Conclusion

In 1906 Governor J.C.W. Beckham proclaimed that the Reconstruction was over and self-exiled white Kentuckians should come back home. The New South orator and Pulitzer prizewinner, Henry Watterson gave the welcoming address at the “Homecoming” in Louisville on June 13, 1906. He declared that during the four day celebration “the Goodloes, the Ballards, and the Speeds, the Harlans, the Frys and the Murrays, clasped their hands across the breach and made short shrift of the work of Reconstruction with the Buckners, the Prestons, and the Dukes.” He urged these elite Kentuckians to cast off antagonisms produced by the Civil War and collaborate once again in charting Kentucky’s course. Watterson predicted that “the perplexed grandchild” would then not be ablt to “distinguish between the grizzled grandfather who wore the blue and the grizzled grandfather who wore the gray.”\(^1\) He was more accurate in this vision of unification than he hoped, but he spoke with the wrong families in mind.

By the turn of the century, Kentucky had embraced Lost Cause mythology, and Kentucky Civil War historians had begun their revisions of antebellum life. Writers such as James Lane Allen, Margaret Mitchell, and Southern Agrarian Robert Penn Warren helped them along. The gender-dominated world of the antebellum era became central to the history of the Old South: gracious belles and honorable gentlemen obscured issues of race and class.\(^2\) Conforming to the sentimentalized vision of Confederate heroes, the Preston men helped shape this view. The Preston women, however, just as they had done before the war, did not fulfill public expectations and had little to do with the services expected of the white women’s auxiliaries of the Confederate veterans. Much more like
her father, the Old Duke Robert Wickliffe, MW Preston kept her eye on the pecuniary advantages of a new marketplace rather than join the ranks of middle class white women in a newly politicized public agenda of reform activities.3

MW Preston’s life reveals an exercise of political power that complicates the usual definition of political agency. MW Preston’s experiences were bound by her society’s expectations of her gender and race, but her status as a member of a conservative elite allowed certain freedoms most women never imagined for themselves. The public sphere in which MW Preston functioned so ably lay across several different axes, and while the geographical spaces in which her “public” worlds shifted, the very exclusivity which defined them remained constant. MW Preston’s words and actions show us how the American conservative elite maintained their power in the nineteenth century despite the political and economic chaos. In essence then, MW Preston’s life is not worthy of study simply because her experiences give us another perspective on the diversity of women’s history and furthers our knowledge about white elite Southern women. Rather, her prosopographical biography presents us with an opportunity to analyze “the production of that knowledge itself.”4

As Pete Daniel has suggested, Southerners stood at a crossroads in the twentieth century: they could keep their regional distinctiveness or become a replica of the North.5 Kentucky’s elite played a unique role in Southern history, and the Civil War played less of a role in twentieth century Kentucky than did the rise of big business and big government. The conservative intellectuals of Kentucky remained representative of their society but they faded from plain view. The very elite families whom the neo-Confederates
wished to emulate quietly removed themselves from the geo-political scene, and post-war Kentucky became far more parochial than antebellum elite society had ever been. The large farms were sold, subdivided, and reconfigured for outsiders looking for the picture-perfect Old South. A new national mythology formed out of images such as those in the Stephen Foster song, “My Old Kentucky Home.” The antebellum elite left the local political scene and black Kentuckians and newly urbanized Appalachian whites rallied around their own leaders. Paradoxically this old elite created strong segregationist restrictions on the sale of their property to the new working class citizens: “They are not acting as individual men and women with individual faces; they have assumed a mask of power which gives them an imperial role and a code of action unlike what can be expected of ordinary men.”

The Preston-Wickliffe families maintained their conservative identity and worldview despite the political and economic changes of a New South. MW Preston’s descendents have continued to place particular value on her families’ names, in particular, the names Margaret, William Preston, and Robert Wickliffe. William Preston Johnston, MW Preston’s admiring nephew, wrote in a history of the family that William Preston was like “a Roman patrician” and that MW Preston “was, in every sense, his peer.” The founder of the Filson Club Historical Society, R.T. Durrett, wrote in 1893 that MW Preston was “one of the first grand ladies of the olden time now left among us.” She “had every advantage which ancestry, social position, wealth, and education could confer upon her.” He went on to praise her high educational accomplishments, insisting that she “was so intellectual, so bright, and so cultured that she was as much at home in
the Spanish and French courts as she was in her native Lexington.” He reflected on her “ancestral home,” Glendower, and insisted that she lived “in such a home as a princess might covet; and no other princess is needed to make it a princely abode.”

Durrett’s sketch, reflecting upon MW Preston’s autonomy as a widow, placed her within an elite circle of a romanticized American royalty but at the same time gave her a decidedly diminutive role. She was, for him, a “princess,” not a widowed queen or reigning monarch in his analogy. Despite her status, her gender restricted her, princess-like, in what she could do, say, or be. As Drew Gilpin Faust wrote, “In ladyhood southern women accepted gender subordination in exchange for continuing class and racial superiority.”

