

GROWING POSSIBILITIES, SAME SOCIETAL SHACKLES: WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE
CIVIL WAR

Growing Possibilities, Same Societal Shackles: Women's Role in the Civil War

What role did women play in the Civil War and how did these efforts affect their role in society?

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The Civil War was an important event that shaped and defined America and its future social and gender roles. While the Civil War did present itself as a great opportunity for women and men alike to extend their stations, it was not the fast track to freedom people claimed it to be, especially for women. Abolitionists saw the war's purpose as to establish more rights and freedoms for traditionally oppressed individuals, but this did not accomplish nearly as much as they set out for it to do. Women had already begun their fight for gender equality prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, and thus some were able to recognize the similarities between their struggle and the fight for the abolishment of slavery.¹ As many women could understand the desire for equal rights that African Americans expressed, Union women were often active members in the fight for the freedom of slaves. This connection between women and slaves and their yearn for freedom helps to explain why Union women were so involved with the Civil War. However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, Confederate women were also quite involved with the war effort, but with radically different motivations. Thus, regardless of their stances, both Northern and Southern women were heavily involved with the Civil War effort. While the war itself was fought over the abolishment of slavery, it also provided an opportunity for women to gain some independence and far greater responsibilities and roles than ever before. However, women's rights did not change in any grand manner and women did not make any great strides toward equality.

An increase in opportunities does not always equate to a growth of rights. This was the scenario for women during the Civil War. The war required women to help the cause and thus had to allow them to work outside of their homes, one of the rare opportunities to do any work outside of their typical domestic roles. But was it *really* that far outside of the domestic roles

¹ Richard Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 3.

they already performed? For example, one such role that women filled during the Civil War period was nursing. While men had previously dominated the medical care field, the Civil War provided that opportunity for women to enter their ranks. Nurses were expected to do stitches, care for soldiers, and clean the hospitals. However, even this role demonstrated the lack of advancement in the treatment of women because it was resoundingly familiar to their already established domestic duties. These women may have had new experiences as they now worked in a violent and masculine environment, but they were essentially still sewing, cleaning, and caring for people. This was seen in both World War I and II as well as women were required to join the workforce to fill in for the men who had been drafted to meet the production requirements for a wartime economy. Over the years, scholars have debated whether the Civil War profoundly changed life for women in America and yet few have considered the middle ground. While life did change for women in America, the change was only temporary and merely forged a path for future women to establish their independence.

Abolition and the Women's Movement

Women's involvement with the Civil War began long before the outbreak of the war itself. Women were some of the largest advocates for the abolishment of slavery and thus were highly active during the lead up to the Civil War. Many women's organizations were formed during this period to tackle the issues with slavery and gender equality. Such groups included the Anti-Slavery Society, which was formed in 1835, and the Female Moral Reform Society, which formed in 1836.² Unsurprisingly, organizations such as these were often met with resistance, but the formation and size of these organizations alone demonstrated the greater opportunities

² Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 2.

women had to get involved with the political realm. The common resistance these groups met demonstrated the restraints that women were kept in regardless of their progress. Sexism was not unheard of within the abolition movement, but rather was a common issue. While some men freely accepted and supported women's role in the fight against slavery, others felt differently. Despite many women's dedication to the cause, some men felt that these women's efforts would only discredit the antislavery movement. Frederick Douglass brought attention to this very issue in an essay shortly after attending the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Just as Union women could commiserate with his struggle for rights, Douglass felt the same sympathy for the women at the convention.³ In his essay, Douglass addressed these men who are staunchly against women's involvement and rights. He went so far as to state that "a discussion of the rights of animals would be regarded with far more complacency".⁴ This tie between women's rights and abolition was sometimes a detriment to the cause because of these staunch beliefs that women could never be equals. A number of people left the fight for abolition because of this connection to women, out of concern that their contributions to the abolition movement would also help the women's fight for rights.⁵ Women may have taken a step forward, but they continued to be held back.

It was especially true that the daily lives of elite White women were not changed profoundly by the Civil War. African American women obviously experienced far more growth in their independence and autonomy than other women, but the struggle for freedom was far from over. While legally freed from slavery, there were still many limits to the freedoms of African American women, including Jim Crow- era segregation. While the Union believed in the

³ Frederick Douglass "The Rights of Women," *The North Star* (July 28, 1848), <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abwm03dt.html>.

⁴ Douglass, "The Rights of Women."

