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"A CALL TO HONOR": REBECCA LATIMER FELTON AND WHITE SUPREMACY

By

Mary A. Hess

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

"A CALL TO HONOR": REBECCA LATIMER FELTON AND WHITE SUPREMACY

By

Mary A. Hess

Rebecca Latimer Felton, suffragist and reformer, was a fervent advocate of white supremacy and a believer in the use of lynching as social control. Her status as an elite white woman of the New South, the wife of a Georgia politician who served two terms in the U.S. Congress, as well as the protégé of Populist leader Tom Watson, allowed her unusual access to public platforms and the press. Felton, a woman of extraordinary abilities, relished her power in Georgia politics and remained a force until her death. She was appointed as interim U.S. Senator in 1922, an office she held only two days. Her legacy is less one of reform than of her notoriety for her racial politics. This study examines her personality and her place in the New South political universe.



This is dedicated to my friend, Dianne Rebecca Cafagna  
1949-1993

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Introduction

The "Southern lady", once overlooked by historians, has come under intense scrutiny. Her diaries and memoirs are searched for significant observations on racial, sexual, class and gender issues in an effort to decipher and recast the role of the elite white woman in the postbellum South. It is an effort that was overdue: as Anne Firor Scott has observed, for most Americans, Scarlett O'Hara is the Southern woman <sup>1</sup> Now, however, we know the likes of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, Sarah Gayle and Mary Chesnut, and we are coming to know Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman and Ida Wells-Barnett, who each offer us a view of the Southern woman that is both candid and unencumbered by the self-deceptions so characteristic of white Southerners. As the invisible woman Scott describes emerges, Black Southerners are also brought into focus.

Rebecca Latimer Felton is described by Scott as neglected, but when her story is brought forward, so too are the freedmen and women of her time. Recent attempts to render Felton as a feminist pioneer and, in particular, as an advocate of the farm wife and mill girl, miss an important aspect of her public persona-- that of a designated and tolerated voice for lynching as social control. Many women's voices were heard in the public arena by the year of the Tybee Island speech (1897), but they spoke of missionary

work, and of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Daughters of the Confederacy. Felton's message in that speech was very different: direct, savage, and targeted at her own class: "If it takes lynching to protect woman's dearest possession from drunken, ravening human beasts, then I say lynch thousand a week if it becomes necessary."<sup>2</sup> Felton was an instrument of the architects of the New South, and as a well-connected elite woman and gifted propagandist, she proved a valuable asset for the white supremacist cause. Her views were shared by many of her class but even a powerful politician like Tom Watson was held in check by the conventions of a gentleman's political discourse. The audacity and passionate delivery of her jeremiads astounded her audiences and helped legitimize the derailing of justice and the subsequent murder of Blacks.

In this thesis I have attempted to answer a simple question which has proved most difficult: why did Rebecca Felton, in so many ways a reformer, become an advocate of lynching, and how did she overcome the supposedly rigid structure of the proper sphere for the Southern lady and become a woman of extraordinary influence in the most public of arenas and the most thoroughly male, politics. In essence, what created Rebecca Felton the journalist, activist and politician and what can account for her astonishing career as an advocate of white supremacy. Felton speaks not only for herself, but attempts to represent all



women. Her views were news, but as will be shown, she spoke for many Southern white women, though hardly all.

Felton herself can be seen as a figure that prefigures the activity of the women who participated in the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s as described by Kathleen Blee <sup>3</sup>as a representative of the often racist woman suffrage movement. Felton's acceptance as a respected journalist and politician, culminating in her appointment as the first woman Senator, made it permissible for the formation of a group in Atlanta in the late 1930s called the Women's National Association for the White Race. Their motto: "The spirit of God must govern and future America be sired by the white race." <sup>4</sup>

Rebecca Felton's career is particularly surprising considering the way the supposedly conservative South supported traditional gender roles, but it is important to remember that the New South was a raw and disorderly shadow of the Old South. The transitional nature of the 1890s created an opportunity for women who were poised to enter the public arena as it did for the demagogues of the time. The very novelty of a public woman assured her of an audience, and her grandmotherly visage assured that she would be respected and believed. Rebecca Felton is, like her mentor Tom Watson, a paradox. Both abandoned idealism in later life and embraced racial politics that propelled them to the U.S. Senate. Watson's was surely a pyrrhic victory, but when Rebecca Felton stood in the Senate, made a speech and was

showered with congratulations and roses,<sup>5</sup> she can be accounted as a success in her own opinion and by her own constituency.

Felton was the most successful of the demagogues because her class and gender provided her with protective coloration in the fierce political struggles of postwar politics, and ultimately surpassed her husband in her own time and certainly in history. Her triumph came in midlife, after a lifetime of disappointment in the domestic sphere, and it came because she presented herself as the embodiment of wisdom and experience both as a wife and mother, but first as a Southerner.

The Atlanta Journal was her forum and her pedestal; she dispensed homey advice in her column as well as racial cant from her protected preserve of the women's pages. The nineteenth century woman's world was powerfully affected by growing numbers of women writing for women. Housekeeping and child-rearing were the focus of these writers, and usually it involved an older woman giving wise advice to a naive young woman.<sup>6</sup> Felton used her column, "The Country Home" to proselytize on all issues that concerned her, going far beyond the old "kinder, kirche, küche" paradigm of women's concerns.

Rebecca Felton, who made her name championing the rights of women, has finally found a place in Southern history to suit her. The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture lists Felton as the sole female profiled in the section on "Politics." All

other "political" women have been confined to the "Women's Life" essay on "Women in Politics." <sup>7</sup> Felton, in other words, belongs with the likes of Orval Faubus and John C. Calhoun -- like Faubus, racism has clouded her legacy and as a "fire-eater" Rebecca Felton would surely have gained the respect of the ultimate sectionalists. Certainly not an unqualified heroine of women's history, Rebecca Latimer Felton deserves a fair assessment.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Anne Firor Scott, "Introduction to a Special Issue on Women in Georgia and the South," Georgia Historical Quarterly 2 (Summer, 1992):240.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black -White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 128.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen M. Blee, Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. J.E. Andrews, Atlanta, to Mrs. David Alter, Pittsburgh, 8 April 1939, Typescript from J. Rosenwald Fund papers collected in the National Urban League papers, Series IV, Box 7. I am indebted to my colleague Felix Armfield for calling this to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley J. Lemons, The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 105-106.

<sup>6</sup> David P. Handlin, The American Home: Architecture and Society, 1815-1915. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 412.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Wilson Reagan and William Ferris, ed. Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1989), 1186-1187.

# I. Mrs. Felton: "Georgia's Empress"

The life and public career of Rebecca Latimer Felton (1835-1930) is a study in paradox. A famous woman in her time, she is practically unknown today. An activist in the woman-suffrage, temperance and peace movements, one might expect to find her name with that of her friends Frances Willard, Isabella Beecher Hooker and Bertha Palmer, influential and prominent women all -- but instead she is consigned to the shadows of history. Her most cherished achievement, that of being appointed Senator from Georgia in 1922, the first woman ever in the Senate, is a virtual footnote in history, despite the intense furor it aroused at the time. When Governor Hardwick offered her the interim appointment, she recalled later:

I was left to ponder the significance of it. It meant that a woman reared in the sheltered security of an antebellum plantation was to be the first of her sex to sit in the United States Senate. It was hard to realize. I thought back through the years and decades, and remembered the first time a woman had lifted her voice in public at our little country church in my girlhood. What a stir that had caused! Who in that day would have had the hardihood to predict that the time would come when Georgia women would hold public office?<sup>1</sup>

A brilliant student and a lively cheerful girl, Rebecca Felton cherished two ambitions above all others: a life in politics and a career as a writer. Her marriage to the widower William Felton only delayed those ambitions, given

their fullest reign at the end of her long life. Her progress from valedictorian of Madison Female College to sleepy Cartersville and her beloved farm, to a grim wartime existence as a refugee in Macon, shaped her public life in postbellum Georgia. One constant aspect of her character echoed again and again in her speeches and writings is a palpable nostalgia for her former privileged existence.

Rebecca Felton's life spanned the last years of the Old South and reached into the raw New South. For a time, from the tumultuous 1890s through the 1920s, she exerted significant influence in the public sphere; Mrs. Felton was the foremost woman politician in Georgia. Her strength lay in her ability to elicit the same nostalgia for vanished prosperity and order in her audience; like General John Gordon, a professional Confederate, she skillfully manipulated the bruised psyches of a humiliated people. Mrs. Felton's particular genius was her emotional connection with her audience; folksy and familiar, her columns were florid and sentimental. She gave the impression of maternal care, and of near saintliness: one young man asked her, "Aren't you the Mrs. Felton who writes for us?"<sup>2</sup>

Despite her appalling legacy as a propagandist, she is still uncritically viewed in some quarters as a feminist heroine: one publication calls her "A Reformer of the First Order."<sup>3</sup> Her gift for words made her both an influential reformer and a demagogue of considerable influence. A feminist assessment must weigh these two personas carefully



in order to give Felton her due. Certainly her influence extended beyond her two day tenure in the Senate, and this study will examine her legacy, particularly in the politics of race in the South.

A gifted writer and speaker, she enjoyed phenomenal popularity through her column in the Atlanta Journal that ran from 1899 to 1930. Clearly among Georgia's governing elite, this congressman's widow wielded immense power in the affairs of her state. How had she seemingly avoided the barriers of propriety and custom that effectively silenced so many Southern women? What experiences or beliefs motivated her aggressive opinions on the subject of race which enflamed passions with such tragic results?

The most promising area of exploration on this question would seem to be Felton's upbringing, but the evidence here raises more questions than it answers. The young Rebecca grew up in very comfortable circumstances on a plantation ten miles from Decatur. She reminisces about her childhood in a rambling memoir, Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth, which establishes her family tree and casts her family in a hagiographic light. What mention she makes of her relations with Blacks are innocuous and often warm, albeit usually condescending. One account of a wedding between a favorite housemaid and a groom from outside the Latimer plantation illustrates her view of the proceedings, in which she is "present at the asking": "Will you treat your wife decent, if I allow you to marry her?" Will you act the dog

and beat my good darky when you get mad with her?" He gladly answered "no." "Now I expect you to behave yourself if you come here to live. It's my house you will live in with your wife but you are welcome if you behave yourself." <sup>4</sup>

Since Rebecca was an adolescent when this wedding took place, it is clear she already saw herself as an authority on the management of the slaves. Her biographer, John Talmadge, portrays an idyllic girlhood, punctuated by the practice of domestic tasks, training her for her future as a mistress of a plantation. He describes Rebecca as surrounded by "kindly, fun-loving Negroes to praise and pet her and make her feel important."<sup>5</sup> There is no hint of anything other than benevolent condescension in her relations with the servants at the Latimers' Panola Plantation.

The name "Miz' Becky", given to her by the servants, was her preferred mode of address throughout her long life. While this connotes a certain easy familiarity with the plantation slaves, it also signifies her absolute insistence on a recognition of her position as a woman in charge, a plantation mistress in training. A self-absorbed, precocious girl, Rebecca absorbed the conditioning of the planter elite that insisted on the natural superiority of whites and consigned Blacks to meek servility. Her belief in *herrenvolk democracy* was a natural outgrowth of her upbringing and of her class background. Whatever her adult experience, no matter how devastating the trauma, her behavior remained consistent with her childhood inculcation in white supremacy.





Once the plantation order was upset by the war, benevolence quickly gave way to a nearly hysterical hatred for Black men that was pathological in its intensity. Talmadge is at a loss to understand it in his biography of Felton: "A possible explanation is that her antipathy for the Negro was accentuated by her strange antagonism towards all men. More than one of her firmest convictions were warped by this persistent hostility...."<sup>6</sup>

Talmadge does a remarkable job rendering Felton's "nine stormy decades" as he called them, but deducing what prompted her "strange antagonism" and "persistent hostility" is beyond the scope of his study. Joel Williamson's analysis in The Crucible of Race offers the best insight into Felton's personality. He agrees that Felton's feelings towards males were primarily those of resentment and fury, and his psychosexual analysis of her behavior is convincing, grounded as it is in a larger study of a South similarly afflicted by Victorian demons.<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Felton became a voice for that South, but, as I will demonstrate, she was not the only elite woman who felt as she did.

