

The Diarist's Identity: Mary Chesnut and her Civil War Diary

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can understanding your identity help you to promote freedom?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about how Mary Chesnut’s identity drove her to write a diary during the Civil War. They will also learn about how to use their own identity to achieve success in their lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze the identity of Mary Chesnut.
 - Students will understand the significance of their own identity.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of their identity to help them promote freedom.
- **Background**
 - Mary Chesnut was born to an elite South Carolina family in 1823. Her father served as a United States Representative, Senator, and governor of his home state. At seventeen, Mary married James Chesnut, Jr. and the couple lived on his parent’s plantation. James served as a U.S. Senator before becoming the Chief of the Department of the Military of South Carolina and brigadier general in the Confederate army during the Civil War.

Mary was a major part of Confederate society throughout the South, and she understood the importance of the secession crisis, slavery, and war. She decided to record her experiences and thoughts in a diary throughout the war that focused on the political and social issues surrounding the war. She did not shy away from contentious matters such as class, slavery, and the power of white men.

After the war, Mary began to edit and revise her entries and notes in order to ready the diary for publication. After her death in 1886, a friend worked to have the diary published. An abridged version was released in 1905 with more extensive editions released in 1949 and 1982. The 1982 edition, compiled by historian C. Vann Howard, won the Pulitzer Prize in history.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Plantation
 - Confederate
 - Secession
 - Contentious
 - Abridged
 - Extensive
 - Pulitzer Prize
 - Revolved
 - Rhetoric
 - Elite
 - Summoned
 - Enslavement
 - Secede
 - Enslavement
 - Monumental
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Mary Chesnut?
 - What was Mary's purpose?
 - What actions did Mary take during her life that were significant?
 - Imagine you are Mary Chesnut. What might drive you to write a diary about your experiences?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - "Mary Chesnut, Diarist." Civil War Trust. Web. 27 June 2015.
<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/biographies/mary-chesnut.html>
 - MacLean, Maggie. "Civil War Women: Mary Boykin Chesnut." July 31, 2010.
www.civilwarwomenblog.com/mary-boykin-chesnut

Handout A: The Diarist's Identity: Mary Chesnut and her Civil War Diary

Background

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Narrative

South Carolina's social circles revolved around the slaveholding landowners in Charleston and Columbia. Born as Mary Miller, she grew up surrounded by this society. She attended Madame Talvande's French School for Young Ladies in Charleston in order to prepare her for the social world which she was expected to enter when she married. Young Mary studied literature, rhetoric, sciences, and history to be equipped to handle her societal requirements.

When she was thirteen, Mary met James Chesnut, Jr. James was a member of an elite southern family that owned a great estate in North Carolina. When Mary's father heard that his daughter was being courted by Chesnut, he summoned her to live with the family who had relocated to Mississippi. It was in Mississippi that Mary's ideas about life and society began to change. For the first time, she started to consider the enslavement of African-Americans and the treatment of Native Americans as unjust.

Despite the move, Mary and James married in 1840 when Mary was seventeen. The couple moved to his parents' plantation, Mulberry. James' father owned nearly 500 slaves and was a wealthy planter, but James was forced to live off the money he made from his law practice. Mary spent the majority of her time reading from the Chesnut's library. The boredom of the estate life began to wear on Mary's health, and James took her on a trip to Saratoga and Newport. Mary's health and attitude improved greatly. Within a few years, the Chesnuts moved into their own house in Camden, South Carolina.

During the first few years of their marriage, James served as a South Carolina Representative and Senator. Mary worked to help James with his writings and speeches as a politician, but she didn't always agree with his positions. While Mary supported states' rights and the South's right to secede, but she was against slavery and advocated for gradual emancipation.

When James was elected as a United States Senator in 1858, the couple moved to Washington, D.C. Mary immediately became involved with society life in the capital city. After Abraham Lincoln's election as president, James resigned his Senate seat. The Chesnuts moved back to South Carolina where James served at the secession convention and at the writing of the Confederate constitution.

Mary understood that she was immersed in a monumental time, and she decided to record her thoughts and observations in a diary. Mary kept the diary beginning in 1861 until the end of the Civil War in 1865. James took a position as an officer in the Confederate Army. He served as an aide to General Beauregard during the siege of Fort

Sumter, the action that began the war. Mary too was in Charleston when the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter. She wrote detailed descriptions of her experience watching the bombing of the fort from a rooftop.

Mary followed James to many of his other posts during the war. When not following James, she remained at Mulberry Plantation. Accompanying James allowed Mary to rub elbows with the leaders of the Confederacy, which she recorded in her diary. Mary's diary showed the changes of the lives of those who lived in and fought for the South. She delved into issues of class, race, and gender. She described the issues faced when white male slave-owners having children with their female slaves and the expected subordination of southern women. Mary understood the significance of the war and the effect that it could have on southern society. Writing and describing these issues affected the way she viewed her own life.

After the war, Mary and James returned to Mulberry, but their way of life had been completely turned on its head. James went back to local politics, but when his father died in 1866, the Chesnuts were left in debt. Mary tried to help make more money for the family by opening a dairy.

Within a decade of the war, Mary began to write novels, but in 1876, she decided to begin editing her diaries for publication. She collected the many notebooks she had written during the war, but her initial edits did not cut back the size of the book. She was also concerned that some of the more controversial entries would ruffle feathers and cause her to lose standing in society. She continued to edit the diary over the remaining years of her life, removing the more personal entries and filling in gaps.

Prior to her death, Mary gave the draft of the diary to a friend, Isabella Martin, so she would have it published. Mary passed away in 1886 from a heart attack. Her diary was not published until 1905. Mary was determined to record her thoughts throughout the Civil War so that others would understand the issues faced by southerners. Her identity as a member of southern society influenced her writing, but also affected the understanding of southern culture and practices by later generations.