The Civil War had a greater effect on American women than any other conflict in the nation's history. Women from both the North and the South played a wide range of roles during the war. "Although conditioned in contrasting environments and schooled in opposing philosophies, women stepped forward as defenders of their respective causes," Mary Elizabeth Massey wrote in *Women in the Civil War.* "Emotions, energies, and talents that even they did not realize they possessed were unleashed."

Many women made direct contributions to the war effort as nurses, spies, government employees, factory workers, and members of aid societies. Some even hid their identities in order to join the fight as soldiers. In order to serve their country, these women had to overcome traditional attitudes that had limited them to roles as homemakers and mothers in the past. Many other women became involved in the war against their will. They spent long hours worrying about the safety of their loved ones in battle, writing letters to boost soldiers' spirits, and taking care of their homes and children in the absence of men. Especially in the South, women faced extreme shortages of food and clothing, and many were forced to leave their homes as enemy troops arrived.

When the war ended, life did not return to normal for most American women. Over six hundred thousand men died, and many of those who did return home had physical or emotional scars. Many families lost their homes and property and struggled to make ends meet, especially in the South. Such hardships forced some women to begin working outside the home. Other women found that they enjoyed the freedom and independence they had discovered through their wartime experiences. Many of these women refused to return to traditional roles after the war, and instead chose to continue their education or to become politically active. Famous Civil War nurse Clara Barton (1821–1912) once claimed that the war placed women fifty years ahead of where they would have been otherwise in American society.

**A time of hardship and grief**

The Civil War placed a terrible emotional burden on women on both sides of the conflict. Those who were left at home worried constantly about the safety and comfort of the husbands, fathers, and sons they had sent to battle. They followed reports of the war in the newspapers and waited anxiously for word about their loved ones. Throughout the war years, women often gathered at train stations across the country to hear the names of the dead called, and to comfort those who were grieving afterward. The endless fear and sadness took a heavy toll on them. As diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823–1886) wrote, "Does anybody wonder why so many women die? Grief and constant anxiety kill nearly as many women as men die on the battlefield."

Many women found that keeping busy helped ease their anxiety. In the North, some women passed the time by sewing and knitting furiously in order to produce warm clothing for the soldiers. Some formed aid societies, which were groups that raised money and collected food, clothing, medicine, and other supplies for the troops or for wounded soldiers and their families. Other Northern women took jobs outside the
home in order to support their families and contribute to the war effort. Since many men had left factory jobs to enlist in the army, over one hundred thousand industrial positions opened up for women during the war years. Thousands more women became "government girls" by taking office jobs as civil service workers (employees in government administration). Free black women formed groups to help former slaves who had escaped to the North.

The Civil War was more difficult for Southern women in some ways, because most of the major battles took place on Southern soil. "Although women in both camps shared many of the same problems and experiences, one very important distinction existed," Massey explained. "This 'woman's war' was being fought by Southerners on their own doorsteps and the women had to battle the enemy as best they could." In addition to worrying about the safety of their loved ones, Southern women also had to worry about protecting their homes and getting enough food for their children.

During the course of the war, Northern troops conquered many major Southern cities, including Nashville, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Richmond. When some of these cities were captured, particularly towards the end of the war, large numbers of women and children were forced to leave their homes and become refugees. The Northern troops often took whatever food and valuables they could find, either for their own use or to keep them from falling into enemy hands. After the Union troops left, many Southern women returned to find their homes destroyed and their fields burned. In this way, a once-wealthy woman might suddenly find herself poor and homeless.

To make matters worse, basic necessities of life such as food and clothing were in very short supply throughout the South during the war years. Northern ships had blocked the flow of goods into Southern ports, and many farmers either left their fields unplanted or saw their crops seized for the war effort. Prices rose quickly on the goods that were available. Southern women had to be very resourceful in order to make ends meet. Some traded fancy dresses, jewelry, and other items for food. Others set up small businesses in their homes, making soap or candles.

