throughout, that whenever there was a chance of giving fresh air, an additional or better ration or an opportunity of purchasing a little vegetables, it was reserved for men who came from Belle Island, as they were the men who[se] incarceration had been the most protracted” (Boate 2004, p. 37).

The harshness of prison life was a reality attested to almost without exception in surviving accounts of prison life. Prison existence was however, recalled with an admirable lack of animosity and in a detached, objective manner by those who suffered within its grasp. Edward Boate, as an example, processed his experience and considered his captors in a most compassionate and non-judgmental fashion. Similarly, what grace the pages of a surprising number of letters, diaries and memoirs in spite of the baseless inhumanity of living conditions, is the endurance of the human will and the resilience of the human spirit.

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Robbie C. Smith

Women on the Battlefield

While their numbers were relatively small, the Civil War battlefield included women in addition to men. Thousands of Union and Confederate women aided their country’s war effort as nurses, laundresses, and cooks. Some of the more daring served as local scouts, spies attached to the military, and, in rare cases, as soldiers.

Spies and Scouts

Advances in military technology meant that the Civil War battlefield could extend over a wide span of territory, particularly in such situations as the siege of Vicksburg. Spies crossed battlefields to provide critical information on troop movements; their job was just as dangerous as soldiering (Blanton 2002, p. 120). Women spies could more easily evade detection than men partly because they did not raise the same degree of suspicion. A Confederate spy, Mary Ann Pitman (alias Molly Hays, Charles Thompson, and Second Lieutenant Rawley) of Tennessee, often slipped through Union lines by pretending to be a loyal citizen who had information that she would impart only to the commanding officer. Once inside the lines, Pitman had little trouble persuading younger staff officers to show her the defenses and positions of troops and fortifications (pp. 89–90).

Prostitutes also visited battlefields to ply their trade, but at the risk of being mistaken for spies. Shortly after the conclusion of the Battle of Nashville in 1864, two prostitutes took a carriage out to the battlefield. The women ventured so far out that they were captured by Confederate
cavalrymen who suspected them to be spies. The women were briefly jailed in Franklin, Tennessee, before being escorted back to Nashville (Blanton 2002, pp. 124–125).

Combatants and Support Personnel

Some women worked in male guise on the battlefield as combatants, teamsters (drivers of teams of horses used to pull cannon and other heavy equipment), or mule drivers, but many more appear to have served as musicians in regimental bands. Drummers did not need the upper body strength required in other battlefield occupations. Edmonia Gates spent six months as a Union teamster as well as a stint as a drummer boy in Wilson’s Zouaves, the One Hundred and Twenty-first New York Infantry Regiment. Rebecca Peterman served as a drummer in the Seventh Wisconsin Infantry before abandoning music to become a scout. An anonymous Union woman wounded at Gettysburg served as a drummer, as did Fanny Harris of Indiana, who reportedly “passed through a dozen battles.” Because many women looked like teenaged boys too young for regular enlistment, their only possible entry into the army was through the ranks of the musicians. At least a half-dozen women are known to have served through the war as drummers (Blanton 2002, pp. 50, 57, 71).

In addition to serving in the ranks, women also served in various headquarters commands. A Union soldier, Ida Remington, spent part of her two-year enlistment detailed as an officer’s servant. Two girls from Pennsylvania, including one using the alias of Charles Norton of the One Hundred and Forty-First Pennsylvania Infantry, also served in regimental headquarters as personal aides to officers. Norton cooked, nursed, kept guard over the property of the officers, and did whatever other jobs were assigned to her. During the Battle of Fredericksburg, Sarah Edmonds served as an orderly to General Poe. Ella Hobart Gibson was elected chaplain of the First Wisconsin Regiment of Heavy Artillery in 1864 and served for nine months in that capacity (Blanton 2002, pp. 41, 157).

Soldiers who were discovered to be women often persuaded officers to permit them to stay with their regiment as nurses or laundresses. If they could not be soldiers, they would be useful in other ways while still remaining with their loved ones. Thomas L. Livermore reported that a laundress attached to the Irish brigade advanced with the unit at the Battle of Antietam in 1862 and “swung her bonnet around and cheered on the men” (Wiley 1952, p. 339) At the Battle of Port Hudson in 1862, Mrs. Bradley, the “wife of a 2d sergeant in a company of Miles’ Legion was struck in the leg by a piece of shell ... She suffered amputation, but died soon after” (Hewitt 1983, p. 80).

