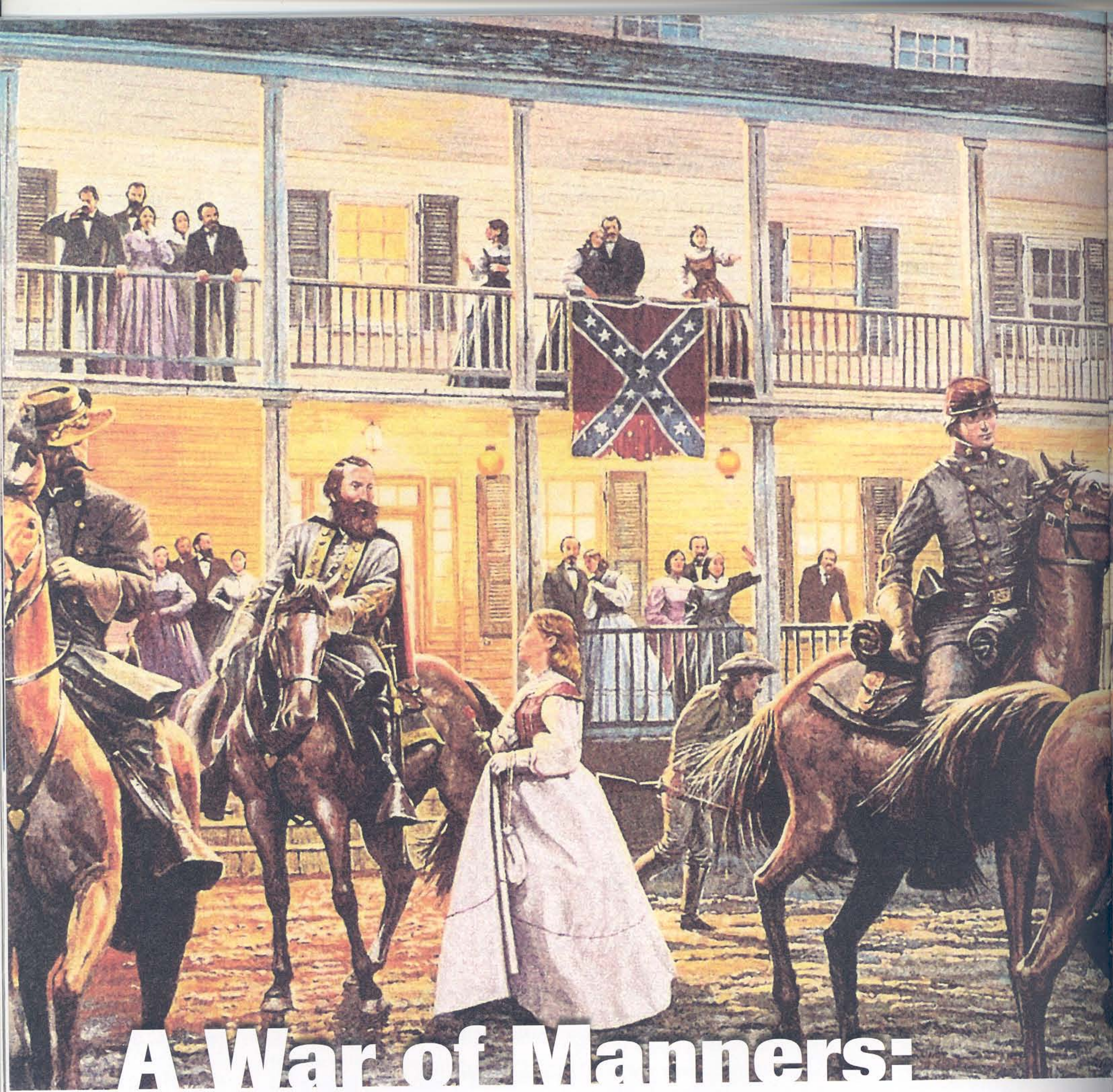


A War of Manners: JEB STUART'S "Sabers & Roses" BALL

James A. Davis

IMAGE COURTESY OF GALLON HISTORICAL ART, GETTYSBURG, PA, WWW.GALLON.COM

▲ The Landon House ball was interrupted by nearby skirmishing, and General Stuart and his men rode off to face the enemy, as depicted in this painting by Dale Gallon.

