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"I must and will survive"

The Civil War-Era Diary of Virginia Daniel Woodroof, Class of 1866

BY BETH HARRIS

Christmas

Hollins Institute, '64

night.

Well, again the circling years
brought to me this season of joy and
and I am still surrounded with
and more a school girl by the
brothers I find here were
based upon

Romantic love. Familial duty. Devotion to God. Fear for those at war. College life. Worry about the future. The struggle to do the right thing.

These are themes that run through young Virginia Daniel Woodroof's diary, one of the treasures housed in the archives of the Wyndham Robertson Library. The diary covers 1860 through 1866, critical years in the history of the United States, when the Civil War (1861-65) affected everyone in the country, including a young woman in rural central Virginia.

Born in 1838 in Amherst County, Virginia was the fifth of Frances and Winston Woodroof's eleven children. Her father was a moderately prosperous farmer, most likely growing tobacco, one of Amherst County's main cash crops. Until she went to Hollins at age twenty-six, Virginia Woodroof did what many young ladies of her time and station did: she lived at home, helped with the younger children, visited friends, family, and neighbors, attended church services and prayer meetings, tended the sick, and had social engagements. She also made time for reading and personal study.

The diary opens with a passage about the trip to the wedding of her younger sister, Leslie, on February 12, 1860: "We...took the cars for Liberty and found, to my surprise, riding on the rail one of the luxuries of life[;] one of the most exhilarating exciting rides I ever enjoyed was rushing up the cliffs...over bridges, rocks whirling around the hills and through the dark [tunnel?]....of danger."

With two of her sisters no longer living at home and with her mother being frequently ill, major household responsibilities fell to Virginia. "Rose at 4...gave out Breakfast. Spent 2 hours in domestic duties of the season, housekeeping and...now am engaged with the children." On occasion, she was called away to stay several months with a relative who needed her help. On April 28, 1861, she noted, "I have returned home after staying five weeks

in Bedford attending to Aunt Anns [sic] domestic affairs while she was in Richmond. My time was mostly given [to] housekeeping and as long as I was faithful in my own special duties, was happily spent. I went with the idea of reading to the servants, looking after the poor." On another occasion, she recorded, "In the midst of this happy living at home I was called to Lynchburg [and] went very reluctantly[—]tried to do my duty to sister while there."

Virginia attended as many prayer meetings and services as weather and family obligations allowed. A Methodist, she sometimes traveled with her Uncle Pitt, a Methodist clergyman, to the churches where he preached. Although she also attended services outside her denomination, she was clearly dedicated to her own church. "I love that favored institution of our much loved church. I realize more than ever the ties of membership[;] no one can be a stranger who is a true Methodist."

Virginia strove to integrate her faith into everyday life and often expressed guilt over not being as dedicated as she should be. "Sunday found me unprepared for its privileges, I felt my loss from not being in a right frame, did not enjoy the day half as much as when Saturday is spent in preparation." At another point in her diary, she remarked, "Sunday not kept holy, for we talked of secular topics. I could not keep my mind on sacred subjects."

Although Virginia appeared to find her peaceful domestic life a happy one, she often returned to the theme of needing to be useful. She wanted more than domestic duties; she wanted to teach and used any opportunity she had to do so. "I think no work I was ever engaged in affords such pure simple enjoyment as that of the Sabbath School...I love the school & my heart is in the work." She also taught her younger siblings at home. "I had one of the sabbidist [sic] days this week... Emily got in a pout about her grammar lesson, as usual, and treated me in an ungrateful manner I thought. At last in the schoolroom my overtaxed feelings gave vent to a flood of tears. I had



Samuel Murrill, Virginia Woodruff's favorite beau, who became her husband.

no more trouble with her but could not get rid of the idea that I was losing their affection for me as a sister by trying to teach them."

In May 1862, she was able to secure a teaching position at Minter's School House, most likely in Amherst County. "Here I am this bright May morning seated by the Teacher's desk...with a dozen or more flaxen-haired little girls pouring [sic] over their books before me. My place found at last, the vision that has been flitting before me from childhood realized now in my position. I never thought a teacher's life enviable but when planning for the future I could think of nothing else that would give me so wide a field of usefulness if well improved."

