Judith W. McGuire had fled her home in Alexandria, where her husband was the principal of the Episcopal High School of Virginia, in May 1861 when the town was occupied by Union troops. In February 1862 the McGuire family settled in Richmond, where she later found work as a clerk in the Confederate commissary department. She wrote in her diary about the fate of Westwood, the estate of her brother, Dr. William S. R. Brockenbrough, and Summer Hill, the home of her nephew’s widow, Mary Newton. Both plantations were located south of the Pamunkey River near Hanover town, Virginia, and were occupied by Union cavalry on May 27.

11th.—Just heard from W. and S. H. Both places in ruins, except the dwelling-houses. Large portions of the Federal army were on them for eight days. S. H. was used as a hospital for the wounded brought from the battle-fields; this protected the house. At W. several generals had their head-quarters in the grounds near the house, which, of course, protected it. General Warren had his tent in the “shrubbery” for two days, General Burnside for a day or two, and those of lesser rank were there from time to time. General Grant was encamped at S. H. for a time. Dr. B. was at home, with several Confederate wounded from the battle of “Haw’s Shop” in the house. Being absent a mile or two from home when they arrived, they so quickly threw out pickets, spread their tents over the surrounding fields and hills, that he could not return to his house, where his wife and only child were alone, until he had obtained a pass from a Yankee officer. As he approached the house, thousands and tens of thousands of horses and cattle were roaming over the fine wheat fields on his and the adjoining estate, (that of his niece, Mrs. N.,) which were now ripe for the sickle. The clover fields and fields of young corn were sharing the same fate. He found his front porch filled with officers. They asked him of his sentiments with regard to the war. He told them frankly that he was an original Secessionist, and ardently hoped...
to see the North and South separate and distinct nations now and forever. One of them replied that he “honoured his candour,” and from that moment he was treated with great courtesy. After some difficulty he was allowed to keep his wounded Confederates, and in one or two instances the Federal surgeons assisted him in dressing their wounds. At S. H. the parlour was used for an amputating room, and Yankee blood streamed through that beautiful apartment and the adjoining passage. Poor M. had her stricken heart sorely lacerated in every way, particularly when her little son came running in and nestled up to her in alarm. A soldier had asked him, “Are you the son of Captain Newton, who was killed in Culpeper?” “Yes,” replied the child. “Well, I belong to the Eighth Illinois, and was one of the soldiers that fired at him when he fell,” was the barbarous reply.

On these highly cultivated plantations not a fence is left, except mutilated garden enclosures. The fields were as free from vegetation after a few days as the Arabian desert; the very roots seemed eradicated from the earth. A fortification stretched across W., in which were embedded the fence rails of that and the adjoining farms. Ten thousand cavalry were drawn up in line of battle for two days on the two plantations, expecting the approach of the Confederates; bands of music were constantly playing martial airs in all parts of the premises; and whiskey flowed freely. The poor servants could not resist these intoxicating influences, particularly as Abolition preachers were constantly collecting immense crowds, preaching to them the cruelty of the servitude which had been so long imposed upon them, and that Abraham Lincoln was the Moses sent by God to deliver them from the “land of Egypt and the house of bondage,” and to lead them to the promised land. After the eight days were accomplished, the army moved off, leaving not a quadruped, except two pigs, which had ensconced themselves under the ruins of a servant’s house, and perhaps a dog to one plantation; to the other, by some miraculous oversight, two cows and a few pigs were left. Not a wheeled vehicle of any kind was to be found; all the grain, flour, meat, and other supplies were swept off, except the few things hid in those wonderful places which could not be fathomed even by the “Grand Army.” Scarcely a representative of the sons and daughters of
Africa remained in that whole section of country; they had all gone to Canaan, by way of York River, Chesapeake Bay, and the Potomac—not dry-shod, for the waters were not rolled back at the presence of these modern Israelites, but in vessels crowded to suffocation in this excessively warm weather. They have gone to homeless poverty, an unfriendly climate, and hard work; many of them to die without sympathy, for the invalid, the decrepit, and the infant of days have left their houses, beds, and many comforts, the homes of their birth, the masters and mistresses who regarded them not so much as property as humble friends and members of their families. Poor, deluded creatures! I am grieved not so much on account of the loss of their services, though that is excessively inconvenient and annoying, but for their grievous disappointment. Those who have trades, or who are brought up as lady’s maids or house servants, may do well, but woe to the masses who have gone with the blissful hope of idleness and free supplies! We have lost several who were great comforts to us, and others who were sources of care, responsibility, and great expense. These particulars from W. and S. H. I have from our nephew, J. P., who is now a scout for General W. H. F. Lee. He called by to rest a few hours at his uncle’s house, and says he would scarcely have known the barren wilderness. The Northern officers seemed disposed to be courteous to the ladies, in the little intercourse which they had with them. General Ferrara, who commanded the negro troops, was humane, in having a coffin made for a young Confederate officer who died in Dr B’s house, and was kind in other respects. The surgeons, too, assisted in attending to the Confederate wounded. An officer one morning sent for Mrs. N. to ask her where he should place a box of French china for safety; he said that some soldiers had discovered it buried in her garden, dug it up and opened it, but he had come up at this crisis and had placed a guard over it, and desired to know where she wished it put. A place of safety of course was not on the premises, but she had it taken to her chamber. She thanked him for his kindness. He seemed moved, and said, “Mrs. N., I will do what I can for you, for I cannot be too thankful that my wife is not in an invaded country.” She then asked him how he could, with his feelings, come to the South. He replied that he was in the regular army, and
was obliged to come. Many little acts of kindness were done at both houses, which were received in the spirit in which they were extended. **Per contra:** On one occasion Miss D., a young relative of Mrs. N’s, was in one of the tents set aside for the Confederate wounded, writing a letter from a dying soldier to his friends at home. She was interrupted by a young Yankee surgeon, to whom she was a perfect stranger, putting his head in and remarking pertly, “Ah, Miss D., are you writing? Have you friends in Richmond! I shall be there in a few days, and will with pleasure take your communications.” She looked up calmly into his face, and replied, “Thank you; I have no friends in the Libby!” It was heard by his comrades on the outside of the tent, and shouts and peals of laughter resounded at the expense of the discomfited surgeon. The ladies frequently afterwards heard him bored with the question, “Doctor, when do you go to the Libby?”