COURTESY OF VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

◀ A nineteenth century portrait of Confederate General James Ewell Brown (JEB) Stuart, by William D. Washington.

On September 8, 1862, in the recently occupied town of Urbana, Maryland, Confederate Major General Jeb Stuart and his staff enjoyed an evening of dance and conversation with some young ladies from the area, an event that would earn the sobriquet the "Sabers and Roses" ball. Nine days later, over twenty thousand soldiers were killed or wounded in the Battle of Antietam. From a modern perspective such a juxtaposition of events can be difficult to grasp. Were the waltzing couples unaware of the magnitude of the conflict surrounding them? Did they choose to remain oblivious to the carnage that defined combat of the time? Did they see themselves as somehow above the war, or were they simply more concerned about their own social amusements than about the suffering around them?

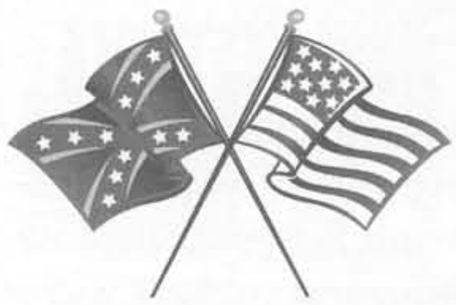
Scholars of nineteenth century American music and dance offer a different perspective. The arts were a pervasive part of mid-nineteenth century society, and so the notion that music and dance were ancillary – or even trivial – during the Civil War misses the significance of these activities in a larger context. The explanation for music and dancing in the midst of war lies with the participants. How did *they* regard a fashionable dance held between battles? It is worthwhile to reevaluate Stuart's ball in light of social and cultural values of the time, and to view that ball not through puzzled twenty-first century eyes but through the eyes and ears of the nineteenth century participants.

Certainly some of those who would attend such an event were indeed oblivious or unconcerned about the troubles surrounding them. One contemporary could only see "heartlessness & frivolity" in these wartime social events. In 1863, observing the contrast between the frequent balls and the terrible realities of war, diarist Emma Holmes of Baton Rouge wrote: "... the storm of war, which has swept away hundreds of our brave soldiers from our homes, seems to have [made] many of those left callous."[1]

Yet for others, however, music and dancing offered something far more than an evening's gratuitous entertainment. Captain William W. Blackford, a member of Jeb Stuart's staff, would later recall the time spent socializing in Urbana in a very different light:

Landon House, Urbana, MD

COURTESY OF CRAIG SWAIN



Catherine Markell of Frederick described him as "a gay, rollicking cavalier and a great favorite with the girls." Stonewall Jackson's wife called Stuart "gallant" and "dashing," and John Esten Cooke noted that: "There was about Stuart an inspiration of joy and youth." For those who were perhaps less favorably inclined to Stuart, he could be described as a dandy, audacious, or even hungry for glory.

Our horses stood saddled day and night, and Stuart and his staff slept in the open air in the shady yard of the residence of Mr. Cocky, with clothes, boots, spurs and arms on, ready for the instant action, but with these precautions we enjoyed the society of the charming girls around us to the utmost. One hour's acquaintance in war times goes further towards good feeling and acquaintanceship than months in the dull, slow period of peace. This no doubt makes a military people like the French call it "Merry War."[2]

These gatherings reminded soldiers of the social contacts and customs that had governed their lives before the war. A ball could serve, then, as a coping mechanism for the attendees, reaffirming that life still held graciousness and compassion. Furthermore, participating in aristocratic activities and exhibiting proper etiquette was a means for the upper class to bolster its status and simultaneously offered an opportunity for the middle class to rub shoulders with social superiors. A ball also reinforced the notion that people could still behave in a civilized fashion despite the bloodshed surrounding them. Ultimately it can be argued that music, dancing, and genteel behavior all functioned as edifying activities, and participating in a ball was an attempt, whether conscious or not, to promote some semblance of civilized behavior and establish moral superiority in the midst of civil war.

