




## Grappling With Gender, Religion, and Higher Education in the South: Mary Sharp College from Its Founding Through the Civil War

Cynthia Reifsteck Gage\*

\* Independent Scholar, Austin, Texas,  
United States.  
Email: [CynththiaReifsteck@gmail.com](mailto:CynththiaReifsteck@gmail.com)

### Article Info

Received: January 6, 2022  
Revised: February 2, 2022  
Accepted: February 8, 2022

 10.46303/jcsr.2022.4

### How to cite

Gage, C. R. (2022). Grappling With Gender, Religion, and Higher Education in The South: Mary Sharp College from Its Founding Through the Civil War. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 4(1), 31-42.  
<https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.2022.4>

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers a case study of how regional, gender, and religious ideals collided at one Tennessee women's college during the antebellum and Civil War eras. Mary Sharp College, founded by Baptists in 185, strongly advocated for women's education that equaled the contemporary men's institutions. Local factors relating to religion and education contributed to the creation of Mary Sharp College. Tennessee Baptists founded the college as a replacement for more informal education of women and made the school the first women's college in the U.S. to require Latin and Greek. Two key early figures tied to college, the Vermont-born Graves brothers. James Robinson Graves, a Baptist pastor and editor of *The Tennessee Baptist*, provided advertising for the college; Zuinglius Calvin Graves, a Baptist educator, gave it direction. J. R. and Z. C. Graves combined southern identity, gender ideology, and Baptist piety to produce a unique form of higher education for women. Although the Graves brothers saw the home and family as the proper place for southern white women, they still believed in the necessity of a rigorous education. Mary Sharp built up faith and southern character in women and prepared them for their chief service to society: motherhood. When the Civil War came, despite their own northern connections and divided loyalties in Tennessee, the Graves brothers and their college fully supported the Confederacy. Despite the college's supposedly secure location, an occupation by the Union army led the school to close in 1863 and remain closed until 1866, when it reopened as a much weaker school but as one firmly committed both to educated female piety and to the "Lost Cause."

### KEYWORDS

Higher education; history of education; Mary Sharp College; Civil War; gender history; women's college; Baptist history; Southern history.

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## INTRODUCTION

Zuinglius Calvin Graves, a Baptist originally from the North and founder of the all-women's Mary Sharp College, located in Winchester, Tennessee, declared to its first graduating class in 1855,

Your place in the great harvest field of life is entirely different from that of the male. The wide world is their field, and its multiplied pursuits present themselves for their choice both on sea and land.... But yours is a far different sphere. 'Home,' in the beautiful language of another, is emphatically your world; the heart your harvest field, and it is there your ambition must strive for empire.... It is in the quiet retirement of home that the foundation is laid for everything that is valuable in character, solid in principle and pure in morals. To the intelligence, the refinement, and the virtue of our females is committed almost all we hold dear (Graves, 1855, p. 71).

Mary Sharp College disseminated these ideas of educating women, southern pride, and pious living. Thus, this college offers an intriguing case study of how different Baptists interpreted women's education as well as how those who supported southern women's education understood the divide in the nation.

Two key men led to the development of the college, the Vermont-born Graves brothers. James Robinson Graves (J.R.), a Baptist pastor and editor of *The Tennessee Baptist*, a Baptist newspaper based out of Nashville, provided advertising and funding for the college; Zuinglius Calvin Graves (Z.C.), a Baptist educator, gave it direction. J. R. and Z. C. Graves combined southern identity, gender ideology, and Baptist piety to produce a unique form of higher education for women. These brothers believed education significant to a Southern women's growth and their future motherhood. With the intersections of higher education and American Christianity, identities that could be considered contending from an outsider perspective, emerged at southern institutions.

Mary Sharp taught general evangelical ideas along with demanding academics, seeing itself as a place for young women to grow morally, socially, and logically. To follow the importance of these continuous ideals at Mary Sharp, I will first examine the foundational principles of the college, beginning in mid-nineteenth century, and the two main leaders credited with the establishment of the institution. The leaders' religious background and understandings of women's education reveal the teachings of the college. After exploring the inception of the institution and its religious basis, I will discuss the college during the Civil War and the resulting experiences.

