

**“GENIUS UNCULTIVATED IS LIKE A METEOR OF THE NIGHT”:
MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF METHODIST FEMALE
COLLEGE LIFE IN THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA**

PEARL J. YOUNG

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, readily espoused female education as a means to cultivate intellect. A devout Methodist, Dr. Samuel D. Sanders, saw education not as the mere acquisition of knowledge but the dedicated development of the mind from which refined character, godliness, and elite status would proceed. A planter father and an educator himself,¹ Dr. Sanders constantly encouraged his daughter Mary at South Carolina’s Columbia Female College to understand her education according to this perspective:

Genius uncultivated is like a meteor of the night; which flashes and sparkles for a moment, and then goes out in darkness; while medium talent, well disciplined is like the morning sun ‘shining more and more to the perfect day.’² Moderate ability, well cultivated will give you every advantage, that genius has, and is much more reliable For if your intellect be ever so good, it will be brightened, strengthened, and chastened by close intense application. The object of education is not so much to gain information, as to enable the mind to think closely and systematically, and to investigate for itself. The mental training that hard study produces, is worth much more than the facts or information gained thereby.

Writing in 1863, Dr. Sanders envisioned education as the means for his daughter Mary to maximize her God-given ability through hard work and discipline; then, he believed she would be able “to think closely and systematically” for herself.³

¹ Samuel D. Sanders, “Letters from Dr. Sanders to His Daughter, Mary, 1861-1867,” microfilm, Mar. 28, 1862, July 15, 1862, Aug. 31, 1867, Samuel D. Sanders papers, 1861-1867, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. See also Bell Irvin Wiley, “Description of Collection, 1964,” microfilm, Samuel D. Sanders papers, 1861-1867, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

² Reference to Proverbs 4:18: “But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”

³ Sanders, March 18, 1863. As much as possible, I have adhered to the original punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure when quoting these original documents. While at time the style may seem unconventional, this preserves the integrity of the author’s meaning and feeling as conveyed by his own words.

In the same spirit, someone only identified as J. B. D.,⁴ penned these words in the eulogy of Louisiana, or “Lou” Burge in late 1863:

Among her many charming endowments, was that of a finely organized mind—quick, vivid, vigorous and of remarkable penetration. The training, the discipline, and strength to which her mind attained in acquiring a most excellent education in perhaps the best Female College in the state,—which she left with the highest honors,—well fitted it for receiving and retaining the ample treasures which she gathered from a judicious course of varied and extensive reading.

The intellect he admired was trained, disciplined, and strengthened—all marks of what he judged a “most excellent education” from Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia. He valued not what Lou had studied but the rigorous training to which her mind had been subjected and by which it had been molded.⁵

For elite southern Methodists, female education was a means to develop the mind through careful training and discipline, marking the true refinement of a woman. Motivated by this vision, citizens and conferences of Methodist churches established female colleges throughout the southern United States as part of a greater effort to produce refined and godly women within an elite circle. Both the parents and the daughters valued the intellect obtained through such education while recognizing the importance of religion and friendships as important complements to a trained mind. Because such college education formed an integral part of the elite life the Confederates fought to protect, the outbreak of civil war in 1861 did little to interrupt the pace of college life.

A movement within Methodism and a new secular perception of intellect as a characteristic of the elite inspired the establishment of Methodist female colleges in the mid-nineteenth-century South. Unlike the boarding or finishing schools prevalent throughout the South in the early nineteenth century, these colleges were not merely institutions run by a single family to instruct girls in French or embroidery.⁶ Rather, the education from these colleges included subjects such as Latin, Algebra, Rhetoric, Chemistry, Botany, and

⁴ I presume that J. B. D. who wrote this eulogy preserved along with Louisiana’s diary was her love-interest; he certainly admired her as more than a friend. In her entry on Christmas 1861, she mentions having been engaged one year and then feeling anxious to hear from a Mr. DeJarnette, a juxtaposition that editor Richard Harwell suggests may not be coincidental. Furthermore, J. B. D. says, “To him who writes these lines, her death was inexpressibly saddening.” Though the identity of her fiancé is not certain, it is possible that she was engaged to Mr. DeJarnette and that his initials were J. B. D. See Richard B. Harwell, “Louisiana Burge: The Diary of a Confederate Girl,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 34.2 (1952): 160.

