health advances, antiseptic surgery, and antibiotics that raised hopes for longer and more robust lives. Drew Gilpin Faust notes, "Some scholars have suggested that in the 1840s and 1850s, life expectancy in America may actually have dipped slightly in comparison with the earlier part of the

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<sup>58</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, January 28, 1860.

nineteenth century. If this is true, then the generation of Americans who stood on the cusp of the Civil War knew death even better than did their parents.”<sup>59</sup>

Americans were not only increasingly aware of death, but morbidly fascinated with it as well. According to Gary Laderman, during the antebellum period one crucial element of America’s culture of death was the morbid gaze. The morbid gaze was a trait of growing importance to Protestant antebellum culture. Laderman explains that it involved “the desire to contemplate such mementos as locks of hair, as well as to be with the deceased, to sustain the last look, and to monitor the early stages of decomposition.”

<sup>60</sup> Antebellum Americans wished to maintain physical proximity to their deceased loved ones, resist the finality that comes with bodily disintegration and descend into the damp and dreary tomb to gaze upon the decaying bones. This cultural fascination with death was especially prevalent within antebellum literature and newspaper reporting on suicide. The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century experienced a dramatic increase in sensational literature. As noted in the previous chapter, the emergence of this form of literature began with the growth of the penny press, which regularly reported gruesome atrocities and perversities. These violent and scandalous reports found a mainstream audience that was largely male. Gary Laderman notes, “Those intrigued by such narratives preferred lust over love, adventure over domesticity, and dismembered and rotting corpses over heavenly family reunions.”<sup>61</sup>

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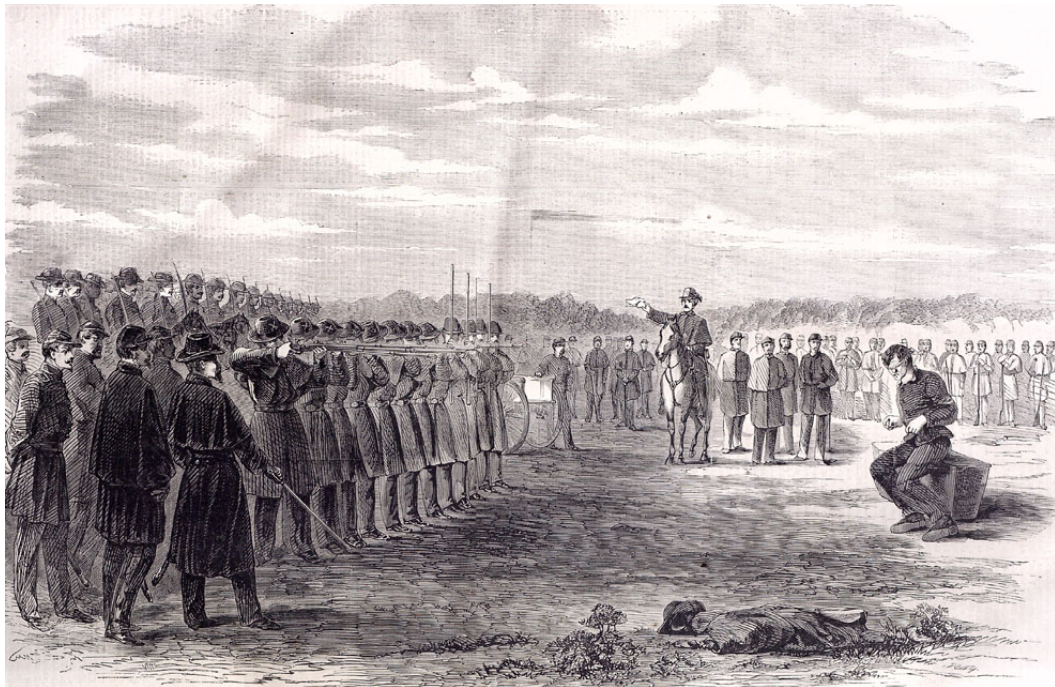
<sup>59</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 76.

<sup>61</sup> Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 79.

The morbid obsessions of the antebellum period clearly reflected a culture surrounded by death. Early nineteenth-century Americans were intimately familiar with death and they encountered it in all aspects of life. Faust writes that 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans experienced death in their “homes and witnessed it in their streets. They had washed the corpses of loved ones and laid them out in their parlors. They had seen bodies wasted by epidemics piled in city gutters.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, the pervasiveness of death in antebellum America prepared an entire generation to view it not as something to be avoided, but as the inevitable destiny of humanity.

