

WOMENS ROLES IN THE CIVIL WAR

The roles of the Soldiers, Generals, and Government leaders during the American Civil War have been well documented and publicized. The roles that women played during that same time have only recently been given the same respect. What were some of the roles played by women during this time period?

If we look in the context of this time period, the woman was considered the light of the hearth and home. Upon her fell the duty of managing the home, bearing and teaching the children, and in the rural communities would run the farms and plantations as well. Etiquette manuals tell us that a lady could not leave the house without a gentleman escort. When the war broke out the entire sphere of the woman's world changed. With fathers, husbands, sons and brothers going off to join the ranks, women had to adapt, change their way of thinking in order to survive. Keep in mind that at this time, a woman could not vote, or sign contracts. The woman's heart beat responsive to the call of war. While she could not still remain a lady and take up arms and fight, there were many things she could do to support the cause. They became nurses, laundresses, spies, vivandiere's, Sanitary and Christian Commission workers, writers for newspapers for example.

Nurses

When the war broke out in April 1861, both sides were not prepared for the onslaught of wounded that would follow a battle. There were no trained nurses. By June 1861, it was decided that Dorothea Dix would be appointed Superintendent of Army Nurses by order of President Lincoln and Secretary of War Cameron. This was in response to all the ladies who proposed to follow the men to the front and tend their wounds. Dorothea Dix set very tough standards for her nurses. They were to be over the age of 30, plain of face, dress in a plain serviceable dress (preferably brown or black) without the fashionable hoops or fancy decorations and be of good moral character. Each nurse would be personally interviewed by Miss Dix, then assigned to a hospital or later on in the war a hospital transport ship. Nurses generally worked 12 hour shifts in a ward of at least 40 sick or wounded soldiers. They would be responsible for cooking the diet and feeding the soldiers, washing the soldiers faces and hands, writing letters for the soldiers, dispense medications as ordered by the surgeons and if especially trusted by the surgeons could change bandages. The long hours and work load would often cause even the strongest of nurses to become ill. Some even died. One of the best descriptions of life as a nurse is in a book entitled "Hospital Sketches" written by Louisa May Alcott. It is a fiction book that chronicles her experiences as a nurse in a hospital in Washington around the time of the battle of Fredricksburg. Another excellent source is "The Diary of Hannah Ropes".

Many women chose to become nurses on their own. Clara Barton was one of these nurses. She is perhaps best known for her post war work as the founder of The American Red Cross. She was employed in Washington at the start of the war. When the Massachusetts regiments were attacked as they attempted to pass through Baltimore, she felt it was her duty to assist these men, many of whom were her former students. She began collecting supplies and distributing them to the men. She was not affiliated with Miss Dix's nurses in any way, therefore she had no authority to enter the hospitals or the field unless she had special permission. This she obtained from a very influential senator from her home state of Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson. She was one of the first on the field at Antietam with wagons full of supplies desperately needed by the surgeons. She came under fire there including having a bullet pass through her sleeve and hit the soldier she was tending.

Mary Todd Lincoln, the First Lady, also visited the hospitals often on a daily basis when she was in

Washington, spending time bringing flowers and special foods to the soldiers. She would also write letters for them and read to them. She was present with a soldier as his leg was being amputated. It is said that she held his hand and comforted him, showing an unusual strength and courage for her normally high strung character. She might be accompanied by other Washington ladies such as Mrs. Gideon Welles (wife of secretary of the Navy).

The Confederacy did not have a formal organized nursing service. There are some famous Confederate nurses however. These include Kate Cummings and Phoebe Yates Pember. Phoebe Pember served as a Ward Matron at the Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond. She wrote a book after the war on her experiences entitled "A Southern Woman's Story". It is a very insightful look into the life of a nurse in the Confederacy. For many women in the south, they would be pressed to serve as nurses as the Battles were fought in and around their homes.

Spies

Many women found themselves involved in the war as spies and couriers. They chose this role out of a burning desire to do something for "the Cause". Women could not take up arms and fight. Many wanted to do something glamorous and exciting and serving as a spy fulfilled that wish. Particularly around Washington and Richmond and near battle scenes were opportunities found. One of the most famous spies is Mrs. Rose O'Neal Greenhow. She lived in Washington and had been very influential in the Buchanan Presidency. She had many friends and acquaintances who moved in the political circles of Washington. She was able to gather information, code it and pass it through the lines to the Confederacy. She is most noted for gathering the plans which lead to the Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) in July 1861. She was arrested and spent time in the Old Capitol Prison before being sent south to Richmond.

