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The Forgotten First Lady: Reinventing Varina Davis Through Her Journalism

By [Teri Finneman](#), University of Missouri

<1>Despite her prominent status during the Civil War and her marriage to one of the most infamous men in U.S. history, Varina Davis has all but vanished from historical memory. The wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, a figure on the losing side of history, is often overlooked or considered illegitimate by historians who write about the nation's first ladies. Even women who never held the official title, such as Martha Jefferson and Rachel Jackson, tend to be included in comprehensive books featuring first ladies, despite the fact they died before their husbands' presidencies. Yet the life of Varina Howell Davis, a first lady during four of the most tumultuous years in U.S. history, is frequently ignored, pushing her contributions to U.S. history deeper into the forgotten past.⁽¹⁾ Although the post-Civil War lives of Jefferson and Varina Davis are largely disregarded in mainstream history, the end of the Civil War was far from the end of Varina's influence on the nation. Her life with Jefferson provides her with historical status, but this study argues that the contributions she made after his death deserve closer examination and are perhaps even more important to history.

<2>Broke and widowed by 1890, the former Confederate first lady left behind the Southern life that her husband fought to preserve and moved to former enemy territory in the North for the remaining years of her life. Here, she worked for another prominent man in American history: Joseph Pulitzer. This article explores the little-known story of Varina's career as a journalist at one of the nation's most influential newspapers in the late 1800s, *The New York World*. My research investigates how Varina Davis became a journalist, what she wrote about, and how her journalism can be used to reestablish and reinvent her faded collective memory. The goal is to expand upon the limited scholarship on Varina overall, particularly in regard to her journalism.

<3>The fact that Varina has been overlooked by mainstream scholars makes it seem like she could not be representative of the American "ideals" that Janice Hume writes about when discussing the qualities

essential to collective memory (Hume 184). Scholars have found that certain criteria are necessary for survival in American collective memory: “the designation of ‘hero,’ the connection to a larger American story, and the establishment of cultural artifacts” (Russell, Hume, and Sichler 588-89). Collective memory provides a sense of identity and a shared past for communities (Hume). Therefore, “society tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals or that might distance groups from each other” (Schuman and Scott, 182). As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that the first lady of the Confederacy would be among those erased from memory. However, the publicity campaign by Libbie Custer on behalf of her husband serves as evidence that image restoration of a controversial historic figure is possible (Russell, Hume, and Sichler). As a former first lady who worked for the most famous man in U.S. newspaper history and who helped pave the way for other women to work as journalists, Varina Davis merits further attention. However, even more notable than these achievements, the widow of the Confederate president used her journalistic writing to help reconcile tension between the North and the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With a history this rich, Varina Davis deserves to be recognized and to have her faded collective memory reestablished and reinvented.

<4>This analysis includes examination of Varina’s *Sunday World* etiquette columns that were included in the book, *Etiquette for All Occasions*,⁽²⁾ as well as other articles she wrote for the *Sunday World*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *the Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *The Arena*.⁽³⁾ As Michael Schudson notes, “distance can give people historical perspective on matters that may have been hard to grasp at the time they happened” (“Dynamics” 349). In other words, when the emotions connected to an event or individual wane, there is an opportunity for reexamination to reach a new understanding of the past (“Dynamics” 349). As the United States marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the time is ripe to reexamine one of its key figures and her role in journalism history. First, however, a review of Varina’s life is necessary to understand the factors that led her to a career in journalism.

Life After Jefferson

<5>Throughout her life, Varina Howell Davis endured a number of hardships. Her father went bankrupt during her teenage years growing up in Mississippi. Two of her sons died as children, and her two other sons died from disease in the 1870s (Cashin). Her relationship with Jefferson experienced strain throughout their marriage. As first lady during the Civil War, she had a close-up view of the horrors of war and faced the criticism about her appearance and personality that all first ladies endure (Cashin). Following the war, she was kept under house arrest in Savannah, Georgia, during the summer of 1865 while her husband was imprisoned (Cashin). No young bride of 18 could have imagined such a life. The death of Jefferson Davis in 1889 was yet another transformative moment for the woman whose life experienced so many upheavals as his wife.

<6>Widowed at 63 and without surviving sons to care for her, Varina’s most pressing concern was securing a future. At the time of Jefferson’s death, the Davises were \$40,000 in debt, a fact publicized in the press (“The Widow’s Work” 11). They had struggled financially for much of the 25 years after the Civil War as Jefferson went from one business failure to the next in the United States and Europe (Wiley). Their final home together, Beauvoir in Biloxi, Mississippi, was a gift from Confederate supporter Sarah Dorsey who was aware of their financial plight (Cashin 223). Although her husband left Varina

their Brierfield plantation in his will (Cashin 265), the unreliable income from the cotton crop was not enough to support her and their unmarried daughter Winnie (Cashin 233). The former first lady had no choice but to earn income. She would ultimately settle on journalism but, like so much of her life, the path to get there was filled with conflict.