MW Preston was a Southern belle all of her life, complete with the belle’s sense of power over the people with whom she consorted and her sense of the limits to that power. Most historians agree that the roles of belle and lady became even more exaggerated in the South, especially as moralizing Northerners scrutinized white slaveholding society. The Southern belle’s world has been analyzed many times over through memoirs, literary reviews, or ladies’ magazines. Only recently, however, have scholars begun to perceive in the words of the Southern belle a sense of personal power. Christie Farnham asserted that elite white women of the South expressed satisfaction with their finishing school education in the belief that they were gaining tools for living in a world of domination and hierarchy. Though the belle participated in a male-dominated culture, as historians Barbara Welter, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Drew Gilpin Faust have asserted, her interactions with men hinged most successfully on her ability to assert her status.
MWPreston reveled in her elite world and never really challenged the larger society’s prescribed role of gender, class, and race. She used her father’s and her husband’s last names in informal and formal correspondence, and she identified herself with a concept of family that extended far beyond the nuclear family of today. For every remonstrance against her husband for using her property without her permission, she spent extravagant sums of his money on elaborate social affairs. For each time she left him behind to visit relations or take the waters at the Virginia springs, she had, in another instance, written a letter in which she appealed to her husband’s sense of patriarchy by telling him that she could not “do” without him. She carefully honed her sense of the proper order of a patriarchal family, even as she pushed at its edges, to reflect well on her and her kin in the eyes of her elite society. Though she enjoyed the glitter of European court life, she told her husband she “would rather die than show a disrespect to [her dead father’s memory], and I therefore feel pained at a report of… [me] entering into the gaieties of Paris so short a time after so great a loss.”¹¹ For MWPreston, crises came not in the form of lost elections or a civil war, but in the fragmentation of her kin network and the expansion of political and legal boundaries. Both a New Negro and a New Woman of the Progressive Era confused the established hierarchy and its “ruse of authority.”¹²

MWPreston identified herself as set firmly within a discriminating circle, and her role as daughter, wife, and mother were an important part of the construction of that identity. Her double last name conveyed her status within the elite. While her story does not resound with universal generalizations, it tells us of the complex ways in which
power both served her and was served by her. Her words, the letters and documents generated by a highly intellectual woman, give us a panoramic vista of an elite worldview and “the interwoven problems of progress, freedom, and social order.”\textsuperscript{13} Her life struggle to maintain the prestige of herself and her kin provides documentation on elite American ideals. MW Preston was a provocateur while alive and remains one today.
Footnotes: Conclusion


2 The classic studies of Southern women by Catherine Clinton and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese made clear that households were the fundamental unit for the study of Southern history. Kinship networks and another domestic institution, the evangelical church, reinforced male dominance for both blacks and whites in Friedman’s *Enclosed Garden*; and for Steven Channing, the Kentuckian “patriarchal family unit remained the principal instrument for managing the labor of kin and slaves (p. 92).” See Steven A. Channing, *Kentucky: A Bicentennial History* (New York and Nashville, 1977).

3 The Northern middle-class model of female reform activities did not fit the Southern world. Perhaps this was because, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese wrote, “women of that strata did not normally inherit significant property of their own, because aspiring middle-class male intellectuals and professionals did not relish female competition, [and] because women who were expected to do some or all of their own housekeeping and childrearing rarely had the time to develop into sophisticated intellectuals or political sages.” See her personal email to the author, September 11, 1996, in the author’s possession. The Wickliffe-Preston women did not have to take their political agendas into the public streets or to the newspapers since they had political agency within their exclusive public world of extended kin and international strata of elite actors. Unlike the Breckinridges of Kentucky, the Prestons worked more effectively within a hidden world of politics. The life of Margaret Wickliffe Preston also represents a change in governing families of the South from the antebellum era to the Progressive era, from the “old-time planter” extended kin to those nuclear families focused around “the soft hands, pink faces, and general corpulence of the business men.” See Francis Butler Simkins and Charles Pierce Roland, *A History of the South*, 4th edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 377.

4 Joan W. Scott, “‘Experience’,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, p. 37.


7 Johnston, *Johnstons*, p. 197. Robert Wickliffe Preston Johnston, a descendent of MWPreston’s only son, was given a full scholarship to college by a descendent of one of MWPreston’s daughters, sight unseen. Mr. Johnston assured me in a personal interview in May 1997 that he was given this gift simply because of the legacy he carried in his name.


10 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s emphasis on a female world of love and ritual and Barbara Welter’s “cult of true womanhood” consigned not just their historical subjects to the private sphere and made them “a hostage in the home” but also the history of Southern women was consigned to a history of the home and the private sphere. See Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): pp. 151-74; and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1 (1975): pp. 1-30. The Civil War according to Drew Gilpin Faust, was “a preeminently ‘gendering’ activity, casting thought about sex differences into sharp relief as it has both underlined and realigned gender boundaries.” Thereupon the war “demanded the mobilization of women for civilian support services,” and because they could not be conscripted “they had to be enlisted by persuasion. The resulting discourse about woman’s place in Confederate society represented the rhetorical attempt to create a hegemonic ideology of female patriotism and sacrifice.” But by early 1865 they had refused to accept the war story of purposeful sacrifice as “relevant to their own lives” and thereby they began to undermine “both the narrative presented to them and the Confederate cause itself.” See Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” *Journal of American History* 76 (1990): pp. 1202-03 & 1228. See also Mary Elizabeth Massey’s *Bonnet Brigades* (1966), Bell Irvin Wiley’s *Confederate Women* (1975), and Anne Firor Scott’s *The Southern Lady* (1970) which laid the important groundwork for Faust’s assertion that Southern women’s altered status during the conflict led to gradually expanding opportunities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This stance has been complicated by the new histories of gender politics such as Elizabeth R. Varon’s *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

11 MW Preston to WP, n.d. [Paris, July 6, 1860], Box 54, WPFP.
