

Primary Source: A Female Raid ^[1]

On the 18th of March, 1863, the streets of Salisbury, North Carolina, were invaded by a group of about 50 determined local women, identified only as wives and mothers of Confederate soldiers. The women believed that local merchants had been profiteering by raising the prices of necessary foods and demanded that the merchants sell these goods at government prices. When the merchants refused, the women broke down one shop door with hatchets and threatened other storekeepers. What a local newspaper described as the "Female Raid" netted the women twenty-three barrels of flour as well as quantities of molasses, salt, and even twenty dollars in cash.

The Salisbury "Bread Riot," and the more widely known food riot in Richmond, Virginia, also in 1863, are dramatic evidence of the stresses on local life brought on by the Civil War. Volunteers for the Confederate army from Salisbury and surrounding Rowan County at the beginning of the war were by and large young, unmarried men. In 1862 demand for fresh troops brought about the increasing enlistment of older men with wives and families. In a county such as Rowan, with a large number of small farms, the absence of a husband and father was a serious economic loss. The failure of the county's attempt to provide for soldiers' families also contributed to the hardship. The fact that the women involved in the incident were never prosecuted is evidence of the understanding and sympathy of their neighbors. The Carolina Watchman, which reported the incident, extended its most scathing criticism not to the women, but to the county commissioners who failed to provide adequate aid for soldiers' families and who should "go, all blushing with shame for the scene enacted in our streets on Wednesday last."

Between 40 and 50 soldiers' wives, followed by a numerous train of curious female observers, made an attack on several of our businessmen last Wednesday, whom they regarded as [speculators](#) ^[2] in the necessities of life, for the purpose, as we are informed, of demanding an [abatement](#) ^[3] in prices, oor forcibly taking possession of the goods they required. The first house visited was Mr. M. Brown's. They demanded he should sell them flour at \$19.50 per barrel. This he declined to do, alledging that his flour had cost him more than twice that sum. They then said they were determined to have the flour, and would take it, unless he would sell it to them at the price Government was paying for it; and accordingly went to work with hatchets on his store room door. After some time spent in vain efforts to open the door, a [parley](#) ^[4] was had, and Mr. Brown agreed to give them, free of charge, ten barrels, if that would satisfy them. They accepted the offer, the flour was rolled out and hauled off.

They next visited Mr. John Enniss, of the firm of Henderson & Enniss, and made a similar demand on him. He gave them three barrels of flour.

They next called on Mr. Frankford, who, it is reported, told them he had not been speculating in [provisions](#) ^[5], and that he now had nothing in his store but himself, "so ladies if you take anything here, you will have to take me -- yes, take me. I'll go with you any where you please. They next called on Mr. H. Sprague. Mr. S. received them in his usual calm and courteous manner, and gave them a barrel of molasses.

They also called on Mr. David Weil, whom they charge with having run up flour from \$40 to \$50, and who was supposed to have a large lot at the [depot](#) ^[6] to be shipped South. It turned out that he had none within their convenient reach. He gave them a sack of salt.

They next called on Mr. Thos. Foster, who was advertising salt [onconsignment](#) ^[7]. He told them the salt belonged to a man in Wilmington, and that he had no interest in it beyond that of an agent. That he felt it to be his duty to protect it, &c., and that rather than they should take it, he would give them \$20 out of his own pocket. Some one in the crowd answered - "we will take that, and the salt too." Mr. Foster replied, that he would take the responsibility of also giving them one sack of salt. They accepted this offer and left.

They also called at the door of a building formerly occupied by Mr. Simmons; but we think they found nothing there.

And finally they visited the North Carolina depot, in search of flour supposed to belong to Mr. Weil, and other parties believed to be speculators in this and other provision articles. They found, and took forcible possession of, ten barrels flour belonging to some one in Charlotte.

This completed the day's work. The next morning was spent in settling the question of division -- a delicate, and as it proved, a difficult question. There was some disputing, flashing of eyes, and some angry words. It was, however, accomplished, whether satisfactorily to all or no, we cannot say.

This movement was aimed as a blow at the practice of speculating in provisions. Whether or not it fell on proper subjects is not for us to determine. Indeed, that is a question which none should presumptuously decide.

These proceedings were also caused, in part, by pinching want. It is said there are many families in this town and [vicinity](#) ^[8] who have not tasted meat for weeks, and some times, months together. Of course, they have had no butter, molasses, or sugar. Many of them have no gardens and consequently no vegetables of their own raising, and the scarcity and high price of potatoes, peas, beans, &c, [render](#) ^[9] it extremely difficult if at all possible to obtain these articles. What, then, have

they to support life? Bread and water! Bread is the only thing with their limited means they could provide for themselves; and at present prices, it is not very easy for even the industrious poor to provide this. They certainly cannot afford to buy flour at \$50 per barrel. Fortunately, our soil is peculiarly adapted to CORN, which, as a staff of life, is not excelled in the world. And we believe there is enough of this invaluable rain in the country to save us from suffering. The only difficulty about it is in distributing it among the people. Speculators must be prevented from sending it out of the reach of our needy people. Avaricious ^[10] horders of grain and other provisions, for high prices, must open their eyes to the danger of their selfish and covetous ^[11] practices. It is impossible for the poor to endure the hardships and privations ^[12] these two classes have imposed upon them. They cannot, they will not, and it is the part of wisdom to recognise the truth and provide against the danger which threatens the good order and well being of the country. Speculators must stop their operations or they will ruin themselves and every one else. Those who have surplus provisions must make up their minds to put themselves on short allowance for the sake of the common good, and sell their surplus not to those who can pay the highest prices, but to those whose wants are most pressing.

