

# This Day in History... March 31, 1823

## Birth of Mary Chesnut

Author Mary Boykin Chesnut was born on March 31, 1823, near Stateburg, South Carolina. She kept a detailed diary of the Civil War from her perspective, and the resulting book had been labeled a masterpiece and a work of art.

Mary was the oldest of four children born to Stephen Decatur Miller. As the daughter of a South Carolina governor and US senator, she was immersed in politics from childhood. She attended a French school for young ladies and her family spent some time on a farm in Mississippi.

At age 17, Mary married James Chestnut Jr. The only surviving son of one of the largest landowners in the state, he was elected to the US Senate in 1858 – a position he resigned from when Abraham Lincoln was elected president. He then returned south as a delegate to the Confederate Provisional Congress, and later served as personal aide to Jefferson Davis.



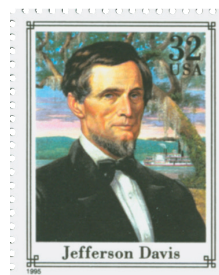
*From the 1995 Civil War issue*



*Mary's father and husband were prevalent in South Carolina politics, giving her a front row seat to major events in the state.*

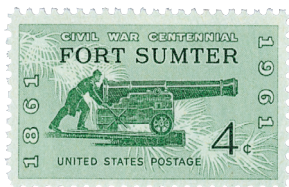
With her husband working as an aide to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Mary played a role in her husband's career. They hosted regular events, which were important to build political connections. Mary was a popular hostess, and her hotel quarters in Montgomery soon became a fashionable salon where the elite of the new Confederacy came to socialize and exchange information.

Aware of the magnitude of the events unfolding around her, Mary began keeping a diary on February 18, 1861. She stated at the start, "The journal is intended to be entirely objective. My subjective days are over." She was present at several historic moments from the meeting of the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America to witnessing the first shots of the war.



*Chesnut's husband was a personal aid to Jefferson Davis.*

Everything Mary saw and heard she candidly recorded, from political rumors and firsthand reports of battles, to wartime romances, parties, and funerals. Her writing explored the conditions of the different social classes in the South during the war, covering slavery, the treatment of women, and more. After the war she converted her diary into a novel, though she didn't finish it in her lifetime. She also wrote three other full novels that she never published. Mary died on November 22, 1886.



*Chesnut's diary includes a detailed account of the battle of Fort Sumter.*

Excerpts from her journals appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* under the title "A Diary from Dixie," and later several heavily revised editions were also published. Finally in 1981, with the publication of *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, her journals appeared as she had originally written them, giving us one of the finest firsthand accounts of the Confederacy. This 1981 edition earned a Pulitzer Prize. The popular Ken Burns television series, *The Civil War*, included several readings from her diary.

One modern review of her book stated that "The very rhythm of her opening pages at once puts us under the spell of a writer who is not merely jotting down her days but establishing, as a novelist does, an atmosphere, an emotional tone... Starting out with situations or relationships of which she cannot know the outcome, she takes advantage of the actual turn of events to develop them and round them out as if she were molding a novel."



*Mary's book is considered one of the most important works from the Confederacy during the war.*

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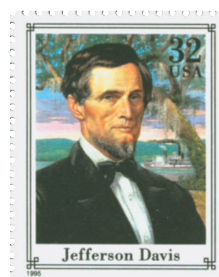


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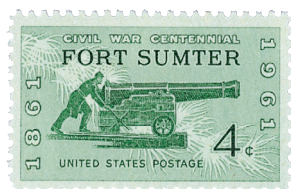
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