“Writing Is Fighting, Too”: The World War II Correspondence of Southern Women

By Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith

Good mail is essential to the morale of our fighting men. Uncle Sam can provide our men with good food, clothing, shelter, and the ammunition with which to fight, but Uncle Sam can’t provide them with good mail. This is our job—YOURs and MINE!

Listen, that lad whose letter never comes is stirring again. Don’t let him down. . . . You owe it to your country, to that boy—yes, and to yourself. Sit down today and WRITE ’EM A LETTER.

These stirring words formed the conclusion of a senior English theme written by Anna Rahnis, a member of the class of 1943, at Kenwood High School in Essex, Maryland.¹ Her sentiments were shared by millions of Americans during the Second World War. Mail was universally recognized as the number one morale builder in the service person’s life. One widely-distributed government poster of World War II boldly proclaimed: “Mail from home is more than a fighting man’s privilege. It is a military necessity, for there probably is no factor so vital to the morale of a fighting man as frequent letters from home.”² During the entire period of American involvement in the war, the number of pieces of mail handled annually by the post office rose from almost 28 billion in 1940 to nearly 38 billion in 1945.³

¹Personal correspondence of Anna Rahnis Mathis to the authors, February 17, 1989. After writing this theme, Anna Rahnis delivered it as a speech to the entire student body of Kenwood High School. Her speech roused the students to begin the custom of writing letters to all Kenwood High alumni in the service.

²This quotation is taken from a government poster which also urged wartime letter writers to “Be with him at every mail call” (authors’ collection).

³For an examination of the relationship between mail and morale during World War II, see Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, “Will He Get My Letter?”: Popular

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Women on the home front were frequently reminded that "Writing Is Fighting, too." Southern women, like their counterparts throughout the United States, responded with enthusiasm and ingenuity to the nationwide call to write letters. They organized letter writing campaigns for school children, churches, and businesses; wrote feature columns in the form of letters to soldiers for local newspapers; single-handedly wrote hundreds of letters to lonely servicemen; and composed an untold number of letters of love and longing for sweethearts, husbands, brothers, and sons stationed far from home.

Schoolteachers were, typically, prolific letter writers. Rusha Wesley, principal of the Lee Street Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia, located the names and addresses of more than three hundred graduates of the school who served in the military during World War II. She and her students sent hundreds of handmade cards and letters to Lee Street graduates in uniform.5

One of the most significant newspaper letter columns for men and women in the service was written by Mrs. Keith Frazier Somerville of Cleveland, Mississippi. She wrote a bi-monthly "Dear Boys" column for the Bolivar Commercial from January 1943 until the war's end in August 1945. Through the letters of her column, she offered "the boys from Cleveland and vicinity who are all over the world an opportunity to keep up with happenings" in the Mississippi Delta, while she also helped to prepare her readers for the changes which would take place in the postwar world.6

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Portrayals of Mail and Morale during World War II," Journal of Popular Culture (Spring 1990): 21-45. Annual Reports of the Postmaster General, 1941-1946, provide valuable statistical information on the importance of the mail during the war.

4 This phrase appeared in a number of Zenith pen advertisements. For example, see Life, December 13, 1943, p. 6.

5 Information on the letter writing activities of the Lee Street School is located in the Lee Street School Papers, Atlanta Historical Society, Atlanta, Georgia.

Though primarily a promotion for war bonds, this poster also suggested the importance of mail in maintaining morale both at home and abroad. Photograph courtesy of Judy Barrett Litoff.

From Dallas, Texas to Wilmington, Delaware, southern women took it upon themselves to write “miles of sentences” to individuals stationed far from home. Dorothy Heath, an eighteen-year-old war worker at the Magnolia Petroleum Company in Dallas, wrote to hundreds of sailors and soldiers around the world after her “girl next door pin-up” photograph appeared in the December 8, 1944 issue of the Dallas Morning News.7

7The “girl next door pin-up” photograph appears in Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home
Mollye Sklut, a secretary at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association in Wilmington, Delaware wrote approximately seventy-five letters each week to Y.M. and Y.W.H.A. members who were in the service.8

The letters of Anna Rahnis, Rusha Wesley, Keith Frazier Somerville, Dorothy Heath, and Mollye Sklut represent 5 of 221 letter collections written by southern women during the Second World War.9 This correspondence forms a part of our larger archive of letters, "The World War II Letters Of American Women." Until recently, it was widely assumed that few of the billions of letters which women wrote had survived the vicissitudes of the war and the postwar years.10 Our archive provides an important missing piece to the World War II puzzle, offering scholars the first significant opportunity to incorporate the wartime voices of American women into their accounts of the period.11


8The Mollye Sklut Papers are located at the Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, Delaware.

