

Marriage, Family & Divorce in the Antebellum South  
The “Disunion” of Ann Pierce Parker & William Cowper

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Historical scholarship is traditionally dictated by perceived structures in time. These structures are often signified, though not limited, by people, places, and beliefs. The significance of discussing particular structures is, however, usually limited to what is typically noticed as an event. Scholarly interests in historical events are piqued when these structures are in conflict. Unfortunately, historical research is too often dictated by these events, whether or not a connection exists. One example of this is in how scholars view Antebellum America with the determination to explain the Civil War. This episode of crisis is included in every major textbook of American history, and the years preceding are always explained as a signification of the growing divide between North and South. For instance, historians of the Antebellum South often attempt to show a unity within Southern culture that is distinct from the North. While initially studying cultural elements in the antebellum South, this study came across the fragility of union, not on a national scale but within the confines of the family. Because of the individualistic nature of human beings, conflict regularly threatens unions, regardless of their size. From marital vows to political alliances, unions between people and peoples have experienced various crises that have made up the events of our historical analyses. This study has analyzed the crisis of union between William Cowper and Ann Pierce Parker. By examining documents concerning their family, including Ann's request for a divorce, and comparing these to other documents of Southern families during the same time period, this study has enabled a better understanding of the requirements of union. While union can be explained in politics, this study has employed the social role of family life to demonstrate that "a more perfect union" is established when certain rights are guaranteed under a balance of sovereignty and subjection, and that when an imbalance or inequality exists, that union is threatened with dissolution and destruction.

The institution of marriage, particularly in Antebellum America, serves as a prime example of the balance between sovereignty and subjection. In addition to respecting individual sovereignty, in order to form a union one must also sacrifice a degree of that sovereignty. In modern America, married couples often recognize the need to sacrifice individual interests for the good of their partners and children. This includes sacrificing leisurely pursuits as well as making decisions jointly rather than independently. A more perfect union in marriage is obtained when these sacrifices are equally made and a balance of powers, so to speak, is implemented. There were certainly instances where such equal treatment in marriage was experienced in nineteenth-century America, but marital laws were not favorable to both parties. British principles of coverture were commonly in practice throughout the states, including in the South, as “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage.”<sup>1</sup> The limitations on a *feme covert* whose legal rights were swallowed up by her husband tilted the balance of the marital union in favor of male sovereignty and female subjection. This imbalance made the female participants in these unions particularly vulnerable in instances where husbands exercised excessive control, including engaging in verbal or physical abuse. Perhaps the only weapon a woman had was the threat of divorce, but given the laws governing divorce even this was not in their favor.

The laws in Antebellum America prevented women from holding the bargaining power that is common in unions. In American politics, sectional rhetoric was commonly utilized as a bargaining tool. Threats of secession are found in the debates of Congress as early as 1811 by Federalists opposing war, and continued thereafter. In the debates concerning Missouri, Senator Barbour recognized “some who are ready to make the sacrifice” of dissolving the union though

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<sup>1</sup> James Stewart, *The Rights of Persons, According to the Text of Blackstone, Incorporating the Alterations Down to the Present Time* (London: Edmund Spettigue, 1839), 478.

he admitted that when it came to voting for secession, he was “not ready to perform.”<sup>2</sup> The Tariff Bill of 1824 sparked considerable debate as Mr. Randolph of Virginia spoke out against it as a threat to the Union. “There is no magic in this word *union*,” he said, following up by comparing union to marriage. “Marriage itself is a good thing, but the marriages of Mezentius were not so esteemed. The marriage of Sinbad, the sailor, with the curse of his deceased wife, was a union; and just such a union will this be, if, by a bare majority in both Houses, this bill shall become a law.” In an 1826 judicial bill, the marriage between the “Old Thirteen” and “New States” was once again threatened in a debate that Representative Burgess argued “will bring us a profound discourse on the probable disunion of these States.”<sup>3</sup> In the year prior to the Nullification Crisis, “disunion and nullification were instantly made the watchword, and every yelper of a particular cast immediately joined in the cry.”<sup>4</sup> Politicians regularly utilized this threat of dissolution for the first generation of the United States, but theirs was a threat that enabled them to extract concessions from other states because secession was a credible threat both for the states that could exist outside of the union and for the politicians, whose prestige and role would only be enhanced at home.

