

Mary Boykin Chesnut

1823–1886



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Mary Boykin Chesnut was the wife of an elite leader of the Confederacy. She recorded her family's experiences in a series of diaries. She later turned these diaries into a book that is considered the finest literary work of the Confederacy.



As you read the biography below, think about how Mary Boykin Chesnut's knowledge of plantation life influenced her opinions.



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Mary Boykin Chesnut began her adult life as the young wife of James Chesnut, Jr. James Chesnut was a wealthy plantation owner and a U.S. senator. The plantation, called Mulberry, was located near Camden, South Carolina. Many people, including slaves, had lived at Mulberry for many years before Chesnut arrived with her new husband.

There was very little for Mary Chesnut to do when she arrived at the plantation. She spent much of her time reading in the library of the mansion. She also began teaching the slaves to read and write, which was illegal at the time.

Chesnut's husband eventually left the Senate when President Abraham Lincoln came to office in 1860. Important figures of the Confederacy began to visit at Mulberry. The Chesnuts became good friends with Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, and his wife, Varina. With all of the visits and talk of war, Chesnut began to write in her diary about the events of the day. When her husband became a close aide to Davis, Chesnut was able to get an inside look at important figures and ideas surrounding the Confederacy.

VOCABULARY

schism division

During the Civil War, Mary Chesnut followed her husband to many places throughout the South. She sewed shirts for the Confederate soldiers while back home at Mulberry and helped out with the hospital duties. Chesnut became excited by the Civil War and wrote often in her diary.

One of the most interesting details of Mary Chesnut's diaries concerns her opinions on slavery. While a staunch supporter of the secession, Chesnut did not believe in slavery. She recorded many instances of the mistreatment of slaves and the fear of rebellion held by many slave owners. Her writings also document the **schism** in the South, between those who believed in the war and those who did not. While some experts believe her slavery opinions may have been added after the war, others strongly disagree.

Whatever the case, Chesnut's diary, first published in 1905 under the title of *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, provides readers with a firsthand look at life in the South during the Civil War.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Contrast** How do you think Mary Boykin Chesnut's role in the war was different than the role of other women of her time?

- 2. Expressing and Supporting a Point of View** Why do you think Mary Chesnut might have disliked slavery? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

ACTIVITY

- 3.** Read some of the entries found in Mary Boykin Chesnut's diary. Write a short essay telling if her words changed or supported your views of life in the South during the Civil War.