

The Civil War: Contributions of Women

Women on both sides of the conflict played a vital role in the war effort. One of these women was Clara Barton. When the war began, Barton volunteered for war relief on the Union side. "While our soldiers stand and fight," she said, "I can stand and feed and nurse them." She began by gathering food and other supplies for the troops. Later she became a nurse and cared for hundreds of wounded soldiers. At Antietam, when the field hospital came under artillery attack, she steadied the operating table while the doctor completed his surgery. The doctor later called her "the angel of the battlefield."

Women Soldiers and Spies

Though women were not allowed in the armed forces, some saw combat on the front lines. As many as 400 women disguised themselves as men and enlisted in the Union and Confederate armies. One woman, "Franklin Thompson" of Michigan, had to desert on her way to a hospital in order to keep her secret.

Other women served behind the lines in the dangerous role of spy. Women made good spies, in part because they were not suspected as quickly as men. If caught, they were also less likely to be punished severely. One of the most famous Confederate spies was Rose Greenhow. A well-connected member of Washington society, she used her contacts to learn about Union troop movements and passed this information along to the Confederate army. Her reports helped the Confederates win the First Battle of Bull Run in 1861. Eventually, Greenhow was discovered, arrested, and banished to the South.

Rose Greenhow worked as a Confederate spy. She was caught and tossed into prison, along with her daughter "Little Rosie." To Southerners, her treatment was yet more proof of Yankee brutality. Greenhow seemed to relish the role of the martyr who suffers for her beliefs. A fellow prisoner wrote, "Greenhow enjoys herself amazingly."

Elizabeth Van Lew, a resident of Richmond, was a successful spy for the Union. She even managed to plant one of her assistants, a former slave named Mary Elizabeth Bowser, as a maid in the home of Jefferson Davis. In that way, Bowser and Van Lew gained access to Confederate war plans. Van Lew managed to divert suspicion and avoid arrest by pretending to be mentally unbalanced. In public, she muttered to herself and looked confused. The locals called her "Crazy Bet," but when Union troops took Richmond in 1865, she dropped the act and was honored as a hero.

Women Provide Medical Care

Other women, like reformer Dorothea Dix, played a crucial role by providing medical care to wounded and sick soldiers. Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman served as Union nurses as well, dividing their time between medical work and scouting for the Union army. In the end, more than 3,000 women served as nurses to the Union army.

Southern women also worked as nurses, and because almost all of the fighting took place on Southern soil, many turned their homes into medical shelters. After the First Battle of Bull Run, for instance, Sally Tompkins established a hospital in a private home and began caring for wounded Confederate soldiers. Altogether, she treated more than 1,300 men over the course of the war, while registering just 73 deaths. In honor of her achievements, Jefferson Davis made Tompkins a captain in the army. She was the only woman to become an officer in the Confederate army.

Women often had to overcome prejudice in order to serve. At the start of the war, many men viewed caring for wounded soldiers as "unladylike." Others believed the presence of women nurses in hospitals would distract the soldiers or that women would prove too delicate for battlefield conditions. As Confederate nurse Kate Cumming wrote, conditions were often shockingly bad, but women got used to them:

Nothing that I had ever heard or read had given me the faintest idea of the horrors witnessed here . . . I sat up all night, bathing the men's wounds, and giving them water . . . The men are lying all over the house, on their blankets, just as they were brought in from the battlefield . . . The foul air from this mass of human beings at first made me giddy and sick, but I soon got over it. We have to walk, and when we give the men anything kneel, in blood and water, but we think nothing of it.

—Kate Cumming, *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*, 1959

Women doctors faced even greater obstacles. Surgeon Mary Walker tried but failed to get approval to join the Union army as a doctor. Instead, she volunteered as an assistant surgeon in a Washington hospital. Throughout the war, she worked as a battlefield doctor and later received the congressional Medal of Honor for her services.

Women held many jobs during the war, including working in munitions plants. This work was dangerous and resulted in a number of deaths. An explosion in a Richmond, Virginia, munitions factory killed 40 women. Similar tragedies occurred in Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

Women Hold Down the Home Front

With thousands of men fighting in the war, women—black and white—stepped in to perform crucial jobs to support their families and the war effort. They took over family farms and businesses. They also organized aid societies to raise money for war supplies and to collect and distribute food to soldiers.

Northern women had already been a part of the prewar workforce in the textile industry. As the war dragged on, rising demand for military uniforms led to more women working in textile mills and garment factories. Women in the South also made clothes, though most worked at home as private contractors.

The war also provided new job opportunities for women. For the first time, women filled a significant number of government positions. They worked in offices copying documents, for the Treasury Department minting money, and for the postal service. Women also took dangerous jobs in munitions factories, making bullets and artillery shells for the Union and the Confederate armies. Accidents in these factories were common, and many women lost their lives.

Primary Source Excerpts: North and South

I was urged to leave the city [Washington, D.C.] by more than one and an escort offered to be furnished me if I desired; but, at whatever peril, I resolved to remain, conscious of the great service I could render my country, my position giving me remarkable facilities for obtaining information.

—Rose Greenhow, *My Imprisonment*, 1863

Grayhaired men—men in the pride of manhood, beardless boys—Federals and all, mutilated in every imaginable way, lying on the floor, just as they were taken from the battlefield; so close together that it was almost impossible to walk without stepping on them. I could not command my feelings enough to speak.

—Kate Cumming, Confederate nurse, describing the scene in a Confederate hospital ward

Shoes were pretty scarce in the Confederacy in those days, but Miss Van Lew's servants had two pairs each and changed them every day . . . The soles of these shoes were double and hollow, and in them were carried through the [Confederate] lines letters, maps, plans, etc. which were regularly delivered to General Grant . . . the next morning.

—Colonel D. B. Parker in an 1883 interview, explaining how Elizabeth Van Lew passed information to the Union command

No women under thirty need apply to serve in government hospitals. All nurses are required to be very plain looking. Nurses' dresses must be brown or black, with no bows, no curls, no jewelry and no hoop skirts.

—Dorothea Dix, superintendent of women nurses, outlining the initial requirements for serving as a Union nurse

The sight of several stretchers each with its legless, armless, or desperately wounded occupant, entering my ward, admonished me that I was there to work, not to wonder or weep; so I corked up my feelings, and returned to the path of duty.

—Louisa May Alcott, describing her work in a Union army hospital as a nurse

Name:



Women and the Civil War