

Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 1998)

Elizabeth Varon's aptly titled monograph, *We Mean to be Counted*, challenges the perceived wisdom that antebellum southern white women were excluded from the political arena. Her case study of middle- and upper-class women in Virginia adopts a similar line of inquiry to Suzanne Leacock's earlier book, *Free Women of Petersburg*. Varon uses extensive primary materials to demonstrate that slaveholding women in the state were active politically, especially during the three decades prior to the Civil War.

Virginia women made their mark by engaging in various benevolent reforms, verbalizing their sentiments in writing, and participating in political events. A number of women were active in the controversial Colonization movement and the temperance cause. They became partners with men in forging a political consensus. Female writers initially promoted national harmony, but as southern sentiments shifted, they became strong pro-slavery defenders. Their anti-Tom novels responded to Harriet Beecher Stowe's best seller by portraying slavery as a benevolent institution, especially compared to the "free" labour system in the North. Essays and letters by females answered northern and European critics of slavery. The Whigs were the first political party to systematically use women. Whig leaders identified female partisanship and encouraged women to petition and attend rallies, realizing that women's softening influences and moral beneficence could influence male voters and lend a more compassionate image to the rough and tumble of politics.

Southern women's loyalty to the region strengthened as secession approached. With Lincoln's election in 1860 and his call for northern troops following the attack on Fort Sumter, Virginia women became loyal defenders of the Confederacy. Ardent secessionists saw women as critical to their efforts to encourage men to defend the cause.

We Mean to be Counted is a well-written, carefully argued examination of Virginia women's public roles. Varon sets herself apart from other scholars who claim southern women's political voices were either muted or ineffective and from those who pinpointed the Civil War as the moment that first unleashed women's political interests. She argues that female political involvement began long before the Civil War and that their public actions and verbal responses after 1865 had sound precedents. Just as antebellum Virginia women played a pivotal role in supporting Colonization, preserving Mount Vernon, and raising money for a statue to honour Henry Clay, they raised money for Confederate monuments and continued to promote prohibition after the War. A few even fought for women's suffrage. Varon sees Virginia women's post-War political involvement as a continuum rather than something new.

While Varon ably argues her thesis, her definition of political involvement

is a broad one. However active women were in the political sphere, they still lacked basic rights such as suffrage and equal treatment under the law. She also admits that Virginia was somewhat atypical, being more political, urban, and industrial than other southern states. Nevertheless, this study broadens our understanding of antebellum southern women's lives and their involvement in a world beyond their traditional domestic sphere. Whether this case study speaks for other southern women, particularly those in the Deep South, remains for other scholars to consider.

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