

### CIVIL WAR TREASURES a Confederate Girl Remembers

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#### Recommended Citation

Jewett, Leah W. (2011) "CIVIL WAR TREASURES a Confederate Girl Remembers," *Civil War Book Review*.  
Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.1.02

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss1/2>

## Feature Essay

Winter 2011

**Jewett, Leah Wood** *CIVIL WAR TREASURES A Confederate Girl Remembers.*

Best known for her war-time diary, published in part by her son as *A Confederate Girl's Diary* (1913), Sarah Morgan Dawson (1842-1909) was the daughter of a prominent judge in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She, along with her widowed mother and sister, fled the capital city to Linwood Plantation near Port Hudson in 1862 when Union gunboats began appearing with regularity on the Mississippi River. After witnessing the siege at Port Hudson, Morgan and family moved to New Orleans until the end of the war.

Following the war Morgan married Francis Dawson, the British editor of the Charleston, South Carolina newspaper *News and Courier*. She was a contributing writer to the paper, signing her columns with the pseudonyms "Mr. Fowler" (Fowler being her mother's maiden name) or "Feu Follet." After her husband was murdered in 1889, Morgan moved to Paris, where she lived out her years as a widow with her son, Warrington.

*Hope Estate Ladies* is an unpublished manuscript, housed within the LSU Libraries Special Collections. Dawson describes people and places from a lost way of life, and not always a pleasant one. The following is excerpted from the reminiscence.

Nov. 19th 1908

"The Hope Estate Ladies"

This record is to oblige Ethel, who dislikes vulgar stories, and thinks anything concerning the Hope Estate Ladies, would be much more attractive than tales of low, common people. To me, their life, because of its futility and emptiness is sadder than the worst recorded here. They lived, and died, these Hope Estates Ladies, without leaving a bubble on the surface of the waters to mark where they sank at rest forever. And without a most respectable, quaint, and interesting though prosaic group, these Hope Estates Ladies of the old

regime!

Hope Estate was the Sugar Plantation of Colonel Philip Hickey\*, on the left bank of the Mississippi, five miles below Baton Rouge. "Grandpa" we called him. Not that he bore that relationship, but because his daughter Adèle had married my mother's brother, Walter Fowler; and his daughter Caro had married my father's brother, Morris Morgan. "Aunt Eliza" his eldest daughter came naturally to us. "Aunt Patsy" had died many, many years before I was born, sacrificed her life and her eye sight to the careful stitching of exactly two threads in the multitudinous seams, tucks, and frills of sheerest Batiste that clothed her three Walsh children two of whom were married before I remember them. Aunt Patsy kept her several servants at fine needlework, also. But I believe they all lived ages after the foolish mother was dust and ashes, and the little marvels of fine serving were in the ash heap. There was a brother, Philip, who went the way of flesh early, thanks to Yellow fever. And Uncle Dan, who lived across the river at "New Hope" who lived to see the ruin wrought by the war, and in his dire poverty escaped by a miracle to suffer still more, when a crevasse engulfed his whole plantation, house and all it contained.

Grandma Hickey made a deep impression on my childish mind, the only time I saw her which must have been shortly before her death. She was in deep black, All Hope Estate Ladies wore mourning from birth to death. I think that is why my father hated it so. Whenever they decided to lighten it a little, some remote connection or prematurely deceased baby scion re-plunged them into funereal garb. My father said he had seen them in unbroken black forty years, when Aunt Eliza's beautiful daughter Mary Scallan, then the young widow of James Mather, burst in upon him in rainbow colors one Sunday accompanied by purple and lilac tinted relatives. And next day, Pretty cousin Mary, whom mother hoped to see Brother's bride, died of cholera in two hours notice! Hope Estate took up its discarded livery promptly and forever, then....

After grandma went, probably most of Grandpa's Sundays were spent at my father's house or else my father drove down late to see him... He was very tender to us little ones. Everyone loved him. From the hour he lost his wife, Aunt Eliza, his eldest, never left him. She had buried her beautiful daughter, and now centered her life on her father and her grandson, Jimmy Mather. She and jimmy slept in Grandpa's room, so that he might never need help in the night. Slender, fragile, gentle, she had survived the bitterness of a terrible marriage, and lived to be a comfort to all who approached her. She had brought up, years before, Aunt

Patsy's three orphan children...