On September 6, 1862 Stuart crossed the Potomac at White's Ford as part of the advance guard for Lee's invasion of Maryland. The cavalry moved on to Poolesville and by September 7 Stuart established his headquarters at Urbana while the infantry moved into Frederick. Upon arriving at Urbana Stuart made the acquaintance of some local citizens, and a stroll past a vacant girls' school (today known as the Landon House) led to the idea of hosting a ball.[3] The following day the main room was redecorated, invitations were issued to staff officers and local families, and the band of the 18th Mississippi was brought in to play. The evening progressed in fine style until gunfire was heard in the distance and an orderly appeared to inform Stuart that a skirmish had erupted. Units under Wade Hampton and Thomas Munford had encountered Union cavalry and fighting ensued. Stuart and his staff immediately took to horse, gallantly encouraging the ladies of the ball to wait for their return. Eventually the troopers returned and dancing resumed, only to be interrupted again. This time it was the appearance of ambulances with Munford's casualties that ended the music, and as the wounded were brought in many of the ladies turned their attention to assisting the injured.[4]

One of the driving forces behind this story is the image of Stuart himself. Catherine Markell of Frederick described him as "a gay, rollicking cavalier and a great favorite with the girls."[5] Stonewall Jackson's wife called Stuart "gallant" and "dashing," and John Esten Cooke noted that: "There was about Stuart an inspiration of joy and youth."[6] For those who were perhaps less favorably inclined to Stuart, he could be described as a dandy, audacious, or even hungry for glory.[7] His passion for music is well documented; Sam Sweeney, his banjo player, was seldom far from his side, and Stuart surrounded himself with staffers who enjoyed the arts and socializing as much as their commanding officer. In his memoirs Blackford offered this description of Stuart's coterie:

> ... he collected around him a number of experts, not only in music, but in theatricals and tricks of various kinds, and they added much to the pleasure of camp life. Sweeny and his banjo and his negro melodies were the favorites; and Sweeny always carried his instrument slung at his back on marches, and often in long night marches the life of the men was restored by its tinkle.[8]

Stuart, then, enjoyed music, and his fondness for female company was also well-known. Hosting a ball was a way to enjoy both. Stuart was always described as a complete gentleman, yet it is interesting to note that he failed to mention the Sabers and Roses ball in his letters to his wife. He did tell her that the "Ladies of Maryland make a great fuss over your husband, loading me with bouquets, begging for autographs, etc. What shall I do? I find the most demonstrative joy on the part of most of the ladies and Marylanders are flocking by hundreds to our standards."[9]

Some of Stuart's subordinates may have felt differently about these evenings involving music and dancing. Although those like Fitzhugh Lee, who came from distinguished lineage and represented Virginia's old blood, participated happily in Stuart's ball, others, like South Carolinian Wade Hampton, were cut from a different cloth.[10] As Hampton's biographer noted: "It is not of record that he [Hampton] ever attended Stuart's frequent balls and concerts."[11] On September 8, 1862 Hampton was responsible for the pickets around Hyattstown, which might explain his absence from the Sabers and Roses ball. What did Hampton think of Stuart's ball? His concise and even terse report offers no clue: "The next day we moved to Urbana, in which neighborhood the brigade remained for several days, having various little skirmishes with the enemy near Hyattstown, driving them back on every occasion."[12]

Identifying those who did discuss the ball, as well as those who did not, helps to reconstruct the social framework surrounding such an event and the role it played during the war. Beginning with General Stuart's staff, the most lengthy and detailed description of the festivities comes from Heros von Borcke, a Prussian immigrant who served as Stuart's adjutant. Von Borcke not only planned the event but assumed the duty of Master of Ceremonies as well. William W. Blackford, who joined Stuart's staff as Chief Engineer, gave a similar although less detailed description. Lt. R. Channing Price, aide-de-camp to Stuart, was visiting another regiment on the night of the ball and did not participate; he does not mention the ball in his correspondence although he surely knew about it.[13] Major Henry B. McClellan, who would eventually become Stuart's adjutant, was not with Stuart at the time of the ball. He, too, omits the event completely when he later recounts Stuart's activities. Henry Kyd Douglas and Jedediah Hotchkiss, both of Stonewall Jackson's staff, do not mention the ball, although Douglas noted that upon arriving in the area "Stuart was ready to see and talk to every good-looking woman."[14] General Jackson himself made no mention of any social gathering of Stuart's, instead describing to his wife the church service he attended.[15]