In addition to this it is important to consider the large part that frustration had played in Felton's life. Of the five children born to her, only one survived to maturity. That child, Howard, favored his cranky and often ailing father, and was a real trial to his mother. Felton worried constantly that she might lose that child as well. It was also Rebecca Felton's lot to put up with the constant

complaints and peevish insults of a stepdaughter. She worked hard all her married life, and her letters to her mother in particular reflect her weary and worried state of mind. Hard economic times had cut deeply into the Feltons' small inheritance, and Rebecca found herself scrimping and hoarding, which pained her proud spirit.

Rebecca Felton would have agreed with Lucy Breckinridge of Virginia, who expressed a view of marriage that was acid and telling : "A woman's life after she is married , unless there is an immense amount of love, is nothing but suffering and hard work. I never saw a wife and mother who could spend a day of unalloyed happiness and ease... I wish I were a man! I would make my wife so happy. She would never repent having married me." Despite a genuine love of her home and family, Felton wanted far more, and felt trapped. 8

Small wonder she found consolation in her stories of a South of plenty and grace, and later turned her anger on the men who had destroyed her South. That she reserved her particular wrath for the freedman is less mysterious when one considers the inversion of their fortunes. Emancipation of Black men seemed to her the ultimate insult; the freedman even had the franchise and in her paranoia she saw him as "a ravenous beast at heart, capable at a given opportunity of violating any white woman."<sup>9</sup> She felt perfectly comfortable espousing such a view, and believed that most of her friends and neighbors shared it, which in fact, they did.

Another window on her world view is her copious writings on Native Americans. Mrs. Felton admired the "noble savage" and praised the departed first residents of Georgia whose descendants now lived in exile in Oklahoma. She deplored Andrew Jackson's removal of Cherokees to the Indian Territory. One of her own relatives had died after her rescue from a long captivity with the Cherokees, but Rebecca believed her demise came from her separation from the tribe since she never readjusted to life with whites. In Country Life she explores the local lore of the Etowah Mounds, a significant archeological site of the Muscogulge people. Typically, she wildly mixes pseudo-science and fact in these earnest passages : "[the artifact] ...we may reasonably suppose was fashioned by a race of people who occupied this section long before anything was known of the rude and illiterate aboriginal Indians of America."<sup>10</sup>

What follows is a tribute to the "red man who refused to be the white man's slave, preferring to be bayoneted off the continent, in his love for freedom."<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Felton may have been expressing the sentimental folk-wisdom of the time, but her express comparison to Blacks reveals much about her own racism: "The African in the slave holding states did not rise up in defense of democracy or human freedom when the Federal armies of the North had overrun and subjugated the slave owning Southern Confederacy. Whoever writes the true story of the red man must give him credit for higher ideals



and loftier patriotism than the Mongolian or any of the yellow or black tribes can furnish."<sup>12</sup>

This romantic vision of Native American life probably appealed to Rebecca Felton's sensibilities strongly; she certainly identifies with her lost child captive cousin. Captivity narratives were thrilling reading for repressed Victorians, and no real Native Americans were about for her to observe. She was convinced that her life experience with Blacks had given her acute insight into their "nature." She piously huffs that "the story of Georgia for a hundred years and the methods used to dispossess the Indians of their happy hunting grounds will ever be a humiliating confession of the Anglo-Saxon's greed and injustice against their red brother."

13

Felton eagerly romanticized a people she did not know rather than accept equality with Blacks whom she had known her entire life. Particularly revealing is her scorn for Blacks' supposed passivity. Felton and any other Georgian would be familiar with the legacy of the Stono Rebellion and Denmark Vesey: fear and suspicion of slaves' conspiracies underlay the placid plantation facade of the white elite. Rarely expressed but omnipresent was that threat of violence in the antebellum South; after Emancipation that facade was stripped away, revealing the legacy of fear. An imagination that thrived on romantic captivity narratives could easily concoct the fevered threat of the "black beast rapist" as Joel Williamson calls this phantasm.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps she further identified with the Native American because she envisioned an active, vigorous existence in what she called "the wild woods" as preferable to her humdrum life as a farm wife. She could also recall her childhood, one of relative freedom and indulgence from her father. Bertram Wyatt-Brown observed that girls in antebellum days were raised much as boys were to the age of menarche.<sup>15</sup> It is not too preposterous to imagine that her warm sympathy for the oppressed Indian sprang from her own resentment at her confinement within the stifling conventions of southern culture by men who just as often as not were her intellectual inferiors.

In Iron Cages, Ronald Takaki describes the fascination of white males of the nineteenth century with the "noble Indian."<sup>16</sup> A cultural commonplace for white males gradually crossed over into the popular culture of women, witnessed the proliferation of poems about Indians and pageants featuring "Indian" themes. Rebecca Felton's nascent feminism would make her all the more receptive to tales of the brave Sacajawea or Pocahontas. Starved for autonomy, it is understandable why she would yearn towards these idealistic tales and away from the Blacks who shared her oppression in a South and a country controlled by white men. Her attitude towards Native Americans seems to reinforce Winthrop Jordan's observation of the beliefs of the colonists regarding the sexual behavior of Black and Indian males: "Far from finding Indians lusty and lascivious, they discovered them to be notably deficient in

ardor and virility... the colonists developed no image of the Indian as a potential rapist...In fact the entire sexual complex did not pertain to the Indian." <sup>17</sup> By the 1850s Native Americans, desexualized and absent from Georgia, provided a safe outlet for fantasy and romantic fictions. Rebecca Felton is clearly drawn to the "Other", but only as a foil for her "historical fictions." Her view of women of all races is similarly skewered, but she is determined to write women into history, however sentimentally and whatever the distortions she creates.

She related in her memoirs, for example, a tale of Mary Musgrove, "The Empress of the Creeks" who was an ally of Oglethorpe in the early years of the Colony of Georgia. After praising Mary's resourceful negotiations with the General, she typically adds, "When she was full of rum she made a fool of herself as generally happens. Nevertheless there was in her the making of a great woman."<sup>18</sup> Felton almost always qualifies any praise she offers non-whites with such bits of racist cant or moralistic qualification of their "weakness" as perceived by whites.

Rebecca Felton used this "great woman" trope extensively in her writing. Even a casual reader cannot escape the insinuation that in framing her memoirs as a sequence of tales of heroic Georgians, she fully expects to be included in that number. She may be disapproving of Mary Musgrove's consumption of rum, but she admires her daring and her command of authority. She mentions that Mary had a sequence



of bad husbands, but approvingly notes that when sober she refused to obey them. Even closer to her heart is Nancy Hart, the heroine of the Revolution who was, according to a "critic" Felton quotes as saying, " a honey of a patriot and a d\_\_\_\_l of a wife." 19

But her warmest remembrance is of her own Mammy, who she knew by no other name. Her account is cloying and familiar to anyone who has read the sentimental tributes of southern whites to a favorite servant. "Mammy" is favored by no quotation of homey wisdom but Rebecca does guiltily recall how "one time I got impatient and slapped Mammy. I knew I had committed a serious offense but I was too stubborn to say so. I went to the big house, crept into my little bed and suffered as I deserved to suffer...."20

This reminiscence occurs within her framework of "great Southern women" of Georgia before the Civil War. Rebecca Felton marveled at the fidelity of Black female slaves during the war, which she attributes to that affectionate bond she believes bound Confederate women and their black female slaves together against a common enemy. Her paternalistic coloration of this relationship is hardly unusual, but her singling out of Black women for praise for their "fidelity and general excellence" is striking. No such praise is forthcoming for the partners and sons of these women, however.<sup>21</sup> Removed from affluence and absolute authority over the lives of freed Blacks, Rebecca Felton's resentment of their new position in society followed naturally after her

own domestic discontent. Like many another white feminist, she regarded the new status of the freedman as an insult to her, although she was far less reticent about expressing her anger than were other women who preferred to let their spouses or male relations act out their own fears and resentment for them.

Felton's candor and the shocking and violent nature of her remedy for the perceived threat of the Black male instantly connected with the Southern white man who saw in this deceptively genteel matron a justification for his most irrational and violent behavior. Many Southern women warmed to her message. Nancy MacLean describes this surging violence as "a pattern of political mobilization best described as reactionary populism."<sup>22</sup> She argues for "militant sexual conservatism" as a key to this phenomenon. This is also a key to Felton's crusade for the women of Georgia, the mill worker and the farm wife, the "decent" white women like herself who might have lost much but not honor.

Her fear of isolation, however, shows itself all too clearly in her speeches and writings in defense of the lonely farm wife, whom Felton sees as prey for the Black man "roaming" the countryside. The paradoxical nature of her fears and her fantasies can be explained by her romantic image of Native Americans ( who are conspicuously absent in her Piedmont home ) and by her terror of the Black freedman who is all too present and familiar. Her identity as

plantation mistress altered and diminished, Felton demonized the men she could no longer control.

Rebecca Felton herself became a useful symbol for the powerful men of the "New South" exemplified by Henry Grady who condoned lynching by publishing lurid and moralistic accounts of incidents occurring throughout the South. Grady made his views clear on the subject in his collected essays, The New South, published in 1890. While Grady's newspaper The Atlanta Constitution rarely supported Dr. Felton's political views, Grady would certainly have been in accord with Rebecca Felton on the politics of race. Recalling the "shameless villainies of Negro supremacy," Grady explained the legacy of Reconstruction:

Deep was the degradation to which these sovereign States were carried, and heavy as is the burden they left on this impoverished people, it was only when the white race, rallying from the graves of its dead and the ashes of its homes, closed its decimated ranks, and fronting federal bayonets, and defying federal power, stood like a stone wall before the utmost temples of its liberty and credit, and the hideous drama closed --that the miserable assault was checked. 23

This rhetoric might be directed against Republicans and the threat of black political power, but it expresses also the implicit fear of miscegenation that Williamson discusses in The Crucible of Race. In the next section I wish to examine Rebecca Felton's character in light of various psychological theories, expanding on the base established in Williamson's study.

## Self Image and Historical Agency

Rebecca Felton's friends were legion, as were her foes. Without understanding her fierce loyalties and undying enmities, any explanation of her often pathological behavior is inadequate and misleading. The young Rebecca absorbed her attitudes from her family, particularly her father. From him came her rabid and abiding interest in politics, and from him she absorbed her affinity for a good scrap. She wrote her massive and largely tedious My Memories of Georgia Politics (1911) primarily to settle scores with the Bourbons, and left explicit instructions for a future biographer with her voluminous papers "explaining" the feud. <sup>24</sup>

One adjective used by both contemporaries and historians alike to describe Rebecca Felton is "remarkable." She is certainly that, and was, as Joel Williamson observed, "one of the most interesting women the South ever produced." He sees her relationships with her father and husband as particularly significant: "In an age in which women were to be seen and not much heard outside of the home, in a state where husbands might legally whip their wives and sell their property, each of these men was uniquely sympathetic towards Rebecca Felton's rise in public life."<sup>25</sup> Her intelligence and ambition complemented first her father's upbringing, then her husband's political and social agendas. To this I would add that Rebecca's personality and position in Georgia society

greatly enhanced her rise to prominence. But what caused her to turn sharply away from the Victorian female tropes that had served her so well and adopt a spare, angry racial rhetoric in her Tybee speech of 1897, and marked a startling preoccupation with the threat of interracial sex and violence against women?

Felton came of age when the plantation South reached its zenith and fully enjoyed the life of a young lady of quality. Her marriage and subsequent heartbreak as a mother coincided with what was certainly the galvanizing event in her life, the Civil War. During the infamous "Great March," Felton found herself forced to shuttle between her ailing mother in the eastern part of the state and her family in Macon. Sherman had swept through Bartow county early in 1864, and the Feltons had been refugees ever since. Her youngest son died in a measles epidemic, as did "thirty members of our Negro family." Sherman's advance meant they lived "in hourly dread and anticipation." 26

Rebecca Felton, like so many other southern women, blamed the war on male stupidity, but her true feelings ran much deeper. In Country Life in Georgia she examined the institution of slavery closely, displaying at times sentiments that would not be out of place in an abolitionist newspaper. But one passage stands out, one that is characteristic of Felton's more reasonable public persona, that of the wise old head who has seen the folly of men: "All we individually owned disappeared, except the farm land,

and in my old age, I am pondering this question, why did not the South compromise by selling their slaves or offering to take a price, and put it up to those who were afraid of war? Was slave ownership ever worth the sacrifice of blood and treasure that resulted from that secession ordinance? " 27

This is Felton at her most disingenuous. She deliberately ignores the question she herself raises: that the wealth of the South, of the planter class, would not have existed without slavery. Shrewd student of politics that she was, Rebecca Felton knew that the North had no intention of offering a financial settlement to end slavery. Writing her memoirs in later years her tactics are those of appeasement and reason, but as I will demonstrate, her newspaper columns and public speeches reveal her true sentiments on the subject of race.