<7>Varina was, however, better equipped to handle life without her husband than many other women of the period. She had developed a strong sense of independence as, throughout their marriage, the Davises were frequently separated due to Jefferson's army service, political career, post-Civil War imprisonment, and business pursuits (Cashin). Varina was also educated, having received tutoring and briefly attending a prestigious school for girls in Philadelphia during her youth (Cashin 83). Determined to take care of herself after Jefferson's death, Varina declined charity (Cashin 266). Hoping her husband's fame would bring her financial security, she focused her attention on writing his memoirs (Cashin 266). Varina had previous writing experience, having helped Jefferson with his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy*, published in 1881 (Cashin 230-31). Both projects undoubtedly aided her later journalism that reflected upon the Civil War.

Writing Memoirs

<8>In 1890, however, Varina had placed her hopes in book publishing, a journey that would cement her connections to New York and journalism. Realizing she could not write the memoirs alone, she wrote to Southern newspapers in late January 1890 and asked for the public's help. Her plea was picked up by the Northern press several days later ("The Biography"). "In order to make the book as complete as possible, I shall be greatly obliged if our friends, whose personal recollections of Mr. Davis would throw light on any event of his life or tend to illustrate his character, will record them and forward them to me as I shall endeavor, as far as possible, to tell the story of Mr. Davis's career in his own words," Varina wrote ("The Biography").

<9>The newspaper publicity about her book piqued the interest of Southern admirers and curious Northerners, foreshadowing the future interest there would be in her journalism. "Seldom had a book been given wider publicity before its literal inception," *The New York World* noted ("The Widow's Work" 11). Varina signed a contract with the Belford Company in New York on March 4, 1890 ("The Widow's Work" 11). She returned to Mississippi to work on her manuscript but quickly realized the enormity of the task. "It is weary work – and a crown of sorrow to me," she wrote on June 15, 1890, from Beauvoir to her friend and fellow author Flora Darling ("Item 14, Box 1").

<10>Yet throughout 1890, newspapers predicted she would find the success she desired. "The work promises to be one of the most popular ever published," a story in the *Woodland (Calif.) Daily Democrat* on April 15, 1890, said (2). "Mrs. Davis makes no claim to literary finesse, but I am told by those who have seen the manuscript of the book that she has strung together an extremely entertaining narrative," a story in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on November 23, 1890, said ("Mrs. Jefferson Davis Book" 12). Devoted to "my own people" in the South (Varina Davis letter May 20, 1899), Varina dedicated *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir* to "the soldiers of the Confederacy, who cheered and sustained Jefferson Davis in the darkest hour by their splendid gallantry and never withdrew their confidence from him when defeat

settled on our cause" (*Jefferson Davis* dedication). She would draw upon this same tone of romantic writing about the war in her future journalism.

<11>The book sold more than 5,000 copies within the first three months of its release in 1891, with Varina earning \$4,000 from the sales ("The Widow's Work" 11). But Varina's happiness was short-lived: her publisher refused to pay her.

Facing Poverty

<12>After 18 months of struggle writing her husband's memoirs and now facing poverty, Varina hired former Ohio Gov. George Hoadly, now an attorney in New York, to represent her in a lawsuit against Belford ("The Widow's Work" 11). The court complaint accused Belford of "taking advantage of their insolvency and Mrs. Davis's helplessness" ("The Widow's Work" 11). Varina placed some of the blame on herself. "I am a poor business manager as you probably now know since I have been cheated entirely out of the proceeds of my book," she wrote in a letter a year after her book's release, to a Mrs. Gregory who wanted Varina's advice on a manuscript (AHMC March 12, 1892).

<13>Varina would eventually win her lawsuit (Berkin 211), but in late 1891 she was still without the money from her book and in need of income. She decided to pursue a journalism career and make New York City her primary residence. She never considered Beauvoir to be her home and knew many Southerners found success in New York after the Civil War (Cashin 268-69). She decided to see what the city had to offer.

In Search of a Dream

<14>Varina Davis was not the only one seduced by city living in the late nineteenth century. From the start of the Civil War to 1900, New York City's population tripled to nearly 3.5 million people, partly due to the surge in immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island in search of a better life in America (Kobre 26). Beyond the cultural evolution, Varina arrived in New York at the height of its economic transformation. A stark contrast from plantation life in Mississippi, New York was a major economic center with ships arriving from around the world and railroads linking the city to the rest of the country (Kobre 25). The United States "vaulted ahead in manufacturing, shipping, and marketing" (Chafe 2) as the Industrial Revolution took hold. New York City became an eclectic mix of "millionaires, a white collar class, factory workers, and the poverty stricken . . . jammed together" (Kobre 26). With the economic activity and brewing storm between classes and cultures, New York City was "a journalist's dream" (Spencer 70).