Despite their use of marriage as comparable to their idea of union, in contemporaneous marriages women did not have as much bargaining power as any section in the United States. The law rarely favored women in situations that required legal activity, especially in considerations of divorce. For instance, women generally were not given priority, or even equal consideration, in child custody. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains, “By common law tradition in regard to male property rights, children were considered to be possessions of the head of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, Vol. VIII (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1860), 15 & 629.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Gales & William Winston Seaton (editors), *Register of Debates in Congress*, Volume VII (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1831), 655, 658, & 660.

household. Thus, in law, fathers had the better case for child custody.”<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that fathers were always granted custody, but the way for women to gain guardianship over their children was difficult under coverture. As such, the threat of divorce did not enhance a woman’s bargaining power within marriage because in and after a divorce, a woman’s legal and social standing were reduced. This may be one reason why Ann Pierce Parker threatened divorce a few times, but without any real changes occurring in her marriage. When the abuse worsened and Ann’s husband forced her from her home and denied her access to her children, she had nothing left to lose and she sought divorce one more time.

The petition of Ann Pierce Parker to divorce from William Cowper illustrates her understanding of the male-dominated laws that she faced. On November 20, 1816, Ann wrote a petition directly to the General Assembly of Virginia, the highest office in the state. She began the petition, not with any statement regarding the unfortunate circumstances of her marriage, but by introducing herself as the child of the late Col. Josiah Parker. Recognizing her legal status as being tied to another man Ann chose to avoid opening her petition by addressing her relationship with her husband and instead invoked the name and memory of her father. Almost the entire first page was dedicated to an account of the life of Josiah Parker, much in the same way his life is found in a biographical dictionary. Josiah was a member of Virginia’s convention in 1775 and fought in the Revolutionary War. He moved up in the ranks from major to lieutenant-colonel, and was eventually promoted to colonel over his own regiment in 1778. After three months of serving as colonel, he resigned his post in the army, but continued commanding the militia from 1778-1782 while serving from 1780-1781 in Virginia’s House of Delegates. Following the Revolutionary War, he became a naval officer and was later elected to represent Virginia in the

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<sup>5</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 243.

U.S. House of Representatives in the First through Sixth Congresses. He had lived a noble life that deserved attention, and with his life Ann sought to gain that attention.<sup>6</sup> As Thomas E. Buckley, S.J. explains in his examination of her case, Ann “writes in a style deliberately designed to evoke the sympathy and support of the male lawmakers.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Col. Parker’s behavior throughout his life and the duties he performed on behalf of Virginia are consistent with the Southern male ethic of honor. According to Bertram Wyatt Brown, “the principles of honor were the means to create and bind together a privileged group and to classify the ranks of its members for the purposes of establishing order and group cohesion.”<sup>8</sup> Ann’s petition sought to place her, through her father, within this group while at the same time showing how her husband failed to meet these principles. The structure of her petition contrasts the honorable life of her father to the dishonorable behavior of her husband.

The contrast between honor and dishonor is most evident in Ann’s points concerning the patriarchal duty to provide for one’s family. Following her long remembrance of the service Col. Parker rendered to his state and country, Ann finally turned to her family. It was after retirement that Col. Parker could move “from publick life to the bosom of his family.” The single line where Ann mentions his actions toward her while she was young is “that he spared neither trouble or expense; for my improvement or gratification.” Following this mention, the petition moves on to explain Ann’s “sad narrative of [her] misfortunes” in her marriage to William Cowper. Any following remarks concerning Col. Parker dealt with “his protection” of Ann through financial support. This was contrasted with the failure of William to provide for his

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<sup>6</sup> Rossiter Johnson & John Howard Brown, eds., *The Twentieth Century Biographical Dictionary of Notable Americans*, Volume VIII (Boston: The Biographical Society, 1904), s.v. “Parker, Josiah.”

<sup>7</sup> Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., *The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 155.