**A Bad Death.** *"The Execution of the Deserter William Johnson." Harper's Weekly, December 28, 1861.*



In addition to a nation surrounded by death, antebellum America possessed guidelines for how to die well, which Drew Gilpin Faust terms the “Good Death.” The Good Death was both a social and religious experience that involved dying painlessly at home, surrounded by one’s family, the Bible and ideally with a moving last word and

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<sup>62</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 9.

testament. The manner in which one died was seen as a reflection of a life already lived and predicted the quality of one's afterlife.<sup>63</sup> The Bad Death, on the other hand, was abrupt and typically violent. Faust uses prisoner executions as examples of improper ways to die: "An execution compelled its witnesses literally to confront death and to consider the proper path toward life's final hour."<sup>64</sup>

Given the requirements necessary to achieve the Good Death—a painless experience in which family members supported their loved one's as they moved on from the physical world to heaven—suicide did not seem to fit this category. Rather, suicide was much more like execution. It was an abrupt, violent way to leave the physical world, making suicide more characteristic of the Bad than the Good Death. The violent nature of suicide made it a topic of morbid fascination in antebellum newspapers, but the focus of these reports changed with the emergence of a more sympathetic perception of death—both Bad and Good—during the Civil War. The deaths experienced by both Union and Confederate soldiers were reminiscent of suicide in that they were abrupt, violent, and the deceased typically died alone. In other words, while soldier deaths were seen as noble sacrifices, the violent nature of death on the battlefield still denied young men the chance to die the traditional Good Death—the ideal peaceful, dignified death. Even more noteworthy, however, was that the brutal nature of the Civil War also forced Southerners, both soldiers and civilians, to reconsider traditional notions of courage and suicide as some Confederate soldiers—disturbed by the emotional and psychological trauma of the battlefield—chose to end their own lives. According to Diane Sommerville, soldier suicide ushered in an altered cultural meaning of suicide and broadened the definition of

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<sup>63</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 27.

the Good Death. Sommerville explains, Confederate soldiers took their own lives to escape what they understood to be worse fates than suicide: “to avoid shame, to relieve themselves of paralyzing anxiety, or to liberate themselves from trauma-induced madness and to seek solace in a reconfigured, reimagined Good Death” (490). I do not agree with Sommerville’s assertion that the Good Death began to encompass suicide during the Civil War era. Suicide was still seen as a regrettable way to die as 18.4% of suicide reports in southern newspapers for 1870 still possessed gruesome details or a judgmental tone, and soldier suicides were by no means seen as heroic. Nevertheless, the changed culture of death spurred by the Civil War seemed to influence the way suicide was discussed in the South. Southern newspaper reports of both soldier and civilian suicides during this time period adopted a more sympathetic tone, no longer focusing on the sensational condition of the body or the moral implication of the act, but highlighting the narrative arc of the deceased’s life. Suicide was not a Good Death, but southern newspapers appeared to adopt critical aspects of the Good Death—highlighting the biography of the deceased and publishing final words—when writing about suicide. Through a qualitative analysis of suicide reports in Confederate newspapers, this chapter will explore the changed culture of death through southern views of suicide before, during and after the Civil War.

### ***Sensational Suicide in the Antebellum Era***

Statistics from the antebellum period reveal that the South possessed a stronger reputation for violence than the North. According to Dickson D. Bruce, “Murder rates were significantly higher in the South in 1850, and although Northern rates increased between 1850 and 1860, the South maintained its rather dubious edge on the North in that

latter year.”<sup>65</sup> Regardless of race or class, the South possessed a firm culture of violence that was unique to the region. Southern gentlemen were noted for turning to violence in defense of their honor, Southern planters had utilized violence within the system of slavery and middle- and lower-class whites made community brawls a regular social event.<sup>66</sup> Violence in the antebellum South was not only seen as unavoidable, but it was an essential fact of human life.<sup>67</sup> The South’s culture of violence was especially prevalent in antebellum newspaper reports on suicide. Like the *Daily Dispatch*’s report on Edward Campton’s death, Southern newspapers throughout the 1850s and up until the Civil War displayed particularly graphic accounts of people who committed suicide. In 1859, the *Daily Dispatch* featured a front-page report titled “Horrible Murder and Suicide.”