The woman who served as a spy or engaged in espionage was taking a great risk. Women who were in or near the Army Camps were subject to careful scrutiny and were suspect, particularly if they were there at odd times, unescorted, or acted in anyway eccentric. Spies might tie up papers in their hair to get information to the other side. It was expected that ladies should be treated as ladies so they believed it very easy to move information or even contraband goods through enemy lines. Soldiers were instructed to search ladies attempting to pass through the lines for messages and contraband items such as weapons or quinine. A period journalist reported that "It was better for the blood to rise to a ladies face rather than have the blood of our boys flow on the ground" as ladies would be subject to search. The fashionable hoop skirts of the period were very easy to sew in dispatches, arms and ammunition and desperately needed medicines. The severe hairstyle of the period (parted in the middle with hair neatly confined in a bun or roll) made it very easy to wrap up letters and maps. If you chose to be a spy or courier and attempt this, you risked the loss of everything, your friendships, your reputation and your future.

Vivandiere's

Vivandiere's, or daughters of a Regiment were an acceptable way to serve with the Army. They were commonly found at the start of the war. Most Vivandiere's accompanied their husband or male relative with the intent of being there to serve as a nurse should he be wounded or to keep an eye on their activities. Vivandiere's dressed in a militaristic fashion in attire that resembled an exercise outfit of the period. They would wear military trousers and jacket, along with a knee length skirt. Many of them carried swords or side arms. They were very busy in camp being responsible for cooking for the troops, tending the sick and wounded, and during battles would accompany the Regiment carrying water and medicine for the wounded. On occasion they would work to rally the troops by picking up the flag and

waving the men on. Two of the most famous Vivandiere's is Marie Tepe (buried in Pittsburgh) and Annie Etheridge of Michigan. A daughter of the regiment was held in very high esteem by the men, as they possessed good moral character.

Sanitary and Christian Commission Workers

In June 1861, the US Sanitary Commission was founded. Women of the "Womens Central Relief Association" in New York City were the biggest influence in starting this organization. It encompassed not only nurses, but also field agents and workers in every city town and hamlet in the north. Supplies for the soldiers and the hospitals were being collected and distributed to the soldiers. The Sanitary and Christian Commissions were the 2 agency's responsible for the collection and distribution of these items. There were central depots in key northern cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, Louisville and Washington where the supplies collected would come to be sorted, labeled and distributed. Women were responsible for making many of the shirts, hospital shirts, quilts and bandages sent to these depots. Women would staff the offices, noting what was received and what was dispersed. In addition, women would also send appropriate letters of thanks to contributors and also requests for additional supplies.

By 1863, money was needed to fund the relief efforts and Sanitary Fairs were planned in the large cities. The first was held in Lowell Massachutes. Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cleveland and Pittsburg followed suit. These Fairs were planned by and staffed by women committees. Men were required to sign the necessary contracts, a great source of frustration for Mary Ashton Livermore, a Sanitary Commission Worker in Chicago. The Pittsburg Sanitary Fair in June 1864 raised approximately \$344,000 dollars, the largest sum per capita of any of the Fairs.

For women to even go into the field to distribute the collected items they needed to be accompanied by a male escort and have appropriate Military passes. They were expected to behave as proper ladies. The Sanitary and Christian Commission workers were soon into the field after a battle setting up hospitals and diet kitchens, securing and ensuring transportation of the wounded to general hospitals and offering support to the wounded and dying soldiers. The tireless effort of the ladies involved in this work is greatly praised in a book written shortly after the war " Women at War". The success of both these commissions is directly attributed to the organization and efforts of women throughout the north.

Other Roles

There are so many other roles that women played in the War effort. There are journalists such as Pittsburg's own Jane Grey Swisshelm who wrote for the New York Tribune and other papers. There are the women who worked at the various Arsenals (such as the Allegheny Arsenal in Pittsburg) making the ammunition and uniforms needed at the front. Can we forget women who were political writers such as Anna Ella Carrol whose pamphlets were used to support and defend the war? How about the women who suddenly found themselves widowed and forced to earn a living perhaps as a teacher, or working for the Treasury? How about the southern women who found themselves refugees, turned out of their homes and forced to flee from the invading army?

These are but a few of the roles women played in the Civil War. This time was a turning point for women of all classes and races. To quote the book " Women in the Civil War" by Mary Elizabeth Massey, they were "lept from their sphere's". Women found themselves taking on new responsibilities and roles, rising to the occasion and becoming the better for it. It is no accident that at this time in history and out of this time in history grew the women's movement.