The darkest days of our struggle are coming on. The times which try men's souls are at hand, and cursed be he who is not willing, not only to stake his property, but his life for the sake of our cause.

The Commisioners appointed by the County Court to administer relief to soldiers' families, and who were authorized to use the credit of the County for this purpose to the amount of \$50,000 will be held accountable in large part for this first demonstration of lawlessness? How have they discharged their trust? Have they any stores of corn or other provisions to distribute out to the destitute ^[13] families of soldiers? None whatever. They thought it best to give them the money, and let the heads of families purchase their own supplies where it would suit them best. An honest conviction, no doubt, but the plan has been subject to the grossest abuses for months, and has failed in accomplishing the end designed. Many have applied for an obtained money who were not in need, whilst helpless and suffering ones in remote parts of the county have received nothing. If the present Board of Commissioners continue to hold their office, they should immediately lay aside their pride of opinion and judgment and visit Mecklenburg, Davie, Iredell, and other neighboring counties where similar appropriations ^[14] have been made for the relief of solders' families, and learn from the Commissioners of these counties how they dispense this public fund for the relief of the needy. Let them go, all blushing with shame for the scene enacted in our streets on Wednesday last, and sit at the feet of the more successful Commissioners of these counties and learn practical wisdom and enlarged views on a subject of vital importance to the country. They have trifled with the confidence reposed in them until the mob fiend ^[15] has displayed his hideous form in our midst. Do they suppose they will escape the fury of the devil their mal-administration has helped to arouse? Men of position are already suspicioned of countenancing ^[16], if they did not secretly provoke, the proceedings of last Wednesday. It is natural, for one of the immediate and sure results of such out breaks is the distinction of confidence between man and man, and the conception of dark suspicions and restless jealousies. Let official show by extra diligence in the discharge of their duties as Justices of the Peace and as Commissioners, that these suspicions are groundless as to them. They owe it to themselves and to the public and will not escape the consequences of neglect.

If the ladies who composed the party of last Wednesday will take the trouble to think a little, they will see that although that day's work may not prove hurtful, yet that the experiment of "impressments" is a very dangerous one, and must, if persisted, lead to the gravest consequences imaginable. In the first place, it is unjust to the few whose property is taken. Others who have done as much or more to bring them in trouble, are unfairly permitted to escape. For instance, it was the duty of the Commissioners for relieving soldiers' families to have practiced common foresight and purchased provisions for their use, so that none would be left to suffer by heartless speculators. You passed by these Commissioners on Wednesday and made your demand on those you considered speculators. The latter have been doing what every body loves to do, to wit: making money. The former have proved inefficient and unworthy the trust committed to their hands for your benefit. Was your decision just? The Commissioners are sharp business men in their own affairs, and stood as good a chance to look ahead for you, as the speculators to look ahead and make money for themselves.

Again, many a speculator whom you did *not* visit, is as guilt as those you did visit. It is not fair that one should be made to answer and another allowed to escape. All should be treated alike. But how will you do this? Some have made thousands of dollars, others only hundreds. How will you grade your demands so as to make them bear equally on all? It ought so to bear, for it is manifestly ^[17] wrong to deal partially with them. What a difficult task it would be to proceed upon this rule! and yet it is the only fair one. In fact, your plan can't be made to work equally unless you could require every man in the community to make a truthful exhibit of his business transactions since the war began; and without equality, there will be just cause of complaint, there will be bitterness of feelings, and speedily we shall see wrangling, and deadly strifes amongst ourselves; for these are the fruits of lawless proceedings. We shall then destroy each other out-right, and fall an easy prey to the unprincipled and cruel enemy who is seeking to subjugate ^[18] our country.

The County of Rowan at the beginning of the war, appropriated \$50,000 for the relief of soldiers' families. The Legislature has also made a liberal appropriation of which Rowan will receive some sixteen or seventeen thousand more. This if properly managed, will certainly save the beneficiaries ^[19] from extreme suffering. But this provision, handsome as it is, will not admit of any considerable number depending on it alone. We must *all* work, ad work hard, to support ourselves by producing our own food and clothing, as far as possible. This fund is intended as a help, and not as a main dependence. Indeed, it would be impossible for the County or State to support the people in idleness ^[20]. All must work, and make out with as little as possible. Our soliders in the field are often reduced to half and even quarter rations ^[21]. Let us at home persevere as they do, hoping in God for a final triumphant issue out of all these our present sore trials. It will surely come if we are faithful to ourselves. But in God's name let us not fall to devouring each other by mobs, dishonoring the memory of those who have so nobly fell in our defence [sic], blasting every hope of the present, and drawing down upon our future the blackness of darkness; but rather let us actually mutually associate, and support each other in these times of trouble

and distress.

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Artifacts:



Sowing and Reaping, an editorial illustration of the Southern Bread Riot printed in 1863.

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