When reflecting on gender in nineteenth-century America, historians have coined the concepts of separate spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood (Welter, 1966, p. 151–174; Lerner 1969, 5–15). The notion of separate spheres evolved due to the fact men often participated in public life through politics or their occupations while women mostly participated in private life through child-rearing and domestic work. This developed due to the transformation of the economy and society during the first half of the nineteenth century. Americans of this time regularly believed and referred to the ideas of separate spheres

themselves, but women frequently negotiated a space between these two, as they hosted guests within their homes, joined women's organizations, and taught in schools. In the Progressive Era, more women began physically inserting themselves into the public sphere instead of negotiating spaces in-between. The opportunities that arose—such as social work or leading reforms in organizations—led to this shift. Women often started seeking work or political involvement outside the home, assisting in poverty-stricken areas through settlement houses and community service centers (Schneider, 1993).

The Cult of True Womanhood, also known as the Cult of Domesticity, defined the most common values they saw among women, especially during the Antebellum through Reconstruction eras. These principles included “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Welter, 1966, p. 152). Historians observed white American women during the nineteenth century hoping to embody these four characteristics, as women wanted to personify a devout, chaste, obedient, and home-centered nature. However, the firm divisions of separate spheres and the Cult of Domesticity have been challenged and stretched by historians more recently (Rosenberg, 1982; Kaplan, 1998) With further exploration of class and race, historians also discovered that the idea of separate spheres applied less easily to those of the working class and different races. Despite these differences, Historians still see the notions of separate spheres generally prevailing until around the late nineteenth century for white upper- and middle-class women. At that time, more and more women sought occupations outside the home—although numerous women still worked in a domestic realm, helping families or children through settlement houses or social work (Solomon, 1986, 119–121).

Academic scholarship on American higher education institutions has explored important ways in which educational focuses have transformed over time. In addition, a few scholars have looked at the variations among student life. Scholars such as Roger Geiger, Julie Reuben, and Barbara Solomon, have thoroughly addressed the general trajectory of higher education institutions, but smaller regional colleges remain less studied, especially in the South.

One historian has provided a unique framework to view women's colleges during the nineteenth century. Andrea Turpin's *A New Moral Vision* analyzes the changing religious perspectives of women's colleges from the founding of the first colleges for women, 1836, until the early twentieth century. Turpin considers student life on major campuses and proposes that many women's colleges saw women's relationships with God as more direct leading up to and through the Civil War, which Turpin labels vertical spirituality. Vertical spirituality intended that these women viewed their relationship with God as the most important to create harmony in their lives. Thus, women's education would create evangelical women who could directly spread the word of God. Nearing the end of the nineteenth century, colleges transitioned into focusing more on how women interacted kindly with their community to promote harmony in their relationships with God, which Turpin describes as horizontal spirituality (Turpin, 2016, p. 17–19). Turpin bases the framework in northern women's and coeducational schools. Thus, Turpin's vertical spirituality structure does not apply seamlessly to the philosophies of southern women's

schools because southern colleges disseminated a mixture of vertical and horizontal spirituality. Southern colleges equipped women to become educated mothers and southern ladies (Farnham, 1995, p. 2–5). Mary Sharp promoted and cemented strong ideals of southern pride and ladylike characteristics such as politeness and kindness, while also stressing spreading the word of God to future children and their communities.

Historians have argued about women's higher education during the nineteenth century, especially in the antebellum period, concerning whether women's colleges at this time legitimately taught full collegiate-level academics, particularly in the South. The issue that several historians have taken with this look at women's higher education is that these historical examinations have only compared the best elite male colleges with women's colleges. As Christie Farnham elucidates in *The Education of the Southern Belle*, even if women's colleges were only as good as the worst men's colleges, they still qualified as collegiate institutions (Farnham, 1995, p. 27). Furthermore, most women's colleges focused more heavily on modern languages like French, music, and the arts, while men's colleges required classical languages, like Latin and Greek, as well as advanced mathematics (Farnham, 1995, p. 25).

