

Placing the Knife

In *Placing the Knife*, the chapter details Mary Chesnut's reflections in the wake of Abraham Lincoln's election, which she interpreted as a catalyst for impending war. Traveling back to South Carolina from Florida, she learned the news on a train, where it was broadly discussed that "Lincoln was elected and our fate sealed." Convinced that significant changes were on the horizon, she began documenting her thoughts in a diary, emphasizing the necessity for calm determination as the Confederacy faced dire stakes.

Mary noted her husband, U.S. Senator James Chesnut, had resigned in protest of Lincoln's election, aligning with South Carolina's secessionist movements. While she wished he had shown more ambition, she recognized her desire for action was both a burden and a curse. At thirty-seven, Mary had no children and lived on the expansive Chesnut family plantation, Mulberry. This grand estate in Camden, South Carolina, boasted a rich array of flora and thrived through the labor of hundreds of enslaved Black individuals who maintained the gardens, fields, and household.

The plantation, while beautiful and self-sufficient, also represented the stark realities of Southern life, including the moral complexities surrounding slavery. Mary herself opposed abolition but openly lamented the grievous abuses inherent in the system. She described the infamy associated with the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and girls, remarking on the moral decay it represented.

Despite the charm of Mulberry, Mary felt isolated compared to her life in Washington, D.C., where her social engagements flourished. Returning home from the capital felt like a sacrifice, and she expressed her growing frustration with the monotony of plantation life. The chapter also unfolds the political atmosphere as South Carolina experienced a surge of excitement and militance in response to secession, alongside James Hammond's resignation from the Senate as he aligned with the secessionist wave.

The political and social tensions of the time left an indelible mark on Mary, who navigated the complex dynamics of family and society while grappling with her own ambitious desires amid a swiftly changing national landscape .