A horrible murder and suicide was committed near Monticello, Ind., on Saturday last. Mr. Arthur Burns, an old farmer, who had been divorced from his wife, but was again married to the same woman after a separation of several years, deliberately loaded his gun with heavy slugs and shot her through the head, as she sat knitting before the fire. Reloading the gun, he placed the muzzle to his mouth, and pulling the trigger with his toe, blew his brains out. He was instantly killed. The unfortunate woman, although shot through the brain, lingered for two days, when she expired in great agony.<sup>68</sup>

The *Daily Dispatch*’s report of the Burns family murder/suicide used vivid detail in describing the horrific scene of the crime, noting that Mr. Burns literally “blew his brains out,” and emphasizing that Mrs. Burns died an incredibly painful death. The report only provides a brief biography of the deceased, but the focus is clearly placed on

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<sup>65</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 4.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South*, 4-5.

<sup>67</sup> Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, March 9, 1859.



the act of suicide and the physical condition of the body. Similarly, in 1856, the North Carolina *Western Democrat* reported the suicide of Frederick Eggers who was engaged to a young lady named Caroline Gerdeman. Titled “Love and Suicide in St. Louis,” the article did not hesitate to include a gruesome description of Eggers’ remains.

On Saturday afternoon he was found in his room dead, with the whole top of his head literally blown off, and his brains scattered over the room. In his right hand was still grasped the pistol with which the terrible deed had been done, and in his left was a letter from Miss Gerdeman, refusing to enter the proposed marriage. The jury returned a verdict of suicide.<sup>69</sup>

Like Arthur Burns suicide, the *Western Democrat’s* report focused solely on the method of suicide and the condition of Eggers’ body. By noting that the entire top half of Eggers’ head and brains were scattered across the floor, the report literally recreated the image of the suicide for the reader. Additionally, North Carolina newspapers were not the only southern papers to report suicides in Northern cities like St. Louis. Northerners committed 39% of the suicides reported in southern newspapers for 1860, illustrating that southern newspaper’ editors did not discriminate based on region, but were interested in reporting suicides on a national scale. For instance, in 1859, the *Daily Dispatch* published a sensational front-page report on the death of a St. Louis dentist titled “A Determined Suicide.”

Dr. Charles Merry, dentist, committed suicide recently near St. Louis, by first cutting his throat and then throwing his bleeding body before a train of twenty-four cars on the Iron Mountain Railroad, all of which passed over him. Both legs were severed immediately above the knees so that they hung together only by the skin. One of the feet was crushed to a jelly; more than half of the head was cut off in a transverse direction, and the brains, fragments of skull, etc., scattered along the track. A small penknife, the blade of which was not more than an inch and a half in

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<sup>69</sup> *The Western Democrat*, September 9, 1856.

length, was found on the outside and a few feet from the rails. The knife was covered with blood.<sup>70</sup>

Like the other reports, the *Daily Dispatch* painted a vividly gruesome picture of Dr. Merry's remains. The only biography the newspaper reports is that the deceased was a dentist. Otherwise, the report is solely centered on the moment of suicide and its aftermath.

The gruesome and sensational nature of these articles, which especially in the *Daily Dispatch* were often placed on the front-page, suggests that southern readers possessed a morbid fascination with violent death. While the Good Death was seen as the ideal manner of exiting the physical world, the Bad Death was a topic of fascination and even entertainment. During the antebellum period, sensational literature that glorified violence, explored the more disturbing forces of human nature, and fixated on the pleasures, pain, and corruptibility of the human body" increased dramatically amongst Americans.<sup>71</sup> Newspaper reports of sensational topics such as suicide, murder and accidents tended to be longer in the North; however, Southern newspapers displayed a higher degree of sensational language.<sup>72</sup> Each report provided a detailed description of the deceased's body after death and the method used to commit suicide. Through words such as "jelly," "crushed," "brains," "blood," and "fragments of skull," newspaper accounts of suicide attempted to recreate the image of the body for the reader. Further, newspapers often described suicides as "barbarous," "horrible," "tragic," "extraordinary," and "unfortunate." According to David W. Bulla and David B. Sachman, these words

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<sup>70</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, December 24, 1859.

<sup>71</sup> Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 79.