If the accounts of the Sabers and Roses ball from military personnel are few, the civilian accounts are even fewer. Frederick's newspaper, *The Examiner,* was sacked on Saturday, September 6, so there was no issue released immediately following the ball. The first issue after restarting the press makes no mention of the event. This failure to make reference to the ball by so many is significant. While modern eyes might see the ball as one of the more peculiar happenings of the Maryland campaign, it seems to have made little impact on those not immediately involved. This may be due to the fact that the Saber and Roses ball may not have been particularly noteworthy to nineteenth century Americans. Dancing in all of its forms was fairly commonplace – it was one of the primary forms of entertainment in this country. From ballrooms to barns and plantations, Americans of all social ranks – including those enslaved – enjoyed dancing as a means of socializing.[16] It seems likely that many of those who knew of the ball simply did not record it, seeing it as a rather ordinary event and unworthy of special notice. It is also possible that concurrent events may have overshadowed the ball; September 8 is also the day that Lee released his well-known proclamation to the citizens of Maryland, inviting them to support the Southern cause.

The Sabers and Roses ball was one of many social events involving soldiers and civilians in mid-Maryland during the war. In her diary entry of September 8, 1862 Catherine Markell of Frederick noted that: "General William Barksdale of Mississippi and staff dined with us.... General McLaws and staff, General Kershaw and staff, took tea with us, some 20 officers and many girls here until midnight....

COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

▲ Heros von Borcke

USED WITH PERMISSION OF DOCUMENTING THE AMERICAN SOUTH, THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARIES

▲ Septima Collis

Our house so brilliantly illuminated at night and horses in charge of orderlies stood three deep, the length of the square."[17] Markell also entertained Stuart and his staff on September 12: "Generals Jeb Stuart, Fitz Lee, Wade Hampton, and all their aides with Dr. Davis Thompson, dined here. Gave General Stuart 'Southern Yankee Doodle' which so delighted him that he called up Sweeny, his banjo player – who played and sang 'Old Gray Hoss' and many other of his favorite songs. All the girls were here – several sang for him."[18]

Following the Battle of Antietam, Stuart moved his headquarters to "The Bower," the Dandbridge family home in Jefferson County, West Virginia. While there Lieutenant Channing Price reported: "We had a pleasant time, music & dancing, until 11 o'clock, then returned to our tents, the general finished up all his business & about 1 o'clock we got the music (violin banjo & bones) and gave a farewell serenade to the ladies of the 'Bower.'"[19] John Esten Cooke described countless musical social events involving Stuart (and others), ranging from spontaneous sing-a-longs to more formal affairs, including quite a few balls held by civilians or by members of the military.[20] And it was not just the officers who sought entertainment through music: one soldier reported that throughout the regiments on "moonlight nights the camps … echo … with joyful voices, and musical instruments are abundant."[21]

The Sabers and Roses Ball was by no means the only formal dance held in Frederick at this time. During the winter of 1861-1862, Septima Collis, the wife of a Union general, observed:

> The pièce de résistance of the season, in the way of amusement, was a ball given by Colonel and Mrs. Maltby, who lived in the suburbs of the town. The Colonel, if I remember rightly, then commanded a Maryland regiment or brigade. Their very large and well appointed residence was admirably adapted to gratify the desire of our hostess to make the occasion a memorable one; the immense hall served as the ballroom; the staircases afforded ample sitting room for those who did not participate in, or desired to rest from, the merry whirl, while the ante-rooms presented the most bountiful opportunities of quenching thirst or appeasing appetite. I shall never forget one little French lieutenant who divided his time with precise irregularity between the dance and the punch-bowl, and whose dangling sabre, in its revolutions in the waltz, left as many impressions upon friends as it ever did upon foes; yet it had the happy effect of giving the gentleman and his partner full possession of the field, whenever he could prevail upon some enterprising spinster to join him in cutting a swath through the crowd.[22]

In November of 1862 the following announcement was posted in the Frederick *Examiner*:

> One of the attractive features of Thanksgiving Day is a Grand Ball to be given at Junior Hall tomorrow evening by Mr. M. M. Shelly – Every precaution and care has been taken to make the occasion one of unalloyed festivity, and the admirable catering of the renowned and accomplished 'Mortimer' gives assurance that an evening of enjoyment is in reserve for all who present themselves at the Thanksgiving Ball. The graceful and beautiful Miss Ettie Palmer will be present.[23]