9For this article, we have used the "census South" (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia) plus Missouri as our geographical definition of the South. For a brief discussion of the various definitions of "the South," see Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, eds., Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (Chapel Hill, 1989). All letter collections cited in this article are part of our archive, The World War II Letters of American Women.

10Men and women in combat zones were under orders not to keep personal items, such as letters and diaries, because of a concern that this material might fall into the hands of the enemy.

11Except for an occasional work which uses the letters of women in uniform, there have been very few efforts to locate and utilize the World War II letters of American women. Two contemporary studies which draw upon the letters of service women are Alma Lutz, ed., With Love, Jane: Letters from American Women on the War Fronts (New York, 1945) and Auxiliary Elizabeth R. Pollack, Yes Ma'am, The Personal Papers of a WAAC Private (Philadelphia, 1943). Recent publications using letters written by service women include Anne Bosanko Green, One Woman's War: Letters Home from the Women's Army Corps, 1944-1946 (St. Paul, Minn., 1989); Blanche Green, Growing Up in the WAC: Letters to My Sister, 1944-46 (New York, 1987); and June Wandrey, Bedpan Commando: The Story of A Combat Nurse During World War II (Elmore, Ohio, 1989).

Other than our own publications, the only recent book-length work to include letters from American women during World War II is Robert Easton and Jane Easton, Love and War: Pearl Harbor Through V-J Day (Norman, Okla., 1991). By contrast, several important books, based largely on public records, focusing on American women and World War II have been published during the last fifteen years. They include: Leila J. Rupp, Mobilizing Women For War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945 (Prince-
We became interested in the wartime letters of American women during the mid-1980s as we were preparing a book, *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor* (1990), which was based on thousands of pages of correspondence written by a young Georgia couple caught up in the events of the war. We found the letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor to be extremely powerful documents, chronicling a grand story of romance, making do, learning to cope with life, and "growing up" during that turbulent era.

The strength of Barbara Taylor's letters convinced us of the importance of locating other wartime letter collections written by American women. In the spring of 1988, we submitted a brief authors' query to all 1,500 daily newspapers in the United States and to 400 popular and professional publications. Subsequently, we sent letters of inquiry to every state historical society and state archive as well as to many other important archives throughout the United States. In total, we sent out 2,500 inquiries.

We have heard from six hundred individuals from all fifty states and have collected approximately 25,000 letters written by American women during World War II. The letter writers range in age from six to ninety-six and represent a geographic and socioeconomic cross-section of American life. Secretaries, clerks, teachers, librarians, factory workers, tenant farmers, ranch owners, migratory workers, women in uniform, housewives, and volunteer war workers all wrote letters which have been donated to us. Most of this correspondence was posted to enlisted personnel or junior grade officers. In short, the letters...
Virginia Kitchens, Charles Taylor, and Barbara Wooddall were photographed at the Rainbow Roof in Atlanta in December 1941. Charles and Barbara married the following spring, but were separated for most of the war's duration. Their correspondence makes up an unusually rich chronicle of those years at home and on the European front. Photograph courtesy of Barbara Wooddall Taylor, Gainesville, Florida.

were written by "ordinary" Americans to other "ordinary" Americans.12

Among the 25,000 letters we have collected are 3,451 letters written by 221 southern white women. Unfortunately, we have not yet located any letters written by African-American women from the South. Our efforts to locate such letters have included

12We are preparing a seventy-reel microfilm edition, The World War II Letters of American Women, to be published by Scholarly Resources, Inc. We have designed a database application, written in FoxPro, which will eventually enable us to present detailed statistical analyses of the geographical and socio-economic backgrounds of the letter writers as well as information about a number of other topical categories. A Researchers Edition of the FoxPro database application will accompany the seventy-reel microfilm edition. For additional information on the database application, see Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, "Understanding the Home Front: The World War II Letters of American Women," paper presented at Organization of American Historians meeting, Louisville, Ky., April 1991. For a selection of the letters written by American women on the homefront, see Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, and We're In This War Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform (forthcoming, Oxford University Press).
special appeals to more than 500 African-American organizations, institutions, churches, and publications. Deborah Gray White has commented on the difficulties which scholars often encounter when seeking out the personal papers of black women. She notes that black women have "been reluctant to donate their papers to manuscript repositories" because of their "perennial" and "justifiable" concern with image and because "they have grown used to being undervalued and invisible."13

