Weekly Reading #27
Article #1
Plantation Life During the Civil War

Victoria Virginia Clayton, like many of the wives of southern plantation owners, managed the plantation while her husband fought at the front. As the war dragged on, Union blockades made even the simplest items impossible to obtain. Yet southerners invented their own brand of Yankee ingenuity when the need arose. In the following selection, excerpted from her published journal, Clayton tells how she improvised to take care of herself, her children, and her plantation during the war. Consider the role played by slaves during this period of hard times and deprivation.

While my husband was at the front doing active service, suffering fatigue, privations, and the many ills attendant on a soldier's life, I was at home struggling to keep the family comfortable. We were blockaded on every side, could get nothing from without, so had to make everything at home, and having been heretofore only an agricultural people, it became necessary for every home to be supplied with spinning wheels and the old-fashioned loom, in order to manufacture clothing for the members of the family. This was no small undertaking. I knew nothing about spinning and weaving cloth. I had to learn myself, and then to teach the negroes. Fortunately for me, most of the negroes knew how to spin thread, the first step towards cloth-making. Our work was hard and continuous. To this we did not object, but our hearts sorrowed for our loved ones in the field.

Our home was situated a mile from the town of Clayton. On going to town one day I discovered
a small bridge over which we had to pass that needed repairing. It was almost impassable. I went home, called some of our men, and gave them instructions to get up the necessary articles and put the bridge in condition to be passed over safely. I was there giving instructions about the work, when an old gentleman, our Probate Judge, came along. He stopped to see what we were doing. When satisfied, he said to me:

"Madam, I think we will never be conquered, possessing such noble women as we do." . . .

There was no white person on the plantation beside myself and children, the oldest of whom was attending school in Eufaula, as our Clayton schools were closed, and my time was so occupied that it was impossible for me to teach my children. Four small children and myself constituted the white family at home.

I entrusted the planting and cultivation of the various crops to old Joe. He had been my husband's nurse in infancy, and we always loved and trusted him. I kept a gentle saddle horse, and occasionally, accompanied by Joe, would ride over the entire plantation on a tour of inspection. Each night, when the day's work was done, Joe came in to make a report of everything that had been done on the plantation that day. When Mr. Clayton was where he could receive my letters, I wrote him a letter every night before retiring, and in this way he, being kept informed about the work at home, could write and make suggestions about various things to help me manage successfully.

We made good crops every year, but after the second year we planted provision crops entirely, except enough cotton for home use.

All the coloring matter for cloth had to be gathered from the forest. We would get roots and herbs and experiment with them until we found the color desired, or a near approach to it. We also found out what would dye cotton and what woolen fabrics. We had about one hundred head of sheep, were a temperate family and the use was invariably beneficial.

Closed in as we were on every side, with nearly every white man of proper age and health enlisted in the army, with the country filled with white women, children, and old, infirm men, with thousands of slaves to be controlled, and caused through their systematic labor to feed and clothe the people at home, and to provide for our army, I often wonder, as I contemplate those by-gone days of labor and sorrow, and recall how peacefully we moved on and accomplished what we did.

We were required to give one-tenth of all that was raised, to the government. There being no educated white person on the plantation except myself, it was necessary that I should attend to the gathering and measuring of every crop and the delivery of the tenth to the government authorities. This one-tenth we gave cheerfully and often wished we had more to give.

My duties, as will be seen, were numerous and often laborious, the family on the increase continually, and every one added increased labor and responsibility. And this was the case with the typical Southern woman.
General Winfield Scott was in charge of the Union army. He was an old man, and in terrible physical shape. He even had to be helped onto his horse. But there was nothing wrong with his mind—it was as sharp as ever.

General Scott looked at the situation when the war began and he figured it would take at least two or three years to win a war against the South. He came up with a plan. To begin, he thought the North should blockade Southern ports. That means Northern ships would patrol the Southern coast and keep ships from entering or leaving. That wouldn’t be easy, and a few ships would probably slip through the blockade, but if the South could be kept from trading with Europe it would be in trouble. The Confederacy was an agricultural nation. It didn’t manufacture much of anything. If the South was to fight a war, it would need cash to buy goods—especially weapons. To get cash it needed to sell its cotton in Europe. A blockade that closed Southern ports would really hurt the Confederacy.

General Scott also thought the North had to control the Mississippi River. That would cut off Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas from the rest of the Confederacy. It would close more ports and keep that cotton from being exported.

As to the actual fighting, the Union could send armies from the east and armies from the west to squeeze the Confederacy.

And that is pretty much what happened during the Civil War. But it didn’t take two or three years, it took four years: from April of 1861 to April of 1865.

Guess what happened when people heard of Winfield Scott’s plan.
They laughed. The war lasting two or three years? Why, that was the nonsense of an old man. This was a war that would be over in a few months, everyone knew that. A plan to squeeze the enemy? That was just plain silly.

They called Winfield's plan the "Anaconda Plan"—because an anaconda is a snake that squeezes its prey—and it caused so much dismay that President Lincoln was forced to look for a new general. He found a man who was handsome and intelligent and popular with his troops. He was a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and a former railroad superintendent. His name was George Brinton McClellan.

McClellan, who was 35, was a small, dapper man with a strong body, thick dark hair, and a bushy mustache. He rode a black horse named Dan Webster. His admirers called him "the young Napoleon." He liked the comparison with the great French general and often posed, like Napoleon, with one hand in his vest.

McClellan was an excellent organizer. That's an important ability when you are in charge of large numbers of people. A general has to feed, house, and equip his armies. He has to be able to move them long distances. He has to inspire them. He has to train them. McClellan was good at all those things. There was just one problem. It was a big problem for a general. He didn't like to fight. He kept hesitating, and making excuses, and pulling back.

Poor Abraham Lincoln. It is hard enough being president, but being president during a war is really difficult.
Especially when you can’t find a good general. Lincoln tried Generals McClellan, Frémont, Burnside, Halleck, Hooker, Pope, Meade, and some others. Not one of them fought the way Lincoln thought they should. Every time the North lost a battle—and it lost quite a few—Lincoln got blamed; even though the generals weren’t doing what the president was asking.

There just didn’t seem to be a leader he could trust. Then he looked out west and found a general who was winning battles. A general who trapped a whole Confederate army and took all the soldiers prisoners of war. That general, who was good at fighting, was named Ulysses S. Grant. (He even had initials to match his country.) Lincoln called him “the quietest little fellow you ever saw.”

Grant had been to West Point, where he was nicknamed “Uncle Sam” because of those initials. His army friends called him Sam Grant. At West Point Sam Grant was a fair student but too small to excel at any sport but riding. He fought in the Mexican War, then left the army, and wasn’t much of a success in civilian life. He was poor, really poor, when he inherited a slave. He could have sold the slave for $1,000, but he didn’t do it. He gave the man his freedom.

It didn’t look as if Grant would amount to anything, until the Civil War came along, and it made him famous (famous enough to one day be president). He was the kind of general who didn’t worry much about military theories. He just outkilled or outlasted his enemy. General Grant and his friend, red-bearded General William Tecumseh Sherman (whom we will get to later), were just the kind of generals Lincoln had been looking for.

Lincoln’s General U. S. Grant (above, at the battle of Cold Harbor) once said, “I don’t know whether I am like other men or not, but when I have nothing to do, I get blue and depressed.”

The owners of blockade runners (fast steamers that slipped past Union warships to bring food and other goods to the blocked-off South) were usually in it for the money (not out of patriotism). At right, a midshipman on a U.S. frigate.
The ANACONDA PLAN