Music and dancing, then, played a large role in American culture during the Civil War. It appears that the Sabers and Roses ball was not perceived as a particularly unusual, or even notable, event. Yet this does not diminish its significance. The fact that it was an accepted and commonplace occurrence suggests its important social function. The Civil War proved an immense disruption to the social schedule for an enormous number of America's young men and women, who saw the timely securing of a proper spouse as essential to a successful life. Throughout the country, and especially in rural areas, the war not only drained communities of local men suitable for husbands, but put those men in an environment where meeting prospective brides was not likely. As Patricia Richard noted:

> Soldiers may have been thinking about their mothers just before the battle, as the popular

Civil War song suggests, but they desired a taste of home they could not get in letters exchanged with parents, siblings, other relatives, or male friends. They longed for the dances, the church meetings, and the kinds of activities that presented the opportunities to associate with respectable, single women.[24]

A military ball was a rare opportunity for "respectable" men and women to mingle in a socially acceptable environment at a time when such opportunities were rare.

Even for those not in search of a spouse, the social exchanges between soldiers and civilian women at events such as balls were an invaluable way to link the soldiers with that part of their previous lives that the women represented.[25] Such was the case for George Washington Hall of the 14th Georgia Volunteers when he visited home on furlough: "today I had the pleasure of being at a wedding.... I was the only young man there and the place was thronged with beautiful girls and they all vied with each other to see which could pay me the most attention. Such days as this is rarely seen in the life of a Soldier and will be long remembered."[26] Even the briefest contact with ladies was meaningful for soldiers like Dennis Tuttle of the 20th Indiana, who passed through central Maryland on his way to Gettysburg: "... Frederick is thoroughly a *Union city* and the enthusiasm was decidedly encouraging. We marched to the music of all the bands in the Division amidst the waving flags and handkerchiefs. It seemed odd as well as good to see so many Ladies and so many *sweet smiles* and encouraging looks and words."[27]

Such social contact was of inestimable value to soldiers, and the formal ball held a place of special importance, especially for the affluent classes. This was largely due to the strict codes of behavior that surrounded such events. Etiquette of the time was surprisingly comprehensive and in some ways remarkably inhibitive. The complex rules that governed social discourse allowed the upper class to exhibit and reinforce their standing; at the same time participating in such courtly rituals was a means for the upwardly mobile middle class to improve its social standing. Well-bred or "proper" behavior was equated with genteel society and hence seen as critical to social advancement. As a result, many Americans sought the advice of the countless etiquette guides, including dance and music manuals, published at the time.[28] Stonewall Jackson, while still a cadet at West Point and sensitive to his lack of experience in high society, copied the following maxim from an etiquette book into his private notes: "Good-breeding, or true politeness, is the art of showing men by external signs the internal regard we have for them. It arises from good sense, improved by good company. It must be acquired by practice and not by books."[29] Likewise, the young Jeb Stuart included music lessons as part of his training to become a gentleman: "There is a singing school in town at this time taught by J. B. Wise. He has a great many scholars both male and female – among others I am a scholar. Mr. Wise has composed several pieces of music for the piano and you never heard the like of so much music."[30]

For some, the pursuit of refinement led to unexpected difficulties. On Friday evening, August 1, 1862, a group of young men from Frederick County, Maryland, were arrested by the Provost Marshal and charged with "conspiracy against the government." They claimed that they "were only members of a class in Dancing. Hill's store was closed about 8 p.m., that evening, and within the next hour the 'dancing scholars' gradually and quietly collected and went through their 'lesson' without music. The Provost Guard, however, soon made them dance to a new tune."[31] Whether these young men were scheming secessionists may never be known, but the claim that they were taking a class in dancing – in a border state with the war escalating – indicates the normality of such activities for at least a portion of American society.