<sup>72</sup> David B. Sachman, and David W. Bulla. *Sensationalism: Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Reporting*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 76.

were central to the discourse of sensational news reporting.<sup>73</sup> Historians tend to locate the origin of American sensationalism with the rise of “Yellow Journalism” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the sensational nature of suicide reporting in Southern and then later Confederate newspapers, the degree of grotesque detail included within newspaper reports, and the increased popularity of morbid literature suggest that these roots actually began to sprout during the antebellum period. On the other hand, while Southern newspapers’ tendency to focus on the violent aspects of suicide indicated a morbid fascination amongst southern audiences, this style of reporting may also have been driven by moral intentions.

In his analysis of suicide in Philadelphia, Roger Lane notes, “The Philadelphia *Public Ledger* treated suicide as news and often as an opportunity for the brief expression of moral opinion or sentiment.”<sup>74</sup> This trend was also evident within Southern newspapers. While newspapers were a source of morbid entertainment, many suicide reports ended with a brief note warning the reader to beware of intemperance, love, gambling or whatever immoral act may have led to the suicide. Further the gruesome and detailed descriptions of the body after death were disturbing for audiences to read, suggesting that newspapers wanted to both shock and deter readers from self-murder. In the antebellum South, the idea of passion was central to the region’s culture of violence and perception of morality. Passion referred to irrational, selfish motivations in which individuals acted on spontaneous feelings. Southerners contrasted passion with reason and saw it as an uncontrollable force capable of leading people to act in ways they would

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<sup>73</sup> Sachman and Bulla, *Sensationalism*, xxi.

<sup>74</sup> Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-century Philadelphia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 30.

later regret. Under certain circumstances passion was necessary; for example, Bruce notes that “pride was a passion of the mind, by which people [were] often aroused from a state of inaction and idleness, to one of industry and honor.”<sup>75</sup> Violence was prominent within southern culture, but selfish and spontaneous acts of violence also threatened the core of southern masculinity, which was defined by public displays of honor, courage and unflinching stoicism in the face of danger.<sup>76</sup> The only way to limit violent acts such as suicide was by restraining people from falling victim to self-indulgent passion. Further, from a religious perspective, suicide was condemned as a mortal sin.<sup>77</sup> Protestant and Catholic theology equated suicide with cowardice and selfishness, and argued that it was a violation of God’s supreme authority. While suicide in America was not punished by legal means, as it was in England, at the outbreak of the Civil War the popular and religious stigma attached to suicide largely remained.<sup>78</sup> These southern perceptions of suicide and violent death, however, did not outlive the antebellum period. Rather, as Diane Sommerville notes in her study of Confederate soldier suicide, “The brutal and protracted experience of war forced Confederates, both soldiers and civilians, to reconsider the meaning of many traditional convictions and ideals to which they had clung when the war began,” ushering in a tolerant, sympathetic view of suicide.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Diane M. Sommerville, “A Burden Too Heavy to Bear” War Trauma, Suicide and Confederate Soldiers,” *Civil War History*. 59.4 (2013): 455.

<sup>77</sup> Sommerville, “A Burden Too Heavy to Bear,” 471.

<sup>78</sup> Sommerville, “A Burden Too Heavy to Bear,” 472.

<sup>79</sup> Sommerville, “A Burden Too Heavy to Bear,” 455.

### *Sympathetic Perceptions of Suicide During and After the Civil War*

According to David Silkenat, “Ideas and actions reinforce each other in a period of stasis. At other times, however, small changes in behavior or attitudes can institute an autocatalytic process that can quickly transform old moral sentiments and create new ones.”<sup>80</sup> For instance, the Civil War drastically altered moral sentiments in the United States. This change was most abrupt in the South, where the loss of the Civil War transformed the politics, economy and culture of the region. The Civil War not only had large consequences for the South as a whole, but a lasting personal and moral impact as well, which was displayed within the nation’s changed culture of death. Unlike suicide before the war, wartime and postwar suicide was no longer described in lurid terms. Rather, the focus of newspaper reports on suicide shifted from the morbid scene and condition of the body to the sympathetic biography of the deceased. See Table 2.

**Table 2. Categorization of Attitudes Toward Suicide in Southern Newspapers**

	<b>GRUESOME</b>	<b>NEUTRAL</b>	<b>SYMPATHETIC</b> <sup>81</sup>
<b>WOMEN</b>			
1860	11 (52.3%)	7 (33.3%)	3 (14.3%)

<sup>80</sup> David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina*, (University of North Carolina Press: 2011), 2-3.

