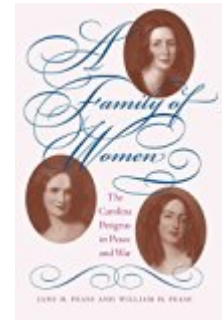


Jane H. Pease, William H. Pease. *A Family of Women: The Carolina Petigrus in Peace and War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xi + 328 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2505-1.



Reviewed by Sidney Bland

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Jane H. and William H. Pease are no strangers to those familiar with the history of Charleston and the culture, values and lifestyles of South Carolina's low country. This latest collaborative effort builds on a thorough familiarity with the Petigrus, a distinguished nineteenth century Charleston family. Their most recent work was a biography of the head of the family and Union supporter, James Louis Petigrus, and they earlier edited two novels by the most colorful member of the clan, Sue King.

Using a wealth of correspondence, diaries and writings from three generations of Petigrus women, the Peases weave and interweave life stories against the backdrop of larger forces at work in the state, region and nation. These are personal tales of fortune and misfortune, triumph and defeat, childhood, marriages (often troubled ones), pregnancies, management of households, life and death. The story, as the Peases note, is not a simple narrative. Through it all, however, including scandal and intrigue, the family stays close.

The saga begins in humble circumstances on a farm called Badwell in the upcountry around

Abbeville where Louise Guy Gibert, a South Carolina Huguenot and William Pettigrew, a "boisterous" upstate Scotch-Irishman, settle. Louise's son, James Louis Petigrus, in changing the spelling of his family name, bestows a distinction upon it and soon achieves a centrality. It is the wife, sisters and sisters-in-law, daughters and nieces, granddaughters and grandnieces of James L. Petrigru, known as Brother to his siblings, who comprise the three generations of women in peace and war. Each achieves meaning, in part, through James's legal and political prestige.

Marrying above them moved the Petigrus offspring beyond their upcountry upbringing. Two of the three brothers married the daughters of low country rice and cotton planters. Four of the five sisters did likewise, with their husbands being well-educated and frequently five to ten or more years older. Prosperity accrued to the second generation of Petrigru women as well, and a handy map of family plantations in the Carolinas shows substantial wealth localized in and around Charleston, Georgetown and eastern tidewater counties of North Carolina. Chicora Wood consist-

ed of over nine hundred acres of land, but it was only one of five plantations and some six hundred slaves owned by Robert Allston, a prestigious client of James Petigru whom his sister Adele married in 1832.

Major challenges facing pre-Civil War Petigru women included coping with the hazards of pregnancy and childbearing, managing complex households, supervision of servants, and enough "miserable marriages" for the Peases to devote an entire chapter to them. In addition, there was always the horrible summer climate and the threat of disease. Every mother of the first generation lost at least one child. Adele Allston had eleven pregnancies; nine children lived. Circumstances moved many Petigru women beyond a narrowly prescribed framework of serving as domestic managers and emotional guardians. Steadily increasing numbers of servants denoted increasing wealth but also added supervisory responsibilities.

Least conventional of the Petigru women, Sue King (1824-1875) coped with the dissatisfactions that wrecked her life by openly criticizing the institution of marriage and fashioning a writing career through frequent trips to the North and on the outer fringes of Charleston intellectual life. Her thirty years of scandalous behavior included two bigamy trials involving her second husband, a Radical Republican congressman, and King's successful entreaties that convinced President Grant to pardon him following conviction in a second trial.

The Civil War was a turning point in Petigru fortunes. The War wiped out family capital investments and left huge debts as a result of land and slave purchase contracts. Five males who went to war did not return, and those who did survive were "mauled and damaged." When the women returned to their homes following Sherman's invasion, most would do much of the domestic work that slaves had formerly done. Some, like Adele Allston, who in the immediate postwar years con-

ducted her school in her Charleston home, and Louise Porcher, who ran a boardinghouse in her family's home on South Bay, would build on patterns of individualism developed before the war.

For the third generation of Petigru women, however, the war insured a marked decline in status, despite President Lincoln's special protection order for Petigru property in recognition of the unionism of the family head. Twelve of Louise Pettigrew's great-granddaughters would "earn their own keep" for a significant period. At least ten (more than half of the third generation) never married, dramatically affecting the family's continuity. Doubtless, at one time or another, all daughters echoed the sentiments of Sue King's daughter Addy, who died in childbirth at age forty-five in 1889, "indeed all our lives were spoiled by the War" (p. 245).

A Family of Women is a richly interwoven social, cultural and family history, constructed almost entirely from the vast trove of Petigru women's writings. No better insights into the trappings and rituals of the social world of Old South low-country aristocracy exist than in the chapter "Reigning as Belles." At times one wishes the Peases had integrated some larger perspective from the solid list of secondary sources contained in their bibliographical essay, for few are cited at all. That, and a bit more user-friendly index, could only have enhanced an exceptional work.

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