⁵ Ibid.

abolishment of slavery, many Union soldiers still shared some of the racist thoughts of their Confederate enemies. Many thought that newly freed peoples needed more guidance to establish their own domestic lives, as these formally enslaved people were seen as more sexually promiscuous and passionate.⁶ There was a common fear that former slaves would threaten the national morality and thus they needed to be taught to follow the White family model. While newly freed couples often flocked to marry as soon as it was legal and thus already willingly followed the same family models, White people still felt that these former slaves were incapable of acting on their own. Free African American women were still discriminated against and seen as lesser but were now expected to follow the same societal expectations as their White counterparts. In this way, the Civil War extended constricting gender stereotypes and expectations to include a previously excluded demographic of women. Thus, while the legal rights for African American women grew as a result of the Civil War, gender equality did not reach any new extremes either socially or legally.

Regiment Camps

Early in the war, it was not uncommon for women and children to follow the traveling soldiers, forcing the generals to have to deal with the greater need for supplies and space but also stuck with the task of keeping the soldiers focused amongst the growing number of people in their camps.⁷ Many African American families chose to follow this lifestyle during the Civil War as they felt that being under the troops' protection would be their best shot at safety. These African Americans left their homes to join the Union troops to claim protection, refuge, and

⁶ Susan-Mary Grant, "When the Fires Burned Too Close to Home: Southern Women and the Dislocations of the Home Front in the American Civil War," *Women's History Review: Home Fronts, Gender War and Conflict* 26, no. 4 (July 2017): 578.

⁷ Laura Mammina, "In the Midst of Fire and Blood: Union Soldiers, Unionist Women, Military Policy, and Intimate Space During the American Civil War," *Civil War History* 64, no. 2 (June 2018): 157.

shelter with the troops.⁸ The Union ties to the Federal government meant that their safety was more secured than if they chose to live on their own. These African American women often brought their children into these camps, demonstrating the overlap of the domestic and military spheres in the era of the Civil War.

These women were thought to be drawing the soldiers' attention away from the importance of the war, thus threatening the regiment's success. Many women in these camps were simply soldiers' wives and were there to assist with the cooking and laundry for the troops.⁹ These women were able to experience new realms and experiment with far more opportunities than they would have ever been provided before the Civil War, but they were ultimately still viewed as lesser. These women in the camps were always serving men in one way or another, other than the disguised female soldiers who were forced to masquerade as men as women were not thought capable enough to serve. Regiment camp life is a clear example of the restrictions still being placed on women despite their endless new opportunities.

Domestic Lives

While the Civil War was a period in which women were given the opportunity to prove their worth by working outside of the home, their work within the home changed greatly as well. These contributions and experiences inside the home held a high degree of importance. After the men left for the war, women were not only left to fulfill their positions in the working economy but were also forced to take on their more physical domestic duties as well. Women had to take on jobs in the home such as laboring in the fields and managing farms.¹⁰ This hard labor was

⁸ Mammina, "In the Midst of Fire and Blood," 157.

⁹ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

another method by which women were able to prove their capabilities as it demonstrated further that they did not need a man to manage their homes; However, extraordinarily little change resulted out of this development. During the war, women managed to keep farm production levels stable and the agricultural industry afloat, but yet their contributions to this effort were largely ignored; Isaac Newton, Lincoln's commissioner of agriculture, displayed this ignorance and encouraged disregarding the women's role as he claimed that this feat was due to the work of the youth left at home and the influx of immigrant workers.¹¹ Newton entirely ignored women's effort in the success of the agricultural industry during a chaotic war, thus stripping them of any credit or change in worth in society.

The more common result of the Civil War's efforts on home life was families falling into absolute destitution and sorrow. One sad and difficult situation that occurred throughout the Civil War was that women were often stuck serving as the pallbearers at the funerals for these soldiers.¹² There were no able-bodied men home to do this task and women were once again forced to step in, regardless of the emotional and physical strain it placed on them. Many of these women were forced to live in bare minimum conditions, surviving on solely bread and water for months at a time.¹³ These women were forced to fulfill a role in society that no one genuinely believed they could, and the hardships they faced often proved to be too much, leaving them to such ramshackle lives during the war.

Even after the men returned home, many of these women were still forced to fulfill these new tasks as they often returned injured or even amputated. These amputations served as a major changing force in society and the definition of manhood during the Civil War, one that had

¹¹ Judith Ann Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 17.