Hope Estate Ladies wore a deep, black, cape in the house as out of the house. I never remember one of them without this covering. Capes, for me, always evoke Hope Estate. I do not assert that their nightgowns had them, but I really think they must have felt indecently exposed if they had not. Before she was fifteen, Eliza had married a brilliant, dissipated Irishman, a handsome young lawyer whose sallies kept Baton Rouge in an uproar. James Scallan was his name. Grandma foresaw how it would end; but Grandpa would refuse nothing to his adored child. Grandma could only consent on condition of keeping the two under her wing. Hope Estate was used to shelter scores of guests. Rooms seemed to develop according to demand upon hospitality. All that was bright, beautiful, intelligent, or noted, passed sooner or later there.

I doubt that Grandma showed wisdom in keeping the girl-wife near her. She only condemned the whole family to useless suffering. It was impossible to be blind to the anguish of an immature bride, when the reckless husband spent days and weeks in contented, beaming, witty and affectionate drunkenness. Aunt Eliza dared not murmur, but cried her heart out. "This family makes my little wifey unhappy," Mr. Scallan would say. "Sam, my buggy! Mrs. Hickey kindly order a basket of delicacies for my little darling. I shall take her to the Choctaw Nation, where she shall remain until she is quite restored." Mother, sisters, cousins and guests would protest save tear their hair, and fall on their knees before the smiling urbane, implacable little man. "You draw fresh tears from my Eliza" he would laugh. "Kindly let me pass! She needs the Choctaw Nation. You will see her in blooming health when she returns." And amid shrieks and prayers, Aunt Eliza would be borne wrapped in a blanket if she happened to be critically ill, and placed in the waiting buggy. Not once but scores of times did these disappearances occur. Perhaps Grandpa knew where she went, but certainly no one else ever did. Aunt Eliza was as silent, even to her mother, as respectable married women ever were, in those days. The woman who spoke against her husband was considered lost then. Whether Aunt Eliza learned that tears meant sudden visits to the Choctaw Nation, and that complaint might be followed by scalping, I know not. "Choctaw" remained a word to conjure with, in that family. And the probably crazy man was shrewd enough to know that an allusion to the tribe would check any sharp remarks mother in law or her daughters might be tempted to indulge in. After some years of this martyrdom, James Scallan decided to take his wife to Baton Rouge away from the women-tongues which so depressed the sensitive soul of his "little wifey." Every comfort was provided for

them, and trained servants sent to guard her from every care. My father lived quite near on the last bluff on the Mississippi River in Baton Rouge, where the State House today stands. There all of us were born, save Jimmy and I, who alone were born in New Orleans. Often in the night, Aunt Eliza's negroes came to call my father to the scene.

Notably one night, Aunt Eliza being in a precarious condition from a premature confinement brought on by Mr. Scallan's drunken recklessness, he entered his home at midnight, in one of his brilliant moods, and declared that the mother and sisters summoned to her aid, were "fretting little wifey!" It was cruelly cold for that country. It was too late to call for his buggy and start for the Choctaw Nation. So he tenderly gathered up the half dead woman, and bore her into a freezing room where he placed her in an unmade bed. At her groans of anguish, he laughed "Bad bed! To make wifey cry? She wants another? Then she shall have a new one!" The frenzied family watched her dragged or rather carried over the whole house, before my father appeared to take the dying victim from him and to put James Scallan summarily in bed himself. He was submissive to my father alone, and never needed any other voice. Always witty and fascinating, alas! My father said. Always smiling and fascinating, even when Grandma and the other daughters used the proverbial frankness, not to say bluntness of "The Hope Estate Tongues." "My dear madam, my little wife is very dear to me! I must consider her happiness, and not my own preferences! In the Choctaw Nation, there are no conflicts, no unpleasant remarks, no strife. We are 'Boba shilla" with all the braves." (Bobashilla remained a familiar word ever after at Hope Estate to signify boon friends.) "Among those quiet people, my Eliza can enjoy the calm and peace denied her here. Her health will be benefited by the change. Kindly order a hamper of delicacies" etc.

