

# Girls helping the cause

Julia Pickens Gwyn to Selina Louisa Avery Lenoir, November 4, 1861, in the Lenoir Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## As you read...

This letter from Julia Pickens Gwyn, a girl of sixteen, to her grandmother describes some of the many activities of southern women on the home front in North Carolina.

In the nineteenth century, southerners purchased cloth made in the North or in Great Britain. When the Union blockade cut off imports from Britain, southerners had to improvise. Women from all economic backgrounds had to make their own cloth, which was called "homespun." Women took cotton grown in the South, spun it into thread using a spinning wheel, and then wove the thread into cloth using a loom. They often dyed the cloth using dye made from local plants. Homespun was often very coarse and the color was often not very attractive. But it was considered patriotic in the South to wear dresses made from homespun cloth rather than silk or lace dresses (which were impossible to obtain by the end of the war anyway).

In addition to sewing clothing for themselves and their children, women had the added burden of making clothing and blankets for Confederate troops.

The blockade also limited the importation of luxury food items, such as sugar, molasses, and coffee. As the war dragged on, everyday necessities, such as flour and salt, became expensive and difficult to obtain. Southern women, including Julia, learned to improvise.

## JULIA PICKENS GWYN

Julia Pickens Gwyn, born in 1845, was the daughter of Mary Ann Lenoir and James Gwyn, and on her mother's side, the great-granddaughter of Revolutionary War general and statesman William Lenoir. Her father was a planter, clerk of court, and merchant, and after 1852 the Gwyns moved to Green Hill Plantation, near Ronda in Wilkes County. Julia's grandmother, to whom she was writing, lived at the Lenoir family home of Fort Defiance in Caldwell County.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How many of Julia's family members were involved in making cloth and sewing clothing for the Confederate Army?
2. What were some of the items of clothing Julia and her family sewed?
3. What other food and household items did Julia and her family make?
4. From this letter, how do you think Julia felt about spending so much time making cloth and clothing for Confederate soldiers?
5. How do you think she felt about wearing homespun dresses?

6. What family news did Julia include in this letter to her grandmother?
7. What was Julia's opinion of the Confederate war effort?
8. How did Julia describe the North or "the Yankees?"

Home Nov 4th 1861

My Dear Grandma

It has been a long time since I wrote to you last, and I am ashamed for having neglected it so long, I hope you will forgive me for the delay. We have all been so very busy, that I actually have not taken time to write a letter to anybody. We have been working a good deal for the soldiers, I believe the homeguard have supplied the first company with clothing for the winter and will soon begin to work for the second. Mr Barber's company started about two weeks ago, I was at Wilkesboro during the time that the uniform was making up, but I did not stay until the company started. Some of us were going up to see them start but the river was up so that we could not go. Cousin Ransom went up, he said that it was a splendid looking company, and left in perfect order, no drinking at all [*sic*]. We did not work as much for Mr Barber's as we wished, but we kept telling them to send us more work and they did not do it. Mother sent them six blankets. Mrs Barber is very lovely, she wants some of us to go and stay with her this winter, I think Millie will go and stay awhile she wants to go and wear her homespun dress. We have made some very pretty homespun this fall, it is the most uncommon looking I ever saw. Cousin Dick speaks of starting to Manassa [*sic*] with the boxes of clothing to day, I believe Tom is going with him, they got a letter from Cousin Nath dated the 28th he was very well then. Cousin Lizzie has been working very hard lately they have had a great many overcoats to make, and a great many gloves and socks to knit. We made some shirts, and knit some gloves, socks, and comforters for their box, I think Uncle Dickie intends to have them warm enough, he has had [*sic*] some jeans shirts made and ever so many overcoats to come down to their feet nearly. Cousin Sallie Hugh has not been up to see us yet, Millie has been down there several times but she has not been up yet, I have not seen her since she came over. Mary and I have been spinning and weaving lately, I wove a dress for myself or nearly all of it. I have not told you anything about the children yet. I know one thing about them, they are very bad and nearly all in rags, for we have been working so much for the soldiers that we have not done anything scarcely for the family and now it is absolutely necessary. Joyce is a mighty sweet little thing when she tries to be, and very bright and smart, she will soon be walking I think. Willie is not very well he has been sick a day or two, but is better now he "says he is going to get behind Coon on a horse and shoot the Yankees". I believe Nora is as fat as ever Millie has shingled her head and she looks mighty sweet. Laura is pretty rapid I tell you, she is learning right fast can read very well, she has been knitting some too, she wants to see little Jule mighty bad she says. Jim and Wat are just running wild I do wish Jim was going to school in Lenoir he could learn so fast and he is not learning a thing here at home. Now is the very time for him to be studying as hard as he can I know he can study when he tries.

I want to see you all very much, I would like so much to go up there, but I don't know when I can again, I wish I could see Gwyn and Tommie, they are such sweet little fellows.

Mother got a letter from Mrs Fulton last week she had not hear from her before in several years, she said that Uncle Tom called to see her once, and she hoped to see him very often. We had a great many pumpkins This year, we are going to make some molasses in a few weeks don't you want some? I do not like it as much as the sugar cane molasses, Uncle Hickinson made some very nice and sent us some. We have had another glorious victory, the scene at the battle of Leesburg<sup>1</sup> must have been terrific, our forces driving the Yankees in the Potomac river<sup>2</sup> like a herd of swine or something so, and shooting at their heads every time they would pop up out of the water. It does seem that Providence is on our side we have gained so many brilliant victories over them, and they always have every advantage almost. I hope this wind is blowing old Abe's<sup>3</sup> ships the wrong way, I think that storm the other night must have swept some of them to David Jones<sup>4</sup> I hope so anyhow. Well! Grandma I reckon I must stop Jim is going to start to Elkin<sup>5</sup> in a few minutes and I must have my letter ready to send by him, I know it is a poor one, but I am sorry to say that I do not write any other sort. Mother says that she has so much word to send and so much to say that she gets out of *[illegible]* and wont begin.

Give a heap of love to all for me and accept a double portion for yourself. I reckon the other children would send theirs if I would as them so you can take it for granted sent.

Your Very Affectionate Grandchild  
Julia

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## Notes

1. The Battle of Leesburg was fought on October 21, 1861. It was the second Civil War battle fought in Virginia. Confederate troops successfully drove Union forces out of northern Virginia and back to Washington, D.C. Although it was a significant battle at the time, it was relatively minor compared with the battles fought during the last two years of the war.
2. The Potomac river marks the border between Washington, D.C., and Maryland, as well as between present-day Virginia and West Virginia. (West Virginia seceded from Virginia during the Civil War and was made a state in 1863.) During the Civil War, the Potomac was the physical marker that divided the North from the South.
3. Abe was the nickname for Abraham Lincoln and it was used derogatorily in the South.
4. "Davy Jones' locker" is a nickname for the bottom of the sea, usually referring to the final resting place of drowned sailors.
5. Elkin, North Carolina, is northwest of Winston-Salem.