Life was difficult for black women in the South, too. Many chose to remain with their masters even though the Emancipation Proclamation had technically set them free. Most of these women stayed where they were because they felt safer in familiar surroundings than in a war zone. Some continued to work in the fields, while others cooked or cleaned for Confederate troops.

Because many battles were near their homes, Southern women also came into more direct contact with the horrors of war than did most Northern women. For example, major fighting took place just outside of Richmond, Virginia, in May and June 1862. During this time, twenty-one thousand wounded Confederate soldiers were brought into the city for medical attention. "We lived in one immense hospital," a Richmond woman said. Churches, hotels, warehouses, barns, and even homes throughout the South were turned into temporary hospitals, and hundreds of women were pressed into service as nurses.

**Women's roles in the war**

Not all American women remained at home while the men fought the Civil War. Some wives, particularly those of officers, followed their husbands to the front lines of battle and lived with them at soldiers' camps. Some unmarried women spent time at the soldiers' camps as well, cooking, doing laundry, and sometimes
serving as prostitutes—even though the traditional values of society frowned upon this practice. In addition, approximately four hundred women posed as men in order to fight in the war as soldiers. Some of these women were inspired by their strong feelings about the cause, while others were merely looking for adventure. Many of the female soldiers managed to serve for two or more years before their gender was discovered, usually after they were wounded.

**Nurses and aid workers**

Over three thousand American women acted as paid nurses during the Civil War, and thousands more performed nursing duties as volunteers. Women chose to contribute to the war effort as nurses for a wide variety of reasons. Some became nurses out of compassion—they saw that the wounded soldiers needed help and were determined to provide it. Others were looking for excitement or for an opportunity to be independent and make themselves useful. Still others became nurses so that they could be near their loved ones or because they needed the money.

In the early days of the war, both the Union and Confederate armies actively discouraged women from serving as nurses. Many men of that time felt that nursing was not an appropriate activity for women. They did not want "refined ladies" to be subjected to the horrors of war by treating sick, wounded, and dying soldiers in army hospitals. "No one denied that most women had an aptitude for nursing, that many had gained experience from tending their families and friends, and that necessity had required those in rural areas to be amateur pharmacists, yet public opinion doubted the [suitability] of their nursing in army hospitals," Massey noted. "It was permissible for white women to nurse the sick at home or even in the slave quarters, but they had no business in the masculine [environment] of an army hospital which presented sights that no lady should see," according to James M. McPherson in *Battle Cry of Freedom*. "[Most men felt that] women should stay at home and make bandages, knit socks for soldiers, and comfort the menfolk when they returned from the rigors [hardships] of battle."

But many women chose to become nurses anyway, ignoring the opinions of their fathers, husbands, or brothers. Some of them were inspired by Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), the Englishwoman who had revolutionized British Army medical services during the Crimean War (1853–56) a few years earlier. Many American women viewed Nightingale as a hero for her wartime service and for building the world's first nursing school in 1860. Unfortunately, there were no formal training programs for nurses in the United States at that time. As a result, the word "nurse" applied to many people who performed different functions in the early years of the Civil War. Some women nurses wrote letters for bedridden soldiers, prepared their meals, or entertained them with music or stories. Others changed bandages, disinfected wounds, and assisted in operations.

Nursing efforts were generally better organized among Northern women than Southern women. Northern women enjoyed greater independence at the beginning of the Civil War, and many had formed or joined groups to support the abolition of slavery. As a result, they became involved in nursing earlier and in greater numbers. Women throughout the North organized local aid societies to collect supplies and distribute them to Union troops. In 1861, several of these local societies combined forces under the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which was created by an order of President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865). The mission of this government agency was to establish training programs for nurses and to improve sanitary conditions for the Union Army.
By 1863, the Sanitary Commission had seven thousand affiliated local organizations and tens of thousands of women volunteer workers. These volunteers raised money and sent food, medicine, and clothing to army camps and hospitals. They also provided meals and lodging to soldiers coming and going from the battle lines. The Sanitary Commission provided training for women nurses and sent them to areas where they were needed. Women nurses were particularly important on hospital ships—large, specially equipped boats that evacuated wounded Union soldiers from Southern ports and took them to civilian hospitals in New York and Washington. These ships often faced enemy fire as they carried out their missions. Another important role of the Sanitary Commission involved inspecting army camps and recommending changes that would improve the health of the soldiers. These inspections were important because poor hygiene at army camps—including contaminated water supplies and unsanitary cooking practices—contributed to widespread illness and disease among the soldiers.

