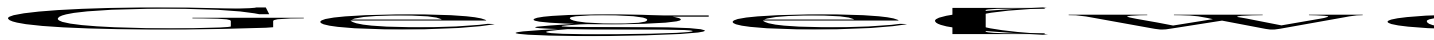


A Young Mother's War: Octavia Bryant-Stephens, Family Life,

Octavia played ball with my brothers
moonlight nights on sawdust down the middle of the street, two or three girls with us.⁶

Octavia was raised within the same context of customs and traditions that had been taught to women all over the antebellum US South during the early nineteenth century. Women were expected to serve as managers of hearth and home. Recent studies of middling and elite southern women have provided a great deal of insight into their daily lives. Scholars, such as Eugene



farmers) and usually planted short-staple cotton, the cash crop of the day.¹⁴ During this time, he also instructed Octavia on the basics of how to manage a plantation and what tasks each slave should perform. This knowledge would be vital when Octavia had to single-handedly manage the plantation when Winston joined the southern militia.

In March 1860, Octavia gave birth to a girl. She did not keep records of her well-being because she was taught that was not polite for women to do so.¹⁵ Rosa was representative of how children were raised during the Civil War by Octavia recording how Rosa lived out her first years of life.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president, the southern states felt that its institutions were being threatened and decided to secede from the Union (Florida did so in February 1861). This not only divided the nation but also families. Most of the southern slaveholders, sided with the secessionists, but her father, James Bryant, remained loyal to the Union.¹⁶ This often caused tension between her and her parents. Octavia and Winston themselves were hardly affected by the political strife although they tended to discuss secession and sectional issues with their neighbors. After Florida seceded and Fort Sumter was fired upon, Willie, immediately joined the Confederate army while her father fled to Cuba. Octavia was displeased with how the war had divided her family. When she saw some of her family members training for battle on the parade grounds near the Duval County Courthouse, she stated that "how glad I feel when I think that you are not in any company, and I hope and pray you may

¹⁴ Blakely, Lainhart, Stephens Chronicles, 22-23.

¹⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁶ Ibid, 58.

pgxgt"dg"kp"cp{ö0¹⁷ Unfortunately for Octavia, Winston himself joined a southern militia unit based in Fernandina Beach.

In fall 1861, Winston Stephens left his family to serve in the Confederate militia based in Florida. Octavia assumed the role of not only a mother and wife but also a plantation manager, something she had never experienced before. During the Civil War, southern women, like Octavia, were not only housekeepers and child bearers. They were often put in dangerous situations as the war raged close to home and their loved ones were sent off to fight and die. They took on new roles, such as shop owners and plantation heads, with little or no experience.

Octavia was left to manage slaves. Winston had acquired

in November, Winston depart

members as well as slaves as some (and sometimes most) were usually sick with fever, possibly caused by malaria-infected mosquitos.²⁸ She would, at times, have to tend to more than one slave suffering from illness. Some

In the middle of these constant changes in her life, tragedy again struck Qevcxkçøu family. First, on March 1, 1864, during a small skirmish, Winston was killed. He and his company were fighting a small detachment of Union gunboats when shrapnel from cannon fire fatally hit him, and he passed away on the field. When Octavia received the news, she was utterly devastated by these tragic events, maybe even more so than when Isabella died, and went into deep mourning for days at a time which included crying spells and other bouts of sadness. Also, she mostly became a recluse afterwards, rarely leaving the house and tending to her ill mother.³⁹

A few days later, her mother succumbed to her brain illness and died.⁴⁰ Octavia was stricken to the core with sadness over the whole situation. She wrote a grim summary of how southern women dealt with their grief in hard times:

With a sad, sad heart I began another journal. On Sunday Feb 28th, dear Mother was taken with a congestive chill. On Friday March 4th, Davis came with the news of the death of my dear dear husband, he was killed in battle near Jacksonville on the 1st of March. Mother grew worse and on Sunday, Mar 6th, she too was taken from us, between 12 and 1qøenm" *uke+"ujg" rcuugf" swkgvn{"cyc{"htq o "V{ r j qkf" Rpgw o qpkc0" Cv"9" qøenm" *uke+" p.m. I gave birth to a dear little baby boy, which although three or four weeks before the

likely mistaken because typhoid is caused by salmonella bacteria, which is associated with food poisoning.⁴²

After the deaths of her mother and husband, Octavia went into a deep depression, which lasted for several weeks. It was not until the end of March that she finally emerged from her house. However, her grief was very much noticeable, and she continued to suffer bouts of depression until the end of the war.⁴³ One way that she coped was by focusing on raising her two children, Rosa and Winnie and making sure she lived for their sake.⁴⁴ Other ways sure e9r wnd making ses1

cope with whatever comes next for her and her children. Like many southern women, Octavia Stephens was fighting her own battles on the home front.

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