Unlike most male or female colleges, Mary Sharp delivered an education that was intended to be equal to elite men's institutions, requiring classical languages and higher mathematics (Mary Sharp College, 1858, p. 86–87; "The Mary Sharp College", 1870, p. 2). The president of the school, Z. C. Graves set out to "make [Mary Sharp College] equal to and parallel with Brown University and other Eastern schools" (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926, p. 11). Mary Sharp's dedication to providing the best education for women shows their distinction from the vertical spirituality present in the northern institutions at this same time. Since Mary Sharp desired to create southern educated pious ladies who would go on to be mothers, the college fostered both vertical and horizontal spirituality. Mary Sharp promoted prioritizing the women's relationship with God directly, but also the social and kind attributes desired in a southern lady. Interestingly, historians still debate whether Mary Sharp provided the level of education equal to men, particularly regarding the level of rigor surrounding classical language and mathematics.

Through religion and discipline, southern higher education institutions for women spread ideals of domesticity and moral development. This rang true throughout the nineteenth century while students and faculty clung to these principles during the divisiveness and violence of the mid-nineteenth century. The Civil War posed too high of a threat to the majority of women's institutions of higher education in the South. The danger of the Union army, the shortage of teachers, and financial deficiencies caused countless southern women's colleges to shut down. The Union army forced Mary Sharp's closure in 1863. Studying Mary Sharp College throughout its founding and the Civil War leads to an understanding of the experiences and thoughts of these southern women and faculty regarding the war, Christianity, women's education, and the South. Despite the adversities the school faced in the war, the students and faculty would retain their religious zeal, southern pride, and acclaim of women's higher education.

## THE FOUNDING

Leading up to the beginnings of Mary Sharp College in 1851, first known as the Tennessee and Alabama Female Institute, several other women's colleges had been founded, including the renowned Wesleyan Female College in Georgia and Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts (Cohen, 2012, p. 94). In the early to mid-nineteenth century, most colleges were connected to certain Christian denominations, although the participation of the church differed. In the case of Mary Sharp College, Baptists helped open the school and served on the faculty.

Before the official opening of the college in 1851, there had been informal schooling of women at the Baptist Church of Winchester [Tennessee] (Mary Sharp College, 1926, p. 26). As more students joined, it was decided a school building was needed. Additionally, two Baptist church associations, the Duck River Baptist Association [Tennessee] and the Liberty Association of Baptists [Kentucky] and several Baptist trustees agreed to help fund the school ("The Tennessee and Alabama Institute", p. 1850). Prior to its founding, the secretary of the West Tennessee Baptist Convention Education Committee had written J. R. Graves, editor of the *Tennessee Baptist*, discussing the building and locale of a new Baptist female school (Covey, 1850). Both Z.C. and J.R. Graves were devout Baptists. These strong ties to the Baptist faith show the more vertical spirituality present at Mary Sharp, due to these two strongly Baptist men, who believed in the importance of everyone's relationship to God.

Pro-slavery Baptists dominated the South, and the Baptists at Mary Sharp were no exception. The citizens of Winchester and students of Mary Sharp overtly favored the South despite the tension in Tennessee between pro-Confederacy citizens and pro-Union (Baggett, 2009, p. 21). Intriguingly, the founders of Tennessee and Alabama Female Institute altered the name to Mary Sharp College to honor a woman who set her slaves free. Mary Sharp supported colonization efforts, which sought to transplant free slaves to African countries such as Liberia. As stated by a relative of Sharp in a letter, Mary Sharp "freed 80 slaves and paid their way to Liberia" and later in life, she bestowed funds to the Tennessee and Alabama Institute, "again evincing her profound belief in freedom—this time, not of the body but of the mind. Not of the body of slaves—but of the minds of women" (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926, p. 104–105). At Mary Sharp and other women's southern colleges, two ideals were held closely, the freedom of the states and freedom to education.

In addition to founding the college and participating in the board of trustees, J. R. Graves frequently advertised the school in his newspaper. The *Tennessee Baptist* regularly promoted and praised Mary Sharp by stating compliments such as it is "superior in every respect to any female school we have ever known" and "few can conceive the influence which it will exert upon the cause of science and religion over all the South" ("The Tennessee and Alabama Collegiate Institute", 1851; Datton, 1857). J. R. Graves' complimentary view on a not strictly Baptist school contradicts his strong Landmarkist position. Believing Baptists had always led true churches, J. R. Graves rejected those advocating for restorations. Despite the fact that not all the students attended Baptist churches, and a few even attended Church of Christ institutions, J. R. Graves

adamantly marketed Mary Sharp as a deeply Baptist school. Aside from Graves's opinions of the school, other readers wrote into the paper and shared flattering comments on the college. In a letter to the editor, one man wrote, "I do not believe, sir, there is the equal of this school in the Union" (Letter to the editor, 1856). The *Tennessee Baptist* served as the main publicist of the school because Z. C. Graves did not want to use money on advertising. He believed that the school's "merits should speak for themselves" (McCrary, 1980, p. 20).