Elizabeth Finnern stayed with her regiment after she was discovered to be a woman. She worked both as a battlefield nurse and a surgeon’s assistant in the regimental hospital. One veteran recalled some years later that Finnern “went through all Marches and battles with us” (Blanton 2002, p. 116–117). Another declared that she “was on every march and every battle field with the 81st Ohio” (p. 117). For practical reasons, Finnern stayed in male attire even after her sex was known to everyone in the regiment. She was also a pragmatist who “in times of danger ... carried a musket just as did the soldiers” (p. 117). Finnern drew no army pay for her work as a nurse and surgeon’s assistant. Sarah Satronia enlisted in an Iowa regiment with her husband and remained undiscovered for about two months. Her commanding officer then allowed her to stay with the unit as a battlefield nurse. Mary Brown, the wife of Private Ivory Brown of the Thirty-First Maine Infantry, also stayed with the regiment when she was discovered to be a woman. She worked as a nurse and surgeon’s assistant (p. 117).

Battlefield Nursing

In the mid-nineteenth century, professional nursing was largely a male occupation. Fewer than four thousand
women served as paid nurses for the Union Army. Neither the number of paid Confederate nurses nor the women on both sides who nursed without compensation is recorded with any accuracy. Frances Jamieson, also known as Frank Abel, left her Union cavalry regiment after the death of her husband at First Bull Run and joined the Hospital Corps as a nurse. Jamieson assisted with amputations as well as other surgical theater nursing duties. The assistant surgeon of the Twelfth Indiana Cavalry was a woman.

Clara Barton (1821–1912) is undoubtedly the most famous woman who ever walked on a battlefield. Determined to serve the soldiers in the field, Barton hoped to become as close to being a soldier as conditions permitted. Barton had filled a warehouse with a variety of goods that the army could use, including food and medicine. Moving throughout Virginia and Maryland, Barton and her supplies aided the wounded and dying at Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam, Charleston, and in the Wilderness campaign. When Barton appeared at Cedar Mountain in August 1862, convention dictated that she should wait until the came to the rear to be treated. Refusing to wait for authorization, something that she was unlikely to receive, Barton moved onto the battlefield after the fighting had subsided. Accompanied by two civilian helpers, she saw men in the throes of death. The soldiers, lying helpless on the field, were suffering from sunstroke, dehydration, and shock. Over the next two days, Barton cooked meals, washed wounds, applied dressings, assisted the surgeons in their gruesome tasks, distributed medicine, and offered kind words to the frightened soldiers. Her ministrations led to the nickname, “Angel of the Battlefield.”

At Antietam, Barton used a pocket knife to extract a bullet from the jaw of a young soldier, the procedure carried out without chloroform for the boy and with some trepidation on Barton’s part. Shortly thereafter, as she was giving a wounded man a drink of water, a bullet passed through the sleeve of her dress and struck the soldier dead. Ranging along the battlefield, Barton continued to provide aid to the other wounded. At the 1863 Battle of Fort Wagner during the siege of Charleston, South Carolina, Barton waded ashore despite the danger of flying bullets and ministered to the men as they lay bleeding. To many soldiers, it seemed as if Barton’s courage had no limits (Oates 1994, pp. 112–115, 186).

Mary Ann Ball (“Mother”) Bickerdyke (1817–1901) of Illinois nursed soldiers during the Civil War as part of a private effort to relieve the suffering of the troops. Next to Barton, she is the most famous battlefield nurse of the war. Bickerdyke gained some national renown at Fort Donelson in February 1862 by using a lantern to search the battlefield for wounded men at midnight before they froze to death. After helping evacuate the wounded, Bickerdyke decided that the most pressing need for nursing assistance was at the front. She joined General Ulysses S. Grant’s army as it moved to take control of the Mississippi River. For seven months, Bickerdyke worked at Union field hospitals in Savannah, Tennessee; Iuka, Mississippi; and Corinth, Mississippi. When challenged by an army surgeon who asked under whose authority she fed the wounded men, Bickerdyke famously replied that she received her authority from the Lord God Almighty and did he have anyone ranking higher than that? (Baker 1952, p. 119).

After the war, Bickerdyke became an attorney and helped Union veterans with legal issues.

