

Women and the Civil War

The Civil War significantly affected the lives of American women. A handful disguised themselves as men and joined the fight. Others served as spies and nurses. Many more took on new roles at home after their husbands, brothers, and fathers responded to the call to arms. Thousands of enslaved women began the transition to freedom, beginning new lives amidst the horrors of war. By war's end, the staggering death toll of approximately 620,000 soldiers had left countless women in mourning.

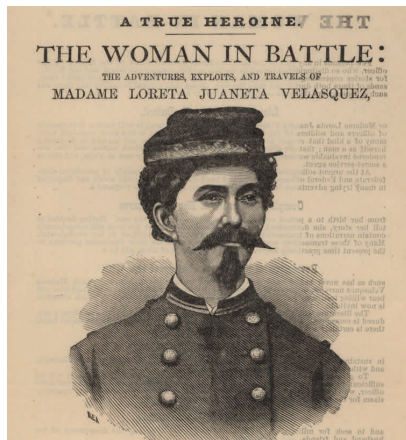
Compared to previous generations, American women as a whole had improved their educational standing, secured additional legal rights, and acquired greater access to manufactured goods by the mid-1800s. Women had participated prominently in the religious revivals known as the Second Great Awakening that swept across the country. As one result of this religious fervor, American women, particularly in the North, became involved in numerous reform efforts, including temperance, the abolition of slavery, the colonization of former slaves, and the improvement of prisons. While this reform activity was significant, the majority of American women still led daily lives that focused primarily on their families, households, gardens, and crops. On the eve of the Civil War, most women in the United States lived in rural areas and regularly performed exhausting, physical work in and around their homes.

It is little wonder, then, that some women, like many men, leapt at the opportunity for adventure by volunteering to fight when the Civil War broke out. Approximately 250 female Civil War soldiers have been documented by historians, and there were undoubtedly more. They took part in every major battle; at the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, for example, at least six women fought, including Confederate Loreta Velazquez, who had also been at Fort Donelson. Most female soldiers joined up with a male relative or fiancé. Like male soldiers, women were motivated by a variety of factors. In addition to the thirst for adventure and the desire to accompany their loved ones, women served out of dedication to a cause and out of the need to earn money for their families. Most female soldiers remained undetected as women unless they were wounded or killed.

Not all women at the battle front were disguised as men. "Daughters of the regiment" engaged in quasi-military work, usually for regiments in which one of their male relatives was serving. Disparaged as "camp followers" in some post-war histories, these women did everything from cooking meals to helping out on hospital ships. Other women were attached to regiments more formally. Susie King Taylor, a former slave who officially served as a laundress for her husband's regiment, ended up doing just a little washing in addition to tending the sick, cleaning guns, and teaching soldiers to read.



[\[Unidentified soldier in infantry uniform sitting between two women, probably relatives\]](#)
[between 1861 and 1865]



[The Woman in Battle](#) [1876]

Female spies and nurses also worked near the front lines. Some women soldiers did service as spies, including Tennessee's Mary Ann Pitman. Because few men expected women to be politicized to the point that they would pass secrets, women were able to glean useful information from the enemy. Both Confederate and Unionist women found various ways to further their respective causes by obtaining information about the enemy and passing it along. Women hid messages within their hoop skirts, corsets, and parasols. Some achieved fame during the war and continue to be well-known today, including Harriet Tubman, Belle Boyd, Rose Greenhow, and Elizabeth Van Lew. Some, such as Nashville's Mary Frances "Fanny" Battle, who spied and smuggled for the Confederacy, shied away from discussing their clandestine work after the war.

Nursing is perhaps the role that Americans today most often associate with Civil War women, in part due to the fame of Clara Barton as a nurse and later as founder of the American Red Cross. Ironically, North and South, military administrators and surgeons initially discouraged women from serving the wounded and ill in any official capacity. Nursing was difficult, often grisly, work and women had to demonstrate that they could do the job. They also had to prove that they could function within a dangerous, chaotic environment full of male strangers. Many Northern women who served as nurses did so under the auspices of the United States Sanitary Commission, a civilian organization created to care for the Union wounded.