It is virtually impossible to determine whether the 3,451 letters collected are representative of the millions penned by southern white women during World War II. Yet based on what Linda Gordon has described as the "methodological principle of saturation," we can be reasonably certain that we have tracked down a substantial sampling of the various types of letters written by this particular group.14

We had expected the mark of the censor to be prominent in many of the letters. In actuality, there is almost no evidence of official censorship. Because of the important role that mail played in building morale, we had also anticipated that many of the letters would have an artificial, upbeat quality to them.15 Yet women throughout the United States did not hesitate to break through this taboo and discuss their fears and frustrations as well as the often harsh realities of life on the homefront.

Pat Aiken, living in Greenbelt, Maryland and working at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., did not spare her Army Air Corps husband's feelings when she told him: "I've about reached my low point, so according to the Dorothy Dix's, I shouldn't be writing to you and lowering your morale—but as I always say, what the hell's a husband for?"16 Lillian Kirkman of Dalton,

15The popular press published dozens of articles cautioning wives, mothers, sweethearts, and friends of servicemen to be judicious in the bad news they conveyed. For example, see Frances Fenwick Hills, "Letters from Home," Good Housekeeping (June 1942), 69. This article includes a discussion of the "do's" and "don'ts" of writing a good wartime letter.
16Patricia Aiken to Al Aiken, April 24, 1943. A selection of the letters of Patricia Aiken is included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 240-41.
Georgia also underscored the importance of writing frank and honest letters. Shortly after her husband was drafted, she wrote to him and said, "You didn't say how you were feeling. I'll let you know here and now I am expecting 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' I'll try and let you have it now as best as I can tell it. It didn't take me very long to pull myself together after you left and I just went about doing as usual." 17

The wartime letters of southern women provide clear evidence of the myriad ways in which they actively engaged in the war effort. Commentary about rationing, war bond rallies, salvaging, blood drives, civil defense, victory gardens, surgical dressing clubs, and many other volunteer war activities supported by women can be found in the letters. 18

Among the hundreds of missives that women wrote to General Douglas MacArthur, several pinpoint a few of the special ways in which southern women contributed to the winning of the war. 19 On November 20, 1944, ten-year-old Carolyn Pursley of College Park, Georgia wrote a compassionate letter to General MacArthur in which she described her contributions to the war effort:

Dear Sir:
I am a girl 10 years old. Am in the 5th grade. I have been reading of your good fight to regain the Phillipine Islands, and of the mean way the Japs have treated the people since the fall of Bataan.

17 Lillian Kirkman to E. L. Kirkman, August 22, 1943.
18 Servicepeople were well aware of the importance of volunteer work of this type. As an example, while serving with the Red Cross in North Africa, Dorothy Shands of Cleveland, Mississippi wrote a letter to the local Red Cross chapter in Cleveland and said: "I trust that you are having larger crowds at the [Surgical Dressings] Club. The dressings serve two purposes: more and more of the materials are needed here and when the soldier knows that the people at home are devoting their time and energy, he is reassured that America is worth fighting for." This letter was reprinted on the front page of the February 18, 1944 issue of the Bolivar Commercial.
19 Upon his arrival in Australia in March 1942, General Douglas MacArthur established a unit in his headquarters which was directed to devise replies to the many letters which were sent to him by persons concerned about the welfare of the troops in the Western Pacific. These letters are located in the MacArthur Memorial Archives and Library, Norfolk, Virginia, Record Group 3: Southwest Pacific Area, Commander-in-Chief Correspondence. Included in Record Group 3 are 125 letters written by southern women.
I am sending you some money to buy food for them. The papers say they are eating potato leaves.

Thanksgiving is next Thursday. We children in America have a lot to be thankful for, and most of all for men like you and other men in service. Jesus (who saved me) will bring you back to us after you have defeated the Japs.

I bought two bonds since last Christmas. I made money doing odd jobs for Mother and raising baby chicks, selling them after they became friars.

I am sending you my tithe and Christmas money and Dady has given his tithe of Nov. and some friends gave me some. Use it anyway to help the Philippine people. And may God bless you.