**Battlefield and Home Front**

With so much of Civil War fighting conducted close to homes, some women found themselves on the battlefield even though they had no intention of getting so close to the fighting. Lucy Rebecca Buck of Virginia wrote in her diary in 1864 that “While I write the hostile armies confront each other at the river in a menacing attitude but everything seems unnaturally still—the quiet so dull and dead broken only at intervals by the distant beating of the tattoo or the wail of a bugle. . . . We shall not undress tonight for there’s no knowing when we may be aroused to a renewal of strife” (Baer 1997, p. 292). Buck witnessed the killing of seven of Mosby’s Rangers, members of a Virginia infantry battalion that carried out small raids and what would now be called psychological warfare, by Union troops on September 23, 1864. Buck’s neighbor Sue Richardson reported that “Poor Henry Rhodes—hadn’t been long in service—was shot in our field, nearly in front of our door. We could see the crowd assembled around him . . . Mr. Carter and Mr. Overby of Fauquier were hung in the Mountain field on a large walnut tree. . . . It almost kills us to witness it” (Baer, 1997, p. 309). By the end of the Civil War, Southerners could no longer sharply differentiate between the battlefield and the home front.

**Bibliography**


WOMEN SOLDIERS

When Johnny went marching off to war, quite a few Janes joined him. Women warriors had taken the field in previous conflicts, and the Civil War proved no exception. There was no public recruitment of women into the army, yet significant numbers of women decided to enlist anyway.

Letters written home by only three women soldiers have surfaced; only two women soldiers published memoirs of their experiences; and no diaries of women soldiers have been found. Like the men with whom they served, the majority of women soldiers hailed from agrarian, working-class, or immigrant backgrounds, where no premium was placed on education for girls. Women probably had a lower literacy rate than men. Additionally, when they assumed male identities and joined the army, women soldiers usually severed contact with family and friends at home. Scholars have identified 250 women soldiers in the ranks of the Union and Confederate armies. There were, undoubtedly, many more distaff soldiers.

The start of the Civil War aroused martial passions in women as well as men. Many women who wanted to join the army did not because war was a man’s business. Lucy Breckinridge of Virginia lamented that “I wish that women could fight. I would gladly shoulder my pistol and shoot some Yankees if it were allowable” (Robertson 1994, p. 26). According to DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook in They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War (2002), Sarah Morgan of Louisiana declared, “O! If I was only a man! Then I could . . . slay them with a will.” Also, a Mrs. Black of Boston, mistakenly drafted by the Union, showed up as ordered and declared that she “wished no substitute” and was ready to “take position in line.” When the men of Richland, Ohio, failed to volunteer in sufficient numbers, seven young women tried to volunteer, and stated that, “as soon as they could be furnished with uniforms, they would leave their clothing to the young men, who lacked the manliness to defend the flag of their country when it was assailed.” Lastly, in September 1864, an Ohio woman wrote to President Abraham Lincoln that “I could get up a Regiment in one day of young Ladies of high rank” (p. 22). Most women aided the war effort by contributing supplies, nursing the wounded, or encouraging men to enlist.

Women who sought more excitement became soldiers. It proved easy to enlist: All a woman needed to do was cut her hair short, don male clothing, pick an alias, and find the nearest recruiter. In the mid-nineteenth century individuals did not carry personal identification, and most lacked a birth certificate. In theory, all recruits were subjected to a physical examination; in reality, the pressure to quickly fill regimental ranks militated against finding reasons to reject a volunteer. Physicians generally looked only for reasonable height, at least a partial set of teeth with which to tear open powder cartridges, and the presence of a trigger finger. In the case of Franklin Thompson of the Second Michigan Infantry, the examiner simply took Thompson’s hand and asked, “Well, what sort of a living has this hand earned” (Blanton and Cook 2002, p. 36). Thompson said that he had focused on getting an education, and was duly enlisted on May 25, 1861. Thompson had been born Sarah Emma Edmonds. Jennie Hodges of the Ninety-fifty Illinois Infantry, also known as Albert Cashier, showed only her hands and feet to the examiner. She served a full three-year enlistment, mustering out with her regiment on August 3, 1862.

A large number of women soldiers joined the army with a husband, brother, sweetheart, or father, much as male soldiers joined up with a male relative. Mary Siezgle originally went to the front and served as a nurse, but
decided to stay with her husband in a New York regiment. The only way for her to do so was to put on male clothing and do “her share of actual fighting” (Blanton and Cook 2002, p. 43). During the Atlanta campaign, Major William Ludlow encountered a wounded Confederate who explained to her doctor that “she belonged to the Missouri Brigade ... had a husband and one or two brothers in one of the regiments, and followed them to war” (p. 54). All of her relations were killed, and “having no home but the regiment,” she took a musket and served in the ranks. When John Finnern returned home and then decided to reenlist in the Eighty-first Ohio Infantry, his wife Elizabeth decided that he was not leaving her again. Both Finnerms signed up on September 23, 1861.