In contrast to these organized efforts in the North, most Southern women entered nursing independently. Some chose to become nurses, while others were pressed into service when their homes were turned into makeshift hospitals. The early efforts of these women nurses were recognized in September 1862, when the Confederate Congress passed a law allowing civilian nurses to work in army hospitals. Many Southern women became part of the official Confederate Army medical service under this law.

Confederate nurses faced special problems. Since most of the fighting took place in the South, they were often forced to move patients and entire hospitals in order to remain behind the battle lines. When Confederate troops made a sudden retreat, some women nurses risked their lives to stay with patients who could not be moved.

Since Southern white women had tended to lead sheltered lives before the war, many people were surprised at the nurses’ courage and ability to recover quickly during the war. Kate Cumming, a young woman from Mobile, Alabama, served as a nurse in a hotel that had been turned into a hospital. "Nothing that I had ever heard or read had given me the faintest idea of the horrors witnessed here," she wrote in her memoir, *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*. "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."

The service of women nurses during the Civil War helped change traditional attitudes about women as the "weaker sex." It also helped turn nursing into a respectable profession for women. "Despite the early skepticism [doubting attitude] of the surgeons and the general public about the propriety as well as the ability of women to serve as nurses during the Civil War, some 3,000 women showed the world they had the stamina [endurance], the commitment, the organizational abilities, and the talent to become a vital force in the Nation," Marilyn Mayer Culpepper wrote in *Trials and Triumphs: Women of the American Civil War*.

**Spies, scouts, couriers, and saboteurs**

American women also played other, less visible, roles in the Civil War—for example, by helping their side gain information as spies, scouts, and couriers (messengers carrying information). "Many spirited girls and imaginative women were challenged by the opportunity to perform daring deeds for their cause," Massey noted. Some women became spies out of strong feelings of patriotism—they wanted to do their part to
help their own side win the war. Others became spies for the opposite reason—they wanted to help the other side win. For example, the wife of one Confederate officer had been born and raised in the North, and she passed information about the South's plans to her father and brothers in the Union Army.

Since many women in both the North and the South had friends or family fighting for the other side, rumors about spying activities circulated from the earliest days of the Civil War. Newspapers often printed such rumors, which forced some women to live under clouds of suspicion. In some cases, neighbors turned on women whose loyalty they questioned. Women accused of spying were often banished from the region where they lived and forced to make dangerous journeys to the other side of the battle lines. Many of the women accused of spying were innocent, but some women actively gathered and carried secret information during the war. Most women who became involved in these activities counted on receiving less severe punishment if they were caught because of their gender.

In general, the Union did a better job of detecting and punishing enemy agents than did the Confederacy. Even before the Civil War began, the Federal government had taken steps to silence people who favored secession in Washington, D.C., and other areas. Many Southern sympathizers and suspected spies were either arrested and put in prison or banished from the Union. However, officials on both sides were reluctant to believe that women would act as spies. They often refused to consider women dangerous until after they had transmitted secret military information to the other side.

There were many successful women spies on both sides of the Civil War. One of the most effective Union spies was Elizabeth Van Lew (1818–1900) of Richmond, Virginia, who became known as "Crazy Bet." Throughout the war years, she pretended to be an eccentric (odd character) so that Confederate officials would view her as "crazy but harmless." In the meantime, she helped Federal prisoners escape from Richmond and provided Union general Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885) with information that helped him capture the Confederate capital city. After the war ended, Grant arranged for guards to protect Van Lew's house and later appointed her postmistress of Richmond.