Another remembrance is more telling of her beliefs, although it is similarly packaged in the language of reason and rationality and decidedly seen in hindsight. Describing a Methodist camp meeting held at her plantation in 1860, Felton writes:

There were neighbors and friends inside our tent armed to the teeth waiting for midnight to go out quietly to suppress a 'rising' that had been reported to them late in the afternoon. The dread of negro insurrection and social equality at the ballot box held the Southern whites together in war or peace. That 'rising' was a false alarm but the terror of those risings made Southern fathers and husbands desperate as to remedies. It was 'born in the blood and bred in the bone, ' and a resultant of domestic slavery in the Southern States. 28

Rebecca Felton's memoir of 1919 went on to blame the East St. Louis riot on the "dread" she describes.<sup>29</sup> The Americans she addressed had seen for themselves what remedies southern whites thought appropriate since D.W. Griffith's film "Birth of a Nation" had been a national sensation four years earlier.

Felton's writings are the only reliable view into her character, since beyond her considerable ability to dissemble she still reveals a great deal about her character because she assumes her audience understands her and shares her beliefs. Denied the opportunity to express her opinions in a meaningful way, her tactics changed to those of subversion. Her ability to charm and coerce outstrip our conventional understanding of "southern charm": married to a an older man of a sour disposition, Felton turned her considerable energies outward as her maternal role diminished; a woman at midlife able at last to negotiate a public life at a time when change was evident everywhere in society.<sup>30</sup> As a transitional figure Felton is especially striking-- what suited her of the mythic code of "southern honor" she kept, what interfered with her vision of the new southern lady she ignored.

In Country Life , Felton declared herself as having been improved by her domestic captivity, by removal to a remote place; the only adult white woman on her plantation. This both suited her and left her unsatisfied. That an adult

woman would identify with girls carried off by "red savages" shows a mind both fanciful and repressed. Annette Kolodny, in her study The Land Before Her examines the popularity of captivity narratives among women readers argues women identified strongly with the white female captives. Kolodny believes that women, isolated and angry with husbands who risked all to explore the frontier, placed that anger "vicariously... onto the dark and dusky figure of the Indian, a projection of the husband's darker side."<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Felton, the young wife of an older husband who remained on his plantation to protect his property during the Civil War, must have been ambivalent about Dr. Felton's nonparticipation and her confinement to her home. Numan Bartley observes that Dr. Felton "did not enjoy good health" and thus remained at home, able to protect his family if threatened by the invading forces, which interestingly enough becomes a familiar trope of Rebecca Felton's writing in the 1890s.<sup>32</sup> She might identify with Nancy Hart, who proved herself capable of defending her own home, but Felton portrayed the typical Georgia planter's wife as a helpless victim in waiting without her man.

Marriage was decidedly a subject that Rebecca Felton addressed with her characteristic passion. She acidly observed that "The marriage business is a lottery. You can draw a prize but you are more likely to draw a blank."<sup>33</sup> Her frank criticism of the inequities of marriage is all the more remarkable considering most women had been inculcated in



their duty to their mates and masters just as Felton had as a young girl. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown points out, "Like the slaves who often heard in the white people's church about the necessity to obey, women were commanded to defer to male authority." <sup>34</sup> Despite her frequent praise of her obliging spouse, enough bitterness tinges her writings to raise questions about the reality of the Feltons' domestic bliss.

A mother who bore five children and saw only one survive to adulthood, Felton's considerable energies were swamped by her domestic life: "For eight or ten years my life was so absorbed in my children that it was cloister-like, months elapsing sometimes when my feet were never outside the front gate."<sup>35</sup> Her biographer attributes her entry into politics and journalism as an answer to her sorrow, but her correspondence often reflects a scarcely-concealed impatience to participate in life outside the "woman's sphere." Perhaps as an answer to those who would question her ladyhood, some of her most impassioned speeches and writings were on the subject of motherhood; two representative speeches ("A Word to Men Concerning Their Mothers" and "The Problems That Interest Mothers") are contained in her memoir Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth. <sup>36</sup> Felton, a lively, very opinionated woman, had been obsessed with politics since childhood and must have been delighted to finally have the opportunity to voice her concerns when her husband started the Cartersville Courant in 1885. At the time of her greatest literary output, Felton is past her child-rearing

days and her most trying years, but still clearly in thrall to her suppressed ambitions. Certainly the life of a sedate older woman was not for her.

Her memoirs reveal her true identification with Georgia heroines was with the bold defender of home (and country) Nancy Hart, and the "Empress of the Creeks," Mary Musgrove. She clearly yearns for a more heroic age, one of thrilling female adventures in the wilderness and a frontier where powerful women dealt directly with powerful men. The colonial experience in Georgia provides her with vivid figures for her pamphlet, "Romantic Stories of Georgia Women", which concludes with her own story, neatly placing herself in history and crafting a self-serving narrative. <sup>37</sup> Constrained by the straitjacket of "true ladyhood," even more farcical after the grueling experiences of Southern women during the War, Rebecca Felton must have felt impatient and cheated of a chance to be a great woman on the scale she imagined.

Her home life was that of a farm wife. Hard work was the daily round. The Feltons financial crisis persisted for decades, anxiety over crops and prices was a constant theme in her letters and columns. Quite a different life that the valedictorian of Madison Female Academy had imagined since playing the piano and mastering dance steps were unimportant now. These social skills mattered far less than her skill at writing "themes" -- writing became her one important release and a source of both money and personal fulfillment.

Many southern women found themselves in an uncomfortable position of privation that brought out hitherto unsuspected entrepreneurial skills. After the war many turned to teaching as Felton herself did for two years. Although culture and character was required of a female teacher (as it would not do for an unsuitable woman to instruct pupils), it was a considerable drop in status for a member of the planter class. One woman frankly called it "drudgery." Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, herself a product of Wesleyan Female Academy in Macon, complained to her diary in February 1880 concerning vanished prosperity and privilege:

Perhaps persons who have never been accustomed to anything better are satisfied with the position in which they find themselves but to me bare floors in winter-- windows without shades --and broken plastering are trials much more irritating than loss of property. They are constant, unending in their annoyance, the more so because I feel I ought to be above such trifles. Loss of property, public advertisements are terrible.... I do not think even my own family know how I have felt my change of fortune. I think I have borne a brave front.

38

She wrote of her cherished rosewood chairs "with coloured brocatelle embroidery. Some of them broken ."

Thomas also mentions her piano, which along with the remnants of her once splendid parlor she clung to stubbornly.<sup>39</sup> Like Felton, Thomas had begun a small school. Her obvious pride in her cultivation and ability is, like her parlor, a link to the past in the midst of penury. Thomas

was unlucky in her husband, a weak man and a poor manager. Felton, on the other hand, continually praises "the Doctor", while she allowed minute glimpses of her real opinion of men and marriage in her columns and private letters.

About Dr. William Felton we learn little beyond his political opinions. <sup>40</sup> The memoirs of Southern elite women of the period are characteristically romantic and adoring when referring to a husband, yet rarely venture beyond a description of a spouse as a good man, a loyal Southerner and a benign slaveholder . A Louisiana woman raised on a plantation, Caroline Elizabeth Merrick, opposed slavery, but exulted in Emancipation seeing her own freedom at hand: "When President Lincoln issued his proclamation of freedom to our slaves I exclaimed: 'Thank heaven! I too will be free at last!' --forgetful of the legal disabilities to which white women of these United States are yet in bondage. "<sup>41</sup> This observation comes after a long passage describing the goodness and fine sensibilities of her beloved husband. Dr. Felton seen through his wife's eyes is much the same, except that his wife frequently remarks on his growing infirmity while her own narrative grows more assertive and bold with the passage of time. She sees herself as a heroic avenger of "the Doctor's" reputation, but this Joan of Arc posture is a clever invention to conceal her own advancement in the public arena and protection from accusations of most unfeminine ambition.

Dr. Felton was, as suspected by the Feltons' political enemies, more and more a mere shadow of his wife. The charge that Rebecca Felton was the real power in their partnership only became true in the Doctor's later life, when it became clear he was an invalid at their Cartersville farm, never to reemerge, while his wife traveled and built her reputation as a crusader. While Rebecca enjoyed her life as a Lady Manager at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, her letters home reflect an ill-concealed impatience with her husband's domestic problems. A letter of March 19, 1893 instructed him not to pay a "rascal" sharecropper: "Don't pay him a nickel--for he owes Johnson all he has in the cotton -- and owes me \$4.00, with interest from 1890...." Exasperated by his understandable fretting after their cook has left, she continues, " ...you must get another... *I can't think of anyone that would suit you* -- but you must get a boy, if you can do no better." That dispensed with, she blithely recounted her adventures at the fair. Her cheerful tone may have been an attempt to appease her spouse, or divert him with news. Oddly, her papers only include her letters to him, this from a woman who seems to have kept virtually all of her correspondence intact in her papers. There is one terse, angry telegram preserved from the same year instructing her to "Are you planning to reside permanently in Chicago. Answer immediately." Dr. Felton was, of course, an ailing older man who depended on his dynamic younger spouse to run his household and order his life, and her absence



obviously disturbed him. Her response is a two-page defense describing her many letters home which have yet to reach him, defensive yet placating in its tone. 42

The relationship between Rebecca and William Felton illustrates well what the psychologist/anthropologist David L. Gutmann describes in his landmark study of gerontology, Reclaimed Powers. Gutmann proposes a *developmental* position in refutation of the "depletion perspective--the weak face of aging -- that currently dominates conventional thinking in gerontology. " 43 His concern is with changes in the entire lifespan of an individual. Elders he sees as the locus of knowledge and experience, to be dislodged at peril to the health of a society. Gutmann is, of course, concerned with the present, but I believe his analysis is particularly appropriate in the Victorian South and sheds light on the development of Rebecca Felton's self image and agency.

He constructs "special developmental axes along which older men and women mature into their special assignments as emeritus parents."44 Further, he sees males in general as progressively less assertive and women, inversely, asserting themselves.45 In a chapter titled "The Inner Liberation of the Older Woman", Gutmann describes a type he calls the Moralistic Matriarch. "They are alert to the moral deficiencies of others and having found them, they take direct, corrective and retaliatory action. "46 Felton's Tybee speech is the best illustration of this, in which she advocated the lynching of Black men to protect white women





from rape. Criticized by the Boston Transcript she retorts, " My rebuke was intended for the inertness of our pulpits in this crisis; my indignation was expended on the incapacity of our courts, and my contempt was freely expressed for the deficient manhood which could not protect the innocent and helpless, in the land their fathers died to save. " <sup>47</sup>In a short statement, she condemns the churches, the legal system and white men, and invokes filial piety and the Lost Cause.

According to Gutmann, the Moralistic Matriarch derives her power and authority from her years and her progeny. Rebecca Felton seemed to have adopted the entire population of Georgia as her children, with particular attention to the white daughters. When Mary Phagan was murdered in 1913, Felton's columns rang with indignation and fury against the hapless Leo Frank. <sup>48</sup> The death of children is an oft-repeated theme of her writings, almost as frequent as her lectures on the dangers to white women's virtue.