<sup>81</sup> The above table displays the degree to which the nature of southern newspaper reports on suicide changed from before the war (1860) and after the war (1870). The categories were determined by the report’s content and tone. Gruesome reports included violent details, a vivid description of the victim’s physical remains or a strong focus on the actual act of suicide. This category also included reports with a critical or judgmental tone directed toward the victim. Neutral reports simply stated the facts: who committed suicide? Where did it take place? And sometimes, what was the method? Sympathetic reports placed a stronger emphasis on reporting the biography of the deceased rather than the actual suicide. These reports often described the suicide as “melancholy,” “sad” or “unfortunate,” and victims were described as “prominent,” “honorable,” and “well-respected” citizens.

1870	19 (23.4%)	27 (33.3%)	35 (43.2%)
<b>MEN</b>			
1860	45 (43.7%)	39 (37.9%)	19 (18.4%)
1870	38 (16.7%)	115 (50.4%)	75 (32.9%)
<b>TOTAL</b>			
1860	56 (45.2%)	46 (37.1%)	22 (17.7%)
1870	57 (18.4%)	142 (46.0%)	110 (35.6%)

With the emergence of the Civil War, Americans were forced to alter their moral sentiments about suicide amid the conditions that made dying—and living—so terrible.<sup>82</sup> Confederate and Union soldiers died honorably on the battlefield for their different causes, and while their deaths may have been violent and abrupt, Americans recognized them as heroic martyrs who deserved to be memorialized for their sacrifices. The horrific nature of the war, however, also resulted in severe psychological effects for soldiers; this psychological impact led a number of Confederate soldiers to commit suicide during and after the war. While suicide never lost its stigma as a deviant behavior, Silkenat notes, “[Southerners] came to sympathize with the plight of suicide victims in ways unthinkable to their antebellum forebearers.”<sup>83</sup> Suicidal Confederate soldiers and veterans played a critical role in this postbellum reorientation, as these men, who were revered as honorable social figures, voluntarily chose the Bad Death.

The traditions of the Good Death defined civilians as participants in war’s losses and connected soldiers to those on the homefront. Both parties worked to ensure that

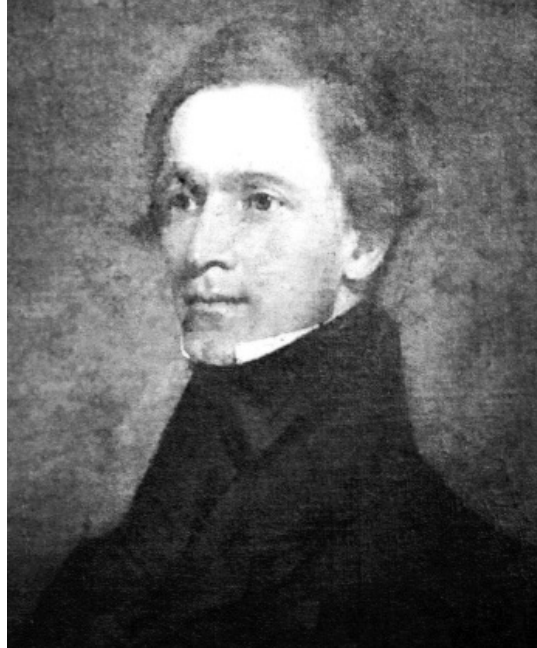
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<sup>82</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 30.

<sup>83</sup> Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 10.

soldiers would not be denied the chance for proper deaths despite the fact that they were killed on the battlefield. A critical way through which civilians constructed the Good Death for soldiers was the process of mourning, by which, survivors used the deceased's last words and moments as the basis for evaluating his entire life. According to Faust, "The funeral sermon, like the ritual that surrounded it, was a memorial, not in granite, but in words; it sought, like the Good Death itself, to ensure that dying was not an end, not an isolated act, itself undertaken in isolation, but a foundation for both spiritual and social immortality—for eternal life and lasting memory."<sup>84</sup> Memorializing the dead was not limited to fallen soldiers, but suicidal soldiers as well. Newspapers in the former Confederate states published during and after the Civil War displayed a more sympathetic discourse in accounts of suicide.