Black women also made effective spies during the war. In fact, Van Lew received much of her secret information from her former slave, Mary Elizabeth Bowser. Van Lew had sent Bowser to Philadelphia for schooling prior to the war. Once the war started, she arranged for Bowser to become a servant to
President Jefferson Davis (1808–1889) in the Confederate White House. Bowser pretended that she could not read, then stole glances at confidential memos and orders while she was cleaning. She also eavesdropped on conversations between Confederate officials while she served dinner. Bowser passed information about troop movements and other Confederate Army plans along to Van Lew, who sent it on to Union officials. Bowser's activities as a Union spy went undetected throughout the war.

An early Confederate spy was Rose O'Neal Greenhow (1817–1864), a Washington socialite who used her prominent position to extract information from Union officials. The secret messages she sent to friends in the South helped turn the First Battle of Bull Run (also called the First Battle of Manassas) into a Confederate victory in 1861. Afterward, she was placed under house arrest, and her home was turned into a prison for other women spies. Greenhow still managed to send messages outside, however, so after a brief stay in a Federal prison, she was sent behind Confederate lines in 1862. President Davis greeted her warmly and told her, "But for you there would have been no Battle of Bull Run."

Many other women acted as couriers during the war, smuggling money, weapons, or messages in their hair or in the lining of their hoop skirts. Still others committed acts of sabotage in support of their cause. For example, one Southern woman and her daughter destroyed several bridges in Tennessee to slow a Union advance. Other women helped prisoners escape, destroyed enemy property, and cut telegraph wires.

**Changes in attitudes after the war**

The Civil War inspired many American women to move beyond the comfort of their traditional roles. Before the war, only 25 percent of white women worked outside the home before marriage. Taking care of a home and raising a family were considered the ideal roles for women, while men increasingly worked outside the home. This situation created separate spheres for men and women in American society. During the war, however, women often worked alongside men as equals in hospitals, offices, factories, and political organizations. In addition, many women began paying attention to current events because many issues had a direct impact on their lives. They began speaking out about military and political matters, proving that they were literate and had the capacity to form well-reasoned opinions. As a result, women were generally taken more seriously in society. "By the end of the war, gone or at least fast disappearing was the typical stereotype of women as delicate, submissive [docile or yielding] China dolls," Culpepper wrote. "The change was a welcome one for many women who savored their newly acquired independence and emerging feelings of self-worth."

But the end of the war brought other problems for some women, particularly in the South. Many soldiers returned home defeated and disheartened, while others faced severe physical or emotional problems. Many families had lost their homes and property during the war. To make matters worse, Confederate money suddenly became worthless, which left many families with heavy debts.

In families where the men had been killed or disabled, women were often required to enter the work force. As a result, the social restrictions that had prevented many women from working outside the home gradually relaxed. Some women chose to continue their volunteer work at hospitals and veterans' rehabilitation centers, while others turned their attention to new causes, such as women's rights. Greater numbers of women sought higher education, and many colleges and universities around the country
began admitting women.

**Words to Know**

**Civil War** conflict that took place from 1861 to 1865 between the Northern states (Union) and the Southern seceded states (Confederacy); also known in the South as the War between the States and in the North as the War of the Rebellion

**Confederacy** eleven Southern states that seceded from the United States in 1860 and 1861

**Union** Northern states that remained loyal to the United States during the Civil War

**People to Know**

**Dorothea Dix (1802–1887)** educator who fought for humane treatment of the mentally ill

**Rose O’Neal Greenhow (1817–1864)** Washington socialite who was a spy for the Confederacy

**Florence Nightingale (1820–1910)** nurse who dedicated her life to the care of the sick and those wounded in war

**Elizabeth Van Lew (1818–1900)** Virginian who was a spy for the Union

**Receiving the Dreaded News**

Many women who remained at home during the war lived in constant fear of receiving bad news about the fathers, husbands, and brothers who served as soldiers in the conflict. In *Reminiscences of the Women of Missouri during the Sixties*, Mrs. P. G. Robert of Richmond, Virginia, described the shock one of her young neighbors experienced upon learning that her new husband had been killed in action:

