

Discreetly Cunning: The Wartime Experiences of Victoria Hansford, a West Virginia Confederate

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In the summer of 1863, twenty-five-year-old Victoria Hansford found herself confronting the authority of the Union army. A Confederate sympathizer from Kanawha County in the newly formed state of West Virginia, Hansford had grown increasingly frustrated with the amount of property and goods that the Union army had requisitioned from her family. “They took all our corn,” she wrote in her memoir, “the best of our meal, eighteen large hams, middlings [wheat flour], all our coal, chickens, turkeys, pigs, and everything else they could get hold of.” The previous year, they had even taken her riding horse, Old Boston. Other Rebel families from Coalsmouth, where Hansford lived, had shared similar experiences. “The soldiers encroached on us in many ways,” she remembered. “If it was known that any Rebel had more than he needed to keep body and soul together they came boldly and took it with guns in hand.”¹ Many of her neighbors felt that they had little recourse for fear they would be arrested and sent off to Union prisons if they complained too much, a sentiment Hansford had heretofore agreed with. She changed her mind though, when she heard from a relative living near Charleston that Old Boston had been spotted in a field where the Union army was keeping its herd of horses.

Charleston was approximately fourteen miles from Coalsmouth, and Hansford’s father was reluctant to try to retrieve the animal, even though it was the family’s only horse. He worried about the risk of retaliation from Union soldiers stationed in the area. But Old Boston had belonged to Victoria, not her father, and she decided to try for herself. Alone, she made her way to Charleston and asked the commanding officer to return her horse. She found him surprisingly amiable, and he eventually gave her an order to take possession of Old Boston. When she found her horse in the Union stables, though, the man who ran them “cursed and swore and said that he was not my horse . . . and that I could not have him back.” This would have discouraged most women, but Hansford’s experiences throughout the war had hardened her resolve, and she returned to the commanding officer in Charleston

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