Civil War nurses did much more than change bandages, tend wounds, and dispense medicine. They also passed out supplies, wrote letters for soldiers and read to them, cooked and served meals, and did laundry. Barton achieved distinction when she refused to wait until wounded soldiers had been brought to the rear of the battlefield but instead nursed them where they had fallen. Dodging bullets at the battles of Antietam and Fort Wagner, she became known as the "Angel of the Battlefield" and was appointed superintendent of nurses in the Army of the James in June 1864, despite her criticism of the military's treatment of the wounded.

The battle front and the home front merged for many Southern women during the war, particularly in highly contested states such as Tennessee and Virginia. Most women could not believe that the war had come to their doorsteps; they experienced both excitement and fear as they heard nearby cannon fire. Local soldiers aid societies, founded by women to provide supplies to men at the front, mobilized to assist where needed; women who had despaired, "if only I were a man and could fight," now had the opportunity to assist their cause directly. Homes and churches became hospitals, and women provided food and nursed the wounded. After the Battle of Franklin in 1864, for example, Carrie McGavock cared for the wounded at her plantation house and later worked with her husband to create a cemetery on the grounds for the Confederate dead. After the same battle, Unionist Fanny Courtney and her mother tended the Union wounded at Franklin's Presbyterian Church.

While major fighting usually only came to communities for a short time, occupation forces often remained. In divided states such as Tennessee, women had mixed reactions to occupation forces.



[Clara Barton. A war time photograph by Brady](#) [between ca. 1890 and 1910]



[\[Cumberland Landing, Va. Group of "contrabands" at Foller's house\]](#) [1862 May 14]

Confederate supporters made up the majority of white women in Middle and West Tennessee, and they often let Union occupation troops know in no uncertain terms that they were not welcome. Other Confederate women enjoyed conversing and debating with Union officers, even as they remained true to the Confederate cause. Still others went over to the other side and fell in love with Yankees. In East Tennessee, many women supported the Union and chafed under Confederate rule until Union troops arrived late in 1863.

For enslaved women, the coming of the armies brought more than a combination of exhilaration and dread. In the sounds of war, they recognized opportunity. While it certainly did not start

out as an army of liberation, the Union army nonetheless shifted the balance of power within the South's slave system and served as a catalyst for emancipation. This occurred in Middle and West Tennessee as early as 1862. As soon as Union forces came to an area, enslaved women and their families had difficult decisions to make. Should they escape to Union lines, or stay put to see how things turned out? Many women chose to flee—some on their own, others in family groups. They took with them the clothes on their backs and sometimes even managed to get away with cooking pots and small livestock in tow. Others stayed at the home place and bargained with their owners for new privileges in return.

Once within Union lines, former slave women faced several challenges. While women worked for the Union army as laundresses, seamstresses, nurses, hospital attendants, and even laborers on fortifications (such as Nashville's Fort Negley), they did not have as many employment options as men did. Nor, of course, did they have the opportunity to enlist in the Union Army as African American men did beginning in 1863. Women with young children, in particular, had trouble finding work and were seen as a burden by most Union commanders. Women and children made up the majority of the inhabitants of "contraband camps," which were temporary settlements of former slaves located close to Union army camps. Some of these women raised crops for the government on farms confiscated from Confederate refugees. Women also tended their own gardens at the camps, raised chickens and hogs, and sold soldiers baked goods, dairy products, and produce.

In addition to the challenge of everyday subsistence, ex-slave women had to deal with such other problems as lack of warm clothing and good shelter, rampant illness (contraband camps had extremely high mortality rates due to disease), abuse from soldiers, and the transitory nature of life within a war zone. To cope, many women helped each other and drew on the resilience they had learned while enslaved. African American women also took advantage of the benefits of freedom, especially the opportunity to learn to read and write. Northern



[\[Full-length portrait of an unidentified woman, seated, and full-length portrait of a child standing on her right, both subjects are facing front\]](#) [between 1860 and 1870]



aid societies established schools within Union lines, and both children and adults attended enthusiastically.