### THE IDEALS AT MARY SHARP

Across the Nation, female colleges often provided a preparatory school and college courses focused on liberal arts, including music and art classes; Mary Sharp was no different (Turpin, 2016, p. 40–41). The distinction between Mary Sharp and other women's colleges was that it was the first women's college to require Latin and Greek for the degree. This curricula choice stood out in the South and the North. Z. C. Graves supported the idea to create a college equal to men's because Graves believed in the significance of education in tandem with religious moral instruction.

Z. C. Graves believed God had called him to education and thus lived his life dutiful to educating and leading students at different institutions (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926, p. 21). He fully supported the higher education of women, and he would consistently defend his positions on women's education by referring to religious ideals. For example, during his address to the first graduating class in 1855, he stated, "then, young ladies, understanding what truth is and how it is obtained and seeing that God has made the mind for the apprehension of truth and set before it a world of glorious truths for it to apprehend" (Graves, 1855, p. 71). Therefore, since God created humans with the ability to find truth within the world, then young women should become educated to know these truths.

Along with the students, the Winchester community admired Z. C. Graves, supporting his endeavors as the president. He wholly believed in women's education, but not for necessarily progressive ideals as he defended education as necessary to create southern ladies. Many women receiving this education would have been daughters of wealthy plantation owners and farmers. Graves wrote in the "blank book" he carried around, how women were bound to help others and therefore exposed to many difficult tribulations. Due to these troubles, he believed women experienced, Graves stated:

Thus, this witness deposeth:

- That woman has trials greater than man.
- She must suffer much more than man.
- She is constitutionally unfitted to grapple with them.

What parent is so insensible to his daughter's future happiness that he does not wish while she is with him, cherished by his love, to provide for the trials and troubles before her? (Graves, 1926, p. 61).

Graves often spoke with this intensity while advocating for his students. As shown in this excerpt, he taught women because he thought they endured more than men and needed school to aid them in coping.

In his same notebook, Z. C. Graves wrote of the relationship between young women's purity and education:

[...] the temptations to which woman is exposed are almost as numerous as their trials, especially during the season of youth, when the heart is most light. [...] Education prevents indolence, vanity, presumption, folly, and selfishness. It promotes politeness, order, decency, reverence, good will and, in short, whatever is lovely and of good report (Graves, 1926, p. 63).

The mix of vertical and horizontal spirituality is revealed because Graves saw education as preventative against selfishness and vanity. Graves also defended women's education by explaining how education connected to motherhood. He saw mothers as the most important influences on their children. Therefore, the more educated a woman was, the better they could raise their children. Specifically, Graves detailed in his journal book, "It is the mother's influence chiefly—the combined weight and power of the lessons she has imparted, the precepts she has inculcated and the examples she has placed before the child that has fixed and determined his character, and made him a blessing or curse to society" (Graves, 1926, p. 64–65). Z. C. Graves believed in the ideals of Republican Motherhood, or in this case, Confederate Motherhood, which meant that women were responsible for raising sons with civic virtue. Graves truly understood education as a vital part of society for young men and women. Although Graves advocated for the importance of education in men and women, he never mentioned Black education. Z.C. Graves stressed teaching strong faith in God as well as moral formation to create kind personalities in his students. These emphases demonstrate the dual vertical and horizontal spirituality of Mary Sharp (Savage, 1926, p. 39–40).

### ENDURING THE WAR

From the opening of Mary Sharp, the students, faculty, and the surrounding city of Winchester held passionate southern pride. Most writings from or about the Graves brothers, even before the war, were centered regionally. For example, in the *Tennessee Baptist*, in a letter to the editor, a man stated; "Mary Sharp is just the very character of female schools that hundreds and thousands of parents want in the South" (Letter to the editor, 1856). At the inception of the Civil War, Winchester and many Tennessee Baptists already favored the Southern cause despite Tennessee's delay in seceding. The *Tennessee Baptist* stated in reference to Mary Sharp, "the sympathies of the President and the Faculty of the school, as well as of the citizens of Winchester, have been with the South, with the Confederate States" (A.C.D., 1861).