It is likely that the death of her children weighed more heavily on her than she recognized. After all, she was reared in the Old South, where, as Bertram Wyatt Brown described in Southern Honor , "Childbearing was an ancient and sacred calling of the gender."<sup>49</sup> He cites Mary Chesnut's diary on the subject of her childless marriage, and observed that " Barrenness ...had always been a point of shame... The married woman who disappointed her husband and relations in this respect could scarcely help having feelings of incompleteness. Moreover, it cut her off from a source of

personal power--the duties of nurture--and from a source of fulfillment as a woman. " 50 While Rebecca had borne many children, only one survived, and as any woman who has lost children can attest, no matter how many children she has, the lost child is never forgotten. Even if Felton was not barren, losing so many children might well have shamed her. She often referred to herself as a "childless mother." 51 While she attributed the mortality of her young children to the harsh conditions of wartime, and the loss of children in an age of large families and primitive medicine was common, it clearly marked her life as a major disappointment. At the point in her life when she had hoped perhaps for a large, bustling clan about her, she had instead a frail, irritable old man, a sickly adult son, and a troublesome step-daughter. It is clear why the public sphere held such an attraction for her, if only as an outlet for her considerable energy.

At age 38, Felton began her public career in earnest, and quickly achieved her place as the much remarked "political 'She' of Georgia." In 1873, as the South was convulsed by Reconstruction, Rebecca Felton and her husband saw their moment and seized it. As Williamson explained in describing the demagogic political leaders of the era (not to be confused with "Radical Republicans") : "Radical leaders, like Radicals at large, seemed to be people specially affected by a sense of powerlessness, people who strove valiantly to develop power and exercise it to counter that

feeling of vulnerability. Of course, managing black people in an arrogant and arbitrary manner was a satisfying exercise for such people, but there was another nemesis to be dealt with , and a very real one --the North." 52 The North, however, would serve as the Feltons' avenue to political power. Entering national politics was a natural step for the ambitious couple, and a way to effect change in Georgia that would trump their enemies in Atlanta, particularly John Gordon and the Bourbons.

John Talmadge, a perceptive biographer of both Rebecca Felton and Corra Harris, understood well the dynamics of the Feltons' marriage and echoes Gutmann's theory on the sex difference in aging:

The poet Robert B. Tristram Coffin has said that a newly-married Maine wife always walks a few steps behind her husband. With the passing of the years, however, she gradually moves up , and then they walk together until that day when she goes ahead 'to break the force of the wind for an old man.' ...If Coffin had been writing about the Feltons he would have had to add another stanza to the poem. When the Doctor retired, his wife went on alone. She had come to love the force of the wind. 53

As Rebecca Felton became more visible and influential, some of her sharpest critics were women, and some were even counted among her friends. Corra Harris (1869-1935), Georgia writer and journalist, shared a great deal with Felton in terms of upbringing and ideology, but her disapproval of her friend Rebecca is plain in the character of Susan in her 1915 novel, The Co-Citizens, an attack on feminism and woman suffrage:

This was Susan Walton, the one celebrated character Jordantown had produced since the Civil War, and she was a source of embarrassment rather than pride. According to the ethics of that place no woman should be known beyond her own church and parlour, much less celebrated... It was said of her that she kept her husband, an elegant soft old gentleman, in Congress for up to a century and up to the very day of his death by being a thorn in the side of the political life of the state. She kept scrapbooks in which she pasted dangerous and damaging information about politicians and prominent men generally. 54

Somewhat of a public figure herself, although a "reluctant" one, Corra Harris condemned Susan/Rebecca's oratory : "She made public speeches at a time when no other woman in the South would go further than to give her "experience" in church or read a missionary report before the Women's District Conference... it was said that she actually did address that dignified body [the state legislature ] as 'boys', and that the 'boys' liked it." Harris described Susan as "waddling like a fat old duck" while wearing widow's weeds and being generally uninterested in her appearance. She manages some grudging appreciation of her gifts: " She had the brains of a man and the temper of an indignant but tenderhearted woman ....And what she said was violently effective. Her victims might persist in the error of their ways, but not one of them ever recovered from the face-scratching fury of her attack."55 The Co-Citizens parodied Rebecca Felton and her beliefs as a counterpoint to a

saccharine love story, conflating feminism with aging and vituperation, and contrasted it with youth and beauty. At the novel's end, a young woman expresses an ardent desire to abandon politics to darn socks and iron for her beloved. The life of the public sphere created only discord and made women unnatural in Harris's view.

Whatever Corra Harris really felt about Rebecca Felton, and jealousy is just one possibility, the most interesting aspect of their relationship is that Felton appreciated this caricature and promoted the book. Perhaps Felton was acknowledging that she was past beauty and the pedestal, and accepted that as a matron of years she could behave as she pleased. Williamson advances this theory in The Crucible of Race and convincingly argues that Rebecca Felton's racial rhetoric was one strategy she used to force the creation of a new and more equitable society.<sup>56</sup> As we shall see, however, her vision extended to whites only, consistent with her lifelong belief in white supremacy.

In an interview with Isma Dooley of the Atlanta Constitution, Rebecca Felton sees her role as a great woman and a reformer. Age suited her better than youth, as she was widely admired, as Dooley puts it: "She is an old woman who has been a new woman for fully thirty years." Rebecca Felton states:

I must have had crude but novel ideas not familiar to Southern latitude, but as I survey 'the new woman's' field of action at the close of the nineteenth century, I find that I have been 'breaking ice' for a quarter of a century, and although I was forced to stem the current with my rude bark, I find the tide is floating in a

convoy of elegant and cultured women who are becoming leaders of thought and opinion. 57

It pleased Rebecca Felton to think of herself as a noble woman who had paved the way for her sisters, but her fame was bought at a high price. She would be chagrined indeed to consider her present obscurity, and to find that she has been left out of the canon of "great women" as constructed by historians.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Latimer Felton, The Romantic Story of Georgia's Women (Atlanta: The Atlanta Georgian and Sunday American, 1930), 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> John Talmadge, Rebecca Latimer Felton: Nine Stormy Decades (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1960 ) , 129.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara B. Reitt, ed. Georgia Women: A Celebration. ( Atlanta: The Conger Printing and Publishing Company -- Atlanta Branch, American Association of University Women, 1976) , 17.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Latimer Felton, Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth. Signal Lives: Autobiographies of American Women, ed Annette Baxter, Leon Stein, and Barbara Welter. (New York: Arno Press, 1980), Reprint of a 1919 edition. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Talmadge, Rebecca Latimer Felton, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 113.

7 Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black -White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation (New York: Oxford University Press , 1984 ) 128-30.

8 Mary D. Robinson, "Lucy Breckinridge Comments on Marriage, 1862-1864." In Major Problems in the History of the American South, ed. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1979. 381.

9 Talmadge, Rebecca Latimer Felton , 113.

10 Felton, Country Life in Georgia . 10.

11 Ibid., 11.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Williamson, The Crucible of Race. 116-19.

15 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor : Ethics and Behavior in the Old South. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). 231.

16 Ronald T. Takaki, Iron Cages : Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) , 84-92.

17 Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black : American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina Press, 1968 ), 162-63.

18 Felton, Country Life in Georgia , 96.

19 Ibid. , 99.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Nancy McLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism," Journal of American History ,78,3(December 1991) :920.

23 Henry W.Grady,The New South (New York:Robert Bonner's Sons,1890),241.

24 Talmadge,156-157.

25 Williamson,124.

26 Katharine M. Jones, When Sherman Came: Southern Women and the "Great March" (New York:The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.,1964),35-36.

27 Felton, Country Life ,84.

28 Ibid.,87.

29 Ibid.

30 Charles L. Flynn, White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) , 140. Flynn calls Dr. Felton " a sanctimonious, vituperative preacher politician ."

31 Annette Kolodny, The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860 ( Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984 ), 33. For a thoughtful discussion of the persistence of the captivity narrative in American history, see June Namias, White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

32 Numan Bartley, The Creation of Modern Georgia (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), 119. Bartley devotes more attention to Rebecca Felton than her



spouse, and credits her with being the more effective politician.

33 Ibid. , 121.

34 Wyatt-Brown,Southern Honor , 231.

35 Talmadge,15.

36 Felton,Country Life ,257, 259.

37 Felton, Romantic Stories of Georgia Women. John Talmadge describes this book: " The first two of the twenty short chapters deal briefly with Mary Musgrove, the Creek princess, and with Nancy Hart, the legendary heroine of Revolutionary days; and the last four describe the rather sparse achievements of Georgia women in such fields as education, journalism, and literature. The remaining fourteen tell the story of one Georgia woman: Rebecca Felton." 134 .

38 Virginia Ingraham Burr,ed,The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,1990), 395-396.

39 Ibid.

40 Stephen Hahn, The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 226-237. Hahn's study discusses William Felton's political career and clarifies his role as an Independent. Dr. Felton's character is only discerned through his fiery rhetoric and contentious political style.

41 Caroline Elizabeth Merrick, Old Times in Dixie Land: A Southern Matron's Memories.(New York: Grafton Press, 1901), 12.

42 Rebecca Latimer Felton, Chicago, to William H. Felton, Cartersville, March 19, 1893. Transcript in the hand of Rebecca Latimer Felton, Felton Papers, 3:2, Box 3, Ms. 81. Correspondence, etc. 1893. Telegram from William H. Felton to Rebecca Latimer Felton, April 5, 1893. Rebecca Latimer Felton to William H. Felton, April 8, 1893.

43 David Gutmann, Reclaimed Powers. (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 5. Gutmann states: "Whereas adult males start from a grounding in Active Mastery, including autonomy from and even dominion over the husband. Across cultures, and with age, they seem to become more authoritative, more effective, and less willing to trade submission for security."

44 Ibid., 133.

45 Ibid. 140.

46 Ibid.

47 Rebecca Latimer Felton, Felton Papers, University of Georgia.

48 Horace Montgomery, ed. Georgians in Profile: Historical essays in Honor of E. Merton Coulter, "Rebecca Latimer Felton" by John E. Talmadge. (Athens: University of Georgia, 1958) 299.

49 Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 236-237.

50 Ibid.

51 LeeAnn Whites, Introduction in Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

52 Williamson, 503.

53 Talmadge, 90.

54 Corra Harris, The Co-Citizens (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co. , 1915) , 21-3.

55 Ibid.

56 Williamson, 303.

57 Felton, Country Life, 122.

## II. A New South Prophet in "The Land of the Tree and the Home of the Grave"

Rebecca Felton's impact on her region and her constituency was significant in her own time, but the real assessment of her influence has only begun as scholars probe the connections between women and white supremacy. In its earliest form, women's history as a discipline was strongly influenced by the "founding mothers" approach, much as the study of "lost women writers" absorbed the attention of literary scholars in the last two decades. Many were unqualified heroines uncovered by those pioneering scholars, but now, as the field matures, our attention is also focused on the women whose influence on history was malignant, or at best, ambiguous. Since it is impossible to render Rebecca Felton's career without accounting for her support for white supremacy, she has been left to wait for a feminist assessment that realistically evaluates her achievements and delineates her role as an advocate for lynch law.