*Portrait of General Philip St. George Cocke, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 1850s.*



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<sup>84</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 163.

Just as funeral sermons were used to memorialize fallen soldiers, newspaper reports on suicide changed from focusing on the gruesome nature of the death to emphasizing the life of the individual who committed the act.<sup>85</sup> During the Civil War era, this changed tone was most prominent in Confederate newspapers accounts of soldier suicides. Take for instance *The Staunton Spectator*'s report of the suicide of General Philip St. George Cocke—the South's highest-ranking wartime suicide victim—and a Virginian of “most estimable character, and possessed of great wealth, which he dispensed with a liberal hand.”<sup>86</sup> After assuring readers that General Cocke's family was not present for his suicide, the newspaper wrote that, “This distressing event will cast a gloom over the whole State, for the unfortunate gentleman was known far and wide, and was universally esteemed.”<sup>87</sup> General Cocke's suicide was widely reported by Confederate newspapers, and while some newspapers attributed his suicide to an unstable mental condition, all accounts of his death reminded readers of his noble reputation in Virginia, enormous wealth and honorable position within the Confederate military. Similarly, the *Daily Dispatch* described Captain Christopher Fisher as “a man of high social position at home, and a very pious member of the Baptist Church,” who shot himself after he became depressed in spirits out of concern that he and his company would be “cut to pieces by the enemy.” Rather than cowardly fear or shame, the newspaper made sure to emphasize that Captain Fisher died out of excessive concern for his company, many of who attended his funeral and “wept freely at his sad end.” Like the account of General Cocke's suicide, the *Daily Dispatch* concluded its report by

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<sup>85</sup> Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 34.

<sup>86</sup> *The Staunton Spectator*. December 31, 1861.

<sup>87</sup> *The Staunton Spectator*. December 31, 1861.



illustrating the noble aspects of Captain Fisher's life as a whole rather than the violent manner of his death.

After the Civil War, newspapers did not stop describing suicides through a sympathetic tone, but continued to emphasize the military experience of veterans. In 1867, the *Orangeburg News* included an account of the suicide of F. C. Clewell. Rather than focusing on the physical state of the body or the method of suicide, the publication described the deceased as "a gentleman by birth and education, and a captain in the Confederate service."<sup>88</sup> The *Daily Dispatch*, which produced the most sensational suicide reports during the antebellum period, discussed the suicide of Joseph O. Taylor through a sympathetic and respectful tone as well. "Joseph O. Taylor, sheriff of Jefferson County, Fla., committed suicide a few days since. He shot himself through the heart."<sup>89</sup> This second sentence is the only point in which the report mentions the method of suicide; the article then goes on to describe the deceased as "highly respected by all classes. At Chickamauga he was badly wounded, and was then elected sheriff of his county."<sup>90</sup> By highlighting Taylor's and Clewell's military service, professional accomplishments and respectable position within society, these accounts were representative of the changed outlook on suicide that grew from the wartime period and then continued into Reconstruction. Suicide amongst Confederate soldiers and veterans was not a widespread epidemic, but because these war heroes chose to end their lives, and their suicides were reported to the entire community by Southern newspapers, suicide

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<sup>88</sup> *The Orangeburg News*, May 11, 1867.

<sup>89</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 18, 1864.

<sup>90</sup> *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 18, 1864.

took on a new meaning during the Civil War era, from an immoral yet morbidly entertaining demise, to a tolerable, albeit regrettable, death.

Sympathetic accounts of suicide in former Confederate newspapers extended to civilians as well. In 1866, *The Southerner* wrote an article titled “Sad End Of A Beautiful Girl,” in which the deceased, Ann Cannon, was described as a woman of “beauty, wit, intelligence, style and refinement.”<sup>91</sup> The report explained that Ann Cannon was forced into a loveless marriage by her family, and after “throwing her warm and loving heart upon a soulless wretch who prized her as one of his possessions,” she ended her life by chloroform.<sup>92</sup> Like the accounts of soldier suicide, *The Southerner* did not provide a detailed description of the act of suicide, but focused on the unfortunate life of Ann Cannon and the circumstances surrounding her death. Rather than judging the deceased for killing herself, the newspaper clearly condemned her husband, describing him as a “soulless wretch,” and blaming his mistreatment of her as the cause of her death. While newspaper editors never failed to indicate particularly sensational suicides, the more sympathetic view of death that arose from the war altered the focus of newspaper reports from gore and guts to memorializing the life of the deceased. Suicide was still a Bad Death, but its victims were no longer condemned.