¹² Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

women serve as the catalyst. After the war, Southerners accepted these disfigured soldiers as honored veterans, with high respect in society.¹⁴ However, the real place men fought to reassert their dominance and manliness was within the home. These men were now forced to rely on their wives in ways they never had to before, for both their own health and the management of the home. Due to this dependency, women were able to gain a sense of control and dominance in their homes that now allowed them to enter relationships on equal terms.¹⁵ However, this upper hand did not extend to society itself. Women were now expected to view injured soldiers as superior members of society, as Confederate President Jefferson Davis told the South's young women to view these men as "aristocracy" and these women were to be tasked with "ensuring the wounded returned as heroes rather than dishonored failures".¹⁶ Despite their new authority in the domestic realm, these women were still trapped serving the men, and were socially outcast if they did not uphold this new societal standard. These women were expected to take on these roles without complaint and yet were given little recognition or appreciation for their efforts.

Changing Work Force

As the Civil War raged on and increasing numbers of able-bodied men were pulled from their homes to join the ranks, the need for able workers grew exponentially, the same occurring in future wars as well. A wartime economy requires many workers to handle the increase in production, thus women were needed to fill the jobs the men in their lives had left behind. Some of these positions were largely related to the war effort itself, but some were just necessary jobs within society, wholly unrelated to the war. These included careers such as teaching, clerical

¹⁴ Brian Craig Miller, "Confederate Amputees and the Women Who Loved (or Tried to Love) Them" in *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges*, ed. Stephen Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 302.

¹⁵ Miller, "Confederate Amputees," 303.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

work in businesses or government agencies, printers, farm labor, at counting houses, and factory labor.¹⁷ These factory jobs were often strongly related to the war as some women took on these jobs in munition plants to meet the production needs of the war.

These women received little resistance to joining these workforces as owners had little to complain about as they were able to pay these women significantly less for the same work. However, this pay was often so little that these working women eventually had to reach out to President Lincoln to request assistance as they were “unable to sustain life for the price offered by contractors.”¹⁸ These women were able to report this issue as the federal government had established a law in 1863, the False Claims Act, which encouraged workers to whistle blow on any workplace malfeasance by offering these workers half of the damages won by the government.¹⁹ The federal government was willing to deal with these workplace issues as these women were needed to fulfill the production needs of the war but also because these women often managed to fulfill these new roles while still maintaining their gender expectations. These women were aware that this was necessary if they were to receive any help from the government, but also to avoid social backlash. They did so by framing their factory work as a patriotic sacrifice while also highlighting their own recognition of their gender roles. This was seen immediately in the opening of their letter to Lincoln as they referred to themselves solely as “the undersigned, wives, widows, sisters, and friends of the soldiers”.²⁰ They only referenced their new working roles in regard to the soldiers, emphasizing that they were intrinsically tied to the soldiers rather than working for out of their own autonomy. While these women were able to

¹⁷ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 5.

¹⁸ THE SEWING WOMEN, *Fincher's Trade Review*, 18 March 1865, p. 2, col. 6, *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, vol. 9, John R. Commons, Ulrich B. Phillips, Eugene A. Gilmore, Helen L. Sumner, and John B. Andrews, eds. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 72.

¹⁹ THE SEWING WOMEN, 72.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

gain access to the workforce in larger numbers than typically seen before, they were still valued less than men and they were still seen as existing only in relation to men.

Espionage

As women became more involved in the war effort, women's covert activity rose to higher levels than ever seen before. One way women were involved with these undercover activities was the smuggling of contraband. Many women during the Civil War were caught and arrested for carrying contraband military goods to the opposing side.²¹ This was a profound change not only in the perception of women but their social roles as well. Not only were these women now involving themselves in the war effort, but they were also assisting the enemies. These women were no longer seen as merely a support system but rather as criminals and traitors, terms rarely applied outside of men at the time. It was easier for the Union and/or the Confederacy to accept and embrace women's role in the war when it was to their benefit, but when they discovered women assisting their enemies, it became a much larger issue and thus far harder to ignore. Women were able to use these gender expectations, which had so long been used against them, in their favor as they were not easily suspected of these crimes. This was seen with Rose Greenhow or 'Rebel Rose', a young and attractive widow of an important man. She had access to many people with important information on the war effort and would have easily been able to persuade people to disclose that information to her due to both her gender and her class.²² This ease of access allowed her to serve as a Confederate spy without much trouble and the social expectations placed upon her allowed her to do so without much suspicion as well.

²¹ Stephanie McCurry, "Enemy Women and the Laws of War in the American Civil War," *Law and History Review* 35, no. 3 (August 2017): 690.

²² "Leaders: Rose O'Neal Greenhow (1817–1864) and Her Daughter Rose," accessed March 25, 2021, http://www.civilwar.si.edu/leaders_greenhow.html.