Where better for proper behavior to be exhibited than at the ultimate social event of the time – a ball? Even from the moment of arrival one's code of conduct was dictated. Consider the following from a popular dance manual of the time:

> On entering the Ball-room, make your obeisance to the hostess, should it be a private ball. If at a public ball, the gentlemen merely conduct their ladies to a seat. If you wish an introduction, it is usual to make application to the [Master of Ceremonies], or Stewards, who will seek a partner for you. In a private party you would ask the hostess, or some member of the family, to introduce you.[32]

Such rules were in place to guarantee honorable behavior by all parties, as well as to ensure that the introductions that did take place were between those who were of equitable standing. In other words, it allowed for a formalized system of courting. In genteel society, anything

JUNIOR HALL.

BY Particular request of the Officers and Citizens of this place a Grand Select Military and Civic

BALL.

will be given on MONDAY NIGHT, FEBRUARY 2nd 1863 It is the intention of the Committee of this Ball, to make it one of the most Select of the Season. Nothing will be wanting on their part to make pleasant and agreeable to all who may be pleased to attend on the above Evening. No spirituous Liquors will be allowed in the Hall nor anything else that will have a tendency to mar the pleasures of the evening. This is positive! Cards of Admission are placed at $1,00, to be had at the following places:- George C. Johnsons, Jewelry Store, Cor. Church and Market St., Thos. E. Pope, Cor. of Market & Second St., V. F. Fraser, Court St., and of the Committee HENRY C. HACK,
Jan. 28 Manager.

COURTESY OF JAMES DAVIS

Advertisement in *The Examiner* (Frederick, MD) for a "Grand Select Military and Civic Ball" to be held in Frederick in 1863.

In this war of manners, then, hosting a ball or dancing a waltz were public means of demonstrating not only one's own status, but also proving social and cultural superiority over the enemy. And it followed that if the enemy was lacking in character, so too was his music.

else would be considered vulgar: "Whatever preference may be felt, none should be shown in a public assemble of pleasure, which should be one large family, and universal urbanity should prevail throughout.... The ball-room is not the proper place for making love, but for general and agreeable association."[33]

Von Borcke's description of Stuart's Sabers and Roses ball reveals that such guidelines were firmly in place. The invited guests arrived on site "according to their rank and fortune." Von Borcke described himself as "master of ceremonies," responsible for selecting the best order of dances and introducing couples, and he chose to begin the evening with a polka. Much to his surprise his intended partner declined the invitation, saying "she did not join in round dances." Round dances (polkas and waltzes, for example) were those that had couples paired together and dancing with each other, usually in close physical contact. These types of dances were considered more intimate than the older line and square dances (reels, quadrilles), where couples were grouped together and danced as a larger unit.[34] The young lady's announcement initially surprised von Borcke:

> ...making me uncomfortably acquainted for the first time with the fact that in America, and especially in the South, young ladies rarely waltz except with brothers or first cousins, and indulge only in reels and contre-dances with strangers. Not to be baffled, however, I at once ordered the time of the music to be changed, and had soon forgotten my disappointment as to the polka in a very lively quadrille.[35]

With the codes of genteel culture governing social events, the ball was viewed as a viable and respectable activity in which to participate, even between battles. The ball also reflected a view of the relationship between civilized behavior and warfare. In any war, and especially in a civil war, accusations of barbaric behavior abound, as both sides seek to demean their opponent while elevating their own troops and citizenry. Witnesses to the American Civil War were no exception, and numerous accounts can be found that show attempts to denigrate the character or moral quality of the enemy.[36] During the Confederate occupation of Frederick, a Southern correspondent reported: "Though thousands of soldiers are now roaming through the town [Frederick] there has not been a solitary instance of misdemeanor. I have heard no shouting, no clamor of any kind, and seen but a single case of intoxication – a one-legged Yankee prisoner."[37] Unionists resorted to the same rhetoric in their propaganda; following the Southern retreat from Frederick, the editor of *The Examiner* wrote in response to some recent unseemly behavior:

> Whilst it is gratifying to note that a returning sense of propriety restrains most of the rebel females of this city, pretending to decency and refinement of feeling, from publicly insulting federal officers and soldiers, who are strangers to them, and induces them to leave such demonstrations of low-breeding to those from whom nothing better is expected.... We are happy to say that this ill-bred she-rebel is not an inhabitant of Frederick, and that such conduct is now seldom seen here, except on the part of public women.[38]