Yours in Christ
Carolyn Pursley

In a November 22, 1943 letter to General MacArthur, Mrs. C. L. McWilliams, Supervisor of Women for Vocational Training for War Production Workers, at the Jacksonville, Florida Vocational School, expressed her pride in the accomplishments of "my girls, women from 17 to 60." She assured General MacArthur that "as far as American womanhood, represented in these girls, is concerned, you and your men not only have their love, their prayers and their tears, but also all of the materiel with which they can provide you through sweat, and grease and grime and the strength of their minds, bodies and spirits."  

Mrs. J. T. Leggett of Hattiesburg, Mississippi wrote a series of letters to General MacArthur in which she reported on her rather unusual venture in support of the war. She began her efforts in March 1944, when she sent small bags of "good old U.S. earth" from her "victory garden" to her son in the 7th Army Air Corps to drop over the Marshall Islands. Her project grew to include bags with soil from the capitol grounds of the forty-eight states. She sent these bags to General MacArthur and other high-ranking military figures to be placed at the foot of the flagpoles to be erected on the liberated islands. Midway through her venture, she wrote the following letter to General MacArthur:

\[20/ibid.\]
\[21/ibid.\]
September 26, 1944

Dear General MacArthur:

In February I sent to Admiral Nimitz several bags of "U.S." earth. I asked that the small bags, "For This We Fight" bags, be placed under the flag poles of the conquered islands and the large "For This We Fight" bag, be placed on the foundation of the Government building in these islands....

I am sending several of the small bags to you to place under the flag poles wherever you like. The larger ones to be placed where you want them. I am sending two extra pretty ones. They are for Corregidor. I hope to be able to send enough of these bags to go on every island....

With all best wishes, I am
Very Sincerely, Mrs. J. T. Leggett

One of the most preeminent themes to emerge from the wartime correspondence of southern women (and, indeed, from the correspondence by women from all sections of the United States) is the new sense of self experienced by many of the letter writers. Whether the writer was a dying stepmother urging her stepson to remain at his duty station or a young war bride forced to "grow up" very quickly, the exigencies of war necessitated that women develop a new sense of who they were and of their capabilities.

Mary Ida Moore Little, a widowed textile worker from Hancock, Maryland, was suffering from an incurable kidney disease when she wrote to her stepson in Greenland and urged him not to "worry so about me. I am o.k. I don't want you to get your discharge on my account." In her last letter to her stepson, written on November 21, 1941, she closed her letter with the comment: "Now don't you worry about me or risk your life to come home. Be a good boy, Bob." Two weeks later, on December 8, 1941, Little died.

Young war brides throughout the South frequently wrote of how they were becoming more self-reliant individuals as they

\[22\]Ibid.
\[23\]Mary Ida Moore Little to Robert Little, October 23, 1941, November 21, 1941. A selection of letters by Mary Ida Moore Little is included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away. In a July 25, 1988 letter to the authors, Robert Little wrote that his stepmother "always asked me to be a good boy. She gave her faith to me.... I thank her for this great gift."
traveled alone to distant places to be with their husbands, learned how to live on meager allotment checks, coped with raising young children alone, and grappled with worry, loneliness, and despair. Early in 1945, Frances Zulauf of Nevada, Missouri wrote to her Army Air Corps husband and discussed how the events of the war had contributed to her growing sense of self:

Personally, I think there's no doubt that this sacrifice we're making will force us to be bigger, more tolerant, better citizens than we would have been otherwise. If it hadn't been for all this upset in my life, I would still be a rattle brained . . . spoiled "little" girl in college, having dates and playing most of my way thru school. . . . I'm learning—in this pause in my life—just what I want for happiness later on—so much different than what I wanted two years ago.24

Frances Zulauf's assessment of how the war had made her a more self-confident individual was shared by Barbara Wooddall Taylor, then a twenty-two-year-old war bride from Fairburn, Georgia. In a letter written in July 1945, Taylor assured her husband that:

when you come home, I can take over my duties as a wife and handle the job considerably better than I did before. . . . I can make starch—and haven't failed yet getting the correct amount in Prissy's [the nickname for their two-year-old daughter] clothes. And I'm not a good cook (by a long shot), but I feel like I can cook a digestible meal now. I made biscuits Sunday a.m. and they weren't bad at all. Really, I'm looking forward to your return—and our settling down—and really keeping house right.25

The mobilization of the American economy for war created an unprecedented demand for new workers. In response to this need some 6.5 million women entered the work force. At

the national level, the proportion of working women rose from 25 percent at the beginning of the war to 36 percent at the war's end. As the war continued, an increasing number of married women with children entered the work force. Because of the critical shortage of day care centers, working mothers faced enormous pressures as they endeavored to reconcile the demands of a war job with the responsibilities of motherhood. In addition, they often sought jobs on the swing shift because it offered them more opportunities to be with their children.26

Southern women worked in shipyards, aircraft plants, chemical industries, and other assembly lines.27 In letters to loved ones, they expressed pride in their jobs and often commented, with enthusiasm, about the new sense of responsibility and independence they were achieving.