Once in the army, it was not terribly difficult to attend to the necessities of life in private. Women soldiers undoubtedly answered the call of nature by heading to the woods or some other private place. This behavior did not arouse suspicion because so many men did the same thing. It is probable that many women stopped menstruating because of the intense athletic training, substantial weight loss, poor nutrition, and severe psychological stress associated with being a Civil War soldier. Soldiers on the march often went for months at a time without a change of clothing or a bath. Herman Weiss of the Sixth New York Heavy Artillery explained to his wife how a woman in his regiment had maintained her male persona for nearly three years: “It is no wonder at all that her tent mates did not know that she was a woman for you must know that we never undress to go to bed. On the contrary we dress up, we go to bed with boots, overcoat and all on and she could find chances enough when she would be in the tent alone to change her clothes” (Blanton and Cook 2002, p. 57).

Female soldiers did not differ in any fundamental way from male soldiers, including their strength under fire. When Sarah Edmonds applied to Congress for a soldier’s pension, a number of her comrades testified on her behalf. First Lieutenant William Turner stated in an affidavit that Edmonds “bore a good reputation, behaved as a person of good moral character, and was always ready for duty” (Blanton and Cook 2002, p. 155). Edmonds blamed her wartime injuries on her failing health. She wrote, “Had I been what I represented myself to be, I should have gone to the hospital ... But being a woman I felt compelled to suffer in silence ... in order to escape detection of my sex. I would rather have been shot dead, than to have been known to be a woman and sent away from the army” (p. 155). Frank Martin was shot in the shoulder at the Battle of Stones River, discovered to be a woman, and discharged. When she left the hospital, she enlisted in another regiment. Women accepted the risks of soldiering for the same mix of reasons that motivated men, including the desire to serve their country.

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Caryn E. Neumann

VISITING WIVES AND RELATIVES
The Civil War separated wives and husbands, sisters and brothers, and parents and children for years as the fighting continued far longer than anyone had initially expected. The separation damaged intimacy between spouses and left wives feeling anxious and lonely. Parents and other relatives wondered if disease or a bullet would claim the soldier in the family before they could see him again. With camps set up within travel distance for many Americans, wives and relatives took the opportunity to visit soldiers.

Women often expressed their loneliness in letters to soldiers and in their diaries, such as the following women included in Nina Silber’s Daughter of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War (2005). Anne Cotton told her husband Josiah, a surgeon in an Ohio regiment, “You do not miss me half so much as I do you. You are all the time surrounded by so many and do not get time to feel lonesome while I am alone most of the time and have nothing to do but think of you and wish you back.” Elizabeth Caleff wrote to her fiancé James Bowler in the First Minnesota that “You have something exciting all the time, but you never can imagine how lonely I feel when I think of you being away.” Mary Baker wrote in her diary in July 1861, “Am so lonely, miss Elliot every minute. Don’t know what I shall do so long without him” (pp. 37–38).

Letter writing helped to maintain contact, but it could not substitute for personal contact. Jane Thompson wrote to her husband in September 1862, “Oh, how I wish I could sleep with you tonight. Would you like to sleep with me?” (Silber 2005, p. 44). Clara Wood wrote to her husband Amos in 1862 that “I have got your pictures in front of me. I write a few lines and then look at them and think and even say how I wish how much I wish he was here” (p. 42). Some women managed to ease their loneliness by visiting male relatives, but not every woman could pay a visit.

Civil War armies usually suspended operations between November and April. In the long periods when troops were holed up in winter quarters, wives and relatives took the opportunity to visit. These visits eased the homesickness and boredom of the soldiers. The
troops also found entertainment by visiting locals during these long winter camps. A young New Yorker in Virginia recorded in his diary that “At night after taps, run the Picets and went out in the country to see the girls” (Wiley 1952, p. 215). A Minnesota private wrote, “When not on post we sit in the house [of a Southern planter] by the fire conversing with the old gentleman’s daughters and enjoying ourselves hugely. It is a long time since I was in a private house…” (p. 216). Alvin Buck, a Confederate soldier, cheered his sister with a visit in September 1864. “Darling Brother! This visit of yours will give me strength to endure much of sorrow and disappointment the coming winter,” she wrote in her diary (Baer 1997, p. 138). Soldiers also called on relatives and friends in other regiments, with eating, drinking, and talk of home as the principal activity.