⁵ J. B. D., “Eulogy for Miss Lou Burge, 1863,” microfilm, Burge family papers, 1832-1952, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁶ For examples of such boarding and finishing schools, see I. M. E. Blandin, *History of Higher Education of Women in the South Prior to 1860* (Washington: Zenger Pub. Co., 1975).

Philosophy, as well as music, painting, and needlework.⁷ College students of this era were commonly in their teens, enrolling with a range of preparation. Both Lou and Mary were thirteen when they first enrolled in college but were by all accounts capable and succeeded often in obtaining the coveted first honor.⁸

American colleges had been founded by Christian denominations since colonial times, but not until the early nineteenth century did leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church express interest in establishing their own schools. Inspired by the Wesley brothers in England, American Methodism centered around middle-class, uneducated laymen whose principle intent was to bring people to know God. By the 1830s, thousands had been converted in the Second Great Awakening and caused leaders to be concerned with developing an educated clergy. The establishment of schools to train ministers became essential to ensure the place of Methodism among the major denominations of America. Some Methodist leaders feared that their old method of allowing uneducated laymen to preach the gospel would isolate their own young men who felt called to ministry; these boys would be inclined to attend colleges of other denominations, and the Methodist Episcopal Church would risk losing its young people to the other denominations. By the outbreak of the Civil War, the various Methodist Conferences throughout the southern United States had established twelve colleges, four of which were female—Wesleyan Female College, Columbia Female College, LaGrange Female College (Georgia,) and Greensboro Female College (North Carolina).⁹

Corresponding with this desire to train its own ministers was a more general movement within the Methodist Church to give its young men and women a secular education qualified by religious expectations and goals. For example, Lou’s Uncle Orrington Lunt and the other founders of Northwestern University in Illinois established their institution with these words of justi-

⁷ Wesleyan College, *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty and Students of the Wesleyan Female College, Macon, Georgia, 1861-1862* (Macon, GA: J. L. Jenkins & Co.), microfilm; Richard W. Griffin, “Wesleyan College: Its Genesis, 1836-40,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 50.1 (1966): 56, 58, 59; Frances Rees, “A History of Wesleyan Female College from 1836 to 1874,” M.A. thesis, Emory University (1935), 76.

⁸ Though this may seem quite young to our standards, Emory College, the local men’s college, had a minimum age of fourteen. See Annadell Craig Lamb, *The History of Phi Mu: The First 130 Years* (Atlanta, GA: Phi Mu Fraternity, 1982), 3; Anne Lide, “Five Georgia Colleges from 1850 to 1875,” M.A. Thesis, Emory University (1957), 18; Wiley, “Description of Collection, 1964,” microfilm, Harwell, “Louisiana Burge: The Diary of a Confederate Girl,” 149.

⁹ Donald George Tewksbury, “The Founding of American Colleges and Universities before the Civil War, with Particular Reference to the Religious Influences Bearing Upon the College Movement,” Ph.D. dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University (1932), 55, 103, 109; John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 49, 51-52, 174, 176; Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger, “Introduction,” *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001), 13-17; David Hempton, “Methodist Growth in Transatlantic Perspective, ca. 1770-1850,” *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001), 54-55.

fiction: "Whereat the interests of sanctified learning require the immediate establishment of a University in the northwest under the patronage of the Methodist Episcopal Church . . ." Church leaders believed that any evil influences of education could be mitigated by the religious atmosphere of a Methodist college. Furthermore, prominent men within the religious community believed that the best wives and mothers were women with a trained intellects. Studying "masculine" subjects such as Latin, mathematics, and science would teach women "not what to think but how to think," thus fully developing their God-given potential. Such training would not only create hardy missionary wives but would also showcase God's glory in their management of orderly and godly houses, a testimony which church leaders hoped would lead others to salvation. Reminding his daughter that Columbia was "our Methodist State College," Dr. Sanders was fully conscious of the religious influences of Columbia. He saw college as an opportunity for her to draw closer to God and to learn to think well, both of which would enable her to lead such a godly life in the future.¹⁰

The secular concepts of republican motherhood and separate spheres of ideology corresponded with the Methodist perception of educated women as ideal wives and mothers. In the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans believed that properly educated mothers ensured the future of our democracy by properly raising the next generation. With intellectual training, a mother could properly inspire a passion for learning and a hunger for knowledge within her own children. A cultivated intellect would complement the beautiful womanly virtues of affection, compassion, and modesty, perfectly becoming a woman in her role in the private sphere. In 1804, one father in Richmond wrote that women could best influence the nation "if to their virtues and their personal graces, they would superadd that additional culture of the mind which would fit them for this noble task." Because women harbored the virtues of the nation and were responsible for the family sphere, their education became increasingly important to many Southerners.¹¹