<15>For Varina, who began referring to herself as Varina Jefferson Davis after her husband's death (Berkin 212), journalism seemed like a logical next step after the detailed work she poured into her husband's memoir. Although she came from a time and place "where no respectable white woman worked for a salary" (Cashin 274), and many Southerners were appalled by her move north with daughter Winnie ("Honor to Mrs. Davis" 2), she defended her decision. In letters to Southern friends throughout the rest of her life, she noted her poor health and financial difficulties as reasons to stay in the North ("Varina Davis letter" May 20, 1899; AHMC January 13, 1899). She thought New York was a

good base for her daughter Winnie, who established her own career writing novels and articles for newspapers and magazines (Van Der Heuvel 253). All Varina needed was a job of her own.

Pulitzer and the World

<16>Ironically, Varina Davis found the help she needed from a Hungarian immigrant who fought against the Confederacy during the Civil War. Like Varina, Joseph Pulitzer came to the North in financial straits and looking for a fresh start (Morris). Pulitzer arrived in Boston in 1864 and, after his military service, went on to become one of the most famous newspapermen in history (Morris). After working his way up to owner of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Pulitzer bought the struggling *New York World* in 1883 (Mott 433). He instructed his staff to find “lively, ‘human interest’ news, with no little emphasis on gossip, scandal, and sensation in general” (Mott 434). Under Pulitzer’s guidance, the circulation of the *World* doubled within four months, paving the way for the *World* to become “the most profitable newspaper ever published” by 1886 (Mott 436). In 1890, the same year Varina arrived in New York, Pulitzer announced he would give up control of his newspapers due to his health problems. However, despite increasing blindness, he “retained a very real command and direction of both the *World* and the *Post-Dispatch*” until he died in 1911 (Mott 440). When Pulitzer learned Mrs. Jefferson Davis needed writing work, the timing could not have been better for both of them.

<17>The relationship between the Davis and Pulitzer families began about a decade earlier. Pulitzer’s wife, Kate Davis, was a distant relative of Jefferson’s. However, Winnie Davis was the catalyst for the families’ friendship after meeting the Pulitzers while traveling (Cashin 249). The Pulitzers found Varina to be a “vivid conversationalist” (Swanberg 147), and she admired Pulitzer’s work “to help humankind with journalism” (Cashin 250). The Pulitzers were “sympathetic with the impoverished leader of the lost cause” (Swanberg 134) and maintained contact with the Davises for the rest of their lives. So when Joseph Pulitzer heard Varina and Winnie were struggling financially after Jefferson’s death, he offered to help. He also undoubtedly saw the appeal of having the byline of the former first lady of the Confederacy in his newspaper at a time of yellow journalism and when women’s sections were increasingly popular (Schudson, “Discovering the News” 99). Pulitzer offered Varina between \$1,200 and \$1,500 a year to write for the *Sunday World* (Cashin 274; Van Der Heuvel 253), about half of what the city’s top reporters were paid (Smythe) but enough for Varina and Winnie to settle into their new home at local hotels (Berkin; Van Der Heuvel).

<18>Sunday papers were a fairly new development in American journalism. Until the Civil War, the public opposed newspapers publishing on the Sabbath (Stevens 63). However, the demand for news during the war weakened this argument, and now New York papers made their biggest profits on Sundays, a day of leisure for those working six days a week (Stevens; Chafe; Juergens). The *Sunday World* was similar to a magazine in design and content (Schudson, “Discovering the News” 99), with “sensationalism, illustration, sports, (and) special features for women ... prominently displayed” (Juergens 57). In the 1880s, the newspaper increased its focus on attracting women readers (Schudson, “Discovering the News” 100), a sign of the evolving nature of the advertising industry.

Women and Journalism

<19>Women represented a market of growing interest for U.S. newspapers as the role of women in society began to change. The rise of manufacturing in the late 1800s altered the habits of many American housewives, who could now buy mass-produced products rather than make them at home (Schudson, "Discovering the News" 100). Publishers worked to convince women to buy the paper, which included advertising directed at them (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming; Kobre). The biggest strategy for publishers was hiring more female journalists to write stories aimed at women (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 15). In 1880, fewer than 300 women worked as journalists in the United States (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 15). Most shared a common assignment: to cover "marginal areas of news – fashion, domestic issues and a form of 'society news,' that is essentially glorified gossip about the lives of the rich and famous" (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 15-16). However, the most popular women's features were advice and etiquette columns as "American concern for correctness fostered a minor industry between 1870 and 1917" (Juergens 147).

<20>As Varina Davis went to work for the *World* during the 1890s and early 1900s, she joined the ranks of etiquette columnists in addition to writing about her Confederate experiences. For the remainder of her life, Varina wrote for various newspapers and magazines, but her work for the *Sunday World* was her primary income (Cashin 274). This article argues that Varina's journalism career is of national historical significance due, in part, to her role as an early woman journalist who helped pave the way for other women to work in the industry. However, even more notable is how the former first lady of the Confederacy used her writing to help bridge the divide between North and South decades after her husband's Civil War.