Although the Graves brothers came from the North originally, they dedicated themselves to the southern cause. J. R. Graves gave his life to preaching, establishing Mary Sharp, and working towards his view of the Baptist faith within the South. In addition to advocating for the

South in his *Tennessee Baptist*, J. R. Graves also began printing Bibles for the South. Since Bibles were mostly printed in northern cities, Graves printed Bibles for southerners at the outbreak of the war. The *Winchester Daily Bulletin* bragged on J. R. Graves's patriotism to the South by asserting, "to him we are indebted for the first set (and finest) of stereotype plates for printing the Scriptures ever brought South. He succeeded in getting these South" ("Rev. J. R. Graves, formerly of Nashville", 1863). Z. C. Graves also showed his dedication through the South in several ways. According to one student, "when sad news came to the home of the Winchester people during the war... Dr. Graves was always there with an encouraging and comforting thought for the bereaved. A good citizen indeed!" (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926, p. 49). Furthermore, Z. C. Graves sent his son off to fight with the Confederacy; he never returned as he died in battle. One student, Belle Murrell Pinson, a student who attended during the war, recalling her time at Mary Sharp specified, "he proved himself a true citizen of this Southland in this great sacrificial act" (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926, p. 49).

The Mary Sharp students themselves showed their fervent support of the South in several ways. In 1861, the summer that Tennessee seceded, the students wore cotton dresses to their examinations. These cotton dresses were to show their strong solidarity with the South. Following the students' reading of their essays, the faculty and trustees discussed the implementation of homespun cotton dresses for the girls' uniforms until the war ended, instead of utilizing materials from the North. One of the trustees even went so far as to write into *The Tennessee Baptist* considering the prospect of the cotton dress uniform ("Home Spun at the Mary Sharp", 1861).

To further aid the Confederate cause, Mary Sharp College also opened a normal school department in 1861 to train teachers. Specifically, they wanted to help take the place of teachers "who have left for the North to return no more" ("Normal School for Female Teachers", 1861). They thought it "should encourage a large class to prepare themselves to serve their country in her day of need" ("Normal School for Female Teachers", 1861). Countless teachers during the Civil War fled to the North or stayed home, resulting in the closing of numerous institutions in the South. Out of the schools that remained opened, many southern women's colleges created normal departments during the war to generate more teachers for the schools lacking them.

A student remembered that, in the spring of 1861, Z. C. Graves dismissed his class so they could wave goodbye to the men going off to war. Later in May, the entire student body collected to hear Peter Turney, the man who had been president of the board of trustees for Mary Sharp, speak before he left to fight for the Confederacy. The student, Franny Holman recalled,

Dr. Graves made a ringing speech which was cheered to the echo of the soldiers. Then Colonel Turney, his heart evidently stirred to its inmost depths and his face all aglow with the fire of love for the South, dismounted from his horse... assured Dr. Graves that his eloquent, burning words, and the half-smiling, half-tearful faces of the girls, would be an inspiration to him and his brave men....As he mounted his horse and rode away, followed



by his gallant soldiers, some of the girls sobbed quietly, but all felt in their hearts that such men and such a leader could never know defeat (Holman, 1926, p. 89–90).

Holman recollected these events with an enduring passion for the South and love for her school. Peter Turney's connection to the school and his beloved presence in town helped recruit several of the first volunteers for the Confederate army from Tennessee in April of 1861, months before Tennessee seceded from the Union (Smith, 1993, p. 39).

Leading up to Civil War, Baptists had already split into northern and southern factions over slavery in 1845. At the time, the southern Baptists did not explicitly say the split was over slavery. Southern white Baptists mostly fell in the middle of the spectrum between resolute pro-slavery or anti-slavery. Many believed that the institution was flawed but Christians could redeem it (Kidd and Hankins, 2015, p. 131). Thus, they did believe the Bible allowed certain methods of slavery and did not explicitly defend or condemn it (Kidd & Hankins, 2015, p. 132).

