

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Mary Chesnut

By **Catherine Clinton**, University of Texas at San Antonio

Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
C. Vann Woodward, ed.	<i>Mary Chesnut's Civil War</i> . 2 vols. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981.

Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Chesnut, Mary Boykin, Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett, eds.	<i>A Diary from Dixie</i> . New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905.
Chesnut, Mary Boykin, Ben Ames Williams, ed.	<i>A Diary From Dixie</i> . Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1949.
Clinton, Catherine, ed.	<i>Mary Chesnut's Diary</i> . New York: Penguin Press, 2011.
Daniels, Martha M. and Barbara E. McCarthy	<i>Mary Chesnut's Illustrated Diary</i> . 2 vols. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2011.
DeCredico, Mary A.	<i>Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Confederate Woman's Life</i> . Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 1996.
Glymph, Thavlia	"African American Women in the Literary Imagination of Mary Chesnut," in Robert Paquette & Louis Ferleger, eds., <i>Slavery, Secession and Southern History</i> , Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000.
Muhlenfeld, Elisabeth S.	<i>Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography</i> . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

Muhlenfeld, Elisabeth S. ed.	<i>Two Novels by Mary Chesnut</i> . Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002.
Stern, Julia	<i>Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
Wilson, Edmund	<i>Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War</i> . New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
Woodward, C. Vann & Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, eds.	<i>The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries</i> . New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Organizations

Web Resources

URL	Name and description
http://www.c-span.org/video/?164438-1/writings-mary-chesnut	This is a C-Span video entitled Writings of Mary Chesnut showing a Round Table chaired by Walter Edgar, director of University of South Carolina Institute for Southern Studies.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StS3gpywkw	This is a YouTube video on Mary Chesnut's Illustrated Diary at the Carolina Library.
Mulberry, U.S. Route 521, Camden, Kershaw County, SC	Materials to designate Mulberry Plantation as National Historical Landmark from the Library of Congress Historic American Buildings Survey.
http://www.nationalregister.sc.gov/kershaw/S10817728009/index.htm	Description and Images of Mulberry Plantation from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Other Sources

Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut	This is a brief entry discussing Mayr Chesnut from Documenting the American South University Library of University of North Carolina which is available at: http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/bio.html

Scholars

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Topic Précis

Mary Chesnut was a diarist whose writings were never published during her lifetime, but whose “diary” has been reworked for print by a handful of editors and scholars over the past century. Chesnut’s diary provides one of the most vivid voices from this era, because, as one of her editors, C. Vann Woodward, suggests: “The enduring value of the work, crude and unfinished as it is, lies in the life and reality with which it endows people and events and with which it evokes the chaos and complexity of a society at war. Her cast of characters includes slaves and brown half-brothers, poor whites and sandhillers, overseers and drivers, common soldiers and solid yeomen, as well as the very top elite of state, military, and society that thronged her drawing room and saw her daily.” Is her book embellished memoir, propagandistic puffery, confessional, self-aggrandizing or all of the above? In the late 1870s, when she decided to return to autobiography, Mary embellished her scribbles: transforming as she transcribed. Chesnut’s alleged clairvoyance was retroactively sprinkled into her chronicle. As she reshaped her journal, imagination overtook center stage. She blended memos and memories with hindsight—heightening the drama, creating an account massaged for effect. Chesnut spent her later years wrestling with the manuscript. During her prolonged bouts of editing, she put her materials into forty-four notebooks and fifteen pads. She then recalled and recast events, assembling a complex jumble of palimpsests to be interlaced into an epic. During her final years, Chesnut preserved only three of her original volumes, completely refurbishing her “diary” into a memoir. She would interleaf amplifications into the original text to make herself look prescient. Chesnut died in 1886. Her dear friend Isabella D. Martin, a South Carolina

educator to whom Chesnut entrusted her jumble of pages, shared the manuscript many years later with author Myrta Lockett Avary and D. Appleton & Company editor Frances Halsey Together they pruned enthusiastically culling roughly 130,000 words from the more than a million Chesnut left behind. At the turn of the twentieth century many readers ached for the lost world where Confederate hopes were not yet erased. Chesnut's edited diary was first published as: Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905). In the book, Chesnut employs African American agency to advance her message. She brings in a chorus to reinforce the points she hammers home about the wickedness of Yankees and the virtues of her fellow Confederates. Chesnut's recollections stress masters' benevolence and African American fealty. She was, above all, an unapologetic promoter of her class. The book remains riveting reading. G. Thomas Couser calls it "a novelized chronicle in diary form." The snap, crackle and pop of the book's creativity fascinates--for what it reveals, as much as what it attempts to disguise. Since the first publication of her autobiographical writings in 1905, Chesnut's reputation has been on the rise. She has attracted two fine biographers, Mary DeCredico and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld. The latter has also edited Chesnut's unpublished fiction (2002) and co-edited Chesnut's unrevised wartime journal entries (1984). Douglas Southall Freeman called her book "the most famous war-diary of a Southern woman." Louis D. Rubin, Jr. declared she had produced "by all odds the best of all Civil War memoirs, and one of the most remarkable eye-witness accounts to emerge from that or any other war." And finally, William Styron proclaimed Chesnut the author of "a great epic drama of our greatest national tragedy." And despite her text's anti-Yankee bias, none other than Lyman Butterfield, as editor in chief of the Adams Papers—with impeccable Yankee credentials—anoointed her work, "the best written by a woman in the whole range of our history."