With these religious and secular motivations, Macon's founders established Wesleyan Female College in 1836 as the first chartered woman's college. In order to secure key financial support, the founders of Wesleyan invited the Georgia Conference of the Methodist Church to join them in backing this venture. The school was dominated by the Methodists: at least half of its Board of Trustees were members of the Methodist clergy and numerous professors had Methodist backgrounds. However, the school it-

¹⁰ Jay Pridmore, *Northwestern University: Celebrating 150 Years* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2000), 11-13, Lide, 4, Leonard I. Sweet, "The Female Seminary Movement and Woman's Mission in Antebellum America," *Church History* 54.1 (1985), 43, 45, 46, 47, 49; and Sanders, Oct. 8, 1861; Sept. 30, 1862; June 1, 1863; and Feb. 18, 1863.

¹¹ Anya Jabour, "'Grown Girls, Highly Cultivated': Female Education in an Antebellum Southern Family," *The Journal of Southern History* 64.1 (1998): 24; Nina Silber, "Prologue: Summoned to War, Charged to Patriotism," *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 4; William Wirt, "On the Condition of Women," 10-15, as quoted in Jabour, 27.

self was a “non-sectarian institute,” principally encouraging girls to be pious and to know God while allowing them to worship at any of the churches in town. Wesleyan’s 1861-1862 catalogue perhaps gives the best insight into its founding:

The public mind of the South was first awakened to the subject of higher education for females about the years 1835-40 At the period of its first going into operation, it was, so far as now known, the only institution organized with a full Faculty of Instruction, for the especial design of carrying young ladies through a prescribed curriculum (sic) of studies, on the completion of which they receive a literary degree. The liberality with which it has been patronized, and the rapidity with which it has been surrounded all over the Confederacy, by flourishing and honorable competitors, evince the movement to have been demanded by the age and country.

The school would be the first of numerous¹² parochial Southern female colleges offering a curriculum rivaling that of men’s education.¹³ In 1858, Mrs. Burge wrote to Lou of Wesleyan as a place “[for the] cultivation of your mind and the improvement of the talents given you.” Lou would enroll here in 1857 with her step-sister, Sadai, following in 1868.¹⁴

One of the “flourishing and honorable competitors” mentioned in Wesleyan’s catalogue was neighboring Columbia Female College, opened in 1859 by the initiative of the South Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Of the faculty, Columbia’s constitution demands, “it shall be their duty to not only to cultivate the minds, but also to have a scrupulous regard for the improvement in manners and morals of those committed to their care.” Columbia’s catalogue affirmed, “The great aim of the College is to offer young women facilities and opportunities for broad and deep culture, careful and exact training and thorough education, equal to the best.” Unlike Wesleyan, which was initiated by the residents of Macon, Columbia had a clearer religious tone with its stated mission: “to educate young women for fruitful service to church, state and nation.” Having sent his daughter to be educated at a Methodist institute, Dr. Sanders found the school to satisfy his definition of education as the cultivation of the mind,

¹² Using Tewksbury’s “List of Permanent Colleges and Universities Founded before the Civil War Arranged by States” and general information on the history of each college, six of the forty-seven colleges founded in states that seceded were female colleges. While Tewksbury’s list is by no means comprehensive, it gives a general impression of the number of female colleges that existed by the outbreak of the Civil War (Tewksbury, 211-220).

¹³ I. M. E. Blandin writes, “the principal difference between the colleges of men and women [in the mid-nineteenth century] was the substitution of French for Greek and the addition of music and art to the curriculum of the colleges for women.” See Walter Rundall, Jr., “‘If Fortune Should Fail’: Civil War Letters of Dr. Samuel D. Sanders,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 65.1 (1964): 130; Blandin, 18.

