Judith W. McGuire and her husband, John P. McGuire, the principal of the Episcopal High School of Virginia, had fled their home in Alexandria in May 1861 when the town was occupied by Union troops. In February 1862 the McGuires settled in Richmond, where she later found work as a clerk in the Confederate commissary department. On New Year’s Day she wrote in her diary about Lieutenant Colonel Raleigh T. Colston, the son of her sister, Sarah Jane Brockenbrough Colston. The commander of the 2nd Virginia Infantry, Colston had his left leg amputated below the knee after being shot at Payne’s Farm on November 27, 1863, during the Mine Run campaign.

January 1, 1864.—A melancholy pause in my diary. After returning from church on the night of the 18th, a telegram was handed me from Professor Minor, of the University of Virginia, saying, “Come at once, Colonel Colston is extremely ill.” After the first shock was over, I wrote an explanatory note to Major Brewer, why I could not be at the office next day, packed my trunk, and was in the cars by seven in the morning. That evening I reached the University, and found dear R. desperately ill with pneumonia, which so often follows, as in the case of General Jackson, the amputation of limbs. Surgeons Davis and Cabell were in attendance, and R’s uncle, Dr. Brockenbrough, arrived the next day. After ten days of watching and nursing, amid alternate hopes and fears, we saw our friend Dr. Maupin close our darling’s eyes, on the morning of the 23d; and on Christmas-day, a military escort laid him among many brother soldiers in the Cemetery of the University of Virginia. He died in the faith of Christ, and with the glorious hope of immortality. His poor mother is heart-stricken, but she, together with his sisters, and one dearer still, had the blessed, and what is now the rare privilege, of soothing and nursing him in his last hours. To them, and to us all, his life seemed as a part of our own. His superior judgment and affectionate
temper made him the guide of his whole family. To them his loss can never be supplied. His country has lost one of its earliest and best soldiers. Having been educated at the Virginia Military Institute, he raised and drilled a company in his native County of Berkeley, at the time of the John Brown raid. In 1861 he again led that company to Harper’s Ferry. From that time he was never absent more than a week or ten days from his command, and even when wounded at Gaines’s Mills, he absented himself but three days, and was again at his post during the several last days of those desperate fights. His fatal wound was received in his nineteenth general engagement, in none of which had he his superior in bravery and devotion to the cause. He was proud of belonging to the glorious Stone-wall Brigade, and I have been told by those who knew the circumstances, that he was confided in and trusted by General Jackson to a remarkable degree.

Thus we bury, one by one, the dearest, the brightest, the best of our domestic circles. Now, in our excitement, while we are scattered, and many of us homeless, these separations are poignant, nay, overwhelming; but how can we estimate the sadness of heart which will pervade the South when the war is over, and we are again gathered together around our family hearths and altars, and find the circles broken? One and another gone. Sometimes the father and husband, the beloved head of the household, in whom was centred all that made life dear. Again the eldest son and brother of the widowed home, to whom all looked for guidance and direction; or, perhaps, that bright youth, on whom we had not ceased to look as still a child, whose fair, beardless cheek we had but now been in the habit of smoothing with our hands in fondness—one to whom mother and sisters would always give the good-night kiss, as his peculiar due, and repress the sigh that would arise at the thought that college or business days had almost come to take him from us. And then we will remember the mixed feeling of hope and pride when we first saw this household pet don his jacket of gray and shoulder his musket for the field; how we would be bright and cheerful before him, and turn to our chambers to weep oceans of tears when he is fairly gone. And does he, too, sleep his last sleep? Does our precious one fill a hero’s grave? O God! help us, for the wail is in the whole land!
“Rachel weeping for her children, and will not be comforted, because they are not.” In all the broad South there will be scarcely a fold without its missing lamb, a fireside without its vacant chair. And yet we must go on. It is our duty to rid our land of invaders; we must destroy the snake which is endeavouring to entwine us in its coils, though it drain our heart’s blood. We know that we are right in the sight of God, and that we must

   “With patient mind our course of duty run.
   God nothing does, or suffers to be done,
   But we would do ourselves, if we could see
   The end of all events as well as He.”

The Lord reigneth, be the earth never so unquiet.