In August of 1897, Rebecca Felton gave an address to the Georgia Agricultural Society meeting at Tybee, entitled "Farm Wives and Their Needs." The audience, largely affluent and male, was startled by this speech, which on its face was a plea for the women of Georgia who, like herself, were an integral part of farm life. Felton asked that the men in agriculture recognize that their wives needed and deserved

some equity in their property, the "wife's farm."<sup>1</sup> But the sensational aspect of her speech , eagerly reported by the press, was her stern upbraiding of Georgia's white men for what she believed was their failure to protect their women from rape. She painted a lurid picture of women alone on the farm, vulnerable to attack from Black men, "... if it takes lynching to protect woman's dearest possession from drunken, ravening human beasts, then I say lynch a thousand a week if it becomes necessary." As Williamson observes, her words seemed the "gospel truth" to the planters and her incendiary opinions took on a life of their own, which had tragic consequences for the already besieged African-American.<sup>2</sup>

Rebecca Felton was a true maverick, a born politician and pundit. Restrained by nothing more than duty to her family, she staged a careful and subversive agenda for women's rights that encompassed more than fifty years in the public eye. Her self-image was firmly grounded in her role as a southern white elite woman, yet as LeeAnn Whites has pointed out, much of her rhetoric was distinctly that of the "new woman."<sup>3</sup> Claiming sisterhood with the less fortunate women of her region, Felton launched her most famous campaign. She could not have anticipated that her Tybee address would gain her so many new admirers and supporters. Neither could she envision this description of her: "This woman not satisfied with the South's bloody record since the war is clamoring and whining like a she wolf for more human

sacrifices, and an increased flow of human blood. She is unmercifully pounding a helpless and defenseless people...."4

The author of that novella, "Jack Thorne" begins his Hanover; or, The Persecution of the Lowly, with this imagined outburst by the Black editor of the Wilmington Record, Alex Manly. Manly's response to Rebecca Felton generated even more controversy than the Tybee speech, and inspired two works of fiction based on the Wilmington Riot of November 10, 1898. Both David Bryant Fulton (writing as "Thorne") and Charles Waddell Chestnutt in his The Marrow of Tradition, felt compelled to address the horrors of the event more properly known as the Wilmington Massacre from the perspective of the victims. Both novels utilize Manly's editorial in their plots, but neither sees the exchange between Felton and Manly as the provocation for the events of November 10. Most accounts have dismissed the Record editorial as a convenient blind for what actually provoked white supremacists-- the Populist/Republican fusion Republican government of the city of Wilmington, considered until that date to be the most tolerant Southern city in the matter of race. But just as the "threat to white womanhood" or "rape" was the convenient excuse for lynchings, so the Felton/Manly exchange served as a incitement to a massacre.<sup>5</sup>

Trudier Harris' study Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals explores the nexus of "violations" of the southern white male psyche. She cites a reporter's account of a lynching and burning of a Black

man accused of attacking a white woman. The reporter asked if the man was guilty and if any attack had actually occurred. A bystander answered the question concisely and chillingly: "No, I was told; that was really irrelevant. No particular crime was being avenged. The Negro population was being warned never to forget that the coloured man in the South is still a slave, that between him and the white man there can be no law, no claim to justice."<sup>6</sup>

Lynch law superseded the gains of Reconstruction among both Blacks and whites, and linked both inextricably to the days of slavery. Wyatt-Brown observes in Southern Honor that: "Lynchings consciously defied the law and abstract justice and could result in an explosion of hatred, rage and anarchy... As anthropologist Victor Turner argues, the use of ritual tends to anticipate deviations and conflicts by channeling crowd actions into long-practiced forms."<sup>7</sup> The ritual of lynching had more power to control behavior than any government, and this Rebecca Felton knew implicitly. It is doubtful that she was unaware of the effect her Tybee address would have on her audience, though her subsequent denials have a familiar ring of dissemblance. In her way, she had found her opportunity to stand on the pedestal, fulfill her part in the ritual and slake her ambition all at the same time.

The Manly/Felton controversy may matter less in explaining the Wilmington massacre and the surge in lynchings than the familiar scenario of southern Blacks achieving

economic parity with whites and then suffering a violent backlash. Ida Wells-Barnett, the famous Black journalist, became an anti-lynching activist after the lynching of her friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Henry Steward in 1892, managers of the successful Black-owned "People's Grocery" in Memphis.

For Wells-Barnett, the economic link to lynch law was all too clear. In her essay, "Lynch Law in all Its Phases", she dissected the events that led to the burning of her press and her exile from Memphis. Significantly, it was her Free Speech editorial that contained the statement, " Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that black men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the reputation of their women." <sup>8</sup> The Memphis Commercial-Appeal and the Evening Scimitar fired back its own editorial threatening to lynch the editor, and the result was the destruction of Wells' press. She was traveling to Philadelphia to attend the A.M.E. conference at the time, and thus narrowly escaped the mob. Such was the rage of whites against her that Wells recalled that a white "lady" had professed regret that the three men were lynched "but she did wish there was some way by which I could be gotten back and lynched." <sup>9</sup>

All this should have warned Alex Manly that his editorial would provoke a terrible response. The pattern



had become alarmingly clear, but as Williamson suggests in The Crucible of Race , perhaps the growing power of Blacks in North Carolina assured him that he could "defend the colored man" with impunity. <sup>10</sup> The reality was that very little had changed. In fact, the old restraints of common decency were crumbling, as Charles Chestnutt's old white gentleman Mr. Delemere says: "Time was, sir, when the law was enforced in this state in a manner to command the respect of the world! Our lawyers, our judges, our courts, were a credit to humanity and civilization. I fear I have outlasted my epoch,-- I have lived to hear of white men , the most favored of races, the heirs of civilization, the conservators of liberty, howling like red Indians around a human being slowly roasting at the stake."<sup>11</sup> The old planters' 'gentility' had vanished when a threat to his economic life and racial purity seemed imperiled.

Rebecca Felton's address at Tybee was the first step for her own crusade to achieve political hegemony. Cloaked in her passionate appeals for gender equity and the "wife's farm" was her call to honor, a message no southern person, particularly no white man, could mistake. In the next section, the Tybee speech and the Wilmington Massacre will be examined in the light of this understanding of ritual and the consequences of the Felton/Manly controversy.

## The Press as Pedestal

Rebecca Felton wrote compulsively, and few details about Georgia life escaped her attention. It can be said that the Tybee address gave her one of her most significant opportunities, as Hoke Smith, the publisher of the Atlanta Journal, offered her a column on "women's issues" the year after her greatest notoriety, 1899. The part the press played in creating her as a symbol was substantial, and both the Journal and the Constitution had a role in creating "Mrs. Felton," the woman who dared to advocate white supremacy.

Felton was excellent copy, perfect for the "New Journalism" that Henry Grady had made ubiquitous. Grady's "keyhole journalism" was characterized by "sensational stories and flippant headlines."<sup>12</sup> Grady might have expired in 1889, but his influence persisted in the relentless boosterism of Atlanta's newspapers as well as the preoccupation with melodrama and political chicanery. A typical day for the Constitution included the latest news on the new jail, a lawsuit filed over the "value of a dog" and the "Queer Story of a Young Girl Whose Relatives Say She Is A Lunatic" concerning a certain Miss Lula Meeks said to have been in a "towering passion."<sup>13</sup> Fallen women ruined by drink and glib seducers abound in their pages, and the content of all the city's publications reflect a profoundly racist and nativist sensibility.

At the same time, the newspapers of the South were propagating an image of the southern woman which one writer called "hypocrisy... Editors played all the keys from idolatry to gross jest." Southern women were "taught not to say unkind words and to be horrified at any form of crudeness...to learn more about men than Shakespeare, to love God and her ancestry and to be a comforting nurse. In short, 'she is the strongest power in the South, that sweet-voiced, gentle womanly creature that we call the Southern girl.'"14 But the woman of the South worked hard after the Civil War. Yesterday's belle found herself holding a broom instead of a fan, and the newspapers promoted this new image : " Music, art, painting and embroidering were ideal pastimes for girls, but the time had come when sweeping the floor, washing clothes, darning socks, cooking, patching breeches and saving money were more important. A girl's kisses could be just as sweet and her smile just as tender in the kitchen as under the parlor chandelier." 15

Many women's lives were indeed grim, and in the hard economic years of the 1890s the newspapers offered a false gentility and romantic nonsense about "moonlight and magnolias" of the Old South to appeal to those sentimental for the Lost Cause. Popular literature held up the plantation ideal to a generation which had never known either the prosperity of the antebellum years or the War itself. As women began to claim a place in the public sphere, the southern press could only adapt by creating a

fiction that a girl should emulate. All the old virtues and accomplishments were needed as well as domestic skills and a strong back. "Women's issues" were segregated to a women's page marked by advertisements for Lydia Pinkham's tonic and dress patterns. For a white woman to make the transition from the society columns to the editorial page, she had to be either be visiting royalty, an adventuress, or involved in a murder. Rebecca Felton, who Margaret Mitchell dubbed "Georgia's Empress," was a special case.<sup>16</sup> Her tenure at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, and subsequent expositions in Atlanta, Tennessee, and St. Louis gave her added prestige in a city that worshipped celebrity and success. She turned an inheritance from her father into investments in land which paid her in crops and revenue from mining. Talmadge likens her drive for financial security to the fictional Scarlett O' Hara's, and perhaps the young Mitchell also observed this also in the feisty old lady.<sup>17</sup>

The Constitution had been hostile to the Feltons, having supported their archenemy General Gordon in several encounters, and once, their candidate for Governor, Major A.O. Bacon, was accused of "hiding behind the petticoats of a woman."<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Felton wrote most of her stinging epistles under pen names like "Citizen" or "Bartow" (her home county), ostensibly to conceal her identity and her gender. Rebecca had been likened to H. Rider Haggard's She, "a mythical monster in a novel who preyed on mankind for two thousand years." This was offered as an *apology* to the Feltons by the

culprit, a young upstart Bourbon legislator, E.G. Simmons, who claimed he likened the Doctor's prison bill to the monster. <sup>19</sup> In 1893, she tangled with Bishop Warren Candler on the editorial page over, of all things, the ultimate destination of financier Jay Gould's soul, and then scrutinized Emory College's endowment, much to the annoyance and embarrassment of Candler. <sup>20</sup> She survived it all, and thrived as her legend grew.

Mrs. Felton had not mellowed by 1897, but the Constitution now found her rhetoric was extremely effective in bolstering the white supremacy/peace and order mandate of the New South gospel as articulated by Henry Grady. The Nineties were turbulent and violent, and the Constitution became less reticent to give its sanction to lynching than it had been in Grady's time. In time, confronting the "menace" of the Wilmington Fusion government, the Constitution would drop the pretense of civility and become the most significant newspaper supporting who the white coup d'état. It was in a unique position to influence the outcome, being the most prominent paper in the Southeast, and one read avidly in the Old North State. <sup>21</sup> Those readers would read of lynchings all over the South, of so-called "race wars", and always derogatory and viciously racist reporting on Blacks. Significantly, Rebecca Felton's name began to appear with remarkable frequency in the Constitution , especially after with the Tybee speech.

The Journal was somewhat more moderate in tone, and lagged behind the Constitution in international reporting. Local news predominated , and "Mrs. Felton" was a familiar name in its pages. A November, 1898 Journal article announced, "Mrs. Felton Victim of Midnight Thief." 22 The story concerned two robberies by a night burglar, who absconded with the lady's traveling bag and some money while the Feltons slept. The story calls her "one of Georgia's noted women" (though such identification would hardly be necessary for most readers) and nowhere in the piece is Dr. Felton, a former congressman, mentioned in any other context than as the owner of the Cartersville home and the lady's husband.

The actual coverage of the Tybee speech by the press was direct and reverent. A stark headline in the August 12 Journal declared "'LYNCH,' SAYS MRS. FELTON," and went on to describe a "remarkable" and "sensational " address. The most controversial passages were printed in bold-face type, including this angry philippic:

I say it is a disgrace in a free country when such things are a public reproach and the best part of God's creation are trembling and crying for protection in their own homes. And I say, with due respect to all those who listen to me, that so long as your politics takes the colored man into your embraces on election day to control his vote; and so long as the politicians use liquor to befuddle his understanding and make him think he is a man and a brother; when they propose to defeat the opposition by honey-snuggling him at the polls, and so long as he is made familiar with their dirty tricks

in politics, so long will lynchings prevail because the causes of it grow and increase. 23

The speech also included a plea for coeducation at the state university and her pet project, the "Wife's Farm" proposal, which was actually reasonable and would certainly be a considerable step forward for rural women and a recognition of their labor as part of the farm enterprise. Both, however, were lost in the furor over lynching. Felton had by all accounts given an inspired performance, by turns passionately pleading with her audience, then subjecting them to withering scorn. This was her moment, and she intended to make the most of it.<sup>24</sup>

When the Agricultural Society closed its meeting at Tybee, the headline read simply: "THE FARMERS OF THE STATE ARE PROSPEROUS AND HAPPY." In a brief mention of her "exceptionally able paper--sensational to a degree", the reporter concluded that "The convention was thoroughly entertaining." <sup>25</sup> The speech was picked up and republished all over the country, and a flood of letters and invitations followed. Many of the letters were from southern men who praised Rebecca Felton extravagantly and must have gratified her vanity. She had, after all, awakened their consciences and they responded with the most elaborate chivalry and astonishing ferocity. One correspondent is typical, the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture, O. B.