Men could not always obtain furloughs to return home. George Shepherd, a Wisconsin farmer, explained to his wife Mary that “You know when I was your man I would come when I could and see you. But now I am Uncle Sam’s man and can’t come only just when he pleases” (Silber 2005, p. 30). When Fighting Joe Hooker took command of the Army of the Potomac he restored morale by instituting a policy of liberally granting furloughs (Hunt 1992, p. 63). Frank Dickerson of Maine reported to his father in January 1863 that he had applied for a furlough, but his commanding officer refused to approve it until one of the furloughed officers returned to duty; he expected to return home for a short visit at that time (Hunt 1992, p. 63). The liberal furlough policy did not last long. It proved easier for wives to travel to visit husbands.

The visits of wives often enlivened camp routine. Frank Dickerson of Maine reported that when General Stoneman and his wife visited his camp at Buford, Maryland, in September 1863, the men fixed up the camp with evergreens and cedars so that it looked like a garden. Dickerson wrote that, “We had an excellent cold dinner, gotten up by a celebrated caterer in Washington, which we sat down to about 5 o’clock. Several of the officers had their wives present. Mrs. Capt. Mason, Mrs. Dr. Porter, Mrs. Sweetman, and Mrs. Paden” (Hunt 1992, p. 76). The wives of Mason and Porter boarded at a house about a mile from camp. Dickerson told his father that, “On the whole the entertainment was one of the most pleasant I have ever witnessed and everything passed off with great eclat. The band enlivened the scene with their fine music and the General appeared to be very much pleased and his wife also” (Hunt 1992, p. 76).

Generally, visits to Union troops took place while troops remained encamped in their Northern quarters, before they departed for battlefields in the South. The poor communications of the day and the difficulties of traveling across battle zones could complicate travel to the South. The father of the Indiana officer Ovid Butler attempted to visit his son in Tennessee, without success. The senior Butler wrote,

We left here on the train . . . but owing to obstructions on the track did not get to Louisville till 11 O’Clock the next day. There we were refused a pass from Gen Granger. We got that pass but too late to leave Louisville till the morning of Saturday the 21st. We arrived at Nashville the night of that day and found upon inquiry that the Signal Corps party had left for the front on the day we left home. This was a great disappointment to us as we had hoped and much desired to see you there. (Davis 2004, p. 54)

Travel also proved costly. When Emily Elliott of Ohio joined her major husband in Nashville, Tennessee, in January 1864, she had not seen him for sixteen months. She wrote in her diary, “I want to get Dentons clothes all in good order for maybe I will not stay long. Living here is very expensive” (Woodworth 2000, p. 169).

Once Union regiments moved South, camp visits were less likely for enlisted men, unless medical circumstances compelled a woman to come and attend to a soldier’s needs. E. Anne Butler left her home in Indiana to visit a wounded relative recuperating at Franklin, Tennessee, in 1864. She expected to see the lieutenant’s wife as well and catch up on family news. In January 1865, she again traveled to Nashville to aid another wounded relative. “When through a letter from Mrs. Scovel we learned the condition of Capt. It was thought best that I should come to him as Nettie was too feeble either to take the trip or to render him any service in the way of nursing,” she wrote to her son (Davis 2004, p. 89). Officers’ wives often stayed with their spouses for extended periods, even in Southern camps, so long as the military situation allowed and the women could cope with the inconveniences.

Southern women did not necessarily find it any easier than Northern women to visit relatives. Although the travel distance to Confederate camps certainly was shorter, the collapse of the Southern economy and the severe transportation problems of the South made visiting difficult. The fiancée of Confederate general John Morgan ran a Union blockade of Nashville to marry him in November 1862 (Chicago Tribune, August 6, 1863). Other women visited camps close to home. Laura Beecher Comer brought cakes to friends stationed at a nearby camp in Georgia (Clinton 2000, p. 144). Leila Willis, heavily pregnant with her third child, could not even manage to see her husband in a nearby camp because of her condition (p. 125).