¹⁴ Griffin: 54, 57, 68, 60, 58; Richard W. Iobst, *Civil War Macon: The History of a Confederate City* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1999), 1; Mary Lane, “Macon: An Historical Retrospect,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 5.3 (1921): 28; Rees, 10, 27-28, 132, Wesleyan College, *Catalog of the Trustees, Faculty and Students of the Wesleyan Female College, Macon, Georgia*. See also the memory of Lizzie Massey Fitzpatrick as quoted in Lamb, 19; Letter from Dolly Burge to Lou, Nov. 7, 1858, and Jan. 1, 1868, entry as quoted in Christine Jacobson Carter, ed., *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge: 1848-1879* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1997), xxxii, 191-192.

writing, “I like Columbia College very much in every respect, except the religious tone”—the girls were not sufficiently pious. In turn, the College respected his evaluation of female education, offering him first the presidency in 1862 and then a professorship in 1863.¹⁵

These Methodist female colleges were not part of a radical or feminist movement but rather an issue of a conservative trend within an aristocratic and religious community to develop intellect, character, refinement, and piety through discipline and study. “I am so anxious that you shall grow up to be intelligent and good,” wrote Dr. Sanders to Mary in 1863. As womanhood was the destiny of educated girls, Southern female colleges remained isolated from the professional and materialistic focus of men’s colleges. Instead, they retained a lofty idealism of chivalry where women were respected because of their womanly characteristics and godliness.¹⁶

While the curriculum and intellectual demand of the women’s colleges such as Wesleyan and Columbia was modeled on that of the men’s, their stated purpose and goals were fundamentally distinct. Historian Anne Lide asserts that, “[Young men] were trained to excel in public life, either in the ministry or high civic positions.” A man graduated from college prepared to enter a profession and to support his family financially. Girls, however, were not actually expected to use the skills they learned in school but were to use their intellectual and character training in their future role of wife and mother. Unlike those of Northern women’s colleges, graduates of Southern female colleges would never teach unless their family fell into dire circumstances. Instead, as wives to professional men, they could serve as appropriate partners—equally pious, cultured, and educated—and thus, were fit to understand and complement their spouses. As mothers, they could instill within their children a passion for knowledge, respect for education, and devotion to God. Thus, the education of young ladies ensured the continuity of the elite manner of life in the South, reinforcing the value of the family with its specific roles for the man and his wife.¹⁷

Not only did the education of women ensure the longevity of the aristocracy, but it was tempered to be an integral part of it. As Mrs. Burge wrote Lou, “A good education will fit and prepare you to adorn the station your wealth will call you to occupy.” Life for educated women marked the true refine-

¹⁵ Columbia Female College, *Catalogue of the Columbia Female College, June, 1860* (Columbia, SC: R. W. Gibbs), microfilm; Blandin, 259, ‘*History of Columbia College*,’ (accessed March 14, 2008); available from <http://www.columbiacollegesc.edu/about/history.asp>; Sanders, Oct. 8, 1861; July 15, 1862; cf. Dec. 25, 1862; July 15, 1862; and April 28, 1862. Dr. Samuel D. Sanders is listed in Columbia’s 1863 catalogue as a professor of ancient languages and chemistry. In fact, he was forced to decline both of these invitations as he was serving as a soldier in the Confederacy; Columbia Female College, *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty, Pupils, &C., of Columbia Female College, Columbia, South Carolina, June 1863* (Charleston, SC: Evans & Cogswell), microfilm.

¹⁶ Blandin, 12, Sanders, Jan. 1863.

¹⁷ Lide, 134. Christie Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York UP, 1994), 32, 62; Sanders, Feb. 18, 1862, Sweet: 50, 52-53, Blandin, 12.

ment of the Southern belle, resting firmly on slavery and dependency. For a girl to aspire to spend her future as a refined and cultured woman, equipped with a liberal arts education and trained in painting, music, and French, required that she have no expectation of cooking, gardening, or working on the farm herself. Rather, a professional or wealthy husband would support the family while slaves and hired servants would do much of the manual labor. Both Mary and Lou came from sufficiently wealthy families that met these conditions. Mary’s father, a doctor and teacher, owned substantial property and slaves and had ample funds to supply her with pocket money and to pay expensive dentist bills during the war.¹⁸ Lou’s father, a prosperous Georgia planter, bequeathed to her stepmother large acreage with thirty slaves.¹⁹ Because neither Mary nor Lou foresaw a destiny of a yeoman wife laboring alongside her husband, this sort of education became a viable option.²⁰

Elite families found great pride not only in intellect but also in the arts. An intelligent girl skilled in painting, embroidery, or music was ideal. Dr. Sanders was particularly keen that Mary excel in drawing, oil painting, and music. He wrote one summer, “Have the piano moved up to Grandmother’s so that you can practice”; and then another time, “I want you to be able to perform *well* on piano, guitar, and violin”; and then: “Are you learning to sing well, as well as to play? You must cultivate your voice.” Music would be useful for playing in church meetings, but he cautioned Mary against letting her love of music led her to sin. For art, he had an equally high standard—*perfection*.²¹