Polly Crow, a young mother living with her parents in Louisville, Kentucky for the duration of the war, explained in a June 1944 letter to her army husband why she wanted a war job. She also highlighted the advantages of swing shifts for working mothers:

I'm thinking seriously of going to work in some defense plant . . . on the swing shift so I can be at home during the day with Bill [their young son] as he needs me. . . . Of course, I'd much rather have an office job but I couldn't be with Bill whereas I could if I worked at nite which I have decided is the best plan as I can't save anything by not working and I want to have something for us when you get home.28

After securing a job at Jefferson Boat and Machine Company in nearby Anderson, Indiana, Polly Crow proudly proclaimed: "You are now the husband of a career woman—just call me your little Ship Yard Babe!" She described the "grand and glorious feeling" of opening her own checking account, gas rationing and automobile maintenance, the many "wolves" on the swing

26For additional information on women and war work, see Hartmann, The Home Front and Beyond, chapter 5, "Women's Work and the Female Labor Force," 77-100 and Campbell, Women at War with America, chapter 4, "Making Way for Rosie," 101-38.
27For an excellent discussion of women war workers in the shipyards and defense industries of Alabama, see Thomas, Riveting and Rationing in Dixie, especially pp. 36-80.
28Polly Crow to William Crow, June 8, 1944. A selection of the letters of Polly Crow is included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 146-52.
shift, and what it was like to join a union. Late in 1944, upon learning that the work of building Landing Ship Tanks at the shipyard would be completed within the next few months, she wrote a letter in which she bemoaned the fact that "my greatly enjoyed working career will come to an end."29

Letters written by women who donned military uniforms during War II contain vivid descriptions of the ways in which wartime experiences afforded them a new appreciation of their abilities. After joining the American Red Cross, Rita Pilkey of Dallas, Texas was sent to China where she was given the responsibility of establishing Red Cross facilities in Yunan Province, near Chungking. Pilkey penned long letters to her parents which were filled with descriptions of Chinese life, her meetings with Chinese dignitaries, such as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and information about her Red Cross work.

In March 1944, shortly after her arrival in China, Pilkey wrote about learning to fire guns in small arms class because, as she noted in another letter, "when you drive any place away from the base you are on, you always take a gun because of the bandits." In November 1944, after being selected to set up the first tent facility at a new base, she told her parents that "I like it here, but I feel honored to be chosen to go there because it is supposed to be the hardest place here." She wrote that with "hard work we were able to open two of our tents for an Open House on Christmas. . . . It was a big success and the boys all seemed to appreciate all our efforts so much that we decided to keep those two tents open while we continued to work on the rest of the club." The grand opening of the Canvas Cover Club occurred in January 1945, and Pilkey reported that the Red Cross doughnuts are "the talk of the base" and "our tents are so small and there are so many men that the sides literally bulge."30

Following her enlistment in the Women's Army Corps in the spring of 1944, Virginia Towle of Louisville, Kentucky wrote enthusiastic letters to her father about her WAC experiences.

29Polly Crow to William Crow, June 12, 17, November 6, 9, and December 5, 1944.
30Rita Pilkey to her parents, March 8, 1944; July 4, 1945; November 1944; May 1945, Rita Pilkey Papers, Blagg-Huey Library, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.
While stationed at the army recruitment center in Seattle, Washington, she spent a weekend visiting with friends who worked in Hanford, Washington, a top-secret location where heavy water was produced for use in the atomic bomb. On March 5, 1944, she informed her father that “the whole place is teeming with activity and they seem to be working at fever heat. No one talks about what it is and it is very bad form even to ask.” In fall 1945, awaiting orders to go to officer candidate school at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, Virginia expressed her newfound independence with a few choice words about some of the military personnel under whom she served: “I just live from day to day and take it as it comes, and that’s about all you can do. In the meantime, all leaves, furloughs and even three day passes are frozen., i.e., we can’t get them. It’s our new C.O. who is a brass hat, stuffed shirt and a general so and so who is bucking for something for himself, but not getting very far with his own outfit. But even he may not last—we’ve seen them come and go.”