Southern women, generally the better-off wives of officers, did travel some distances to visit. Mrs. Morgan joined her husband in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The August 9, 1863, Chicago Tribune reported that Mrs. Morgan joined her husband at a great ball, dressed in a green silk dress and bonnet that Morgan had brought back from one of his raids. On July 17, 1864, the New
York Times reported that the summer season in St. Louis, Missouri, was marked by the arrival of numerous women from the South: “They are wives of officers in the rebel service and come hither, as they say, to settle business affairs and visit relatives.” The women were arrested for failing to comply with the military order requiring persons crossing into Union territory to report to the nearest provost-marshal.

It is possible that some visiting wives brought back vital military information when they returned home.

Many Southerners certainly suspected Northern visitors. The Richmond Dispatch, reprinted in the New York Times, reported in February 1863 that many Northern women had crossed Confederate lines to visit husbands. The women were suspected of being spies by the editor of the South Carolinian, who wrote,

We had supposed that the object of the flag of truce permits was to persons returning to their domicile, and had no idea that Northern women whose husbands had been caught in our workshops...
Visiting Wives and Relatives

when the war commenced were to be allowed to visit them. It may be all well, but they certainly should not be allowed to communicate again with the North until the war is over. (reprinted in New York Times, February 8, 1863)

The Charleston Courier editorialized that

We have good reason for suspecting, if not believing, that many spies and doubtful characters ... are among the subjects of the late flag of truce. We beg that a strict watch be kept over all who have recently arrived within our lines, and are not well known. We have been too often betrayed by the credulous courtesy accorded to flags of truce, and to female apparel. (reprinted in the New York Times, February 8, 1863)

Northerners also discovered suspected spies. Mrs. Cheatham of Nashville, the sister-in-law of Confederate General John Morgan, tried traveling under a flag of truce to visit her sister. While returning to her home in Alton, Illinois, she was captured with suspected smugglers and jailed (Chicago Tribune, August 6, 1863).

Some Northern women, especially those in border states, were sent South because they were viewed as enemies of the Union. Such women aided Confederate officers and soldiers revisiting border states, boasted that they were enemies of the Union, and publicly wished ill to the Union.

The New York Times reported on August 8, 1863, that:

Only the open, avowed, incorrigible and dangerous enemies of the United States, and those detected in secret acts of correspondence with them, were ordered beyond the Union lines, and forbidden to return. No “children” have been ordered away—no women have been sent except those convicted of disloyal acts and refusing to cease their guilt, and those asking to be sent away because their husbands or protectors are already in the South, bearing arms against the Government.

As the Missouri women who asked to be sent South show, many women, especially Southerners, were accustomed to being cared for by others. Forced to fend for themselves without the assistance of men or slaves, some Southern women were lost and, if able, went to visit relatives for extended periods of time. The New York Times reported on November 2, 1862 that a former resident of Key West, Florida, returned to the island in November 1862 because while her husband served in the Confederacy, she could not support herself, and she returned to live with her father.

Some women in war zones refused to leave their homes to visit relatives because of fears of what might happen in their absence. Mrs. John S. Phelps of Springfield, Missouri, the wife of a commander of Missouri troops loyal to the Union, declined to travel to see friends in New York City. In a letter reprinted in the January 24, 1862, New York Times, Phelps wrote,

You very kindly invite me to visit New-York. Nothing would afford me more pleasure, were these not “war times;” but now I cannot leave Missouri. There may be a battle at Springfield, and my husband may be wounded; if he should escape, unhurt, others will not; and if I cannot engage in battle, because of my sex, I will have the honor of dressing the wounds of those who have left their homes and friends to fight for our glorious Union.

Other women remained at home to care for ailing relatives, maintain the farm, and take care of other business that could not be suspended, even briefly.

Women occasionally became ensnared in a tug-of-war between the desires of their soldier husbands and their parents’ anxieties about their safety. Leila Turpin Willis was the wife of Larkin Willis, a Richmond tobacco agent and an engineer for the Confederate army. Between July 1861 and January 1864 Leila Willis made at least eight trips—many of several months’ duration—between the home of her parents and the house that she shared with her husband and two small children. Leila’s mother, Rebecca Turpin, pressured her daughter to visit by citing her own poor health and the threat of nearby Union troops. In one letter she warned, “I am glad you are all well and safe . . . but you may be deprived of your husband and everything else soon . . . . Your father says if you can get home you had better come” (Clinton 2000, p. 125).