<sup>8</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 56-57.

own family, even to the point of receiving aid from his father-in-law. Perhaps one of the strongest indictments of William's honor was in his reliance not on Col. Parker but on Ann who "would send him secretly the greater part of the money; allowed me by father for my expenses." Although William himself had served as a Captain in the Navy, no service could hide such shame and dishonor he inherited in his failure to provide for his family.<sup>9</sup>

The transition from Col. Parker to Capt. Cowper in Ann's petition was gradual, for Col. Parker's death did not take away his continued assistance to their marriage and family. Before his death, Col. Parker had already spent considerable time and money providing for his daughter and her family. When William could no longer provide support Ann was taken in by her father who promised to "divide with me his last shilling." William was often away at sea, either on naval voyages or engaging in trade, and in eight years of marriage Ann lived under William's "entire controul" for only six months. Eight years was enough for Col. Parker to recognize that Ann would continue to need his support even after his death. In his will, Col. Parker provided Ann with regular assistance, including quarterly payments, slaves, and the use of his home. The property, however, could not be bequeathed to Ann without it legally belonging to William. Col. Parker maneuvered around this legal point by granting his estate to Ann's eldest son, Josiah. Anything given to Josiah, as a minor under the legal guardianship of William, would also be in danger of falling completely into William Cowper's hands. As such, Col. Parker managed to place an additional stipulation in his will, granting his estate only upon the condition that Josiah would change his surname to Parker. The change of surname and, therefore, legal inheritance

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<sup>9</sup> "Petition of Ann P. P. Cowper to the General Assembly, 1816," The Library of Virginia, *Working Out Her Destiny*, [http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/destiny/where\\_women/cowpertext.htm](http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/destiny/where_women/cowpertext.htm) (accessed March 1, 2009).

could be postponed until the boy reached the age of adulthood. Beyond the grave the honorable colonel provided all the assistance he could legally conjure, but it was not enough.<sup>10</sup>

For the next six years William continued to provide evidence of his dishonorable character. He had previously been before the courts, even on a charge of assault and battery in 1806. After the death of his father-in-law, William sought to gain control over the estate. Had Josiah's name been changed to Parker, according to the will, he would have inherited the estate and he and his inheritance would immediately fall under William's guardianship, especially if the boy died. William attempted numerous times to have the boy's name changed, but Ann and others familiar with the situation effectively prevented the immediate change. Despite various strategies utilized to secure authority over the estate, William was usually prevented by legislators in the assembly. He continued his cruelty, abusing Ann to the point of peace warrants being issued against him and eventually in kicking Ann out of Macclesfield, the home left by her father, and preventing her from seeing her children. The courts regularly failed to protect Ann or ensure application of her father's will. Once the executor of the will died others feared taking on the role of managing the estate. Forced from her family and home, Ann stayed with nearby relatives while William squandered away "virtually all the movable property" of the Macclesfield estate, "including Josiah Parker's bequests to his daughter." Ann was in dire circumstances under the principles of coverture, and none of the courts seemed willing to engage in actions that would allow a married woman to own property or enter contractual agreements. She had no other hope left but to petition the highest council in Virginia for divorce and a redress of her grievances.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Buckley, S.J., *The Great Catastrophe*, 156-161.

The response of Virginia's General Assembly is illustrative of how protective the government was of marriage. On January 9, 1817, the Assembly granted Ann's petition for a divorce, but with certain stipulations. While William Cowper's rights and authority "over the person and property" of Ann and her children were legally dissolved and her status as *feme sole* restored, the honorable institution of marriage needed to be protected. After all, marriage was a union recognized by God above all else. In Ann's petition, her grievances regarding property rights were addressed by granting *feme sole* status, but there was one form of contract this newly single woman was denied to pursue. Both William and Ann were denied the right of future marriage while the other yet lived. If either attempted to marry another, the law would recognize that person as "guilty of bigamy, and shall be punished in the same manner as if this act had never passed." Ann was free from any obligations to her husband, but she was not free to pursue other relationships. It could be argued that future marriage was prohibited to protect the children, but only Ann was granted legal custody. William was also prohibited from remarrying.<sup>12</sup> Given that the principle of coverture was accepted in nineteenth century America, reason seems to suggest that early laws concerning marriage after divorce were also practiced. An earlier seventeenth century text provides the answer. In *Judgment of the Reformed Churches*, the author restates the principles of coverture and then follows by showing that marriage after divorce was acceptable in instances where adultery had occurred. This was based on the Christian doctrine that "whosoever shall put away his wife except it be for whoredoms, and shall marry another doth commit adultery."<sup>13</sup> In early nineteenth-century Virginia, marriage was still