Well-known Civil War figure Emma Edmonds had served in the capacity of a spy as well for a time and recorded the experience in her memoirs, “He was too generous to harbor a suspicion against me, and thus furnished me the very means of betraying him.”²³ Trust was so easily given to her due to her gender and she very easily collected the information she needed without much cause for trouble.

Women were also caught in the act of a variety of other war crimes. Most of these crimes involved the conveyance of private military intelligence to the enemy camps. Many women were caught running rebel spy networks across the nation, even within the Union camps themselves.²⁴ These women often acting as spies and scouts were also often found to be using their homes as key outposts in the war.²⁵ Another way women assisted with the war effort was through the distraction of the enemy. Women often acted as decoys in the Civil War, using their gender as a disguise.²⁶ These women played into the presumed innocence that still ran rampant through the minds of many soldiers. This innocence allowed these decoys to distract the men through claims of needing assistance or spreading false intelligence to lead the troops astray. This demonstrates how extensive these spies’ and war criminals’ actions went and how deeply they were able to intrude on the enemy. However, women also partook in and were subsequently arrested for lesser acts of rebellion including disloyalty speech, forging permits, sewing rebellion flags and uniforms, and running Confederate mail networks.²⁷ This demonstrates how women of all stations were able to join in the rebellion in their own ways.

²³ Edmonds S Emma E., *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army The Adventures and Experiences of a Woman in Hospitals, Camps, and Battle-Fields* (Project Gutenberg, 2012), 169.

²⁴ McCurry, “Enemy Women,” 690.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 691.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 692.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 690.

The Union soon started deploying female detectives to go undercover and investigate these crimes. These women were also needed for this role as the men were not as able to search women's bodies at check points due to the impropriety. Emma Edmonds also served in this capacity during the war as "there were many spies in our midst who were daily giving information to the enemy."²⁸ This soon led to the Union's introduction of the requirement of women to take an oath, swearing their loyalty to the Union. Edmonds had experience with this as well as she was examined and found that her "organs of secretiveness, combativeness, etc. were largely developed" and so "the oath of allegiance was administered."²⁹ The ability of women to involve themselves with the war and politics this deeply did represent a fundamental change in the ability of women to be politically active, but this introduction of oaths only further restricted them. As soon as women were given new opportunities and more freedoms, another restriction was added to keep them in their place in society.

Hospital Work

A significant way that women were able to assist in the Civil War effort was through nursing jobs in Civil War hospitals. The introduction to nursing and hospital work did not make substantial strides in the establishment of greater women's rights. Women's role in the Civil War hospitals strongly related to the domestic roles women were already delegated to, and their skills in the home were often particularly useful in their nursing roles. Before the Civil War had begun, women had already been expected to play the role of nurse in their own homes. During the nineteenth century, most nursing care had occurred within the home by the women in the

²⁸ Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy*, 320.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

family.³⁰ The women in the household were expected to care for the family whenever illness hit the home. Mary Livermore, a nurse in the Union Civil War Hospitals, expressed this as she stated that “as the soldiers were brought in, we fell into maternal relations with them, as women instinctively do when brought into juxtaposition with weakness”.³¹ The duties of a nurse were similar enough to that of the domestic duties of a woman that it was still considered a proper role for a woman. In fact, one nurse, Katharine Wormeley, wrote home in letters to “reassure . . . friends and relatives that her work” as a nurse during the Civil War “was perfectly consistent with her position at home”.³² Women were expected to care and sacrifice for others so their involvement as Civil War nurses followed the same logic. Often these spheres of their lives interacted as well. If women were not working at Civil War hospitals, they were often opening their homes up to be used as one.

Many historians have argued that many women, especially Southern White women, were reluctant to work in these positions and only did so when the war effort required it as they did not want to surrender their place in society.³³ These women felt as if their societal privileges would be lost if they sacrificed their belief that women were helpless and needed men to do such untoward duties. Whereas in reality, this was not a common issue that women expressed as they more so felt that they were simply sacrificing their own comfort to assist the men, which fit well within the societal standards of the time. Emma Edmonds had addressed this very mentality in her own memoirs as she stated that “in the opinion of many, it is the privilege of woman to

³⁰ Long Telford, “Gendered Spaces, Gendered Pages: Union Women in Civil War Nurse Narratives,” *Medical Humanities* 38, no. 2 (December 2012): 97.

³¹ Mary Livermore, *My Story of the War: A Woman’s Narrative of Four Years Personal Experience as Nurse in the Union Army* (Hartford, CT: A.D. Worthington & Co., 1890), 345-46.

³² Melissa J. Strong, “‘The Finest Kind of Lady’: Hegemonic Femininity in American Women’s Civil War Narratives,” *Women’s Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2017): 2.