Some visitors came to military camps for sightseeing. Early in the war, a Richmond girl took a tour of the Carolina encampment in her city. She wrote on May 22, 1861, “We had a delightful walk and when we got there the place was so pretty that we did not want to come home until very late. The tents were fixed in rows under trees, and the soldiers were gathering in groups preparatory to dress parade, we saw that before we came away” (Clinton 2000, p. 123). Later in the war, Demia Butler traveled from Indiana to Nashville, Tennessee, to see the place that her soldier brother had long been encamped. Butler wrote that she had taken several rides in different directions to see the place that she termed “a city of Soldiers” (Davis 2004, pp. 96–97).

Once in a great while, the life of a Union or Confederate soldier would be brightened by the visit of wife, relative, or friend from home. Such visits, however, were rare. Soldiers mainly had to be content with letters and newspapers from home as well as whatever recreation they could provide for themselves.

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Men were not the only ones moving from camp to camp during the Civil War. Camp followers, including the families of soldiers, cooks, launderers, and sutlers, were present throughout the war. Although some individuals recognized business opportunities in camp following, others simply had no other place to go. Women with husbands in the military sometimes lacked the resources or the emotional strength to live apart from their spouses. African Americans, newly escaped from plantations, had no place to go and no means of earning a living except by serving Union soldiers. Camp followers dressed wounds, cooked food, mended clothing, provided sexual services, and shared the fears of the soldiers.

Although men at war were granted a certain amount of moral leeway, the same could not be said for the women they left behind at home. A woman’s behavior was often read by her neighbors and relatives as a barometer of her commitment and support for her husband’s wartime sacrifice. Eliza Otis aroused her family’s suspicions by traveling frequently without a male escort (Silber 2005, p. 35). Rose Stone, the wife of a Minnesota soldier, was categorized as “loose” for allowing another man to take her to a party and for flirting at the party (Silber 2005, p. 37).

Over the course of history, only a handful of women have recorded their experiences as prostitutes because of the shame associated with the activity. If a prostitute was literate, it is unlikely that she would have recorded her sexual activity for posterity to condemn her. Likewise, a soldier who visited a prostitute would not include such a detail in a letter back home that would likely be read by his parents, wife or sweetheart, sisters, and other loved ones. Much of the history of prostitution during the war is lost.

It is certain, however, that prostitution was widespread. Many individuals believed that there was a connection between masculinity and sexual activity. A rite of passage from boy to man in nineteenth-century America was sometimes marked by a first visit to a prostitute, who initiated him into the sexual world. Men were thought to require frequent sexual activity, and in the Civil War era, masturbation was heavily condemned by religious and medical authorities. When wives were absent, many individuals expected that soldiers would visit prostitutes.
In contrast, when husbands were absent, wives were expected to remain chaste, but many people suspected lone wives of making themselves sexually available to other men. Julia Underhill relocated to Massachusetts in part because the number of men approaching her in public with unwanted sexual advances made it increasingly difficult for her to maintain a respectable reputation (Silber 2005, p. 35). Northern society found it difficult to determine the extent to which unchaperoned women could be considered instigators, as opposed to victims, of inappropriate sexual behavior.

The number of prostitutes during the war is likely relatively high. In times of economic downturn or personal economic emergency, poor women often turned to prostitution to survive. Prostitution stemmed from desperate circumstances rather than some innate predisposition. In 1858, the physician William Wallace Sanger released a survey of 2,000 women who had been incarcerated at the venereal disease hospital at the Houses of Correction on Blackwell’s Island, New York. Nearly 47 percent were very young (median age of fifteen), foreign-born (mostly recent Irish or German immigrants), and unskilled, though 38 percent were native-born (Gilfoyle 1992, p. 117). Although most were themselves unskilled, more than half were the daughters of skilled workers. Male desertion, widowhood, single motherhood, and, especially, the death of a male wage-earner, made prostitution the only viable economic choice. Casual prostitution was a way to supplement low-wage employment. It is unlikely that the pattern of prostitution changed much with the coming of the war.

The collapse of the Southern economy during the Civil War may have forced many women into prostitution as a means of survival for themselves and their families. The enlistment or death of a Union soldier also resulted in economic loss for Union women, and possibly forced widows or abandoned wives into prostitution. After 1800, prostitution branched out from houses of prostitution to hotels, cafes, dance halls, music halls, and the streets. Clandestine commercial activity could be a one-time affair or a long-term pattern. The absence of brothels made it difficult to monitor and regulate illicit sexual activity.