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley E. Pippenger, ed., *Connections and Separations: Divorce, Name Change and Other Genealogical Tidbits from the Acts of the Virginia General Assembly* (Heritage Books, 2000), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Anon., *Judgment of the reformed churches: that a man may lawfully not only put away his wife for her adultery, but also marry another* (London: printed for Andrew Crook at the Green Dragon in Pauls Churchyard, 1652), page 1, Early English Books Online (EEBO), [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rft\\_id=xri:eebo:image:33559](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:33559) (accessed April 18, 2009).

a union that included God's laws. Despite all the abuse William may have inflicted on Ann, there was never any proven adultery. As such, even granting a divorce was not fully acceptable according to tradition.

Legislators throughout the states were increasingly accepting additional reasons other than adultery for divorce, which led to the formation of two forms of divorce. As one nineteenth century law book states, "there are two kinds of divorce, namely *a mensa et thoro*, which merely separates the parties, without destroying the contract; and the divorce which severs the tie, *quoad foedus et vinculum* which is a dissolution of the marriage contract."<sup>14</sup> Although Virginia's Assembly recognized the marriage between Ann and William as "forever dissolved and annulled,"<sup>15</sup> neither of these types of divorce is mentioned. This is probably because the divorce they were granting was somewhere in between the two. Property obligations were no longer in force as found in a divorce *a vinculo*, whereas the right to remarry was prohibited as found in a divorce *a mensa*. Various Southern states adopted their own allowances and laws regarding divorce, especially when it came to property. In most instances, property was awarded according to fault. For instance, "in Kentucky, when a divorce is caused for the fault of the husband, the wife takes as if he were dead."<sup>16</sup> This, however, was very rare as property was often divided according to pre-marriage contracts. Things usually became a bit more difficult when it came to child custody.

The existence of children in this case makes it unique when analyzing how unions are broken apart. The separation of Ann from her husband could be conducted legally just as their union was created. In the midst of this union, however, children were created, and such a union between children and parents could not so easily be severed. In a system that regularly favored

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<sup>14</sup> John Bouvier, *Institutes of American Law* (Philadelphia: Robert E. Peterson & Co., 1854), 121.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley E. Pippenger, *Connections and Separations*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> John Bouvier, *Institutes of American Law*, 124.

the father with regard to child custody, it should be asked why the Assembly granted Ann's petition. Was it due to her father's prominence in the community, the many abuses inflicted upon her by her husband, or the testimony of witnesses on behalf of Ann? The full deliberations or implications of this case may never be known, but the same could be said of any union in crisis. Why did the South later secede from the Union, and why did the North choose to go to war to maintain the Union, or at least to prevent a divorce *a vinculo*? Were there "children" involved? It could be argued that the Federal Government had purchased the Louisiana Territory, and that those states residing in that territory were children of that union. In addition, the land further to the west was in danger of being segregated between North and South. Who would have been granted custody over the land acquired following the War with Mexico? Many reasons for maintaining union can be speculated upon. Even in the simple case of Ann Pierce Parker and her family, the choice to allow dissolution was also a choice confirming union, or at least the prevention of alternate unions. Granting child custody to Ann is consistent with the ideals of southern honor. Again, as Wyatt-Brown explains, "male honor required masculine headship of the family."<sup>17</sup> Ann's father had proven his honor with regard to serving the state of Virginia, rearing an educated woman, and in providing not only for her but for her children as well. As the father, William was also required to fulfill this ideal, but he had proven to be a dishonorable husband as well as a father incapable of supporting his family. Nevertheless, the union of the family needed to be protected. Ann was granted legal custody of her children, and it was to these that her marital obligations continued.