In this war of manners, then, hosting a ball or dancing a waltz were public means of demonstrating not only one's own status, but also proving social and cultural superiority over the enemy. And it followed that if the enemy was lacking in character, so too was his music. Dr. Lewis Steiner, representing the U.S. Sanitary Commission, offered his view of the Confederate troops as they entered Frederick. On September 6 he noted: "They had but little music; what there was gave us 'My Maryland' and Dixie in execrable style." Later he would expand on his musical-moral critique: "Their apologies for regimental bands were vile and excruciating. The only real music in their column to-day was from a bugle blown by a negro. Drummers and fifers of the same color abounded in their ranks."[39] For Steiner

the character of the enemy was obvious in his music, and he mocks their claims of gallantry: "A motlier group was never herded together. But *these* were the chivalry – the deliverers of Maryland from Lincoln's oppressive yoke."[40] Steiner's linking of music and morality was not exceptional. The concept of music as a "high art" in this county had begun to take shape in the decades preceding the Civil War, such that there was an emergent perception of music as a moral agent. Following the lead of reformers such as Lowell Mason and Samuel A. Eliot in Boston, many Americans were beginning to treat music less as "simple entertainment" and more as an edifying practice.[41] In *The American Chesterfield,* a popular etiquette guide of the time, low-class music was directly linked with poor behavior: "A taste for sculpture and painting, is, in my mind, as becoming, as a taste for fiddling and piping is unbecoming, a man of fashion. The former is connected with history and poetry; the latter, with nothing that I know of, but bad company."[42]

It is arguable that many soldiers felt this way about certain musical performances, with the highest regard being reserved for religious music and performances by the regimental bands. Stonewall Jackson, when writing to his wife, refers to her visiting his camp to hear the brigade band; on August 22, 1861 he wrote, "I wish my darling could be with me now and enjoy the sweet music of the brass band of the Fifth Regiment. It is an excellent band." Then, on September 9 of the same year, he wrote, "If my darling were here, I know she would enjoy General Jones's band, which plays very sweetly."[43] In both cases it is relevant that he links her visit with the band, as if the musical performance is the one aspect of his military life that is most suited to her presence.

For many soldiers there was an intrinsic link between the idealized vision of womanhood and the art of music, as when Stuart wrote to A. S. Brown that: "Cousin Kittie says you must be sure to call on her on your way to Charlottesville. Take care you don't leave your heart in her custody – she plays and sings delightfully. One thing you will be struck with in her singing, that is, distinct articulation, with a *sweet voice*."[44] When united with religious or spiritual matters, the impact could be even greater, as Samuel Potter of the 140th Pennsylvania showed when describing Christmas Eve of 1862 to his wife. He says that the night is "like all other evenings" but there was "not so much swearing, and card playing and blackguarding going on as usual." He continued:

> The evening was passed in singing hymns and prayer. There are some splendid singers in our Regt, and at all times we can hear the music of numerous brass bands, and all sorts of military music in every direction both far and near. These sounds mingled with the pious songs in our own camp rendered the evening pleasant and grand, and highly impressive. I wish, darling Sophie, that you could be in camp with me one evening until 9 o'clock, and then you could understand my meaning.[45]

The passion exhibited by soldiers and civilians alike when discussing music reveals the depth and profundity of their musical experiences, enough so that entertainments such as a ball could be viewed as bearing equal importance with other civilian activities during the war, such as patriotic assemblies, charity fairs, and mustering rallies. At the same time, a ball did something more: the gallant and civilized behavior displayed at a ball reinforced the widespread view of how proper war was to be enacted. A ball could bolster the perception that participants were behaving as "gentleman" and "ladies" and, despite the horrors of the battlefield, that they remained proper and civilized. In retrospect, Stuart's Sabers and Roses ball becomes less an act of frivolity and more an attempt to cope with the social and psychological wounds caused by the war.

Jeb Stuart's ball for his officers and the locals of Urbana, Maryland may seem anachronistic to modern readers. In some ways it is startling that the brutal conflict surrounding these individuals could not keep them from enjoying music and dancing, even when a nearby skirmish forced the soldiers to depart for a brief time. Incidents like this might even lead the casual observer to question the seriousness with which the participants approached the war. Yet the seeming absurdity of dancing at a ball while immersed in violent bloodshed is less an indication of a frivolous view towards the war and more a reflection of the importance that music, dancing, and "civilized" behavior in general played in the lives of nineteenth century Americans.

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