Southern Manners

<21>Catering to the popular trend for etiquette advice, Pulitzer no doubt saw the advantage of having not only a Southern woman but a former first lady as an etiquette columnist. Mary White, editor of *Etiquette for All Occasions*, released in 1900, compiled several of Varina's etiquette pieces into the book "to preserve for study and reference these useful and instructive lessons of good conduct" for mothers to share with their children (White foreword). She believed Varina provided "an inestimable service to American motherhood, of which she is one of the highest type" (White foreword). Clearly, Varina still garnered some respect twenty-five years after serving as first lady. At least some of her contemporaries placed her in a heroic frame as an expert on motherhood and manners. This book provides supporting evidence in the quest to reestablish and reinvent Varina's collective memory since her columns serve as cultural artifacts that connect her to the larger American story of idealized motherhood, which invokes a heroic frame.

<22>The fact that a number of Varina's writings were included in this book demonstrates a continuing interest in her and her writing. As noted, Varina's memoirs about Jefferson attracted a great deal of press attention. She also earned praise for her journalistic writing from at least one newspaper early in her career. A story in the *Mansfield (Ohio) Weekly News* noted Varina was writing for a "leading New York daily" and praised one of her book reviews. "The article would have done credit to the pen of an old, trained reviewer of books. The discriminating critic, the lover of archaeological research, the habits of thought of the woman of letters, of clear judgment and fine taste are displayed in every line," the

newspaper raved. "Mrs. Davis would make a capital book reviewer for a Sunday newspaper if she had nothing more compensating to absorb her time and powers."

<23>Focusing on her etiquette writing first, there are twelve chapters in *Etiquette for All Occasions* that include the byline "Mrs. Jefferson Davis." These works cover such topics as wise words for June brides, how to use your handkerchief and not be vulgar, how to wear a high hat, the etiquette of hair, and how to be proper and polite when you are engaged. In addition to her columns, Varina provided answers to readers who wrote in with etiquette questions, which frequently related to the proper ways to make house calls, conduct correspondence, host guests, and act in romantic relationships. In other words, she was a predecessor of Emily Post and Judith Martin (Miss Manners), both of whom are well-regarded in U.S. history.

<24>Among Varina's fans was "Western Woman," who sent this inquiry: "I have just moved from the West to one of the smaller cities in New York State. Should I call first upon the ladies in the neighborhood or wait for them to call upon me? What is the length of time to wait before returning a call?"

<25>"It is the custom for the older residents of the neighborhood to call first upon the newcomer," Varina advised. "First calls should always be returned within a week" (White 34).

<26>In another column, "Constant Reader" wanted to know whether it was proper to keep plans for a date or to stay home after an unexpected guest arrived. She also wanted to know if it was proper "for a girl to give her gentleman friend with whom she is keeping company a lock of her hair?"

<27>"It would be discourteous for you to break your engagement," Varina responded. "You should excuse yourself to the 'unexpected caller,' telling him in a pleasant way of your previous engagement, and asking him to call again. Last question too disgusting for reply" (White 46-47).

<28>Varina also received questions from men, with "Howard N.P." wanting to know if his smoking was as offensive as his mother and sister said. "Is it such a serious breach of etiquette that a girl would hesitate to marry me on that account?" he wondered. Varina, who wrote a separate column about smoking etiquette (White 59-64), told Howard the habit was "a selfish and very unwholesome indulgence."

<29>"Why not turn over a new leaf, stop smoking incessantly and make your family happy, as well as, incidentally, adding many years to your own life?" she responded (White 100).

<30>"J.J.M" wrote to ask, "What is a proper and suitable present for a young man to give his fiancée for Easter?"

<31>"He may send her a big bunch of violets, a jar of maidenhair fern, or a pot of azalias (sic) wrapped in crepe paper; or he may send her a very fine edition of one her favorite books," Varina advised (White 51).

<32>This type of journalism may seem trivial to contemporary scholars. However, it connects Varina to the larger American story of the U.S. women's movement and must be considered within the context of this time period. In the 1890s, women were increasingly challenging the norm that their role was solely wife and mother. Women had secured partial suffrage in 19 states by 1890 (Hill 51). Four states – Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho – granted women full suffrage by the end of the century (Hill xxii). Women's clubs soared in popularity in the 1890s to the point that they existed in almost every town for “recreation and improvement” (Freeman 30). Woloch expands further on the benefits of these clubs for middle- and upper-class women:

They enabled thousands of conventional middle-class women to learn from others, share female values, and work toward common goals. Combining self-help and social mission, they created an avenue to civic affairs ... and they created a separate space for women in public life. (287)

Therefore, women journalists such as Varina were serving women in this newly created space in public life by providing newspaper content of interest to them on the women's pages. Just as members of the women's clubs sought social improvements, many newspapers in the Gilded Age “caught the social drift and urged society to make alterations in ... its way of life” (Kobre v). Certainly writings on etiquette contributed to the advocacy of social adjustments during this time.