But one night, terrified negroes rushed to my father's house for help, long after midnight. Mr. Scallan had come home drunk, and amiable as ever. Whether from madness or from a desire to divert his sobbing Eliza from her despair, he had varied his amusement by blowing his brains out in her presence. My father arrived in time to hear the shot, and to raise the corpse. He could never bear to allude to what passed. "Poor James Scallan!" was all he ever said, save "Poor Eliza! Sad as it is, she is better so." And so it is evident to me, even at this distance. For she learned to live for others who were more worthy of her sacrifices... ..

[Cousin Eugene was] gay, handsome, always the soul of merry making, he was an ideal youth. When the War broke out, my mother suddenly awoke to the knowledge that Eugene loved me more than our cousinship warranted. I abnormally unconscious of such preferences, was amused by her terror, and teased her to my heart's content. Perhaps I provoked the danger and let her do the trembling. I certainly enjoyed playing with fire, I now believe. Then, I was an ignorant fool. Marry a Cousin! I would as soon marry a Brother-in-law! Such a lack of enterprise, to look to the family circle for a sweet-heart!" I would declare. I had a good many adorers then and later – though heart whole myself. And Eugene served to keep them all awake [illegible]. Mother urged Eugene to hasten to the front of battle. He was among the first to go, with my brothers. ... But Eugene was a hero. On the battlefield of the Second Manassas, Eugene died, his leg carried off by a cannon ball, and no one to rescue him. Manuel, the faithful negro, went on to identify his body and bring him home. And Manuel came to tell me how he found him in a shallow grave, wrapped in his grey blanket, a bearded man, so calm, so handsome, so restful at last! He only dug the grave deeper, and left him there. We had no means of sheltering women and children, or of transporting the wounded. Eugene sleeps well there to-day. That bearded face in the grey blanket that did not keep out the clods of earth, has always haunted me. But only mother cried. She believed she had sent him to his early death...

I can hardly bear to speak of her [Aunt Caro's] death. She died in war-ravaged Hope Estate, the day and perhaps the very hour that my brother Gibbes died on Johnson's Island, a prisoner of war in Lake Erie, January 21, 1864. Buried in Baton Rouge in the Catholic cemetery, her grave was violated by United States troops a week later who had a ghoulish mania for dragging out gold and jewels which they suspected in every coffin. Hope Estate had neither gold nor jewels left to bury, alas, so in disgust the body of my Aunt Caro was thrown face down in the mud above and her coffin smashed beside her. I do not know that there was money-enough to pay for a second coffin, I only know that her family, going to her grave to pray for the rest of her soul found her lying there. These desecrations were not rare in the South. Only- we who suffered never care to allude to them. And the men who did the deeds do not boast of them, in their Christian Homes where they pose as Heroes, and draw substantial pay- from the vanquished, as well as from the victors, for their deeds of Derring Do in the Great Army of the Republic.

...[The Hope Estate Ladies were] All widows, in my day. All in unrelieved black; all wearing the gold watch of a deceased husband, and a slender wedding ring as their sole adornment. "And of the whole, not one quite happy! No! Not one!"

They were the last of a Type and of a Place forever extinct. War reduced them to poverty, and scattered them to die under strange conditions. They accepted the hardest blows with singular heroism. They never quaked before danger, violence, or suffering. They survived luxury, and ate coarse food in Christian submission. They learned to hold their peace, and to set an example of patient endurance. After all, I myself find that "The Hope Esatate Ladies" were worthy of more praise and admiration than I am able to offer. Of such stuff, martyrs and their crowns are made!

Morgan died in Paris in 1909.

Notes:

\* - Philip Hicky was born in the Manchac District (now East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana) of West Florida, the son of Daniel Hickey and Martha Scriven. He operated several large plantations in East Baton Rouge Parish including Hope Estate Plantation. Hicky married Ann Mather in 1800, and they had at least five children. As captain of cavalry in the Spanish militia, Hicky was active in the West Florida Rebellion (1810); during the War of 1812, he served as a colonel in the 11th Regiment, Louisiana Militia. He was a Louisiana state senator for a time and a trustee of the College of Baton Rouge. Hicky built the first sugar mill in East Baton Rouge Parish in 1814. He died at Hope Estate in Baton Rouge.

The Philip Hicky and Family Papers (Mss. 2007, 2035) are housed within the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries.

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Francis Warrington Dawson family papers, 1386-1963

Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University