Stevens. He called himself one of "Georgia's boys" and thanked her for her sentiment, that of a "true Southern woman":

We will certainly hang not only a thousand a week, but ten thousand, if necessary, to protect the honor and virtue of our women. Without the influence of our noble women, our manhood, our Christian influences would be below par, -- and God knows they are low enough now. If the Northern women and the Northern men wish to mingle their blood with, and surrender their honor to the negroes of the South, let them come down here and we will let the negroes commit the horrible crimes upon them without raising our hands for their protection. Or, if they desire, let the negroes go north, we are perfectly willing to get rid of them, but we do propose to shield and protect our women. 26

Another correspondent, Mrs. Fannie H. Guilliams of Tennessee, wrote:

Although myself a northern woman coming from the vicinity of Chicago, I lived in Florida ten years, and was never free from fear of the negroe one moment. And if it were only death to be feared, that we could endure. But the thought of outrage is worse than that of a thousand deaths.... Every southern, (or northern either) woman should lend their voice to yours to bring about a state of affairs in which we may breathe the breath of life without cowering and terror from the most dreadful threatening dangers. 27

Mrs. Guilliams' letter is a window into Felton's own psyche, belying the boldness of her words. Her rage is



inseparable from her fear, and similarly troubled men and women found in her appalling racist propaganda permission to employ the rope and faggot. Ida Wells examined this phenomenon and offered this observation:

Their chivalric protectors were hundreds of miles away in their northern homes, and yet they never feared any 'great dark faced mobs,' they dared night or day 'to go beyond their own roof trees'... Before the world adjudges the Negro a moral monster, a vicious assailant of womanhood and a menace to the sacred precincts of home, the colored people ask the consideration of the silent record of gratitude, respect, protection and devotion of the millions of the race in the South, to the thousands of northern white women who have served as teachers and missionaries since the war... The Negro may not have known what chivalry was, but he knew enough to preserve inviolate the womanhood of the South which was entrusted to his hands during the war... Faithful to his trust in both of these instances, he should now have the impartial ear of the civilized world, when he dares to speak for himself as against the infamy wherewith he stands charged. 28

Most historians are disturbed by the idea of women sanctioning lynching, but there is ample evidence that women were frequently involved as spectators as well as accusers. Certainly the 1893 Paris, Texas incident was a community event. As Ida Wells described the scene in A Red Record Henry Smith was burned alive before a "thickly-packed crowd of 10, 000 persons... Every train that came in was loaded to its utmost capacity, and there were demands at many points

for special trains to bring the people here to bring the people here to see the unparalleled crime." Schools let out for the day as well as "whisky shops", "unruly mobs were dispersed...and everything was done in business-like manner."29

Viewed today, it seems difficult to imagine how common lynchings were, nor how brutal they were. Each lynching was a stark tragedy played out like a bloody carnival, sometimes with whole families in attendance, howling their approval as the terrified victim suffered unspeakable agonies. Frequently the victim was tortured before the noose did its work, then the body was riddled with bullets. Often bits of bone and pieces of flesh were carried off as ghoulish trophies. Many were burned alive. Thirty Years of Lynching: 1889-1918, a remarkable documentary source compiled by the NAACP, documents that each lynching victim had a story of his or her own, and that often the victims had only in common the misfortune to have offended the dominant whites in some way, or all too often, merely to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. A quarrel over wages, an imagined slight -- virtually anything could provoke violence. One charge, however, was more common than any other: rape. The statistics compiled by the NAACP proved however that less than one fifth of the lynchings reported were for rape or "attacks on women." 30

One lynching became particularly notorious, that of Sam Hose in Newnan, Georgia in 1899. Accused of killing a farmer

and raping his wife, Hose was tortured and burned alive by a crowd giddy with blood lust, so much so that pieces of the victim's bones, heart and liver were taken as trophies to Atlanta. W.E.B. Du Bois, then at Atlanta University, recalled viewing them in a shop window, while he was on his way to the Atlanta Constitution office to meet with editor Joel Chandler Harris. Du Bois had hoped to set forth the evidence concerning the case, "a careful and reasoned statement of the facts." He turned back, and his shock changed his research forever:

Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing....I regarded it as axiomatic that the world wanted to learn the truth and if the truth was sought with even approximate accuracy and painstaking devotion, the world would gladly support the effort. 31

If Black America had become awakened and angered by the dimensions of this phenomenon, much of white America still found it possible to read newspaper accounts and dismiss it as regionalism and 'inevitable' considering the times and the nature of the South. In the same spirit, it became possible to accept the word of a distinguished gentlewoman who insisted that lynching was the only method of social control that would aid the besieged women of the South. Rebecca Felton's very respectability and her years gave her license; she was a wise old woman who had seen many

horrors in her life. She never tired of reminding audiences or readers of the atrocities of war-- she stood for order and for sacred verities. Her message connected with white men and women powerfully, and each found what comfort they needed. By conflating all the old pieties about the Southland, motherhood and ladyhood and linking them to women's growing restlessness with the confines of separate spheres, Felton crafted an appeal to the uncertain and the fearful. It was a message for its time if ever there was one.

In Iron Cages, Takaki describes the reality of the New South; grimy cities like Birmingham and Atlanta, rapidly growing and peopled by workers of both races. When Booker T. Washington emerged as a black man "preaching the gospel of the New South", he received an enthusiastic reception: "a tension existed between the hope for industrial 'progress' and the desire for racial dependency and order. If they could only have it both ways, wealthy white southerners could feel secure; no wonder they cheered so excitedly and even wept when they heard Booker T. Washington deliver his startling message at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition." Takaki further portrayed the Atlanta Compromise as a signal event in white consciousness and it obviously appealed to the women: "The fairest women in Georgia stood up and cheered. It was as if the orator had bewitched them. " 32

So when the promise of black docility seemed to have fallen apart in Georgia, Rebecca Felton emerged as a prophet

of the Old Testament variety. If order could not be negotiated , it must be enforced. The Tybee speech legitimized lawlessness because of the unique person of Rebecca Felton. The spectacle of a genteel-looking little grandmother shaming an audience of sons, fathers, and brothers into protecting their women from unspeakable indignities was a potent one indeed. Many of the readers were women, whom the dailies desperately wanted to entice into the habit of readership.

When her column "The Country Home" column began its run in 1899, Hoke Smith of the Atlanta Journal had made a perfect match between the paper and its readers. Between the homey stories and the gardening hints, Rebecca Felton opined on anything she pleased, to the delight of her many readers. And what a fitting reward for Mrs. Felton, her very own bully pulpit. White supremacy formed the bedrock of her beliefs, and she was as John Talmadge described her, "a stout hater."<sup>33</sup> Whatever her enmity towards her political enemies, her rage towards the creation of her own imagination, the "black beast rapist," was unquenchable.

## "Blood Will Tell In North Carolina"

This one-line prophecy appeared in the Atlanta Constitution in October 1898, a early indication of the intent of the Democrats to overthrow the interracial Populist-Republican government. Meanwhile, the controversy over the Tybee speech never ended; instead, it simmered as Felton continued to receive accolades and invitations to speak about the state. She also received requests for transcripts of the speech. A Philadelphia woman, Mary Salome Allen, wrote to her expressing her admiration for her and "the holy work you have begun-- here in the North we know by experience absolutely nothing of their brutality for Thank God they are kept in their place that of servants--& not equals except at the voting polls . When the people of the South...learn to curb the education of the Negro they will learn the value of the purity --of our sex-- hoping my prayers for your followers (many I hope) will be of avail that you may conquer." 34

John Herbert Roper comments on the repercussions of Mrs. Felton's call to lynch "a thousand a week": "She was not rewarded with that ghastly number of murders, but she exulted in the wide dissemination of her address, a notice of which was entered in the congressional report for Georgia's General Assembly, as she exulted in the subsequent number of

lynchings: 165 recorded for 1897 and 127 recorded for 1898."<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Felton's crusade took her across Georgia, propelled by her sense of mission. Rebecca Felton was, however, temporarily diverted by a critic, Marie Louise Myrick, who received her own share of attention in June of 1898, and presaged her exchange with Manly. It was not the first time she had quarreled with another woman journalist. Usually she appealed to her readers to back her. They always responded promptly and in great numbers, accusing the writer of all manner of sins. But apparently went unanswered--for awhile.

A cause célèbre had occurred in 1891 when she castigated fellow southerner Claire DeGraffenreid for her report in Century Magazine, "The Georgia Cracker in the Cotton Mills."<sup>36</sup> Stung by the unflattering portrait of lower-class white women, Felton blasted DeGraffenreid as a traitor to her region and implied she was no lady, effectively exiling her from any potential influence she might have in helping to effect change in the miserable lot of the mill workers. DeGraffenreid defended herself ably, but Felton had used the same old trope of "outraged morality" to great effect: "Through her description of the supposed degradation of white mill-working white women, DeGraffenreid created the basis, according to Felton, not only for undermining the further development of the southern textile industry, but she simultaneously laid the ground for a northern attack on the

legitimacy of white supremacy as a whole."<sup>37</sup> Rebecca Felton had prevailed and held the moral high ground and must have gratified the New Southites with her spirited response. But a clever opponent found a weak spot in her armor.

Myrick, the editor of the Americus Times-Recorder, chaffed Felton for her celebrity and her audacity in stepping out of her proscribed role as southern lady, somewhat disingenuously considering her own position. Felton complained to the editor of the Atlanta Journal that she "fell a victim to the virile and emphatic pen of the Americus Times-Recorder." Mrs. Myrick's column, "Let Our Women Beware" is an arch little masterpiece, which nettled Felton since she hated having the tables turned on her. Myrick wrote that she had the "highest regard for the ability of the learned and eloquent woman from north Georgia" and that ".Mrs. Felton has perhaps forgotten more than we can ever hope to know, but there is one fact and truth we do know-- that any woman, whether she be young or old, makes a sad mistake when she voluntarily assumes either the political or professional prerogatives of men." This was the sort of challenge that, if made by a man, would have provoked Felton to fire back a furious reply. But she "made no reply, but saved the newspaper clipping, hoping at a future time to 'point a moral'...."<sup>38</sup>

Mrs. Felton was particularly vulnerable to this sort of criticism, and she encountered it frequently from groups like of the Daughters of the Confederacy, who believed she



went too far in advocating woman suffrage. It must have galled her to read Myrick's pious lecture and hold her tongue:

Believe that there are no accomplishments so pleasing, self-satisfying and God-like as womanly accomplishments. Occupy the sphere properly accorded heaven's best gift to man just as long as you can, for a public life with its snares and cares is killing, and in the end must bring precious little comfort to a woman. Let [?] women beware and take care, and not like 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread.' 39

Felton had gained her first real fame beyond her husband's career as an activist in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. It was the ideal entree into the public sphere, since as Jean Friedman writes in The Enclosed Garden "temperance viewed as a 'maternal struggle' widely appealed to southerners because it implied 'womanliness first' and reform second." 40 Mrs. Felton seemed to be "an instrument in the hands of the dear Lord" to one writer who had been "so drunk I had to shut one eye" to see the speaker but stopped drinking altogether after her address. 41 Such virtue made her unassailable as long as she confined herself to appropriate crusades.

It was essential to Rebecca Felton's appeal to embody womanliness and maternal virtue, which of course allowed her the most outrageous latitude in expressing most unladylike views. Marie Louise Myrick had exposed her in the same style Felton herself employed to such devastating effect. She professed herself amused when Myrick received gallantries and

applause upon her entrance to the Georgia gubernatorial convention, but she submitted both clippings with a letter clearly angling for the publication in the Journal , hoping to show up the lady editor as a hypocrite.<sup>42</sup> The importance of this incident lies in the precedent it set in penetrating Rebecca Felton's invulnerability, and that another lady of the press had accomplished it made the cut worse. Her next confrontation would be with Alex Manly, who, like Myrick, parodied her style in his editorial, further provoking her wrath. To be criticized by a woman and a colleague was trying, but to be insulted by a Black man was beyond endurance.