Marion Stegeman of Athens, Georgia was one of approximately a thousand women who received the silver wings of the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Her vivacious letters to her mother and her fiancé, dated from many cities as she ferried aircraft throughout the United States, recount her joy in flying. In an April 24, 1943 letter to her mother, she wrote:

> The gods must envy me! This is just too, too, to be true! (By now you realize I had a good day as regards flying. Nothing is such a gauge to the spirits as how well or how poorly one has flown.) ... I’m far too happy. The law of compensation must be waiting to catch up with me somewhere. Oh, God, how I love it! Honestly, Mother, you haven’t lived until you get way up there—all alone—just you and that big beautiful plane humming under your control.

Coping with the tragedies of war further contributed to women’s growing sense of self. The news that loved ones were prisoners of war, missing in action, or killed in the line of battle

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31Virgina Towle to Ralph S. Towle, March 5, and October 14, 1944, Virginia Towle Papers, Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky.
32Marion Stegeman to Mrs. H. J. Stegeman, April 24, 1943.
Marion Stegeman of Athens, Georgia served with the Women Airforce Service Pilots who ferried aircraft throughout the United States. Her letters home, like those of other service women, reflected her enthusiasm for the new opportunities the war made available to women. Photo courtesy of Marion Stegeman Hodgson, Ft. Worth, Texas.

required women to draw upon an inner strength that many did not know they had. Christine Cockerham’s Army Air Corps son was taken prisoner of war by the Japanese in April 1942, and was not heard from again until the fall of 1945. The relief and joy which she felt upon learning that her son had survived the war years were expressed in a letter written to him on October 1, 1945:

Just received your letter and you don’t know how happy we were, for you see it has been 4 years next month since I had
your letter telling me you had arrived in Manila. . . . Mother is so excited and nervous I can't think of anything to write . . . Everybody is well and so happy about our hearing from you . . . The whole town was like wild fire—the phone rang all the time to see if it was true.35

At the war's end, Kay McKemy wrote a letter to her future husband describing how she and her Delta Gamma sorority sisters at the University of Missouri in Columbia had relied upon a newly discovered maturity when tragedy struck: "Mrs. Black [the housemother] thinks we all seem so mature. Why shouldn't we? Franny's Richard and June Digby's twin brother were killed. Meyer's fiance spent six months in a German prison camp. The rest of us have been worried sick and hopelessly lonesome for years. It's a wonder we aren't old women."34

In their correspondence, southern women frequently expressed their support of the ideals for which the Second World War was fought. In March 1942, Mrs. J. L. Bass of New Middleton, Tennessee wrote to her son, an aviation cadet in Moultrie, Georgia, and remarked: "The events of the present are something that we in America did not want, but we have no other choice than to try to make a better world than exists today."35 Letter writers referred to reading newspapers and magazines, listening to the news on the radio, and hearing radio commentators debate politics and strategy. In addition, they wrote that they hung maps on the walls of their homes in order to remain close to world affairs. Indeed, they thought deeply about the meaning of the struggle in which they were involved.

As the war drew to a close in the late summer of 1945, the question of the larger meaning of the conflict weighed on the minds of many of the letter writers. A perceptive analysis was provided in a letter dated August 18, 1945, which Constance Hope Jones of Kirkwood, Missouri wrote to her fiance:

I guess our family has been lucky in that both of our "warriors" are safe and sound. There are thousands of families not so

35Christine Cockerham to George Cockerham, October 1, 1945, in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 257-58.
34Kay McReynolds to Jim McKemy, November 8, 1945. A selection of the letters of Kay McReynolds is included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 47-52.
30Mrs. J. L. Bass to Bernie Bass, March 18, 1942.
lucky. . . . Now, I suppose President Truman and Congress really have a big job of getting things and people adjusted to peace time ways of hiring and doing! Perhaps the biggest job is yet ahead. Over the radio yesterday . . . I heard the starting of another war! All about how the U.S. was developing new and secret weapons and how we should keep our secrets from the Russians! . . . Talk like that is a betrayal of those who died or were wounded in this war and of those who are working to make it possible for nations to live in peace with each other.  

The wartime letters of southern women also offer meaningful commentary on the great social and economic changes that occurred throughout the South during those years. More than three million people left the rural South in search of new opportunities. Populations of shipyard towns along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts as well as other southern defense centers dramatically increased. The vanishing rural and small town South so vividly captured in the photographs of Walker Evans and Eudora Welty emerges in many of the letters written by southern women.