A bride of six weeks, going to the door on her way out, returned to tell her mother that the next door neighbor’s son had been killed and was being carried into the mother's house. Her mother hastened with her to the door, only to find that the soldiers had mistaken the house, retraced their steps, and were coming up their own steps, bearing the groom who but six weeks before, in the pride and strength of manhood, went to join his regiment; although he held in his pocket a furlough [leave of absence] for several days, he could not let his regiment go into active service without him. The mother, taking in the incident, caught her daughter in her arms and bore her into the parlor and laid her on the floor on the identical spot where six weeks before she had stood as a bride.

**Dorothea Dix, Superintendent of Female Nurses for the Union**
Dorothea Lynde Dix was born in Hampden, Maine, in 1802. She worked as a schoolteacher for many years before turning her attention to the treatment of the insane. In the early 1800s, people who were deaf, could not speak, or had psychological problems were treated as outcasts in American society. They were often sent to asylums (institutions for the mentally ill) where they endured inhumane treatment by uncaring workers. In 1843, Dix published a report describing the terrible abuse mentally ill people suffered in such places. She claimed that they were treated like animals—left unclothed, sometimes chained to a bed or wall, in small, dark, unsanitary rooms. She argued that the insane deserved special facilities staffed by caring, trained personnel. In the pre-war years, Dix took her case to state legislatures all over the country and succeeded in convincing many of them to build special hospitals for the treatment of the insane.

Over the years, Dix gained a reputation as an important social reformer. In the 1850s, she traveled to Europe to visit Florence Nightingale, the Englishwoman who had revolutionized British Army medical services during the Crimean War and later established the world's first nursing school. At the beginning of the Civil War, it became clear that the Federal government needed an efficient, qualified woman to supervise the female nurses who would be working with the Union Army. Dix was appointed superintendent of female nurses on June 10, 1861.

Dix—who was a proper, matronly woman at the age of fifty-nine—immediately began outlining qualifications and rules for women nurses. Like many other people of her time, she believed that nursing was not an appropriate occupation for young, unmarried women. She thought that attractive female nurses would be harassed by soldiers, would not be taken seriously by doctors, and would have their morality questioned by the larger society. As a result, she set a minimum age of thirty for women nurses, and also required applicants to be "plain in appearance." Women who met these requirements and completed the formal training were allowed to take paying jobs as nurses at army hospitals. While they worked, Dix required them to wear simple, hoopless dresses, and no jewelry or makeup. Although some nurses initially objected to this rule, they soon realized that fancy clothing would only get in the way of doing their jobs.

Dix had equal numbers of admirers and enemies during her time as superintendent of female nurses for the Union. She could be soft-spoken and gentle at times, but at other times she was abrasive (harsh) and opinionated, especially when she had to defend her nurses from discrimination. "It is not always clear whether the men resented Miss Dix because she was dictatorial or because she was more efficient
than many of them," Mary Elizabeth Massey wrote in *Women of the Civil War.* "The nurses' opinions of their superintendent were mixed; the new ones almost invariably were afraid or awed, but after a time most came to respect her and many were sincerely devoted." When the Civil War ended, Dix resigned from her post and returned to her humanitarian work on behalf of the insane. She continued working up until her death in 1887, at the age of eighty-five.

**Appreciation for the Contributions of Women in the Civil War**

By the time the Civil War ended, most people recognized that women had made immense contributions to the war effort. President Abraham Lincoln was one of many men who expressed their appreciation:

> I am not accustomed to use the language of eulogy. I have never studied the art of paying compliments to women. But I must say that, if all that has been said by orators and poets since the creation of the world in praise of women was applied to the women of America, it would not do them justice for their conduct during this war. I will close by saying, God bless the women of America!


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