³³ Barbra Wall, Kathleen Rogers, and Ann Kutney-Lee, “The North Vs. the South: Conditions at Civil War Hospitals,” *Southern Quarterly* 53, no. 3/4 (April 2016): 46.

minister to the sick and soothe the sorrowing.”³⁴ It has been estimated that within the Union army ranks alone there was at least 21,000 women working as nurses.³⁵ This high number of working women demonstrates a clear willingness to join this war effort rather than the hesitancy that others have tried to exaggerate.

While these nursing jobs did allow women to have far more opportunities than before, women’s autonomy and the perspective on women’s rights did not fundamentally change in response to this development. In contrast, women’s contributions to the war more than likely set back their own movement. Because the Civil War required so much effort and involvement from both men and women, this momentous event halted any actions being taken in their own fight for women’s rights. Regarding nursing specifically, as debates and arguments waged on over a women’s proper place and the implications on the issue of gender equality, women continued to be kept out of the nursing role. However, Julia Dunlap recognized this and suggested that the debate over women’s rights and gender restrictions should be held off until the desperate need for nurses had passed.³⁶ She may have accomplished the short-term goal of getting women into nursing, but the larger conversations about gender equality and women’s rights were put on hold and shoved to the side.

The innovations women brought into the profession of nursing were also heavily related to their domestic roles. The clear connection between domestic roles and these hospital duties were what largely allowed these women to take on these new responsibilities. It was a rare societally acceptable way for women to embrace these opportunities while maintaining their feminine fragility. The main innovation women brought to nursing was their emphasis on

³⁴ Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy*, 6.

³⁵ Telford, “Gendered Spaces,” 97.

³⁶ Daneen Wardrop, *Civil War Nurse Narratives, 1863-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 85.

cleanliness and order. The Civil War hospitals were places of violence, chaos, and bloodshed. For this reason, many have argued that women's role in these hospitals changed society's expectations for women as they were uncharacteristically permitted to be involved with this type of violence. However, this perspective is flawed as women had combated this disorder in the hospital through their sanitation implementations. Florence Nightingale, one of the most well-known female nurses from this period, had served as a model for this behavior as she had her own strict code of cleanliness and order that she implemented in her nursing; Other Union nurses strictly followed this protocol as they believed this would help return the soldiers to their original health.³⁷

However, these women made innovations in cleanliness beyond their own daily hospital tasks. This was seen especially with their involvement with the U.S. Army's Sanitary Commission. Women in this commission fought against the dirty conditions in the Civil War Hospitals and pushed doctors to wash their hands and tools between surgeries, recognizing the infections that often hit the soldiers. However, their efforts were not entirely appreciated nor accepted as these doctors were often quite hesitant to listen to their instructions.³⁸ Reflecting the lack of growth in the social value and respect of women, these men hesitated to follow this well-founded guidance as they did not want to follow the advice of a woman.

Women often changed these hospital environments to make them more friendly and less dreary. The women felt that the dreadful conditions of the hospitals and the war itself was lowering the morale of the soldiers and thus felt these additions could help encourage the men. One way these women accomplished this was the addition of activities for the patients and staff.

³⁷ Telford, "Gendered Spaces," 99.

³⁸ Jane E. Schultz, "The Inhospitable Hospital; Gender and Professionalism in Civil War Medicine," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 376.

One such distraction that these women implemented was the establishment of a library and reading room with newspapers from across the nation.³⁹ While some hospitals were more rundown and unable to make such strides as this, many made smaller editions to provide entertainment and distraction for the troops. These distractions included things such as musical performances, games, and billiards rooms, and more. One such hospital even had a printing office to publish its own newspaper, *The West Philadelphia Hospital Register*.⁴⁰ This newspaper allowed the soldiers to have a creative outlet in a place of such chaos as it allowed them to publish their writing, including poetry, short stories, etc. This is not to say that all or even most of the Civil War hospitals had such amenities; many hospitals were run ragged as they were overrun with patients and did not have enough resources to feed and treat all the soldiers let alone provide them with entertainment. This is merely to show the strides women made in their positions as nurses within these chaotic environments as they focused on not only treating the physical ailments of the soldiers but their mental and emotional anguish as well.