With their outspoken support of the Confederacy, the Graves brothers continued to advocate for the South and slavery. Z. C. Graves owned several slaves himself and later in the war would write to the governor of Tennessee to see if he could keep one of his slaves. In this letter, Graves gave details about his situation by stating, "a negro man named Marcus Combs came to my house yesterday accompanied by some soldiers and demanded a girl belonging to me, aged 13 years" (Zuinglius C. Graves to Andrew Johnson 1864). Graves concluded his letter by asking the governor if his papers validated his right to keep the enslaved child. His obstinate devotion to the South and slave-owning added to the complete entrenchment of Mary Sharp in Confederate culture.

Z. C. Graves specifically addressed the war and the safety of Mary Sharp in the 1860–1861 catalog by stating, "In the very heart of the Confederacy, walled in by nature's fortifications, the rocky ramparts of the mountains on three sides; far removed from the Mississippi and also from the Atlantic and the great Gulf of the South, no place at this present time can be more secure from all fear of all danger, than this very spot" (Mary Sharp College, 1861, 26). Although Graves seemed confident in the school's security, Mary Sharp would close over the summer of 1863. Due to the Union army invading Tennessee, Mary Sharp shut its doors and the Union General Rosecrans' army seized Mary Sharp's building and housed troops ("War News", 1863). The soldiers "used the college building as a hospital and either destroyed or marred about all that had cost those years of labor and heartaches to build up" (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926, p. 27). Z. C. Graves and the students went home and remained there until the school reopened in 1866.

J. R. Graves's experiences during the war also proved to be unfavorable for him. Similarly, to his brother, who had to leave Mary Sharp in the war, J. R. Graves had to flee his place of employment due to the invasion of abolitionists and the Union army into Nashville. One newspaper printed an article praising both Graves brothers for their "patriotism and loyalty" as well as declaring that, "J. R. Graves, of this state, is one of the ablest ministers we have... He ably edited the *Tennessee Baptist* for a long time, and that paper was among the first...to advocate

the cause of the South and to urge her noble sons to prepare for the bloody conflict...At the battle of Shiloh he stood shoulder to shoulder with the patriotic hosts of the South" ("Rev. J.R. Graves, formerly of Nashville", 1863).

The passionate support of the Confederacy by Z. C. Graves, J. R. Graves, and Winchester itself influenced the students on campus, which led to the students working towards supporting soldiers and the South in any way they could whether that was through advocating for the South in their papers, their opening of a normal school, or them going out and seeing Confederate soldiers off. Mary Sharp's resolute support of the Confederacy shows both vertical and horizontal spirituality. Since southerners believed that God fully supported them, the relationship between God and humans was prioritized. However, southern Baptists also thought that the relationships between slaves and owners could be improved, resulting in a better connection with God. Furthermore, Mary Sharp's faculty and students rallied behind their community in the war, showing a strong horizontal spirituality as well.

### RECONSTRUCTION AND REPERCUSSIONS

The Civil War devastated the South and many of its colleges. The South struggled to recover financially and culturally, but these white schools clung to their confederate identity and ultimately, propagated the Lost Cause. At Mary Sharp, the Union army damaged the buildings and they needed repairing. To get the school running again, Z. C. Graves used his money to pay for repairs and went without a salary for several years after rebuilding. According to an article in the *Daily Union and American*, the "ravages of war had been repaired" and Mary Sharp was "among the schools, which have been revived since the close of the late unhappy war" ("Mary Sharp College", 1866).

Although Mary Sharp recovered from the war, it never returned to its former popularity. Student enrollment remained steady but did not rise to its numbers before the war (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926). Despite the struggles of the college during Reconstruction and after, students continued to cherish their school and admire Z. C. Graves for many years to come. Previous students would even go on to form the Mary Sharp Club, an alumnae club, and then publish a book with collections of Z. C. Graves's writings as well as speeches and students reminiscing on their times at Mary Sharp (Mary Sharp College Club, 1926).

These experiences at Mary Sharp College show that the school helped develop gender ideals and southern pride among affluent whites. Despite the chaos of war, Mary Sharp College retained its three core principles of domestic ideals, moral development, and southern pride throughout the conflict. They perpetuated the Lost Cause narrative among the wealthy white southerners until they closed. These ideals show the more complex spirituality present at Mary Sharp. Throughout the beginnings of Mary Sharp and through the Civil War, the culture at Mary Sharp prioritized finding harmony through relationships with God and their community. Researching more southern women's schools during the antebellum period through the

Reconstruction era could reveal more information about the cultural ideals surrounding gender, religion, and education.

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