Ann's case not only shows how important children were as a consideration in divorce proceedings, but it also reveals the subordinate status women held not only below men but also below the needs of children. In closing her petition, Ann wrote, "You who have daughters that

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<sup>17</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 255.

are blooming, think of my Father; you who have darling infants think of me!” This emphasizes the contrast between how Ann was brought up by an honorable man, and the future her children faced under the control of a man like her husband. By bringing up her children, she was not asking the legislature to think of her as a woman, but as a *mother* with responsibilities to her children and the future of Virginia. These responsibilities she wrote in the third person: “Her wish is to support and educate her children, to rescue them from vice and ignorance (to which they are now exposed under their father) and bring them up in piety and virtue.” Ann was concerned for the welfare of her children, especially if they were to go on in life without a father. Even William Cowper understood the weight of a parent’s duty when considering children. With the Parker estate left to Ann’s eldest son on the condition he change his name, William did all he could to gain legal possession over the inheritance. When he tried to have Josiah’s surname changed, he spoke to the courts of his “natural love and affection” for young Josiah. Nevertheless, all of his rhetoric could not hide the petitions of his wife which claimed that William had threatened to take Josiah’s life.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the importance placed on children in Antebellum America, historians are faced with the difficult task of trying to recreate Ann’s entire family. According to John Mack Faragher, “any study of marriage under circumstances of male social dominance will be a study of a struggle between men and women that includes the continuing subordination of wives, women’s social and emotional battle against that subordination, and the alternatives of accommodation or resistance to patriarchy.”<sup>19</sup> All that has been previously considered proves this point, but children are usually absent from discussions concerning this case and others like it. What was it like for Ann’s sons growing up in the Antebellum South, and how did they feel

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<sup>18</sup> Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe*, 155-167.

<sup>19</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2-3.

while watching their parents bicker and eventually divorce? From this story we gain a limited understanding of life as a child in the Antebellum South, or of childrearing. Since children are rarely discussed in historical documents, except in concerns over custody, some of the best details of youth are found in biographical and fictional accounts. Caroline Gilman's *Recollections of a Southern Matron* is a fictionalized story, though, according to her, "every part, except the 'love-passages,' is founded in events of actual occurrence." Naturally, her goal to write a successful novel would necessarily "present as exact a picture as possible of local habits and manners" in order to reach human emotion. For instance, we can assume that there were moments when Ann, while living with her father, could have written, as Gilman, "My children are frolicking on the lawn where my first footsteps were watched by tender parents." Surely there were moments of hardship, especially in the effects of being torn between father and mother during the earliest years of one's life. Nevertheless, Ann probably spent quite a lot of time with her children during the years that William was out to sea. Family unity was important to Southern families, as evidenced in another recollection of Gilman's. "My children," Gilman wrote, "love to lead me to the spot where they may spell the inscription on one princely monument to my grandfather, and hear the tale I have to tell of the fair, the good, and the brave who sleep in that enclosure, sacred to the domestic dead. There is but one inscription there," she continues, "for we were as one." In addition to the many stories about their grandfather Ann could have told her sons, especially about his service in the Revolutionary War, Ann probably did all she could to keep her family unified as one.<sup>20</sup>

Giving birth to and raising children in the Antebellum South was no easy task, especially for a single woman. Infant deaths were not uncommon, even in the Parker family. Within Col.

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<sup>20</sup> Caroline Howard Gilman, *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838), vii, 9-10, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Documenting the American South*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/gilman/gilman.html> (accessed March 1, 2009).