When writing to her son in the navy, Margaret Barrow of West Point, Georgia was particularly skillful at evoking small-town southern life of the 1930s and early 1940s. In a Christmas letter written in December 1943, she reported on a trip to nearby Long Cave where she had “a most delightful day. . . . There was a lovely dinner (basket lunch) at the Long Cave Methodist Church . . . baked chicken, fried chicken, country ham, dressing, salads, cakes, everything else you could think of and want. Pretty tree and gifts for everyone. Can you imagine it, I got a large box of roasted pecans . . . wish you had them. You should see what I brought home, backbone and spare ribs, sausage, liver pudding, butter and turnip salad (doesn’t that sound natural?).”

36 Constance Hope Jones to Donald C. Swartzbaugh, August 18, 1945. This letter is included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 279-80.
37 For a recent discussion of the major social and economic changes to take place in the South during the war years, see Pete Daniel, “Going among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II,” Journal of American History 77 (December 1990): 886-916.
38 For two contemporary accounts of life in southern war towns, see Agnes E. Meyer, Journey Through Chaos (New York, 1943) and John Dos Passos, State of the Nation (Boston, 1944).
39 Margaret Barrow to Joseph Barrow, December 20, 1943. This and other letters are included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 190-94.
With the South's declining rural population, farmers were required to seek new sources of agricultural labor. Foreign laborers and prisoners of war were used to harvest crops. In addition, women and children were encouraged to take part in farm work. The crucial role played by American women in the planting and harvesting of the nation's wartime crops is evidenced by the fact that, at the national level, the proportion of women engaged in agriculture increased from 8 percent in 1940 to 22.4 percent in 1945.

After traveling by train across Arkansas, Mabel Opal Miller wrote a letter to her Army Air Corps boyfriend describing the special contributions southern farm women were making to the war effort: "I noticed on the farms, mostly the little ones with just a shack for a home, there seems to be no one but the women left to do the work. You see them out taking care of cattle, etc. It makes one proud to see how the women have picked up where the men left off and are keeping the home fires burning."

The South was further changed by the experiences of millions of southerners who, in the words of one letter, were "scattered all over the world." Women and men in the military traveled to far-flung fronts, and the Census Bureau estimated that 15 million civilians moved within the United States during the war. People hurried to job openings in shipyards and war plants, and families sought out the precious times they could steal together.

A 1944 feature story in the New York Times Magazine aptly described the millions of war brides who crisscrossed the continent as they followed their husbands to distant postings as "wan-

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42 Mabel Opal Miller to Ivan Johnson, September 6, 1944. A selection of the Miller letters is included in Litoff and Smith, Since You Went Away, 208-12.

43 "Dear Boys," Bolivar Commercial, January 7, 1944.
dering members of a huge unorganized club." In a letter written to her husband from the St. Louis train station, a young Missouri bride poignantly described her travel "adventures":

It's 1:25 a.m. and here I sit, practically alone, waiting for the 8:00 a.m. train. My train from Cincinnati was an hour late, making me miss my train home by about ten minutes. . . . Another girl missed the train, too, and we had a gay time walking around Cincinnati. . . . All my life I've wanted something interesting like this to happen to me, and it has. . . . While this girl and I were in Cincinnati, we went through an eighty year old Presbyterian Church that looked a lot like the church in "Goin' My Way" with Bing Crosby. This girl was married, too, and was silly, too, so we really had a picnic laughing over our common misfortunes of missing the train. We got to see the town, and, had a lot of fun on the train coming from there to here. . . . This is really a trip for the books.

Another war wife, Lilian Selinkoff of Wilmington, Delaware, even followed her army husband to his assignment in the Canal Zone. Her letters to friends in Wilmington included a report of her attendance at a Jewish wedding where the marriage canopy was made of palms and lilies. She also wrote about making borscht from canned spinach and beets and preparing gefilte fish from local fish, such as corbina, ocean perch, and snook. As she said in one letter, "We even serve it to goyim when they come to dinner."