In addition to focusing on the narrative arc of the deceased’s life and the nonviolent circumstances surrounding the suicide, former Confederate newspapers published an increased number of suicide notes, which allowed the deceased to publicize his or her final words. Last words were critical to the Good Death tradition because the deathbed was the detector of the heart. Faust notes, “People believed final words to be

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<sup>91</sup> *The Southerner*, August 4, 1866.

<sup>92</sup> *The Southerner*, August 4, 1866.

the truth, both because they thought that a dying person could no longer have any earthly motivation to lie, and because those about to meet their maker would not want to expire bearing false witness.”<sup>93</sup> In 1866 the *Memphis Public Ledger* reported the suicide of Mrs. Margaret Caldwell under the title “Melancholy Suicide of a Beautiful Woman.” Rather than describing the cause of her death, the article only published a letter in which Margaret explained her unfortunate life story.

I mingled in society in New York, enjoyed myself (in a degree) and had many suitors, among whom was John Skinner to whom I married. We lived together one month and were divorced. I charged him with desertion and cruelty. He knew by letters, which I sent him that my health was rapidly failing, and that I was not able to go into a family as a servant, as he requested me to do. I left New York and came here that I might devote the remainder of my life to quietude and devotion. I leave the world at the age of twenty-three with many regrets for my desire was to live long and accomplish what good I could. His desertion after our divorce was obtained was right and proper, but his cruelty afterwards, and to one in feeble health, is not excusable. My future prospects are dishonor or death. I choose the latter in preference to degradation of any kind. Since the death of my first husband I have had so many ups and downs, and suffered so much privation that I am weary of life; my eyes are hollow and sunken, and my face pale with sorrow, and I turn with disgust from a cold and heartless world. I nevertheless leave many kind friends from whom I scorn to seek charity. Those who loved me will mourn my untimely fate, while those who have envied me will be glad that I am gone. I die of a broken heart. P.S.—You will find my body in the pond.<sup>94</sup>

The *Public Ledger* did not comment on the nature of Margaret’s death or the condition of her remains, but focused on the letter itself, noting, “There is yet a mystery concerning the early life of this fascinating woman, which all the letters we have received have failed to clear up.”<sup>95</sup> The actual act of suicide was barely mentioned by the newspaper. Rather, the *Public Ledger* was more concerned with not only detailing the

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<sup>93</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> *The Public Ledger*, 1866.

<sup>95</sup> *The Public Ledger*, 1866.

life of the deceased, but having the deceased describe it herself. The suicide notes published during and after the Civil War all shared a similar tone. Former Confederate newspapers rarely published a note that was angry or violent, but each letter, like that of Margaret Caldwell, was sincere and sympathetic. The *Daily Dispatch* published an effective letter written by a woman named Emily to her lover: “Don’t grieve for me, darling, but think of me often, for I shall be always with you. God forever protect and prosper you my own beloved. Goodbye, Goodbye, Goodbye, Emily.”<sup>96</sup> The letter ran 25 lines long and it was published on the front page of the *Daily Dispatch*—a stark contrast from the gruesome and disturbing suicides reported on the front page during the antebellum period. In the letter, Emily comforted her lover by assuring him that she would always be with him, and that, though she could not speak to him, she would listen when he spoke to her in “words of love.” Within the context of the Good Death, last words did not only offer comfort to the dying, but to loved ones as well. Family and friends used their observations of the deathbed and last words to evaluate their chances for reuniting with the deceased in heaven.<sup>97</sup> By baring witness to the deceased’s final moments, the words spoken at the deathbed were the final source of comfort for kin. The Civil War deprived many 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans of this final connection, as sons, fathers, husbands and brothers died with their words unrecorded.<sup>98</sup> Like soldiers on the battlefield, victims of suicide usually died alone, with no one to bare witness to their final moments. By publishing these notes, newspaper editors provided suicides with this critical aspect of the Good Death, allowing victims like Emily to reach out, not only to

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<sup>96</sup> *The Daily Dispatch*, November 7, 1861.

<sup>97</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 10.