Education and intellect were important not only to show off family talent but also to ensure that daughters could marry well. A wealthy, pious young man would likely show more interest in a woman who shared his intellectual and spiritual interests and whose education reflected an appropriate social status. Lou’s lover clearly appreciated her intellect over anything else. In his eulogy, he praised the “light of intelligence” in her eyes as a virtue; she was the “*queen* of the intelligent, cultivated, and refined social society in which she moved.” Since marriage placed a daughter under the social, financial, and spiritual oversight of another, it was to every family’s advantage to improve marriage prospects for their daughters by educating them.²²

¹⁸ Letter of Dec. 27, 1860, as quoted in Carter, ed., xxxii; J. B. D., “Eulogy for Miss Lou Burge, 1863: Harland Hagler, “The Ideal Woman in the Antebellum South: Lady or Farmwife?,” *The Journal of Southern History* 46.3 (1980): 406, 410, 411, 412; Farnham, 2, 3, 121; Sanders, Nov. 4, 1862; Oct. 31, 1861; and Oct. 14, 1862.

¹⁹ Mr. Burge left his wife more than thirty slaves when he died in 1858. The conditions of his will required her to split the slaves into two equal groups after six years, leaving half for herself and her daughter and the other half for three of her step-children, Carter, ed., xxix-xxxii, 215.

²⁰ For description of life of a yeoman’s wife, see Stephanie McCurry, “The Politics of Yeoman Households in South Carolina,” *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

²¹ Farnham, 87; Sanders, June 23, 1862; Feb. 18, 1863; Mar. 11, 1863; July 3, 1862; Jan. 27, 1863; Dec. 1, 1863; Aug. 31, 1867; Dec. 25, 1863; Nov. 6, 1861; Mar. 4, 1862; Jan. 27, 1863; Feb. 4, 1863; June 1, 1863; Dec. 1, 1863; and Apr. 26, 1864.

²² J. B. D.; Farnham, 31; Jabour, 54.

Parents not only embraced the philosophy of education as the training of the mind, but they also earnestly expected the college and their daughters to match their ideal. Marriage, status, motherly virtues, and even religious piety were the expected results of a proper college education. Because the parents invested so much time and money into their daughters' education, they expected their girls to maximize their experience by working diligently and receiving high marks. Thus, Dr. Sanders would caution Mary, "you must not let your love for your friend induce you to talk to her too much and neglect your studies." Nothing, save religion, surpassed studies in importance.²³

Since intelligence itself was valued so highly in this society, many parents pressured their daughters to earn high grades and receive honors; merely obtaining a college education was not sufficient. High marks meant that a girl would reap great benefit from her education, displaying the family's talents and status upon graduation and marrying well in the future. In 1862, Dr. Sanders wrote Mary: "It is a source of great pride and gratification to me that you stand so well in your class. I hope that you will continue to do your duty and obtain a first class education. I am very anxious that you shall know well and thoroughly all that you study." At least for this father, grades quantified his daughter's diligence in her duty to achieve the prized intellect. The honor of being first in her class "is an indication that you are doing your duty and training your mind by hard study, for usefulness and close thinking in after life." By perusing report cards, then, he could be assured that his daughter was earnestly cultivating her ability, preparing herself for her future.²⁴

With all his eagerness to see his daughter excel and win the first honor at Columbia Female College, Dr. Sanders was most concerned for her spiritual condition and consistently exhorted her to experience a true conversion. For him, "religion is the most essential, all-important quality of education." After encouraging her to pursue knowledge, he wrote, "But above all, dearest, I enjoin upon you to *know* the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, and to be fully conscious that God has pardoned all your sins. This is the highest knowledge, far more precious than rubies or gold."²⁵ Parents, such as Mrs. Burge, saw adolescence as the moment when their daughters ought to embrace God as their own and longed to be comforted with the knowledge that their daughters had genuinely received salvation and would be saved from eternal perdition.²⁶ Historian Frances Rees argues, "The religious element was a vital one in the life of the [parochial] college, and though the faculty desired to send young ladies from the school who had mastered literary and scientific subjects they felt that they had failed if religion had not become a

²³ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007), 47; Jabour, "Grown Girls," 52-53; Sanders, Mar. 22, 1862.

²⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 56; Sanders, Dec. 10, 1862 and Mar. 6, 1863.

