I must and will survive: the Civil War-era diary of Virginia Daniel Woodroof, Class of 1866

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“I must and will survive”

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

BY BETH HARRIS
romantic love. Familiar
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 engage-
ments. 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 Ann’s [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 saddest [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
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 hear of other lands, jokes and o’er true tales [and] therefore shall remember the past visit as one of intelectual [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 ascendency 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 suspend-ed 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 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 glo-rious army...” Another (dated May 8, 1864, under the heading “Battle of Spotsylvania & the Wilderness”) was sorrowful: “Our bravest and best are falling on every side...we hear nothing but strife and bloodshed. Oh! Lord, how long!”

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Eventually the action moved closer 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 enjoy-ment 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 Profesesors [sic] who seem to penetrate the truth that has
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 acquisition, 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.”

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.