Sadly, the happiness she expressed in getting a teaching position was soon dampened by the news of her mother's death. Throughout the diary entries that year (1862), she frequently mourned her loss. In October 1862, she wrote, "I can't still the wild earnest longings to burst the bars of the tomb, to see her again..."

After her mother's death she wanted to go back to teaching, but her Aunt Ann again needed her assistance. "This spring I scarcely know what plans to form for usefulness. If I teach I will leave my sisters work for Aunt

Ann which is not right as she is 60 yrs old, and yet it seems too little for me to stay here only to sew and knit.”

Despite domestic duties and frequent attendance of worship services, Virginia found time for social life. Although she usually enjoyed these occasions, she valued “earnest conversations” over frivolous chatter and was often bored at parties. Visits with friends and family usually provided opportunities to meet young men. “I prize interesting gentlemen, love to

submit or shall we arm for the struggle at hand.” Another entry, dated April 28, 1861: “I have not been out much, there is no pleasure in hearing the horrors of the War discussed. I too feel intensely interested in the struggle but mourn for the sad [honor?] of young men who are so eager to rush into the conflict.”

One undated entry cheered a rebel victory: “Hurra [sic] for the glorious army...” Another (dated May 8, 1864, under the heading “Battle of Spotsylvania & the Wilderness”) was

to home and Virginia herself became a refugee in June 1864. While staying with a neighbor, Mr. Johnson, they received news that the Yankees had reached Liberty [now called Bedford]. They saddled their horses and rode twenty-five miles before they found refuge for a night in a house near the Staunton River. At one point it seemed safe to return home, but they received more frightening news: “About nightfall a gentleman came in & said that the Yankees were at the Mill some two or more miles from here—another said they had shot the Miller, captured some others & he was trying to escape by another road, that we might escape them at any time. We were afraid to sleep. I had jewels & money concealed about my person and those we watched the whole night for the midnight assassin, for so they seemed to me.”

Although Virginia was in love with “Malcolm,” the nickname she gave to Samuel L. Murrill, she didn’t know his intentions toward her. At times she felt confident of his love, and other times she was uncertain of his feelings and wondered if she should abandon him as a failed romance. Her desire for usefulness (and probably her lack of options) led her in the fall of 1864 to the gates of Hollins. She was divided in her feelings: “It was hard for me to leave home, when all was so pleasant to shut myself up at school for years but I think it best for me to prepare for the future by improving the present though I am sacrificing all the enjoyment of society & the regard of lovers. My foolish dreams are over now... I must & will survive and with a hearty Amen!”

Hollins Institute offered serious course work, unlike many other southern female institutes of the day. Virginia was registered for classes in English, French, Latin, instrumental music, mathematics, and natural science. During her first session she wrote, “Well, here I am, this, the first day of October, a regular school girl seated... with my books & slate poring over French, work[ing] out problems, consulting the Professors [sic] who seem to penetrate the truth that has

“Our bravest and best are falling on every side...we hear nothing but strife and bloodshed. Oh! Lord, how long!”

hear of other lands, jokes and o’er true tales [and] therefore shall remember the past visit as one of intellectual [sic] as well as pleasant, association,” she wrote. On another occasion she remarked that “Lieut. Johnson, Mr. Joplin, Mr. Tucker & Talbot were very agreeable in their attentions during my stay. I rather like all of them and find it very hard to say which I think most about: Mr. Nance or Murrill. Mr. Murrill had the ascendancy until I saw Mr. Nance the other day off to the War looking so handsome I can’t keep my mind on anything that his image is not it.”