²⁵ Sanders, July 15, 1862 and Feb. 18, 1863.

²⁶ Jabour, "Grown Girls," 58; Entries of June 19, 1863, July 5, 1863, and Oct. 6, 1863; see Carter, ed., 136-138; cf. J. M. Bonnell, "Obituary for Miss Mary Lou Burge," *Southern Christian Advocate*, November 19, 1863.

part of the girls' lives."²⁷ With the outbreak of war, a dependence on God for success increased the importance of piety; evangelical Confederates believed that God would only bless those who were truly dutiful and obedient to Him and would allow defeat to come to those who did not meet His standard of devotion. Dr. Sanders himself wrote, "I feel that now is the time more urgently than ever for every Southerner to love the Lord with all the soul and to trust in him with all the heart." If the Confederate cause depended on the fervent prayers of her adherents, what better opportunity could there be for a girl to begin her spiritual journey then in supplication to her God for her country?²⁸

Whatever the parents' expectations of college life were, many girls appeared to enjoy the experience thoroughly. They shared their parents' perspective of education as the development of the mind, working diligently to excel in their studies and achieve high marks. At the same time, they found time to make new friendships and to establish sororities. The tight-knit communities where the students knew each other and formed one big family fostered a vibrant environment for competition and for play.

Perhaps because of their parents' demand for excellence, many female students were anxious to write good compositions, eager to perform well at the examinations, and placed much emphasis on their final commencement exercises. If college girls were concerned about writing perfect compositions, Mary was certainly one of them. Her father wrote: "You must not despair of learning to compose well. I think that you improve rapidly, and I hope by the time you graduate, that you will write very well and fluently." Compositions, graded for grammar and penmanship and centered on popular topics, were read by their authors during examinations, at commencement ceremonies, and even for sorority events.²⁹

Perhaps more important, and more stressful, than writing compositions was passing the annual examinations. Lasting for a week, examinations were both written and oral with the oral part open to the public.³⁰ Because examination week marked the culmination of a year of intense study and revealed to what extent the girls had met their parents' expectations, many

²⁷ Rees, 59-60.

²⁸ Sanders, Mar. 28, 1862 and June 23, 1862; Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 10, 102; Iobst, 101-103.

²⁹ Sanders, Apr. 20, 1861; June 1, 1863; July, 1863; and July, 1862; Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 57; Due West Female College, *The Second Annual Commencement in the Due West Female College, Wednesday, 9th July, 1862* (Due West, SC: s.n.), microfilm; Concord Female College, *Programme for Commencement in College, Wednesday, May 28th, 1862* (s.n.), microfilm; "A Literary Entertainment," *Georgia Journal and Messenger*, April 24, 1861; Lamb, 13.

³⁰ Wesleyan College, *Catalogue, 1861-1862*; Sanders, June 13, 1862 and June 9, 1863. Dr. Sanders would have attended the examinations in 1862 and 1863 had he not been "a man under authority" as a Confederate soldier. At Columbia College, a select board of visitors joined the faculty in evaluating students at these examinations. It is probable that in 1862, Dr. Sanders was invited by President Martin to be on the Board of Visitors during examination week (Columbia Female College, *Catalogue, 1860*).

girls grew extremely nervous as the day approached, frantically preparing for that day. Dr. Sanders realized this danger, warning Mary, "You must not allow yourself to be so excited at this examination as you were at the last." Being evaluated against their parents' standards of intelligence and compared to their peers certainly made this week in July an "exciting" one for many female students.³¹

A more cheery aspect of academic life, though, was commencement, which followed examination week. "Helen, can't you come to commencement?" wrote one Wesleyan girl to her friend. As with compositions and examinations, girls often wanted their family and friends to witness their achievements and celebrate their progress towards the desired intellect. Classmate rivalry over grades culminated in the contention over class rank. For Lou to be awarded second honor below Flossie Stevens was more mortifying than receiving no honor at all. Unable to attend herself, Lou still mused over the occasion: "The 8th, 9th, and 10th were commencement days in Macon. My class are there in all the glory which white muslin, white kid, and compositions tied with white ribbon can invest them [and] for these two days entertained the admiring audience there assembled to do honor to the 21st commencement of the Wesleyan Female College." An important occasion in any student's life, for these girls commencement marked a culmination of four years of hard work to cultivate their mind as well as a transition into womanhood.³²