Josiah Parker's family cemetery are headstones of some of Copeland Parker's children who died in the early Nineteenth-Century having not reached two years of age. Despite this possibility and the hardship endured when losing a child, we also find the possibility of forced abortions. As with any union, particularly that between parents and children, sovereignty would need to be sacrificed. William was not keen on the idea of being responsible for another child, and urged Ann to induce a miscarriage when she was pregnant with their fourth son. Such action was out of the question to Ann, though it is significant that the question was even considered by William. Abortions were more commonly accepted in the North, usually being rejected by southerners except in cases where the mother's life was threatened. This even applied to slaves, as slaveholders feared the repercussions if their slave women no longer having children. Regarding whites, however, it was another union that required protection. According to "J. Boring, professor of obstetrics at the Atlanta Medical College, [...] only God could give or take a life." Southerners saw that the union between God and mankind was threatened, and "that the destruction of 'the product of conception' should be regarded as murder." These arguments were had throughout the country, but in the South, it was an issue of honor and respect for God's creative process.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, these thoughts were had in the southern conscious of honor, which was confined to the private sphere. Southern lawmakers avoided legislating laws concerning abortion until the Civil War when abortion was, for the first time in American history, politicized.<sup>22</sup> Prior to the emergence of abortion laws, issues of a moral nature that "endangered personal piety and family responsibility" were seen as confined to the church and

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<sup>21</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birth of a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 109-110.

<sup>22</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 218-220.

apart from the central authority of the state.<sup>23</sup> The strongest authority in deciding upon issues of abortion, therefore, was that of the parents. Of course, in cases such as Ann's, this authority was unnaturally tilted toward the father. Nevertheless, Ann stood up to William's request, even in the face of additional physical abuse, and continued her dedication to childbirth and childrearing.

With limited documentation, it is difficult to pinpoint how Ann raised her children, but with regards to education, an answer can probably be surmised based on her own upbringing. James F. Crocker, a family historian and genealogist, wrote that "Col. Parker had educated his daughter, as if she had been a son, in the languages and in all manly arts."<sup>24</sup> Ann's petition alone demonstrates the value this education provided. Female education was not common during this time, but was beginning to be accepted throughout the South. In 1833, for example, the Angerona Seminary was founded as "a Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies, and their instruction in the higher branches of Education."<sup>25</sup> With the influence of an exceptional education in her youth, Ann likely sought to foster within her own sons a love of books and learning. This is evidenced in one of the attempted reconciliations between Ann and her husband. Following numerous failed attempts to have young Josiah's name changed, William requested in 1811 for Ann to return to Macclesfield. She agreed, largely based on her concern over the welfare of her children, with the added stipulation that she would attempt to procure "estate funds for Josiah's education" by sending him to an academy in Smithfield. Ann soon realized that this was simply another attempt of William's to gain complete access to the estate when he tried again to have Josiah's name changed. When this attempt failed, William "now

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<sup>23</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 103.

<sup>24</sup> James F. Crocker, "The Parkers of Macclesfield, Isle of Wight County, VA," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 6, no. 4 (Apr., 1899), 421.

<sup>25</sup> "Young Ladies' Boarding and Day School, Winchester Va., By Rev. L. Eichelberger, 1840," Library of Virginia, *Working Out Her Destiny*, [http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/destiny/education/winchester\\_school.htm](http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/destiny/education/winchester_school.htm) (accessed March 1, 2009).

‘choaked’ his wife and threatened to kill her.” As the abuse increased, Ann once again fled to nearby relatives. Regardless of the regular separation she endured from her sons, Ann sought every opportunity to remain a part of their lives until the Assembly granted her full custody.<sup>26</sup>

Future records provide evidence of the closeness that Ann and her boys enjoyed despite family problems. It appears that Ann was particularly close to her son, Thomas Frederick P. P. Cowper. Their close relationship is confirmed by a sworn affidavit of Colonel Frank A. Dwyer as well as records from Smithfield’s Christ Episcopal Church that show Ann attending church with her daughter-in-law, Virginia Smith. The son of Thomas Frederick and Virginia, Josiah Parker Cowper, wrote sometime around 1900 a short biography of his great-grandfather, simply titled *Col. Josiah Parker*. These records suggest not only that the family remained close, but that stories of Ann’s father and his courage continued to be told through the generations, just as Gilman depicted in her *Recollections*. Even distance could not permanently separate the family. Ann’s eldest son, Josiah, married Mary Ann Keith and lived with his family in Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri. In 1853, Josiah passed away and his widowed wife and her family returned to Virginia where she was taken in by another of Ann’s children, Leopold C. P. P. Cowper. Leopold and Thomas Frederick both followed in their father’s and grandfather’s shoes by serving the state of Virginia. After practicing law in Portsmouth, Leopold entered the political sphere when he was elected from Norfolk County to serve in the House of Delegates in the 1840’s. He later served as Lieutenant Governor of the Restored Government in Virginia during the Civil War. While Leopold followed the political side of his grandfather’s roots, Thomas Frederick took on the military side. He also practiced law serving as a Justice in Wight County, but he was a ship’s Captain, just like his father. Also, during the 1840’s, he was a Major