<33>Varina was among the nearly 5 million women in the U.S. workforce by 1900 – doubled from 20 years earlier (Kobre 18) – as “late-nineteenth century middle-class women had begun to shed traditional notions that their place was exclusively in the home” (Dumenil 99). Varina's newspaper work served as a public reminder that women – even Southern women – could succeed in the workforce. Not only was Varina a working woman, but women and men viewed her as an expert and sought her advice, thereby contributing to the evidence that women could make a contribution to society outside of the home. Varina may not have been an investigative pioneer like Nellie Bly, who began working at *The New York World* in 1887 and who has achieved heroic status in collective memory. But, like her co-worker Bly, Varina was a journalism pioneer who helped pave the way for future women to work in the industry and who helped build credibility for working women. More specifically, even though she had experienced decades of financial issues that prevented her from being a true member of the upper class, Varina's position as a former first lady who entered the workforce rocked the cultural mores of the time. During the 1800s, middle- and upper-class women were

prevented from working outside the home by cultural norms that declared it ‘unnatural,’ ‘improper,’ and a ‘violation of God's will’ that women serve any role other than that of housewife and mother. (Chafe 13)

After enduring decades of controversy as first lady, Varina's decisions to leave the South behind and to decline charity to instead enter the workforce – all of which generated additional controversy – demonstrate her trail-blazing significance. Pioneers are known as a “powerful symbol in American memory” (Hume 184). Therefore, Varina's collective memory should also be reinvented due to her pioneering efforts to redefine acceptable roles for Southern and middle- to upper-class women.

<34>Varina did not completely leave behind her Southern roots, as she incorporated Southern reflections into her *Sunday World* etiquette columns, adding another notable perspective to her journalistic work. In a column titled “Extravagance of Wives” (White 157), she promoted the simplicity of Southern living:

That which in the South would be considered the wildest extravagance would in New York be accepted as a reasonable expenditure. People who have lived in isolated positions on their own estates learned from necessity to do things for themselves or taught the people of their households to do them ... the better class of people who still live these quiet lives have not forgotten the lessons in sewing, knitting, etc., taught them by their notable mothers. Consequently, they spend less on dressmakers, milliners and embroiderers than the city dwellers do. (White 157)

With this narrative, Varina characterizes the South as essentially non-threatening, noting Southerners are merely a simple, isolated people who appreciate an old way of living without extravagance or fuss. This is just one of a number of writings in which Varina humanized the South to the North. In a column titled “Wise Words for June Brides” (White 89), she romanticized Confederate soldiers and their courtships during the war:

I remember many war-time wooings in those old days, now so remote and misty to the young people of this day, but so fresh to those whose hearts kept time to the measured beating of the muffled drum – when the boys in gray snatched a few hours from their life and struggle[d] to ride clattering into Richmond to visit the dainty maidens who awaited their coming with smoothly braided coils of hair, spreading crinolines and bright eyes shining with welcome ... Sometimes these war courtships ended in withered rosebuds on a soldier’s coffin, and the woman’s heart broke ... but oftener the patriotism and patience that the young couple brought to their engagement made a rich dowry for their married lives. (White 89-90)

With this story, Varina illustrates that military couples in the South – just as those in the North – faced the difficulties of romance in war conditions. Although there was death and heartbreak, there was also strength and loyalty that bound a people together for the rest of their lives. Unafraid to directly address a conflict that remained controversial, Varina used her writing to help bridge the divide between North and South by trying to create empathy, notable work for a woman who served as the first lady of the Confederacy. After the Civil War, Varina, Jefferson, and their daughter Winnie were viewed as symbols of “the lost cause” (Morris 270), as icons for defeated Southerners who sought to establish and reinvent their collective memory in the post-war years. Varina’s longstanding connection to the lost cause of the Confederacy solidified her past collective memory as a divider, hence why she faded from the narrative of U.S. history. However, enough time has passed to look at Varina’s contributions from a different perspective. Although she will forever be associated with the larger American story of the Civil War, her work to heal the divide between North and South in her etiquette columns is worthy of a designation of hero. Furthermore, her work to bridge lingering national divisions went beyond her etiquette columns and even beyond the pages of the *New York World*.

Humanizing the South's Civil War

<35>In addition to etiquette columns that romanticized the South, the former first lady wrote feature stories for several publications about the topic forever associated with her name: the Confederacy. During the late 1800s, it became increasingly popular for Northern publications to ask Southern writers to submit articles about their regional culture and to allow publicity from leaders on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line in an effort to improve relations between North and South (Noonan 133). In particular, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* ran a Civil War series between 1884 and 1887 aimed at improving the South's reputation and promoting national unity (Noonan 156). The magazine provided an outlet "for the first real North-South discussion of the Civil War," and its series was extremely popular (Gabler-Hover 240-41). Editors realized the nation remained divided two decades after the war ended and efforts to heal this divide were necessary (Gabler-Hover 241). Who better to continue this newly popular trend to explain the South than the former first lady of the Confederacy now living in the North?