While in college, friendships blossomed among the girls as they worked towards a common goal. Both Lou and Mary were great companions to their roommates and wrote of the fun they had with their schoolmates.³³ In the 1850s, Wesleyan girls established the country's first two sororities—the Adelphean (Alpha Delta Pi) and Philomathean (Phi Mu) Societies.³⁴ Lou apparently was a member of the Philomathean Society as she rejoiced that Miss Cater, who received the Salutatory in her place, was also a Philomathean. After describing celebrations over the secession of Georgia, Lou adds, "But I must not forget to put down that the Adelphean candles burnt the windows and greatly injured their new carpet; whereat the P's were glad and the A's very angry."³⁵ The Philomathean Society, meaning "seekers of knowledge" or "lovers of learning," was founded for the "social, moral, and mental im-

³¹ Sanders, May 5, 1863, Farnham, 91, 141, Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 58.

³² Letter of January 14, 1861, from Sallie Hudson to Helen Newton as printed in Kenneth Coleman, "An 1861 View of Wesleyan College, Macon, Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 1967, 490; Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 58; Louisiana Burge, "Diary of Louisiana Burge, 1861-1862," microfilm, May 30, 1861; June 30, 1861; and July 10, 1861, Burge family papers, 1832-1952, Atlanta.

³³ Sanders, Mar. 22, 1862, Burge, first entry, cf. Letter from Sallie Hudson to Helen Newton; see Coleman.

³⁴ Rees, 56.

³⁵ I infer Lou's membership only from her accounts of sorority rivalry at Wesleyan. It is certain that her step-sister, Sadai Burge, who later attended Wesleyan was a Philomathean as Sadai was listed as a participant in one of their concerts in 1873. See Rees, 125; Burge, July 10, 1861 and Jan. 31, 1861.

provement of its members." At least paying tribute to the concept of education as the development of each student's potential and the cultivation of her mind, the Society provided a means for the girls to share secrets, enjoy a rivalry with their fellow classmates, and participate in structured diversion among themselves.³⁶

The tension created by the academic standard, together with the camaraderie of the students, was able to exist because of the close-knit community of these Methodist female colleges. In fact, the regulations of Wesleyan demonstrate how valuable this was: "The Officers, their families, and the boarding pupils, all partake at the same table, and constitute one large family, in which the supervision and care of the pupils devolves upon the President . . ." Faculty and officers resided on campus and the President of the college often communicated with the students and parents directly.³⁷ One student even wrote, "Mr. Bonnell and I like each other very much, I sit by him at table and he keeps me laughing all the while."³⁸ The President of Wesleyan no doubt knew Lou very well and cared deeply for her welfare. In 1863, he wrote in her obituary as one familiar and affected: "She was an honored graduate of the Wesleyan Female College, in the class of 1861. During her collegiate course, she distinguished herself by the evidences of a mind remarkable for penetration . . . Amid all the agonies of her last moments, she retained her reason, and repeated passage after passage of Scripture with an accuracy and energy unequalled in her best days."³⁹ Dr. Sanders further underscored the close ties many had with schools when he referred Mary to her uncle, Reverend William Martin, president of Columbia, for instruction whether she ought to advance into the Secondary class.⁴⁰ For these three girls at least, schooling provided natural connections not only to friends but also to parent-figures, making college much more like family life and less like that of an institution.⁴¹

When the Civil War erupted in April, 1861, the life and relationships of many people across the country changed. Sacrifices had to be made as fathers and sons joined the armies, family members assumed new duties, money and goods became scarce, and soldiers infiltrated the South. For many Southern college girls, however, remarkably little changed. The aristocratic foundation of college education fit perfectly with the elite manner of life the Confederacy was fighting to defend.⁴² Because education trained the future wives and mothers of the Southern elite by developing their intellect, its institutions and the life of its students were preserved amid the chaos of war. The biggest change for these female students was that loved ones and fiancés volunteered to fight; aside from this, schools remained open, girls be-

³⁶ Lamb, 11-13.

³⁷ Wesleyan College, *Catalogue, 1861-1862*; Columbia Female College, *Catalogue, 1860*.

³⁸ Letter from Sallie Hudson to Helen Newton, see Coleman, 490.

³⁹ Bonnell, "Obituary for Miss Mary Lou Burge, 1861-1862."

⁴⁰ Sanders, Oct. 8, 1861, Columbia Female College, *Catalogue, 1860*.

⁴¹ Cf. Jabour, "Grown Girls," 62; Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 63.

⁴² McCurry, 37.

came more patriotic, and life with its petty concerns continued on as before.