News of the Civil War didn’t escape Virginia’s attention and she frequently commented on it. In early January 1861, she noted, “Business was suspended in the cities and a sad solemn feeling pervaded the whole country. Civil War with its dreaded horrors is near, has commenced. All social topics give away before this one question, are we to

sorrowful: “Our bravest and best are falling on every side...we hear nothing but strife and bloodshed. Oh! Lord, how long!” She worried for the safety of family members and friends who were fighting in the war, including her favorite beau, Mr. Murrill: “My own, noble hero! That he should have been lying there bleeding & suffering with no hand to support his sinking head!” She pitied her younger, newly married sister, whose husband was killed in battle. “Leslie poor child, sat, with a sad face at home, writing a long letter to her husband and he, with a ball in his head left helpless among the foe. The heart which beat so free to her and his country still and cold in death.” Virginia described the agony of seeing the posted lists of soldier’s names, “reading with trembling lips, the names of the dead & wounded, lest, that of [a] loved one might be there.”

Eventually the action moved closer

just flashed on my darkened mind..." She admired the campus: "This is a beautiful place, large grounds laid out in walks[,] long porches for promenade which now are echoing from the ceaseless tramp of teachers and scholars taking the morning air." Her admiration extended to a faculty member as well: "Prof. Stranger, our new French teacher is certainly handsome. The girls call him cold[,] unfeeling but to me he has been not only polite but gentle. In his office he is as affable as you please but on the porches and in class, a perfect stoic."

She seemed to have trouble fitting in and though she didn't mention it, her age and perhaps her serious purpose set her apart. She wrote, "I am not like the other girls..." and "...the want of local ties makes me indifferent about cultivating particular friendships. But here, I am at least contented. My studies engross my [mind], my thirst for knowledge increases with each acquirements, and forgetting the world I have left behind I plunge into the hidden lore of the past, the erudite wine of the Middle Ages, and wonderful scientific researches of the present century with all...vigor and energy of which I am capable."

In 1866, at the end of her second year and final year at Hollins (Hollins had no four-year classes then), Virginia recorded details about some of the commencement activities, including rehearsal: "At the ringing of the first bell all the girls were assembled in the anteroom of the hall dressed each in pure white with some simple flower in the hair, a strain of music announced our approach and the procession passed on to the seats assigned for us in front of the stage."

She wrote of Charles Lewis Cocke's address: he "arose to address the crowd, went over the scenes of the war, state of the country, women's positions, everything he had been saving for us the whole session, finishing with George Washington. I never was so worn out, and the feeble applause showed the audience were as tired of those hard benches as I was."



Virginia and Samuel Murrill with their children on their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

After receiving a departmental diploma in French and in English language and literature, Virginia returned home and within a few months realized what she had left behind: "I miss the daily feast of knowledge spread for me at Hollins, my own efforts cannot supply it." She also began to see the impact of her education: "I did not think at school that I had gained much but I feel it now. Nature is seen under a new light and books have a charm not known before."

With her formal education behind her and an uncertain future ahead, Virginia longed for a purpose. "I am quite restless, think of going off to teach in some Seminary. I can learn nothing here and this waiting for something to happen don't [sic] suit me. I want to be out in the world..." In addition to the subject of teaching, one name keeps showing up in her diary: "Malcolm." Although the text is not clear about when and why their relationship changed, she and Samuel Murrill eventually came to an understanding and realized they were meant for each other. Her great dilemma was that she loved Samuel, but her family didn't approve because his social status was lower than theirs. She was torn between doing what she felt was right for her and her duty to her

family. "I wanted to do right but what was it?" she asked. "Bro. John has been a noble brother. For years he has struggled to keep us in ease. He fears that I may not be able to bear the hardships of different stations. I have promised him that I would not displease him by taking such a step. What must I do[?]"

Finally, she made her decision. "I feel very calm in regard to the step I am about to take. As Macbeth says it is wiser to go on than to go back... I am satisfied with my choice, am willing to take the odium it may bring upon my own head. I know him, I think, and am not afraid to trust either his heart or his hand... I may be wrong to disobey...but I do not feel that I am. I owe something to myself...and I won't sacrifice my heart..."

On October 16, 1866, Virginia and Samuel Murrill were married in secret. Virginia doesn't say whether her family forgave her for going against their wishes, but a family photograph of the couple's fiftieth wedding anniversary, which shows them smiling and holding hands, surrounded by their children, testifies to their enduring love.

Beth Harris is special collections librarian for the Wyndham Robertson Library. She has worked at Hollins since 1989.