<36>In an 1893 story for *Ladies' Home Journal*, Varina presented a sympathetic tale about the marriage of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson and his widow, Mary Anna, who – like Varina – went to New York in the 1890s to secure a publisher for her husband's biography. Varina noted that she was asked to write the piece about Mrs. Stonewall Jackson ("*The Widow of Stonewall*" 5). In other words, at least in this instance but likely in others, editors capitalized on Varina's name (and fame) by asking her to write about the Confederacy as opposed to her pushing the topic. Varina met with the general's widow in New York before publishing the story and noted it was her first time meeting Mary Anna. Varina wrote that she was "much impressed by her cheerful and simple personality" ("*The Widow of Stonewall*" 5). Certainly Varina must have been sympathetic to a fellow Confederate widow who was trying to earn income from her husband's legacy at the age of 62.

<37>In her story, Varina described the general as "heroic" and wrote of his devotion to his wife, whom he referred to as his "gentle dove" and "his sunshine." However, the Jacksons' marital bliss was interrupted by the "dread realities of war," and soon Mrs. Jackson's visits to her husband at war camps and "the loving letters he wrote to her were all that was left of her domestic joy" ("*The Widow of Stonewall*" 5.) In 1862, Mrs. Jackson gave birth to their daughter Julia, and five months passed before she could safely bring the baby to see her husband. Nine days into their visit, the war flared again, forcing Mrs. Jackson and the baby to flee. "Haunted by the memory of carnage and death, the poor young wife, with a child's faith and a woman's anguish, left her treasure on the battle field," Varina wrote sympathetically ("*The Widow of Stonewall*" 5). In May 1863, Mrs. Jackson was again at her husband's side as he lay dying from complications after being accidentally shot during friendly fire. Varina wrote:

Spent with the anguish of his wounds, he lay dying, too near the silence of the grave to do more than murmur to his wife: 'Speak louder, I want to hear all you say,' and feebly to caress his baby with a whispered, 'My sweet one, my treasure,' while the innocent smiled in his dying face. ("*The Widow of Stonewall*" 5)

Through this narrative in a popular Northern-based women's magazine, Varina is appealing to women, specifically Northern women, to understand and be moved by the hardships that women in the South bore during the Civil War. While "a number of different northern constituencies – veterans, black and former abolitionists – opposed the 'forget and forgive' mentality" and remained suspicious of the South (Silber 5), Varina tried to humanize the Confederate side by illustrating that Southern families were real people who also faced hardship and heartbreaking tragedies during the war. "Stonewall" Jackson is portrayed as a tender-hearted husband and father, devoted to his family until the very end, thereby softening the fact he commanded troops that killed Northern men. As Silber notes, "In the post-Civil War period, former Confederates learned to accept their loss by turning the old South into a land of idyllic plantation settings, heroic men, and elegant women" (4).

<38>By sharing sentimental stories of the Southern side of the war, Varina's writing sought to raise morale in the South and to alleviate hard feelings in the North by personalizing and softening the narrative through a woman's point of view. She also played a role in building up the collective memory of the South with her romantic writings that, as Silber describes, glorified the culture of heroic men and elegant women. Other topics Varina wrote about included the first Christmas in the Confederate White House for the *New York World* (*Mrs. Jefferson Davis* 1) and Memorial Day in the South and "how the southern people honor their dead" for *Woman's Home Companion* (*Books and Magazines* 4). Both topics added to the mystique of the South as its own special culture at a time when "the North felt a prurient and exculpatory fascination with the land that they had conquered" (Gabler-Hover 245).

<39>Varina was more direct in the goal of her writing in an April 21, 1901, story in the *World* called "The Humanity of Grant." Varina believed that the request for her to write the article about the Northern general was a critical sign that relations between North and South were improving (Ross 390). In the story, Varina wrote that "bitter prejudices and resentments have been much modified by intercourse, the inter-marriage and inter-education of the people of the two sections" (qtd. in Ross 390). In other words, she is promoting efforts that allow the North and South to better understand the other in order to help heal the nation. This certainly aligns with the piece she wrote about Stonewall Jackson eight years earlier. The fact that the former first lady of the Confederacy would write a piece praising General Grant as part of efforts to help bridge the gap between North and South is astounding and may be argued to represent a cultural artifact illustrating a heroic gesture in Civil War history. This one story alone offers a compelling argument that Varina Davis deserves to have her collective memory reestablished and reinvented.

<40>In the same year she wrote the piece about Stonewall Jackson, Varina wrote a story about Southern women in wartime that ran in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ("Southern Women" 7). It is unknown whether this article also appeared in Northern publications, but Varina's intent was to ensure the sacrifices and courage of her fellow Civil War women were not forgotten. In the opening lines of her story, Varina wrote:

It often seems, owing to changing conditions and circumstances, that if the story of our generation is to be saved from oblivion, the only way is to 'perpetuate testimony' ... for this reason my testimony is offered here as to the character of those women of my section who

labored, suffered and prayed together during the war between the states. (“Southern Women” 7)

Even before the concept of collective memory developed, Varina seemed very aware that “changing conditions and circumstances” contribute to a rewriting or erasing of history – an erasing that she did not want to see happen. This piece in particular demonstrates Varina fighting for history to remember the contributions of women during the Civil War.