<sup>98</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 11.

her beloved, but her entire community from beyond the grave. The lost life no longer belonged just to that individual and his or her family but was also to be understood and possessed by the community—even the nation—at large.<sup>99</sup> Suicide victims may have died alone, but their last words were read by all.

David Silkenat argues that the increase in suicide reporting within North Carolinian newspapers after the Civil War indicated a suicide mania; however, as discussed in previous chapters, the unreliability of census and newspaper data cannot effectively prove that a suicide mania actually occurred. What the increase in reporting does show is that suicide had become more prominent in southern discourse. Still, the content of these reports did not incorporate the same degree of sensationalism displayed within antebellum newspapers. While southern newspapers still reported some gruesome suicides during and after the war, and suicide was still seen as a less than ideal way to die, the vast majority of suicide reports possessed a sympathetic rather than dramatic or critical tone. The topic remained sensational but the language had changed dramatically, illustrating the degree to which the Civil War's impact expanded beyond the battlefield. Further, the psychological impact of the war led some soldiers, who had heroically fought for the Confederate cause, to end their lives. The suicides of these men, who were esteemed in the South as heroic figures, altered traditional moral sentiments in the region. As survivors worked to identify and memorialize fallen soldiers, the Civil War era brought in a new humanity that, like the war itself, extended beyond the battlefield into what antebellum southerners perceived as a scandalous and immoral way to die.

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<sup>99</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 163.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the last year, my research has posed a number of unexpected challenges. When I initially began researching the topic of suicide during the Civil War era, I expected to find a dramatic increase in suicides following the war. Given that Diane Sommerville contended that Confederate soldiers increasingly committed suicide as a result of the psychological disorders brought on by the war, I felt that these suicides, combined with the immense destruction faced by the southern homefront, could potentially have resulted in a suicide mania amongst southern civilians. A great deal of my statistical work, however, never panned out due to the unreliability of the Federal Census Mortality Schedules and newspaper data. Not only did the data found in the census and newspapers contradict each other, but they also both proved to be statistically unreliable due to their flawed data.

This lack of dependable data forced me to reconsider the direction of my thesis. I could not prove whether or not a suicide mania followed the war, but what I did have at my disposal were hundreds of newspaper reports on suicide. As a result, my thesis, while still employing a large degree of quantitative analysis, became more of a qualitative study of *how* suicide was reported on and perceived rather than how *many* suicides were committed.

The work my thesis required—collecting newspaper reports from 1860 to 1870, analyzing the nature of these reports, gathering the names of every suicide in the Federal Census Mortality Schedules for 1860 and 1870, analyzing the trends found in both newspapers and the census in terms of method, gender, race, and cause—was a great undertaking for a period of only one year. With that said, there are number of topics left

for historians to explore on the issue. First, a more in depth analysis of newspaper reports between 1850 and 1860, and between 1870 and 1880, would bring this study full circle. Did the sensationally gruesome reports of the antebellum era extend as far back as 1850, and did sympathetic reports even exist at this point? Similarly, was the increase in sympathetic reports on suicide restricted to the Civil War's immediate aftermath, or did it extend into the later 19<sup>th</sup> century?

Further, the reports on suicide within Southern papers tend to touch on other scandals of the era such as debt, infidelity, alienation, intemperance and murder. An examination of these themes highlights certain gender issues of the time. For example, the suicides of Miss Jones and William English, as discussed in the introduction, emphasize the shame associated with pre-marital sex and male impotence. The Old South possessed a firm gender hierarchy, which dictated certain values and expectations for both men and women. Therefore, because many of the suicides reported in Southern newspapers focus on individuals who have violated these gender norms, this warrants further examination of the association between gender and suicide reporting during the Civil War era.

While the direction of my thesis changed, my initial goal—to illustrate the Civil War's impact off the battlefield in regard to America's culture of death—was still achieved. The degree to which the content and tone of southern newspaper reports on suicide changed between 1860 and 1870, clearly indicates a shift in cultural attitudes following the war. The Civil War was a "people's contest" in more ways than one. As the violence of the war disrupted traditional notions of dying and mourning, and many people, including Confederate soldiers, felt pushed to commit suicide, a more

sympathetic perception of violent death seemed to expand across the southern states. The Civil War's impact was not temporary, but lasting. As the southern homefront worked to rebuild its communities and lives, the notion that "In the midst of life, we are in death" would resonate amongst the war's survivors for years to come.



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