

with flowers from the conservatories. The shrubbery on the lawn was festooned with innumerable Japanese lanterns. The lights among the trees and the bands of music on the portico were to my childish eye like a fairyland.

As magical as was Belmont, every inch decorated for these special occasions, it is clear Acklen was the shining star—to William, and perhaps others as well. “In memory I often see my mother in her beautiful gowns which came from Paris,... and seated at the piano,” he wrote, “her slender fingers gracefully travelling over the keyboard in a minuet by Boccherini.”⁹⁶

William and his siblings would have observed the balls and social events, with their elegant mother at the center, from the top of Belmont’s grand staircase, perhaps making an appearance for introductions before bedtime. During the day, they had the run of the estate and a multitude of amusements and activities to occupy their time. As Ackland remembered, “there was a bowling alley, billiard room, and horses and carriage were always at command. I had a Shetland pony as my own, not much larger than a big Newfoundland dog. The gates at Belmont were never closed and visitors were always welcome.”⁹⁷ Those visitors often stayed days, or even weeks, and entertainment was provided for all—regardless of age. “I recall my special delight in the children’s afternoon parties,” William wrote, of the parties hosted not only for those in residence at Belmont, but

for children from neighboring properties as well.⁹⁸

Life was not all fun and games for the Acklen children, however, and Adelia Acklen, for whom education was an integral part of childhood and adolescence, worked to instill a desire for knowledge, and an appreciation for learning, in her children. Ackland recalled “everybody [was to] be present at breakfast, and to break up the formality of that meal each person was asked to volunteer some scientific or historical fact.... [which] offered thought for conversation during the meal.”⁹⁹ His mother clearly intended mealtime conversation to extend beyond idle chit chat.

The ebbs and flows of family life for the Acklens—the summers in Nashville and winters in Louisiana—the steamship rides to and from—the weeks-long New Orleans visits—all came to an abrupt halt when the Civil War, begun in April of 1861 with the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, moved west into Kentucky and Tennessee. “They say private citizens will not be interrupted on their property,”¹⁰⁰ Acklen wrote from Belmont to her brother Oliver Hayes, Jr., in neighboring Williamson County, on February 16, 1862, after Forts Henry and Donelson, located on Tennessee’s northern border, fell to Union forces.¹⁰¹

Based on the handful of her surviving wartime letters, Acklen did not fear the approaching federal troops; rather, it seems she carefully considered the situation, and began formulating a plan to deal with both

Union occupation and the war as it established itself in Tennessee. Laura F. Edwards has written that southern women who displayed a staunch commitment to secession were not particularly numerous, and greater numbers of them were “reluctant supporters and outright opponents of the Confederate cause.”¹⁰² Acklen falls in line here, for her letters do not reveal the zealotry associated with the proto-typical “Scarlett O’Haras” to whom she is often compared. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long have suggested, “women in occupied areas during the Civil War... were occupied, as in busy and responsive, in the face of an occupying presence,”¹⁰³ and this certainly describes Acklen and her actions.

“I thought it best to remain but prevailed upon Mr Acklen to go South,” Acklen’s February 16 letter to her brother continued, “he left this evening—and says you... must look after us when you can as I would have him go.” It appears the Acklens’ rationale here was two-fold: first, movement of Union troops into the South left harvested, but unshipped, cotton in Louisiana in danger of confiscation or destruction, and demanded Joseph Acklen’s presence on site to stave off the worst;¹⁰⁴ and second, Acklen’s public commitment to the Confederacy, evidenced by his support and funding of the “Acklen Rifles,” or Company F of the Thirty-fourth Tennessee Infantry,¹⁰⁵ made his presence in occupied Nashville problematic—“I would be safer here without him,” the letter continued.¹⁰⁶ As Tennessee’s governor surrendered Nashville to Union

troops, and the retreating Confederate army destroyed arms, bridges, and anything else of a military design as it fled,¹⁰⁷ Adelia Acklen sought to protect her home, family, and personal property. Her brother Oliver lived just twelve or so miles south of Nashville on the Franklin Pike, but far enough away that items stored there might be safe, at least for the short term. “I thought it best to send one of the Carriages & pr of Horses a little further out of reach,” she wrote, “and will be much obliged if you will take charge of them.”¹⁰⁸ All indications suggest he did as she asked.

The Union army used passes and permits for civilian movement and censorship of the mail to control Nashville’s population during occupation, as Acklen revealed in a number of her letters. “I enclose your Pass & permit,” she wrote Oliver Hayes, in July of 1862. “I looked for Hal every day last week” she added, “his pass was for TEN days—and we all thought very strange he did not come down,” referring to their brother, Henry Hayes. Acklen did secure these passes for her brothers, but such was not always the case, and as she relayed to Oliver, passes for members of his wife’s family could not be obtained “without difficulty.”¹⁰⁹ When the Union began to censor letters and randomly inspect shipments for items it considered contraband or subversive, Acklen’s brothers, rather than servants or messengers, made deliveries and moved goods between households. “I reserved papers each day to send you by him [Hal],” Acklen’s letter continued, “I was afraid to send them when Jim¹¹⁰