The wartime transition from slavery to freedom also affected Southern white women on the home front. Women of the slaveholding class saw their worlds change significantly during the war, particularly in states like Tennessee that experienced widespread Union occupation and a significant amount of wartime emancipation. Early in the war, women whose husbands formed companies as officers or enlisted as privates had to take on additional supervisory duties over their enslaved workers. Later, as slaves began leaving for Union lines or refusing to do certain jobs, slaveholding women and their children had to do more work in the home and in the fields.

[If I cannot fight. \[Pictorial envelope\]](#)

Non-slaveholding Southern women had to fill in the gaps left by their male family members who had joined either the Confederate or Union forces. Families depended heavily on assistance from kin and neighbors to keep farms running and maintain households. This was especially difficult for women who lived close to the fighting as soldiers from both sides took corn, livestock, wood, and anything else they could get to feed and warm themselves and their horses. Women and children often suffered acutely as a result. Many Southern white women became refugees during the war, leaving battle-scarred, Union-occupied, or guerilla-infested areas to live with relatives deeper in the Confederate interior of the South. In addition, many women and their families flocked to towns and cities in the hope of getting work or finding provisions. Bread riots broke out in several Southern cities midway through the war when women fought back against the exorbitant prices charged for basic goods.

One of the greatest threats to women and their families on the Southern home front came from guerilla fighting, which made little distinction between soldiers and civilians. Such irregular warfare became rampant in areas of rural Tennessee where the regular military had little or no presence. Although some women participated in partisan warfare, they were more likely to suffer from its ravages. While some partisan fighters did spare white women from direct violence, few had any compunction about spilling the blood of men in view of their families.

Most women on the Northern home front did not directly experience the war's violence and deprivation like their counterparts in the South did. Many, however, also had to struggle to make ends meet when their male relatives—and primary breadwinners—went off to war. Like some urban Southern women, some Northern women found jobs in cities and towns in war-related industries, such as munitions factories. In Washington, D.C., many women took desk jobs, once held by men, in departments of the federal government. Like women in the South, Northern women assisted the war effort from the home front by making and gathering supplies for the troops, and they had considerably more resources to draw upon than did Southern women. As the war dragged on, however, even Northern women grew weary of the sacrifices that they and their families were making. When riots against the military draft took place in Northern cities such as Boston and New York in 1863, working-class women joined in the mob violence.

Most American women welcomed the end of the war in April 1865. Certainly, Confederate women were devastated that their cause had been lost, but even they rejoiced to have their loved ones home. Reunions of families torn apart by the war took place throughout the nation. The difficult

challenges of binding up the country's wounds and completing the transition to a free nation lay ahead. Women contributed by participating in post-war relief and freedmen's aid organizations. Finally, in the decades after the war, as writers and through their involvement in memorial associations and Emancipation Day celebrations, women strongly influenced how Northerners and Southerners would remember the war.

Suggested Resources

- Battle of Murfreesboro Activity: Occupied Home Front (Kate Carney Diary).—<http://www.sitemason.com/files/dreORy/Battle%20of%20Murfreesboro%20activity.pdf>
- Blanton, DeAnne, and Lauren M. Cook. *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (2002).
- Fain, John N., ed. *Sanctified Trial: The Diary of Eliza Rhea Fain, a Confederate Woman in East Tennessee* (2004).
- Faust, Drew. *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996).
- Frank, Lisa Tendrich, ed. *Women in the American Civil War, Volumes I-II* (2008).
- Leonard, Elizabeth D. *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (1999).
- Lesson Plan: Women in the Civil War: Ladies, Contraband and Spies—<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/women-cw/>
- The Library of Congress Wise Guide: She Was the “Angel of the Battlefield” (Clara Barton)—<http://www.loc.gov/wiseguide/nov05/angel.html>
- Meet Amazing Americans: Activists and Reformers: Harriet Tubman—http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/tubman/aa_tubman_subj.html
- Taylor, Susie King. *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S.C. Volunteers* (1902).
- Witnesses to Battle: Accounts of the Home Front (Franklin, TN) —<http://www.sitemason.com/files/hlW9j2/Witnesses%20to%20Battle%20Activity.pdf>
- Witnesses to Battle: Accounts of the Home Front Part II (Nashville, TN) —<http://www.sitemason.com/files/e4Usgg/Nashville%20Addition%20to%20Witnesses%20to%20Battle.pdf>