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<sup>26</sup> Buckley, S.J., *The Great Catastrophe*, 157-159.

over Isle of Wight's 29<sup>th</sup> Regiment. In their honorable positions in the military, public service, and fatherhood, Ann's boys remained united in their dedication to state and family.<sup>27</sup>

The Parker family was not the only family in the South unified by military pursuits and honor in warfare. The unity that Southern families enjoyed in their desire to defend America's freedom is also shown in John W. Carroll's *Autobiography*. A careful examination of Carroll's writings would suggest that unity in war was one mode of patriotism that was consistent in Southern culture, regardless of class. John's upbringing was less than luxurious, especially when compared to the elite Parker family. Nevertheless, both families joined in recollecting the stories told of their forebears involved in war. In relating his grandfather's involvement in the War of 1812, John spoke of how "these recitals fired my youthful heart with a burning patriotism and how I wished to wear a uniform; to hear strains of martial music and the roar of cannon; and see glorious war." John would see how glorious war truly was as the Civil War broke out when he was nineteen years old, "full of patriotism and hope of success [and] anxious to take part in the struggle." The longest chapter in John's entire *Autobiography* is dedicated to his Civil War experience, and is replete with pride in fighting for the Southern cause, despite their eventual loss. John inherited his wartime patriotism from his ancestors, as far back as his paternal great grandfather who fought alongside his own brothers in the American Revolution. In the second war for independence, John's maternal uncle, Samuel Burns, was sent to New Orleans in charge of a volunteer battalion to aid General Andrew Jackson. He was sent home, "owing to the great number of men offering their service." The fact that "many were turned away sadly

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<sup>27</sup> "Col. Josiah Parker Family Cemetery, Isle of Wight, Virginia," *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Section 7, pages 2-5, Virginia Department of Historic Resources, [http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/IsleofWight/NR\\_IsleofWight\\_ParkerCemetery.pdf](http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/IsleofWight/NR_IsleofWight_ParkerCemetery.pdf) (accessed April 13, 2009).

disappointed” shows how Southerners heeded the call to battle above expectations. They understood, however, that such sacrifices were required within a union of interests.<sup>28</sup>

The expectations of union are complex and differ depending on its size and the parties involved. Nevertheless, in order for individuals to unite, whether in political alliances or at the marriage altar, choices must be made in regard to sovereignty and subjection. The goal of America’s Founding Fathers was to create “a more perfect union,” at least one better than that which existed under the Articles of Confederation. Within a century, the American Union was separated and faced with the bloodiest conflict in its existence. If the modern nation is to learn from the past, we must understand the complexities of union and the ways in which unions have faced crises. This can be done on the political level by analyzing state constitutions, but even the most profound lessons can be learned from the smallest of unions. If, as John Demos suggests, “the family usually wears an aspect of similarity across a broad reach of geographical space within a single culture,” then the lessons learned of a single family in crisis should be applicable to multiple families and a variety of unions.<sup>29</sup> In addition to providing a glimpse into family life in the Antebellum South, Ann’s story also provides lessons for contemporary America. Her life and trials in marriage are, in many cases, not new to modern relationships. Ann’s account provides an exceptional example of the threats posed to any union, including marital and political, that does not seek to balance sovereignty and subjection. If modern Americans are to learn from history, they must create an historical union; one that allows the sovereignty of the present to be subjected to the lessons of the past.

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<sup>28</sup> John W. Carroll, *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, pages 4 & 20, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Documenting the American South*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/carroll/carroll.html> (accessed March 1, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), xiii.

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