

## Women in the Civil War

Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her autobiography that “the story of the Civil War will never be fully written if the achievements of women are left untold.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, women played a very major role at home while their men went off to war. For many women, their son or sons, their husband, etc. would never return alive. Of course, with the men off fighting, the women had to run the farm, for example, and take full responsibility for the children.

Unlike any previous war, women played an enormous part in the lives of soldiers’ family and home lives, and they had a significant hand in how the War progressed and eventually ended.<sup>2</sup> Probably all of you would be able to point out that many women were nurses during the Civil War. That was an important role for many women. Did you know, however, that some women also were spies, undercover soldiers, vivandieres, laundresses, newspaper writers, housing troops etc.?<sup>3</sup>

Let’s begin with the nursing role. At the outset of the war, thousands of women left their homes to take care of dying soldiers. At first, many men and even many doctors were angered by this new role. They felt that it was unlady-like for women to care for naked and enlisted men. As the war raged on, however, with the increasing casualties, the demand for women nurses skyrocketed. Even those doctors who had protested so loudly against women in the operating rooms with them had to silence themselves. Northern women organized the United States Sanitary Commission which ran kitchens, distributed medical supplies and inspected army camps to ensure a standard of cleanliness. Over 3,000 Union women became unpaid nurses during the War. Dorothea Dix was the head of the nursing corps and she went unpaid for the entire 4 years at her post. Southern nurses were equally important. Their hospital at Richmond, VA was the largest and most efficient hospital on either side.<sup>4</sup>

While discussing nurses and doctors during the Civil War, it is worth pointing out that a woman was awarded the Medal of Honor—our nation’s highest honor—for her work as a surgeon in the Civil War. Her name is Dr. Mary Walker.<sup>5</sup>

To begin to talk about women soldiers during the Civil War, the first significant comment to make is that both the Union and Confederate armies forbade the enlistment of women. So, women soldiers assumed masculine names, disguised themselves as men, and hid the fact that they were female. Because they passed themselves off as men, it is nearly impossible to know with any certainty how many women soldiers actually served in the Civil War. Frances Clayton disguised herself as a man and served many months in the Missouri artillery and cavalry units.<sup>6</sup> Another example is Mary Owens. During treatment for the gunshot wound to her arm, it was discovered that she was a she. When she returned home, the community received her warmly.<sup>7</sup> One more example is Jennie Rodgers. She served and fought for 3 years as Albert Cashier. Her identity wasn’t revealed until 1913.<sup>8</sup>

Women played important roles as spies. I will briefly comment on three different spies so that you get an idea of the important work these female spies did. To begin, one of the most famous Confederate spies was Belle Boyd who served the Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley. She played so important a role early in the war that Stonewall Jackson made had a captain and honorary aide-de-camp on his staff.<sup>9</sup>

The second spy is Mary Elizabeth Bowser was an African American female who spied for the Union Army while she worked as a maid servant at the Confederate White House of Jefferson Davis. Many nights she pretended to be quite dumb while she listened to the dinner

conversation of the Confederate President. Then she would recite to her owner's wife word for word the military plans discussed over dinner by leaders of the Confederacy.<sup>10</sup>

Hopefully, many are aware that Harriet Tubman served as a spy during the Civil War. With her bandanna on her head, she worked as a scout and spy under the command of Col. James Montgomery of the Second Carolina Volunteers. She collected information on the location of cotton warehouses, ammunition, and slaves waiting to be freed. She was paid only \$200 over a 3-year period and had to support herself by selling pies, gingerbread, and root beer.<sup>11</sup>

During the American Revolution, Molly Pitcher became a war heroine. Mary (Molly) Pitcher accompanied her husband who was a member of the First Pennsylvania Artillery. At the Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778, she carried water in a pitcher to her husband and others. With temperatures close to 100 degrees, when her husband collapsed, she took his place in the gun crew and continued firing his cannon.<sup>12</sup> During the Civil War, many women accompanied their husband into the war and became a "vivandiere." They would serve as a nurse, if needed, to their husband, as well as being a laundress, cook's assistant, camp sutler or supplier, etc.<sup>13</sup> One local example of a woman accompanying her soldier husband into the war was Mary Gahan. Quoting from her obituary in the Phelps *Advertiser* newspaper,

The well known laundress of Co. H, died at Waterloo of heart disease, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1881, aged 49 years. Her husband, Jerry, was a soldier of the 148<sup>th</sup>, and in all the marches of that regiment Mary bore her part as bravely as the stoutest soldier of them all. She was identified with its history. She started with it from Geneva. Shared the perils and fatigues of its Virginia campaign and was with it at its triumphant return. No man in its ranks was prouder of the achievements or stood up more zealously for its honor. She was a prominent figure of regimental re-unions and the boys will remember the hearty emphasis of her assertions on such occasions, that she "belonged to the 148<sup>th</sup>."

Her funeral took place at St. Mary's church, July 6<sup>th</sup>, and was singularly solemn and impressive. The bearers were veteran soldiers of her old regiment. The coffin was draped with the flag which she followed in so many hard campaigns, and in the procession were almost all the surviving soldiers of the regiment in this vicinity. Her kindness of heart and cheery disposition will cause her to be long remembered by the survivors of the 148<sup>th</sup>, and her death will be regretted in no less degree than that of the other comrades who have gone before; who names were now inscribed on the last great muster roll.<sup>14</sup>

Hopefully, this information helps to heighten the appreciation for the significant contributions that women made during the Civil War. To simply say that women managed things at home while the men went off to battle would be a complete misunderstanding of the fact that many women went off to war even if they could not legally enlist or be drafted.

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- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et. al., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Rochester, NY: Susan B. Anthony, 1881, pp 82-83
- <sup>2</sup> “the Women’s Civil War,” [http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/american\\_civil\\_war\\_retired/2263](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/american_civil_war_retired/2263)
- <sup>3</sup> [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_role\\_did\\_women\\_play\\_in\\_the\\_Civil\\_War](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_role_did_women_play_in_the_Civil_War)
- <sup>4</sup> “the Women’s Civil War,” [http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/american\\_civil\\_war\\_retired/2263](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/american_civil_war_retired/2263)
- <sup>5</sup> <http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/femvets2.html>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.archives.gov/publicatons/prologue/1993/spring/women-in-the-civil-war-1.html>
- <sup>7</sup> [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/393212/us\\_history\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_women\\_during.ht...](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/393212/us_history_the_role_of_women_during.ht...)
- <sup>8</sup> <http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/femvets2.html>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.civilwarhome.com/boydbio.htm>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.brightmomevents.com/blackhistory/nmeb.html>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://library.tinkquest.org/4623/htub.htm>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/MOLLY.HTM>
- <sup>13</sup> [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/393212/us\\_history\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_women\\_during\\_p...](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/393212/us_history_the_role_of_women_during_p...)
- <sup>14</sup> Mary Gahan obituary, *Phelps Advertiser*, July 15, 1881