The primary demand the outbreak of war placed on most college girls was that it diverted the attention of their male friends. Some girls wept tirelessly, as any would when her beau was separated from her. Of this Lou wrote: "Em Bellamy spent almost the whole evening in my room crying about the war and John T. Burr who leaves tonight The girls are almost all of them crying I am glad that I am not *in love*, if that is the way I would have to do if my sweetheart should leave for the wars."⁴³ However large this price appeared to the girls, it was small compared to that which they could have paid as mothers or wives in the country, left alone to manage their own plantations and slaves.⁴⁴

Unlike the nearby men's colleges, Wesleyan and Columbia both remained open through the duration of the war.⁴⁵ Mary herself actually enrolled in college in the fall of 1861, months after the war had begun. When male colleges were closing, Dr. Sanders was writing to Mary, "I am so glad that you are so well pleased at the college, and that there is prospect of having more of your friends and acquaintances with you." One girl recalled leaving a school in Mississippi shortly after the war broke out to attend Wesleyan, which was "thought to be safe from the terrible excitement of war." Because female education was founded on the principle that these girls would lead noble lives sheltered from hardships, college education served a two-fold purpose: it sheltered girls from the destruction and violence of war while it trained them to be the next generation of intellectual, pious, and cultured women of the Confederacy.⁴⁶

Isolated from the actual war, college girls were often quite loyal to the Confederate cause, turning their amusements into patriotic happenings. At Wesleyan, they formed play regiments to celebrate the bold Confederate soldiers, holding a special event complete with strawberries for dessert in sympathy for the siege of Vicksburg in 1863. The ornamental subjects also became important as the young ladies showcased their talents at benefit concerts to raise money for the soldiers. A perfect venue for refined girls, one reporter wrote of Adelphian's 1861 Literary Entertainment, "The scene presented itself within the spacious hall—its walls hung with garlands, vying in loveliness with the graceful group upon the stage, budding into cultivated womanhood—presented a most pleasant contrast to the outer world—its din of war and bloody strife." In this same fun but patriotic spirit, Lou wrote:

⁴³ Burge, Apr. 20, 1861.

⁴⁴ See Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996), 53-79.

⁴⁵ By 1863, the male colleges in Georgia: Emory College, Mercer University, Oglethorpe University, and the University of Georgia, all either closed their doors or temporarily became high schools as students and professors joined the Confederate ranks. Columbia Female College did close in 1865 due to war-related financial difficulties but was re-opened in 1873. See Lide, 70-71, 74, 76-77, 83-84, 86; 'History of Columbia College' (accessed March 14, 2008).

⁴⁶ Sanders, Oct. 8, 1861, Oct. 26, 1863; Wiley, "Description of Collection, 1964," microfilm; Recollections of Sallie Love Banks as quoted in Lamb, 18; Lide, 63, 80-81.

"Macon is illuminated in honor of the Secession of Georgia College looks beautifully [*sic*]. We had fine fun fixing up our room 'Twas an exciting scene." An ardent defender of the Confederate cause, Lou, like many of the girls, was eager to make light of even the most serious event.⁴⁷

Though certainly quite patriotic, the girls were often too occupied with the trivial concerns of college life and friendship to be overburdened by the war. They continued to write eagerly of examinations, first honor, parties, clothes, food, visitations, love, and fiancés. Although money must have been scarce, Dr. Sanders wrote over and over for Mary to let him know if she needed additional pocket money. A momentous war might be going on, tearing the country apart, but he wanted to maintain his role as a chivalrous father, shielding his daughter from harm and the terrible reality of war. In turn, many daughters dutifully played the role of college girls, studying diligently and enjoying much recreation even in such hard times.⁴⁸

Studying closely the experiences and motives of Mary Sanders, her father Samuel, and Louisiana Burge reveals a complex set of ideals and perspectives on Methodist female college education. The story they tell highlights an earnest desire for the cultivated mind and a strong devotion to godliness and aristocracy as the rationale for female education. Thus it could be said of Louisiana Burge: "Among her many charming endowments, was that of a finely organized mind—quick, vigorous and of remarkable penetration."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Rees, 120-121, "A Literary Entertainment," *Georgia Journal and Messenger* April 24, 1861, 2: Burge, Jan. 21, 1861.

⁴⁸ Lamb, 18-19. For examples of Dr. Sanders' generosity, see Sanders, Oct. 1861.

⁴⁹ J. B. D., "Eulogy for Miss Lou Burge, 1863," microfilm.