<41>In the article, Varina writes that many women did not think a civil war would happen but, when it did, they did their part to support the effort.

The women of the south did not shrink from the prospect of great and painful economies; they also appreciated that their own patriotic duty was to be (as) cheerful as possible to bid farewell to the men of their family who must go to the front, perhaps never to return. (“Southern Women” 7)

As the war dragged on, Southern women faced a time “when the stock of cloth, shoes, medicines, machinery – indeed almost everything necessary to civilized people – was nearly exhausted” (“Southern Women” 7). Varina also noted the heartbreak these women bore, describing one who lacked proper medicine for her children. Both children died but the woman assured her husband that she was “well and strong.” Southern women never lost their sense of duty and gave up their expensive silk dresses to provide material for flags, Varina wrote. They also spun their own wool and cotton to knit socks for their families and Confederate soldiers and to replace the house linen used as bandages during the war. Varina wrote:

On these women fell the burden of deprivation unheard of. In silence they sowed and reaped the land, clothed and tended their children, buried them when they sank under want and exposure, or themselves laid down in solitude and died. It was the exception when the men in the field knew the trials to which their wives were subjected. The women were vocal in hope, silent in despair. (“Southern Women” 7)

These are a few examples of how Varina illustrated the strength, perseverance, and loyalty of Southern women, perpetuating testimony to ensure future generations remembered lessons from that war. Although their war contributions were not recognized with official honors, Varina thought Southern women showed what women are capable of and deserved to be recognized. Whether this story only ran in the South as a history lesson and morale booster or if it also ran in the North as a Southern humanizing piece, Varina clearly was advocating for more respect for women and their role in society, using her prominent status to give women a voice during a time period when women were pushing for more recognition. Varina’s collective memory should include her advocacy on behalf of women.

<42>However, more than thirty years after the war, Varina did not take this same view of respect toward the black population and used her writing to defend slavery and to criticize blacks. In the same *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* story (“Southern Women” 7), she noted that women and children did not have problems with slaves when the white men left to fight in the Civil War:

All southern women acknowledge with pride the good conduct of the rank and file of negroes on the breaking out of the war. They generally remained true to the families left in their charge and protected the women and children to the best of their ability. In short, their course was a powerful testimonial to the life-long kind and just exercise of their masters' power over them. ("Southern Women" 7)

This served to justify the Southern point of view of slavery and to offer proof to potential Northern readers that slaves were not treated badly, a point of view also expressed by other Southern writers seeking to emphasize their women's "benevolent rule" (Noonan 138). Varina expressed additional views justifying slavery in *The Arena* in 1900 as she wrote of the impossibility of civilizing African-Americans.

You might bring all the processes of civilization to bear upon the negro, and you may educate him; but, except in isolated cases, you cannot make him thrifty. After the negro has acquired knowledge, he usually does not know how best to apply it. ("The White Man's" 3)

Varina wrote the piece to criticize U.S. involvement in the Philippines, noting her biggest concern was the country's predominantly black population. She doubted social equality with African-Americans would ever happen and urged the country to let the Filipinos govern themselves. "Have we not already sacrificed enough blood and enough money for the negro race? The cause of the American negro has incidentally made thousands of widows and orphans," she wrote ("The White Man's" 3).

<43>Living in the North clearly had not changed the Confederate first lady's views of an issue at the heart of her husband's Civil War. Factors such as this contributed to the creation of her collective memory as a symbol of the Confederacy, as someone history would subsequently erase for being a divider. As someone who grew up in Mississippi and spent much of her life in the South in the 1800s, it is not surprising that Varina would express racist views. Yet there were a number of signs throughout her life that she was not nearly as devoted to the Southern cause as her husband and peers in the South were. Her grandfather, Richard Howell, was a prominent governor in New Jersey during the 1790s (Davis "A Memoir" 45), and many of her relatives remained in the North (Cashin). As noted earlier, Varina spent part of her youth being educated in Philadelphia. As early as 1861, she had privately shared doubt about whether the South could win the war, and Southerners at the time "doubted her devotion to the cause" (Cashin 114). In 1893, she made front page news when she met Julia Grant, widow of former President and Union General Ulysses S. Grant ("Eternal Peace" 1). Toward the end of her life, she publicly noted that the "right side won the Civil War" (Cashin 2).

<44>Growing up with both Northern and Southern connections and living in both parts of the country during her life created a duality within Varina Jefferson Davis. In other words, she is more complex than "the first lady of the Confederacy" symbolism bestowed upon her. Just as Jackie Kennedy was more than a fashion icon and Abigail Adams more than a housewife, Varina Davis was more than a symbol of the Civil War and deserves a place alongside the nation's other first ladies. Analyzing her journalism career illustrates that her collective memory deserves to be reestablished and reinvented, and future research should continue to explore the life and contributions of this forgotten first lady.