Military authorities tacitly accepted prostitution during the Civil War, in part because they could do little to prevent it. Some officers themselves patronized prostitutes and were tolerant of the illicit sexual activity of the troops. Major General Joseph “Fighting Joe” Hooker (1814–1879) remained enormously popular with his men throughout the war, even though his personal habits frequently brought condemnation from his peers—Hooker’s fellow officers did not hold him in high regard. A hard-drinking bachelor, Hooker notoriously visited brothels. Charles Francis Adams Jr. famously commented that under Hooker, “the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac was a place to which no self-respecting man asked to go, and no decent woman could go. It was a combination of bar-room and brothel” (Silber 2005, p. 80).

Many men regarded visits to prostitutes as one of the benefits accorded to those risking life and limb. The Minnesota soldier James Beatty seemed resigned to the idea that he might give in to “some kinds of temptations to evil” that “will be much stronger in me now than ever before,” and implied that visits to prostitutes were the inevitable result of war and would be little affected by women’s home-front counseling (Silber 2005, p. 83).

Temptation seemed to plague soldiers at every turn. Not surprisingly, in cities throughout the North and West, and especially in areas where Union soldiers clustered, prostitution increased dramatically. Most of the prostitutes were probably young and single, if the demographics of prostitutes in the West hold true for camp-following prostitutes in the South and North. For most women, fading beauty was a liability, and by the age of thirty, many had turned to other ways of making a living. Some prostitutes did escape this line of work by marrying former clients.

Women also served the army in respectable occupations such as laundress, cook, and seamstress. Civil War authorities did not provide much support staff for soldiers, particularly in the first months of the war. Soldiers often were given uncooked food and were expected to prepare it themselves, but typically, they had not received any instruction in cooking because such work was women’s labor. Confronted with raw beans and raw meat, they were baffled. Some of the sickness that befell men in the early months of the war came from consuming undercooked or poorly prepared food. Similarly, men did not have any training in sewing or laundering. Camp followers were tolerated by the military because they provided critical services to the troops.

Camp-following laundresses, seamstresses, and cooks also sometimes supplemented their earnings by selling...
sexual services to decamped soldiers. The number of women seeking “respectable” work exceeded the demand, forcing women to compete for jobs and driving down wages, and as a result, some laundresses and seamstresses turned to prostitution. The link is seen in the use of the words laundress and seamstress as euphemisms for prostitute in U.S. military records, where several “laundresses” or “seamstresses” listed as sharing living quarters generally may be assumed to represent prostitutes in a brothel.

Camp followers also included people who had no link to prostitution. For example, when slaves escaped from plantations, the Union army faced the problem of housing and caring for them, and they numbered in the thousands. The army put men to work as drivers, cooks, blacksmiths, and construction workers. Black women, many of whom had fled with children, often were denounced as prostitutes and lazy vagrants. The denunciations likely had roots in the age-old stereotype of black women as sexually promiscuous Jezebels, an image that permitted the sexual abuse of slave women. It is not clear if any “contrabands,” as escaped slaves were called by the Union, worked as prostitutes; some newly freed black women found jobs as cooks and laundresses in and around Union camps. However, employment proved difficult to find. Many black families spent the remainder of the war living in wretched conditions. At Camp Nelson, Kentucky, in late 1864, white soldiers leveled the shantytown erected by black women and left 400 freedpeople homeless while the black men of the camp fought a battle against Confederates (White 1999, p. 167).

Camp followers were a part of wars well before the modern era. They provided services that the military either could not or would not offer to the soldiers. Generally valued by the soldiers, they were sometimes viewed as a necessary evil by civilians and military authorities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Child Soldiers

The majority of Civil War soldiers who participated in the conflict were eighteen or older. But a sizable number of Yankee and Rebel troops were minors. This was especially true in the opening months of the war, when motivations such as family honor, duty to country, the prospect of adventure, and proving one’s manhood prompted thousands of boys to join older siblings and neighbors and descend on recruiting stations. The percentage of minors in the armed services of the Union and Confederates armies, however, dwindled in the latter stages of the war, when military drafts became the primary means of replenishing depleted regiments and underage soldiers already in the ranks reached their eighteenth birthdays.

Johnny Clem (1851–1937), child soldier. While the majority of soldiers enlisted in both the Union and Confederate armies were over the age of eighteen, many youngsters lied about their age to gain entry into the conflict. Young soldiers often served as field musicians, relaying orders to the troops by fife and drum. MPI/Hulton Archive/Getty Images