As the year 1898 progressed, the Atlanta press reflected what could only be called a climate of violence. The Constitution featured story after story of lynchings around the state and in the South. In October of 1898, evidence of a " gathering storm" <sup>43</sup> appeared: "FOUR LYNCHED AT PHOENIX, S.C." described a story of an "election race riot" that the Constitution blamed on the Tolbert family, described as "white Republican leaders."A white posse captured eight Black men after a "prominent farmer" was shot during an argument with T.R.Tolbert concerning an electoral challenge:

[The whites] were very quiet at first, but gradually their passions rose.Cool-headed men tried to counsel them not to do violence. Finally, however, one of the negroes was dragged out in the roadway and riddled with bullets.Two broke away and ran in one direction,and another two ran in another. One was wounded while fleeing,but made good his escape. The other three

remained on a log where they were sitting. The crowd, now thoroughly maddened, went for them and all three were lynched....Men of both races are thoroughly aroused and there is no telling where the thing is going to stop. 44

Directly opposite this account is another stark headline: "LYNCHING IN BANKS COUNTY--WILL GOBER, A NEGRO, KILLED JACE AYERS, PROMINENT MAN--Mob Organized Last Night and Just Before Midnight Swung Gober to a Limb." The terse account states that Ayers accused Gober of "running over his father with a bicycle and he shot Ayers then." The report states that fifty masked men lynched Will Gober in front of the courthouse, a powerful symbol of lynch law united with the very symbol of small town justice. 45 From tiny Homer in the Piedmont to the Black Belt, the Pine Barrens and the Coast, Georgia claimed more victims for the gospel of white supremacy.

The Constitution continued to print the stories from across the South: "NEGRO HANGED ON ALABAMA TREE is paired with COLOR LINE IS PLAINLY DRAWN --Excitement Over Coming Election in North Carolina --IS DAILY ON THE INCREASE." 46 The Constitution had kept its readers informed as to the situation brewing in North Carolina -- one editorial cartoon encapsulates the position of the paper. Below the caption "North Carolina's Sweet Womanhood Appeals to the Ballot For Protection" is a young white man standing on a pedestal marked "North Carolina." His left arm is outstretched towards a roiling sea, crested by a huge black waterspout,

"Negro Domination" which threatens in the distance. His right hand holds a ballot, and a young white woman clothed in Grecian garb clings to him fearfully looking back at the sea. She seems to be *returning* to the pedestal. In one image, the readers of Atlanta and the Southeast were alerted to the danger they most feared: "Negro Domination," which meant miscegenation and a Black state. Suddenly Mrs. Felton's prophecy was at their very doorstep.<sup>47</sup>

"BLACKS PROPOSE TO COLONIZE AND CONTROL NORTH CAROLINA" read the accompanying headline, and below was this terse statement: "...they will repeal the laws against intermarriage between the races and mixed schools, and all other laws which, in any manner, shape or form, provide for separate accommodations for whites and blacks."<sup>48</sup> In the writer's view, the whole New South structure of separation of the races was imperiled.

And then there is the other danger , greatest of all, the menace to the womanhood of the state, the constant and growing peril of each man's wife and daughter. That is the thought which is seated in the mind and on the heart of each man's wife and daughter....It cannot be denied that in many counties the farmer leaves his family with apprehension. While in the field his ear strained to hear the first shriek of warning. His eye ever turns in the direction of his humble home... such a tremendous wave of indignation has just swept over the state over a published slander on the white women that actual violence by the criminally inclined has been checked. But if the campaign of the blacks for the conquest of the state succeeds this fall, an epidemic of assaults upon the unprotected in the country is predicted. This has aroused the pure womanhood of North Carolina to the seashore to the mountains. They are asking their husbands and sons how they intend to vote--for the

wives and mothers and sisters or for negro supremacy and a reign of terror.<sup>49</sup>

What actually was happening in Wilmington, North Carolina? H. Leon Prather, Sr.'s, whose We Have Taken a City : Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898 is the single best source on the period, concludes that a deliberate campaign of redemption created the climate that spawned what he calls a "pogrom" against the backdrop of the election. The chairman of the state Democratic Party, Furnifold M. Simmons, engineered the campaign invoking the feared "Negro domination ":"Charges of corruption, scandals, and extravagance were to be leveled against the Republican-Populist regime, but these were to be given secondary consideration" since the real issue was the omnipresence of Blacks in the lives of white North Carolinians. Whites believed Black office holders, Black policemen and magistrates in particular, abused their power. The appearance of economic and political parity for Blacks in Wilmington was intolerable for the white supremacists. <sup>50</sup>

Prather points to Raleigh News and Observer editor Josephus Daniels as an important player in the Democrats' scheme. <sup>51</sup> Daniels was in regular communication with Clark Howell of the Atlanta Constitution and their cooperation insured that the propaganda campaign of the Democrats would be disseminated in the New South capital. Daniels' influence is clear in the above mentioned Constitution piece, and shows how valuable a piece of propaganda the Tybee speech had been

in rallying the whites. The reference to Felton's farm wives is deliberate as is the mention of the "colonization" of North Carolina. The piece warns that Blacks are planning to move in large numbers into the state, and Wilmington, which had a majority of Black voters, provided them with enough "evidence" that the migration had begun. If Rebecca Felton's campaign had provided the spark they needed to inflame the white voter, Alex Manly's response in August of 1898 was the ultimate answer to their predicament.

The history of the editorial is one of deliberate distortion, as Prather points out: "through certain omissions, it was distorted from the beginning by the Democratic news media. Scholars have perpetuated the distortion by using Democratic papers as their sources..." (Interestingly enough, the Atlanta Constitution *did* publish the entire editorial).<sup>52</sup> Manly's reasons for writing the editorial were as complex as the man himself. A Black man who looked white, himself proof of the heritage of slavery and race mixing, who dared to publish a paper that stood for the growing influence and affluence of a Black professional class, was as potent a symbol for the white man as Mrs. Felton, the voice of southern honor. The editorial echoed Ida B. Wells-Barnett's assertion of the falsity of "the old threadbare lie that Black men rape white women..." as well as her other trope of "White Juliets and Colored Romeos" that so enraged the whites of Memphis.<sup>53</sup> Ida Wells-Barnett and Alex Manly both believed that the pen was an instrument

for justice, and like her, Manly "was a humanist, endowed with a strong sense of black awareness; nevertheless, this article touched white Southerners in their most sensitive consciousness." <sup>54</sup> Manly was a young, idealistic and proud Black man who had done much good with his press, though "Jack Thorne" says the editor was thought "*high strung, bold and saucy*" by the white elite of Wilmington. <sup>55</sup> He was also deputy register of deeds, one of the offending Black officials. Hanover, a "documentary novella" dedicated to the "eminent heroine Ida B. Wells-Barnett", is a homage to the powerful, direct style of Wells-Barnett's prose and also to Manly's. As historian Thomas Cripps states in his introduction to Hanover, "Throughout the book the point the point is made clear: proud, competent aggressive blacks could not be tolerated by a white South bent on preserving the old order." <sup>56</sup>

The editorial "that shook the state from the mountains to the sea" began by acknowledging the phenomenon of "Mrs. Felton's Speech":

This woman makes a strong plea for womanhood, and if the alleged crimes of rape were half so frequent as is oftentimes reported, her plea would be worthy of consideration. Mrs. Felton, like many other so-called Christians, loses sight of the basic principle of the religion of Christ in her plea for one class of people as against another .... Mrs. Felton begins well, for she admits that education will better protect on the farm from the assaulter. This we admit and it should not be confined to the white any more than to the colored girls. The papers are filled often with reports of rapes of white women, and the subsequent lynching of the alleged rapists. The editors pour forth volleys of aspersions against all negroes because of the few who may be guilty. If the papers and

speakers of the other race would condemn the commission of crime because it is crime and not try to make it appear that the negroes were the only criminals, they would find their strongest allies in the intelligent negroes themselves, and together the whites and blacks would root the evil out of both races.

Manly spoke from the perspective of a man who, like Charles W. Chesnutt, viewed the entire scene of race relations through the lens of class, and rightly assumed intellectual superiority to his adversaries. This alone would have affronted the white reader who felt himself put upon by Fusion rule, but to suggest that whites thoughtlessly neglected their duty toward their women was unbearable. Manly then instructed the white man on his duty as he saw it, and once again, the effect was electric:

We suggest that the whites guard their women more closely, as Mrs. Felton says, thus giving no opportunity for the human fiend, be he white or black. You leave your goods out of doors and then complain because they are taken away. Poor white men are as careless in the manner of protecting their women, especially on farms. They are careless of their conduct towards them and our experience among poor white people in the country teaches us that the women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men, than are the white men with colored women. Meetings of this kind go on for some time, until the woman's infatuation or the man's boldness bring attention to them and the man is lynched for rape. Every negro lynched is called a "big, burly black brute," when in fact many of those who have thus been dealt with had white men for their fathers, and were not only not "black" and "burly," but were sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with them.<sup>57</sup>



Prather points out that in all the newspaper accounts concerning the Manly editorial, sexism is pervasive. The reference to "your goods" is particularly insulting, reducing women to property, which, in fact, they were according to law. Every sentence in the editorial was enough provocation for the hypersensitive white male, but when Manly asserted that some white women chose consensual relations with Black men, he committed his cardinal error. He probably had a naive faith in the power of the press to persuade and perhaps hoped to help normalize the social climate by stating the facts of the South's hidden history. It was, given his own personality, impossible for him to resist challenging Mrs. Felton. But facts as incendiary as these were suppressed, as Martha Hodes has observed in her research concerning interracial sex during the Civil War.<sup>58</sup> When Manly lectured the white man and challenged the word of a respected matron of years, he had struck at the heart of white supremacy. He was also evoking the resentment the whites had felt in Wilmington's courts and public offices observing the proliferation of Black professionals. Alex Manly exposed the sexual exploitation of Black women and touched on the class sensitivities of the South, always a difficult subject for a region whose "aristocracy" was only a few generations old, and sprang often from common clay as Wilbur Cash wryly observed in The Mind of the South.<sup>59</sup>

Mrs. Felton must begin at the fountainhead, if she wishes to purify the stream. Teach your men purity. Let virtue be something more than an excuse for them to

intimidate and torture a helpless people. Tell your men it is no worse for a black man to be intimate with a white woman than for a white man to be intimate with a colored woman.

Since Mrs. Felton and many southern women (notably Mary Chesnut) commented disparagingly on the number of mulattos in the South, this was a particularly pointed observation. They were as "common as blackberries" and a curse on the South in her opinion. <sup>60</sup> Manly had called attention to a painful reality of the southern woman's life, and the women were no less offended than their menfolk. Manly finished his editorial in an almost Biblical fashion:

You set yourselves down as a lot of carping hypocrites; in fact, you cry aloud for the virtue of your women, while you seek to destroy the morality of ours. Don't ever think your women will remain pure while you are debauching. You sow the seed-- the harvest will come in due time." <sup>61a</sup>

Once the editorial appeared in August, the Democrats knew they had the perfect campaign literature with which to achieve a double victory. They could break apart the Fusion coalition and regain the state and begin the serious work of social "redemption."

As the Constitution observed, " The publication set the state on fire. The white republicans and the populist fusionists saw at once what a terrible political blunder had been made. The campaign was just opening and the democrats had pitched their fight on the recovery of the state from negro domination, declaring that the lives, virtue and

property of the people were at stake." <sup>61</sup> The campaign to conceal what was an orderly conspiracy to seize control of the city succeeded so well because of the notoriety and wide circulation of the Manly editorial, and of course, by the inevitable and no doubt eagerly awaited response of Rebecca Felton. Their angry exchange distracted attention from the deliberate manipulation of the white population and the systematic intimidation of Blacks. Other charges flew back and forth, notably that Manly had written the editorial at the behest of the Democrats. <sup>62</sup> The Black community of Wilmington was shocked and apprehensive, but support did emerge for Manly, notably from a "society of black women of Wilmington passed resolutions praising Manly for defending the race."<sup>63</sup>

In Atlanta and Raleigh, the presses eagerly chronicled the Fayetteville rally of October 20 and the parade and "White Man's Rally " of November 2, which also featured that old southern crowd -pleaser, a barbecue. Senator "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman was the star attraction at Fayetteville, where he harangued the crowd about their failure to lynch Manly. <sup>64</sup> That Manly was not lynched attested to his value as a symbol to North Carolinians of the evils of Fusion rule. Prather quotes alderman Walker Taylor: " I may state right here that when the article appeared, it required the best efforts we could put forth [to] prevent the people from lynching him...the article would make it an easy victory for us." The editorial was reprinted several times in October in Tarheel



newspapers; the Wilmington Star alone printed 100,000 copies. <sup>65</sup> The Atlanta Constitution claimed that "negro policemen rallied to his support" to account for the restraint of the whites, but mentioned that "so many rifles were ordered from North Carolina that wholesale prices were given to the purchasers."<sup>66</sup>