Historical Contributions

<45>The day after Varina died in 1906, *The (Richmond) Times Dispatch* remembered her as “the widow of the honored and illustrious president of the Confederacy” and recalled her life in the South (“News of Death” 1). This – in addition to the South’s view of her as one of the “few remaining links connecting the old South with the new” (“News of Death” 1) – helped to seal the mainstream collective memory of her as merely “first lady of the Confederacy,” and therefore not on the “right” side of history and easily erasable. Research into collective memory has found that

the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present ... the beliefs, interests, and aspirations of the present shape the various views of the past.
(Halbwachs 25)

In other words, as the United States struggled to move past the devastation of the Civil War, it is not surprising that the hegemonic collective memory of prominent Southern figures would be negative and downplayed. Michael Schudson writes of four processes of distortion in collective memory. Of particular relevance to this argument is instrumentalization, which means that memories are selected or distorted based upon what is beneficial to the present. Certain cases of instrumentalization involve repression, which may be due to “a drive for consensus or reconciliation” or due to the historical winners who set the memory agenda (Schudson, “Dynamics” 353). As members of the Civil War generation passed away and lost their voice, it became easier for future generations to rewrite one of the worst periods in U.S. history. Similarly, Zelizer writes that “tales of the past are routinely and systematically altered to fit the agendas of those recycling them into the present” (2). As the victor, the North had a vested interest to ensure its perspective remained dominant in order to “[consolidate] group identity across time” – to ensure the United States remained united – which meant allowing tales “of least concern to fade to the background” (Zelizer 2). Best known for her role in the Confederacy, Varina Howell Davis thus faded into the background of history.

<46>However, this research illustrates Varina’s legacy deserves reconsideration. As a symbol of the cause to the Southern people, she faced criticism for her move to the North, but remained determined to pursue her own life at a time when few women challenged the status quo. Writing sympathetic pieces about the South while living in the North and not being afraid to directly discuss the still contentious Civil War also required courage. Through her etiquette columns and feature stories, Varina Davis educated the North about the South and provided an empathetic, humanizing perspective to the Civil War.

<47>By spreading this message through popular publications that collectively reached millions of people, Varina had a remarkable platform to try to ease lingering Northern hostilities through the simple, sympathetic stories of an elderly woman reflecting on the past. As for the South, the consequences of the Civil War still reverberated, and Varina’s romanticized view of Southern people and their culture helped rebuild morale. As Janice Hume and Amber Roessner noted, stories of Southern courage and ways of life during the war “offered suitable antitheses to the real and psychological destruction of war ... certainly these memories would have helped preserve the dignity of white Southerners” (130). Other historians have specifically noted Varina’s contributions in “bringing the North and South together” (Van Der Heuvel 260) and becoming “a pivotal figure in the reconciliation

between North and South” (Cashin 7). The fact that the former first lady of the Confederacy worked to heal a national divide that her husband helped create could certainly qualify as heroic and is part of the larger American story of the Civil War.

<48>But Varina’s contributions even go beyond this. Although she is ignored in first lady scholarship, Varina should be recognized for her role in breaking a glass ceiling for first ladies by working outside the home after her service. As an etiquette columnist for Pulitzer’s *Sunday World* and a writer for other publications, the former first lady served as a visible role model for women during the turn of the twentieth century. Her advice about dinner parties and correspondence may not seem as groundbreaking as the work by Nellie Bly but, like Bly, Varina used her journalism to help legitimize women as a voice of authority and as contributors to society. Most notable were her writings that praised women’s perseverance and abilities. She was indeed a pioneer female journalist and, with her more famous contemporaries, helped pave the way for future women interested in careers in the news industry.

<49>As the United States commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the collective memory of Varina Davis must be reestablished and reinvented. Her connection to the Civil War and Joseph Pulitzer provide her with the foundation of the larger American story deemed necessary by scholars for survival in American memory. Her journalistic writings provide the cultural artifacts required. Now history must go beyond the one-dimensional framing of Varina Davis as merely the first lady of the Confederacy and explain her significance to relations between the North and the South after the Civil War, and to journalism history.

Endnotes

(1)See for example, Harris, Bill. *The First Ladies Fact Book*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2005; Caroli, Betty Boyd. *First Ladies*. 2nd ed. Garden City, NY: Guild America Books, 1997; Gould, Lewis. “Introduction: The First Lady as Symbol and Institution.” *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*. Ed. Lewis Gould. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. xiii-xx; Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power 1789-1961*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990; Boller Jr., Paul F. *Presidential Wives: An Anecdotal History*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. [\(▲\)](#)

(2)White, Mary E. M. *Etiquette for All Occasions and Highest Personal Culture*. Boston, MA: Allston Station, 1900. This book is available in the rare book collection at Kitty King Powell Library, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. [\(▲\)](#)

(3)Primary sources for this research project were found using newspaperarchive.com, Chronicling America, and *Etiquette for All Occasions*. Some microfilm of the *New York World* was found, but obtaining access to the *Sunday World* specifically for 1890 to 1906 was difficult. Other primary sources are from North American Women’s Letters and Diaries as well as historical societies and libraries that have Davis papers and materials, including Varina’s two-volume memoir of her husband from 1890, *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir*. [\(▲\)](#)

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