Just as large numbers of southerners were exposed to new locales, millions of "outsiders" were stationed at southern military installations where they experienced their first direct contact with the South. One of these "outsiders," Private Katherine Trickey of Lewiston, Maine, was stationed at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. In letters to her mother, she often commented on her experiences as a northerner living in the South. On March 6, 1944, she wrote:

*Frances Zulauf to Robert Zulauf, July 29, 1944.
You have heard, undoubtedly, of Georgia as the Peach State. Yesterday, I found out why. Six of us hired a car and drove to Fort Valley to see the peach blossoms. It was the Sunday when they were in full bloom and we had been told it was a sight worth seeing. There are acres of trees. The pink blossoms against a background of a heavenly blue sky was a sight I shall never forget.47

Although Katherine Trickey was enchanted by the Fort Valley peach blossoms, native southerners were not necessarily enchanted by the presence of so many "outsiders" living in their midst. Writing from rural Tennessee, a mother told her son that "today has been pretty terrible here. 40,000 soldiers over the weekend in the little community with about that many moving out on Friday and you can imagine how it has been." She continued by saying that some of the "boys" were "really catching it and so I have tried to do what little I could for them. Some of them only have 2 more weeks here and then they know not, what next."48 On a more rueful note, however, a young Tampa, Florida woman wrote to an army friend stationed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and commented: "Oh, yes—know what they're saying, 'It will take five years to win the war—one year to beat the Japs—one year to beat the Germans, and three years to get these damn Yankees out of the South.' "49

The events of the Second World War also set the stage for immense changes in race relations and the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. For example, in May 1945, Edith Hicks wrote to her Army Air Corps husband about lunch counter desegregation sit-ins at a St. Louis department store and remarked, "I guess there'll be plenty of trouble in St. Louis—and a lot of places, after the war."50

The "Dear Boys" letter columns of Keith Frazier Somerville are redolent with this sense of impending change in southern race relations. In her column of September 8, 1944, she told

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47Katherine Trickey to Mrs. Harold A. M. Trickey, March 6, 1944.
49Alice Don to Eustasio Fernandez, March 22, 1944.
50Edith Hicks to Roger Hicks, May 6, 1945. For additional information on the wartime lunch counter sit-ins in St. Louis, see Betty Burnett, St. Louis at War: The Story of a City, 1941-1945 (St. Louis, 1987), 114-17.
the story of Annie Tutwiler, a black six-star mother from Merigold, Mississippi whose children were showing "the world that all races, creeds, and colors in America are in there fighting for that victory which today seems almost in sight." She made several visits to the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi in order to obtain firsthand accounts of how African-Americans were aiding the war effort and being affected by the war. In fact, Keith Somerville's most extraordinary comments about race relations came after an April 1943 visit when she told her readers:

In Mound Bayou, I found America dreaming again. Dreaming of the day her sons will come marching home; dreaming of better housing and hospitalization; dreaming of the day when education will really "educate." . . . Dreaming too, of absolute fairness . . . when our boys of all races, creeds, and color come home again to peaceful years, [and] we may all work together to make our dreams come true.51

The wartime letters of southern women, as well as those written by women from other regions of the United States, enable us to see how both the large and small events of the Second World War were played out in the lives of ordinary women; they also provide us with a clearer understanding of how women helped shape the events of the war. History comes alive in these letters as we learn of women's awe, pain, capabilities, and great sense of their role in the world. Letters written by school girls to General Douglas MacArthur, young war brides following their husbands to distant postings, war wives working on the swing swift, Red Cross workers directing tent clubs in China, WASP pilots experiencing the excitement of flying military aircraft across the continent, and mothers coping with the tragedies of war demonstrate that the events of World War II had an enormous and far-reaching effect upon the lives of these women, and transformed the way they thought about themselves. Southern women's lives were dramatically changed by the experience of war and these changes were not

51Bolivar Commercial, April 23, 1943. This and the September 8, 1944 column are reprinted in Litoff and Smith, Dear Boys.
forgotten. Rather, they effected significant consequences for the postwar South—and for the nation.52

52Ancillary materials about the letter writers which we have assembled, including biographical information, diaries and memoirs, scrapbooks, informal oral interviews, and comments from the letter writers, their husbands, and their children provide additional support for this conclusion. After conducting oral histories with two hundred California war workers, Sherna Gluck found that "the unintended effect of their wartime work experience was a transformation in their conception of themselves as women. This change was not translated into a direct challenge of the status quo. At the time, it was probably not even recognized by most of the women, but it did affect their status in their own eyes—and in their homes" (Gluck, Rosie the Riveter Revisited, 265). Gluck also argues that "the potential for social transformation was created by the wartime demand for women workers . . . the reverberations of which are still being felt today (p. 270). On this subject, also see Kesselman, Fleeting Opportunities, 1-11.