However well these nurses did, men still shot down their ability to do the traditionally male job. It was argued that women could not be nurses as they would faint at the sight of blood and gore, disturb patients with their hysterics, get in the way of doctors, and would be too weak to help with the heavy lifting aspects of the job, such as lifting patients and moving hospital beds.⁴¹ While this was clearly not always the case, these women were faced with traumatizing and horrific sights and yet were expected to have the same ability to ignore the carnage as men who had worked in the field for years. Cornelia McDonald, a Southern hospital worker, described the scene in her writings, stating that as she stumbled from one room to the next her

³⁹ Wall, Rogers, and Kutney-Lee, "The North Vs. the South," 43.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 8.

dress had “brushed up against a pile of amputated limbs heaped up near the door.”⁴² These descriptions alone are enough to make a person blanch, and yet these women were expected to overcome the very feminine fragility they were also expected to maintain.

These arguments against women joining the nursing field during the Civil War were common in the North and the South, but this resistance was more difficult to surpass in the South. In Southern society, these women had to overcome not only the gender barrier, but also the class barrier. Nursing in the South had traditionally been a job mostly for lower-class men and thus the desire of women of all classes to join the war effort through nursing led to many debates.⁴³ The South was more staunchly traditional than the North and thus these societal expectations were more difficult to overcome. One such argument that ran rampant in the South was that women should not be in such constant contact with the male body, which was required to be a nurse. This touching was considered highly inappropriate in this time, especially in the South, and thus people feared female nurses would lose their modesty or fragility. Even in the North most nurses had to be widows or spinsters to fit social expectations. For this reason, many Southern women served more as general hospital workers than modern-day nurses.⁴⁴ These women were not able to treat or care for the patients and simply were made to run daily hospital tasks and serve as assistants to the doctors and male nurses as it kept them away from the violence and impropriety of the war. At this time, the only trained female nurses in the South were the Catholic Sisters of Mercy.⁴⁵ The Catholic Sisters of Mercy were nuns who volunteered to work in these hospitals during the Civil War and were allowed to serve in these more scandalous roles as they were considered less prone to sin and more virtuous due to their position

⁴² Miller, “Confederate Amputees,” 306.

⁴³ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

in the Church. Catholic nuns of several different orders served on both sides of the war, such as the Daughters of Charity and the Holy Cross Sisters.⁴⁶

However, there were more roles for women in these hospitals than simply nursing. Nursing and matron jobs tended to only go to the elite White women as these jobs were considered more elite than others. Other tasks within the Civil War hospitals that women were expected to complete were cooking, cleaning, and washing. These jobs were often given to the lower class or working-class White women and enslaved African American women. White women were also expected to visit the patients and distribute the food, supplies, and clothing throughout the hospitals. These roles in the Civil War hospitals clearly demonstrated the class distinctions that had already existed within the social and professional spheres, showing the lack of growth in society. While these class divisions were evident throughout the nation, they were followed much more staunchly in the Southern hospitals than within the Northern hospitals.⁴⁷ This further shows the continuing social restrictions and standards that were implemented in this wartime environment as the North continued to be less limiting but still not entirely accepting.

New Responsibilities

Women were clearly highly active members of the nation during the Civil War in a large variety of ways. Once the war broke out, women began to take on more responsibilities, including getting supplies to soldiers. The sudden rush of men being sent into service meant that in both the North and the South there was a gross lack of supplies to meet the needs of troops and the task of resolving the issue fell onto churches, families, and social groups. Women stepped up and began forming ladies' aid and soldiers' aid societies to fulfill these needs by providing food,

⁴⁶ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 47.

⁴⁷ Wall, Rogers, and Kutney-Lee, "The North Vs. the South," 46.

uniforms, bandages, and other necessary supplies to the troops.⁴⁸ Union and Confederate women also took on major fundraising campaigns. The Ladies Association was one such group that raised funds to provide hospitals stores and clothing for soldiers, also collecting items such as clothing, bedding, food, and bandages.⁴⁹ One such women was Margaret Ann Meta Morris Grimball who stated that the women were “as busy as possible forming themselves into relief societies for the wounded soldiers.”⁵⁰ Women organized these societies and made significant strides in providing for their soldiers, but yet were still forced to frame their accomplishments as solely for others’ benefits. These developments were not seen as proof of women’s autonomy and ingenuity but rather that women were meant to sacrifice and work for men, the opposite message that the Women’s Rights Movement wanted to send.

Women also made advancements for the war effort from within the federal government. Dorothea Dix was appointed Superintendent of Women Nurses for the War Department and personally oversaw the recruitment, training, and deployment of all army nurses.⁵¹ She had a large amount of authority over a field that had previously been considered suitable only for men. She was able to overcome the societal expectations for middle class and upper middle-class women at this time as she was able to gain power in an important government position. However, her role also held many women back and fed into these same societal expectations. Dix had clear preferences for the nurses she allowed to serve in the Civil War hospitals as she quite often chose to send older “plain-looking” women over the younger more attractive women.⁵² Dix was feeding into the narrative that the more attractive and younger women would

⁴⁸ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 16.