As tensions rose, there was a steady increase in reports of lynchings and racial incidents in the Atlanta newspapers, punctuated by reports from North Carolina. The purpose of the saturation coverage of such events as a mutiny by Black troops at Camp Pollard in Knoxville, Tennessee was to show the power of whites even over employees of the Federal government. "NEGRO REGIMENT IS WHIPPED INTO LINE -- Colored Troops from Virginia Refuse to Serve Under White Officers" read the headline in the Constitution November 3, 1898.<sup>67</sup> A much reported trial and imprisonment of a Black convict named Wade Hampton who was said to have murdered another Black inmate at a prison farm had occupied the paper for weeks, and his execution by hanging was scheduled for November 8. "GALLOWS WILL SILENCE THE CURSES OF WADE HAMPTON ON WEDNESDAY--Yesterday the Condemned Negro Cursed His Aged Father and Mother Outrageously and Profaned All Things Holy -- The Other Murderers Quake With Fear" said the Constitution, which vied with the Journal for the most sensational reports of Hampton's term in the jail. <sup>68</sup> The execution was covered in excruciating detail, including how he broke down as he was led to the gallows. A clergyman

reported the scene for the curious, since reporters had been barred.<sup>69</sup>

From Meridian, Mississippi came news of a "race war": an attempt to arrest a Black man, Bill Burke, for having "got the best of the difficulty" with his employer. When a group of Blacks fired on the posse, three white men were wounded and one killed. Eventually, the posse swelled to 300 men and nine Blacks were killed. Below this front page story is a special report from Wilmington concerning an altercation at Ashpole, N.C.: "BLOODHOUNDS RUN DOWN NEGROES WHO FIRE ON GUARD OF WHITES."<sup>70</sup> All these stories suggest increased militancy among Blacks and insist that white justice humbles the boldest and most insolent among them if white men *do their duty*. The newspapers function much as Felton's speech had done to preach the value of ritual and the necessity for white supremacy to maintain order. The Wilmington Massacre was to be the culmination of this climate of violence.

Not surprisingly, "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman made another incendiary address at a "monster mass meeting" in Charlotte shortly before the election. Within his racist diatribe is contained the concocted myth of "Negro domination" rendered in his own unique fashion:

Fusion in North Carolina is nothing but republicanism. The way to kill fusion is to invite populists back as brothers and as white men who love North Carolina. But if they do not come, as sure as the sun shines, the 150,000 democrats will no longer submit to the present state of things, I say this because you people are of

the same race as South Carolinians. In South Carolina no negro editor could slander the white men as the Wilmington negro did. That negro ought now to be food for catfish in the bottom of the Cape Fear river instead of going around above ground. 71

Tillman had invoked "the beautiful girls" in the audience at Fayetteville, but this time he cut right to the heart of the matter in speaking of the "slander" of white men. 72 Their honor was the real concern, not the protection of women. Tillman reminded his audience of the "evils" of Reconstruction, the populist promise, regionalism and advocated lynching in one statement.

The story of the Wilmington riot/massacre/coup is reconstructed day by day in precise detail by Prather in We Have Taken a City and Williamson also treats the subject at length. 73 The Wilmington events have, however, been generally neglected by historians, perhaps due to the difficulty Prather cites in tracking down sources, but more likely because the horrific events of November 10 have little glory about them and the conspirators were so vicious towards the Black community. If President McKinley could claim "constitutional inability" to deal with the crisis in the face of many letters from Blacks pleading for justice, then it follows that the silence on this and other riots of the time (notably Atlanta in 1906) is due to the complex and pervasive nature of white supremacy in America at the time. 74 There is no precise number of casualties, and there will never be because so many Blacks were driven from the city in

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After the election, accolades from southern newspapers poured in to Clark Howell, editor of the Constitution. A letter from North Carolina Democratic Chairman Simmons was reproduced on the front page. "Mr. Weldon's articles upon the North Carolina situation were in every respect excellent. They were decidedly the best exposition of the situation we had during the campaign, and our people so regard The Constitution's work and the good it produced. We feel under obligation to you, to the Constitution, and to Mr. Weldon for the splendid service rendered us in the matter." One response was typical: "White North Carolinians honor the great and influential Constitution for its masterful and telling efforts in their behalf in the gigantic fight they have won for good government and white supremacy."<sup>76</sup> On November 11, The Constitution even found "humor" in the recent events: A republican colored constituent was overheard saying, yesterday : "Well, de white folks done took North Ca'liny; en the next thing you knows, dey'll drive outen Mississippi, complete, en mix us all up with wid de Injuns in the west!" On November 12, the paper reported, "FIRM HAND OF LAW NOW IN FULL FORCE -- Objectionable Characters Are Being Deported by Wilmingtonians." This account followed: "The negroes are frightened beyond description. Hundreds of them retire to the open woods at night with their wives and children, and there, covered with what bedding they have, remain until day. Thousands have deserted the city." <sup>77</sup>

Alex Manly fled Wilmington by night and found his way to Asbury Park, New Jersey. Because he looked white, even President McKinley assumed he was not a Black man but upon finding his mistake in receiving the "author" of the riot, had him ejected from his office.<sup>78</sup> His editorial continued to make "news", as can be seen in a clipping from the Illustrated Police News found in Mrs. Felton's papers and must have gratified her :

Had he confined himself to a just interpretation of his class' call for discontent, if any existed ,no man would have raised his hand against him. But an entirely uncalled for, spasmodical attempt to readjust the laws of the South with his puny, pigmy newspaper, was an instance of paltry ignorance and deserved the fate which took place shortly after. No one with the true spirit on manhood burning in his bosom can ever efface Manly's despicable insinuations against the white woman from his memory. We of the North have always in our mind's eye pictured the lily white Southern woman as the typical woman of America, with true kindness beaming from her blue eyes, with smiles of welcome to the absent returning one, and cordial greeting for the stranger. <sup>79</sup>

Rebecca Felton had finally been called to account for her own inflammatory statements and for the consequences of her diatribe. The Northern newspapers were harsh, particularly the Boston Evening Transcript which had criticized her sharply after her Tybee address. The Atlanta Journal obligingly gave her a forum November 15, 1898: "LYNCH 1,000 WEEKLY DECLARES MRS. FELTON-- White Women of the South Must Be Protected From Ravening Human Beasts and Lynching is Unwritten Law Here-- Wilmington Negro Should Fear

Rope." Felton not only reiterated the claims made in the speech, but added bluntly, "Since that address was made, the crime and lynchings have decreased 50 per cent in Georgia." Once again Mrs. Felton created "facts" to suit her and woe to whoever dared contradict her. She had learned nothing: "It is the unwritten law in Georgia that the black fiend who destroys a white woman in her home or on the highway and is identified with proof positive must die without clergy, judge or jury."

If there was a beneficiary in the entire episode, it surely was Rebecca Felton. She was admired and feted throughout the state, and soon was installed as an institution at the Atlanta Journal. But first another adversary troubled her, and Felton swiftly fired off what the Journal called a "burning answer" to the "vile slander of the women of the South" by Mrs. Elizabeth Grannis.<sup>80</sup> Grannis, a white woman, made a speech at a protest meeting at Cooper Union held by New York's Black community shortly after the Wilmington Massacre. Grannis reportedly said, "I am only here tonight to represent womanhood. Now we all know that the white women and white girls of the south are full of colored blood " and "in my opinion the churches should be in sackcloth and ashes over the effects of the race war in the southern states." Mrs. Felton rebuked her even more sharply than she had Alex Manly, saying that "the colored citizens of New York are welcome to her and the white women of that city are well rid of her. Water seeks its level and Mrs.

Elizabeth Grannis has turned up in such company as she should be obliged to stay in for the relief of the community at large." Felton stormily berated Grannis for inciting racial hatred in terms remarkably like her own Tybee performance:

She aimed to raise violent impulses in the minds of the ignorant, and wearing a white skin herself, she was ready to send her own race down to degradation to awaken the vilest revenge and violence in the minds of the black women and men in the audience towards the white women of the south. It would appear from her presence at such a time and place that she has been outlawed from her own race for some reason yet unexplained), and took the opportunity afforded her in a negro assembly to expose the exceeding filth and falsehood of her own mental and moral anatomy."<sup>80</sup>

Mrs. Felton asked that her readers "pass her around in southern newspapers that she may obtain a little more of this notorious advertising." A reader, a Mrs. Henry Smith, wrote claiming to know "that horrible Mrs. Grannis" and that she lived "with negroes" and said she had been seen embracing a Black man "in her parlor." Smith asked her to pass on this information to her readers but asks her not to use her name. She concluded by asking Felton to "give her a good beating --nothing else will do for that woman."<sup>81</sup>

Rebecca Felton may or may not have continued this particular crusade, as I have found no evidence of further mention of Grannis in her papers. She frequently received letters marked "Confidential" full of gossip about individuals the Feltons disliked. Her correspondence with Tom Watson was characterized by such letters, and one from her

purports to know intimate and scandalous details of Woodrow Wilson's courtship of his second wife Edith.<sup>82</sup> She bore Wilson a particular grudge since he had, in her opinion, neglected the grave of his first wife.<sup>83</sup> As she aged, her obsession with the prurient became more marked. Mrs. Felton feared girls might be drugged while drinking Coca-Colas and whisked away to debauchery, or that a picture of a young girl innocently given to a sweetheart would end up in the "wrong hands."<sup>84</sup> She was still fixated on violent crime, but spent most of her energy working for suffrage.

### Conclusion

As a woman nearly ninety years old, Rebecca Felton became even more unassailable. She was as much an icon of the South as the feeble few remaining Confederate veterans. Most of her most vocal enemies were long dead, and the Doctor had gone to his reward in 1909. It was left to Rebecca to record their life together, which she did with gusto, chronicling their political campaigns and writing her version of the history of Georgia's great women. To the young reporter Margaret Mitchell, she was a noble survivor of hard times and the definition of "gumption", that much-prized Southern virtue. "Georgia's Empress" suffered no self-doubt,

no remorse for her part in a shameful episode in the history of the South.

Ever concerned with her public image, she gladly consented to many interviews and played the grandmother role for her visitors. Rebecca Felton the fiery propagandist had become the "dear and splendid citizen" that received the commission to become the first woman United States senator. This account is from a Good Housekeeping piece, "The Lady From Georgia": "If I just had one sentence to say to the women of these United States, it would be simply, 'Realize the dignity of your calling and stand by whatever is good.'" 85 Mrs. Felton was celebrating her appointment among her friends, and she was in her glory.

Mrs. Felton's voice shook with the joy and wonder of her statements, and as an ovation swept the room, she bowed her head. Tears trickled down her faded, old cheeks, and her shoulders moved gently. "God has been wonderfully kind to me," she ended brokenly. "The credit is all His." 86

Rebecca Latimer Felton's brief tenure in the U.S. Senate proved, among other things, that women had arrived in political life and that there was no turning back to a time of exclusion. Soon, other women would join the Senate, notably Hattie Caraway of Arkansas in 1931, who was appointed by Governor Harvey Parnell in 1931 after the death of her husband. Caraway subsequently became Huey Long's echo and protégé in the Senate after her reelection. Caraway became the first duly elected woman to the Senate, though she too faded from public attention as soon as she reentered

private life. She certainly lacked the flair and relish of her predecessor. 87

If Felton's achievement were to be assessed for symbolic value, it would decidedly be measured as a victory for American women. Her own history and the feeling towards the South explain why she is mentioned in few textbooks, despite her "first" status. Those that do mention her are of recent vintage, and explore her positions on gender and praise her as a reformer. Her "call to honor" is forgotten, but not the racial hostility she helped foster in America. This effectively negates her importance as an icon of women's history, such as those portrayed on "famous women" playing cards or postcards. Rebecca Felton has yet to be measured by a biographer who can account for her complicated nature and deal with the twisted strands of race, region and gender in a way that neither demonizes nor forgives her.

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- 69 Atlanta Constitution , November 10, 1898
- 70 Atlanta Constitution , October 24, 1898.
- 71 Atlanta Constitution , November 4, 1898.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Williamson, 196-201.
- 74 Prather, 158.
- 75 Atlanta Constitution , November 11, 1898
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- 77 Atlanta Constitution , November 12, 1898.
- 78 Prather, 159.
- 79 Illustrated Police News, Jan. 1899 (?) , Felton Papers.
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