⁴⁹ Miller, “Confederate Amputees,” 308.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 21.

⁵² Ibid.

only hurt the cause and become a distraction in the hospitals, rather than having the capability to do their job. This held back the women's rights cause as it demonstrated that even some women felt that certain types of women were not as capable and strong as others, especially based on their appearance. This judgment of skill based on appearance happened to one of the better-known nurses from the Civil War, Fannie A. Beers. A soldier that she had cared for openly admitted in a letter that he questioned her abilities upon first glance, "At first sight her youthful, delicate, refined, and lady-like appearance, showing she had never been accustomed to any hardships of life, caused me to doubt her capacity to fill the position of matron."⁵³ She went on to make an impeccable service record as a nurse during the war but, despite her accomplishments, these judgments were not any less common for her or her fellow female nurses. Judging women on their looks rather than their intellect or capabilities was and always has been a huge hinderance in the fight for gender equality and this judgment coming from other women only gives the message that this is the correct way to evaluate women.

Undercover Soldiers

Arguably, the group of women that displayed the most independence and refusal to conform to societal standards were those who fought on the frontlines of the Civil War battles. These women had a broad range as they spanned across all economic and social classes, as some were poor and uneducated whereas others were the upper-class elites.⁵⁴ Hundreds of women enlisted to fight, in both the United States Army and the Confederate Army. These women were determined to fight this war directly rather than being delegated to merely assisting the men. This

⁵³ Fannie A. Beers, *Memories: A Record of Personal Experience and Adventure During Four Years of War* (Philadelphia: Press of J.B. Lippincott Co., 1889), 333.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 1.

group had the most potential to make great strides for gender equality as these were the only women that did not have to feed into feminine gender stereotypes and expectations. In every other position, the women, while expanding their opportunities and gaining new advantages, were forced to continue to serve men in one capacity or another; for example, women that worked as nurses were able to enter the professional field in far greater numbers than previously, but their jobs consisted of caring for their male patients and following the orders of their male superiors, the doctors.

While most women were able to hide amongst the ranks, discovery of their true identity was not unheard of. However, as long as the officers were not made aware of the discovery, most times these women continued to serve under their assumed identities and their fellow soldiers would help conceal them.⁵⁵ Officers were required to follow much stricter guidelines and thus were unlikely to allow a woman to remain a soldier, whereas her fellow servicemen did not follow such rules. These men instead chose to cover for these women often due to the respect they had earned from the men during their service.⁵⁶ These fellow soldiers understood and respected the patriotism and bravery these women were displaying in their service and thus supported them. This was the case for Jennie Hodgers, alias Albert Cashier, who fought for the duration of the Civil War without the officers discovering her true identity. However, the staff at the home she was staying at had discovered her secret and loyally hid the truth out of respect for her service.⁵⁷ This lasting respect after the discovery of their true sex was also seen in Lake Providence, Louisiana as a soldier's true gender was discovered after her death. The name of this soldier was unknown but the men she served with contended that she "always sustained an

⁵⁵ Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 62.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Jess Righthand, "The Women Who Fought in the Civil War," Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, April 7, 2011), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-women-who-fought-in-the-civil-war-1402680/>.

excellent reputation, both as a man and a soldier” and all spoke of her with “respect and affection” after her passing.⁵⁸

However, the fear of being discovered alone was often enough to remove a woman from the ranks. Emma E. Edmonds fell sick during her service as a soldier and feared that under medical treatment the truth of her gender would be discovered, “my eye fell upon my costume... when the perfect absurdity of my position rushed over my mind with overwhelming force.”⁵⁹ After this reality settled in for Edmonds, she soon chose to sneak off to a private hospital, knowing she’d never evade detection in the Civil War Hospitals. However, this soon led to her soldier alias being known as a deserter so rather than returning to the military she chose to continue her service as a nurse.

Many women disguised themselves as men to go off to war without fearing much backlash from their community. The reasons behind the common lack of public criticism varied but one such reason was their familiarity with the idea of cross-dressing heroic women. Women, both fictional and real, had commonly cross-dressed as men and this had become a popular cultural trope as a result. This was seen in the celebration of female soldiers and sailors in works such as novels, ballads, and poetry during this time.⁶⁰ These women were viewed as heroines and their actions were upheld and supported, despite their supposed impropriety of masquerading as men. It is no surprise with this commonality of female cross-dressing heroines in their print media that most people would not shame these soldiers, but even praise them. This presence of these women in their culture served as an incentive to many women as well.⁶¹ Feeling inspired

⁵⁸ Vicki Betts, “Women Soldiers, Spies, and Vivandieres: Articles from Civil War Newspapers,” *Scholars Works at UT Tyler Special Topics*, Paper 28 (2016): 25.

⁵⁹ Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy*, 151.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

by the bravery and accomplishments of these heroines, they were encouraged to take on the role as well and join the war effort. This act of women serving in the military would not have been a huge shock to society as women had served in previous wars as well, such as the American Revolution, but the Civil War drew far more women to the frontlines than ever before.⁶² Their service may have been no surprise but even today researchers are still confounded as more and more women's presences amongst the ranks are uncovered. The numbers alone were shocking due to this sharp uptick, but the public would not have been astounded by the concept itself. There are various theories about why this sudden uptick occurred, but the answers are most likely to lie within the women's motives for joining the war, which are not entirely clear.

While many people did not criticize women who were found in the army, this risk of social backlash was still a prominent concern. The main determining factor of society's reaction to these women's covert service in the army was their willingness to remain within the socially acceptable gender confines while doing so. This heavily relied on what each woman's motive was behind her service. Women's motives were generally the same as men's: to stay with their loved ones, escape their home lives, get paid, find adventure, and/or fulfill their patriotic need.⁶³ One of the most accepted reasons for this service was following a loved one, such as a brother or a husband, to war. This was a common reason given and was widely accepted. Women were seen as romantics and emotionally motivated, so their desire to follow their loved ones even into warzones allowed these women to maintain the gender stereotypes despite their military service. However, many of these disguised soldiers were using their service to escape their social chains while also seeking social redemption for this through their patriotic actions. These true motives, if shared, were far more likely to receive societal backlash. People did not like the idea of a

⁶² Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

woman being able to display her own independence and strength unless it was solely for the benefit of the nation. People would have feared that these female soldiers that served to rebel against gender norms would use their service as proof that women were as capable as men, which many service records suggested.

However brave and freed from gender restrictions as these female soldiers were, even they did not achieve gender equality to the degree that they desired as their contributions to the war effort were marginalized. There have been several female soldiers who served under known male alias but when researched, their names appear to be missing from the records. Many believe that the superior officers had discovered these soldiers were women and thus erased their services in the war from the records out of embarrassment.⁶⁴ This attempt to erase these women's contributions from history may not have been entirely successful, but it did limit the recognition and appreciation of women's usefulness and capabilities outside of the home. Even to date, the study of a Civil War soldier almost exclusively focuses on a man. While we now know in greater detail the extent to which these women served in the forces, there is still a considerable gap in the exploration of this aspect of the war.

Some women displayed similar bravery as these undercover soldiers from their homes, especially in the South. Early in the war many women in the South took up the role of protectors in the absence of men. To protect their towns and families from raids or being caught in the crossfire, these women would take up arms. Women in these regions formed home guard units and were trained to defend their towns with weapons and a variety of military tactics.⁶⁵ These women embodied the role of a man the most as they became the strong defenders of not only their own families, but of entire towns. While these units were brave and displayed quite a bit of

⁶⁴ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, ix.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

autonomy, men were still unwilling to accept the idea that women were just as capable of filling their shoes. This was seen very clearly with the Confederacy's refusal to officially recognize a popular all-women home defense group organized in the region, as the Confederate secretary of war stated that the government was not yet ready to accept women's service in the field.⁶⁶ The government did not want to acknowledge this as they refused to recognize how common women's service in the Civil War actually was and did not want to accept it as tolerable, or else they would be forced to admit that women were as capable in military endeavors as men. This rejection only serves to show that while women were making great strides for themselves, the nation itself refused to recognize these advancements and merely saw them as either necessary actions to fill in for the more capable men, or as shameful mistakes.

Conclusion

The Civil War was a great chance for women to get out of their traditional domestic roles and explore the men's realm, but they were never allowed to do more than that. These women were given a taste of men's rights and opportunities but were reminded constantly that these opportunities could easily be taken away from them and that the men remained in charge. They were forced to continue to serve men in almost every new role they were given, were still given plenty of traditional domestic duties to fulfill even outside of their homes, and faced constant new restrictions placed on them with every advancement they made. The fight for women's rights was pushed aside to make room for the civil rights argument, which women were very vocal in but took away from their own movement's advancements. Overall, the Civil War established many new roles and opportunities for women to participate in the war effort, but

⁶⁶ Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 7.

these women were never allowed to step too far outside of their bounds. Society only permitted these women to fill these new roles and escape their gender restrictions when it was for the benefit of the nation, not for their own growth.

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