

The Society for Women and the Civil War Contributions by Women During the American Civil War

While military women serving in the Civil War notably played roles such as soldiers, physicians, nurses and *vivandieres*, individual civilian women at home knitted, sewed, prayed for, and worked to maintain the morale of soldiers from their families and communities. They kept homes, farms and businesses running: they were engaged in the business of survival for themselves, their families and their nations. The Civil War offered women remarkable opportunities to undertake “firsts” which had not previously been available to them. They rose to the demands provided by the war to expand their service to their communities. This gave them the knowledge, skills and experience to become vital contributors to the war efforts of their nations, and to later serve their reunited country in post-war healing and recovery. Their achievements provided the foundation for those of the American citizens of today – women and men.



Civilian women served in the field and in general hospitals as paid and volunteer surgeons, nurses, matrons, cooks, laundresses and chaplains. They also opened their homes to serve as hospitals during and after battles and for longer-term care of the wounded. Women made hospital supplies, wrote letters for soldier patients, provided refreshments, and provided support for hospitalized soldiers and their families. Southern women herbalists produced pharmaceuticals for hospitals.



Civilian women engaged in information operations support to war efforts by writing books, newspaper articles, pamphlets and public and private letters. They composed patriotic songs and presented hand-made flags to units. They engaged in open resistance to occupying forces and in more subtle displays of defiance, such as the wearing of patriotic cockades, aprons, petticoats and stockings.



Civilian women worked in factories producing munitions, military equipment, uniforms and foodstuffs for the armies. Women farmers provided fresh produce, grain and livestock to the armies. They were business owners, scientists, teachers, engineers, lawyers, clergypersons, nuns, philanthropists and artists. Women also worked as civil servants in the governments of the two countries.



Civilian women served the armies as spies, detectives, guides, smugglers, cooks and laundresses. Those captured were usually imprisoned.

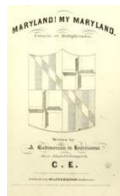


Civilian women in aid societies operated canteens and rest areas for soldiers. Aid societies provided comfort supplies, equipment, clothing and foodstuffs to soldiers and supported hospitals. They operated vast logistics networks to purchase and transport supplies to soldiers. They raised funds to support their efforts and to provide relief for wounded soldiers and to families of soldiers. After the war, aid societies raised funds to assist veterans and the families of veterans and deceased soldiers, to support disabled veterans' homes, and to support hospitals. The societies also worked to recover remains and provide proper burial sites for deceased soldiers, and to assist in community and national recovery from wartime devastation.

Society for Women and the Civil War - Contributions by Women During the American Civil War – Image Key



- 1- Civil War civilian nurse, probably Louisa May Alcott, in an illustration from Alcott's Hospital Sketches, 1885.
- 2- Sisters of Mercy nuns and US Army hospital staff. With few exceptions, Roman Catholic orders of nuns were the war's only professionally-trained nurses, and served in hospitals for both armies.
- 3- Unidentified Confederate nurses.
- 4- Civil War nurse Annie Bell in the Nashville US Army Hospital, 1864. Image issued by the US Sanitary Commission for its 1865 Northwest Sanitary Fair in Chicago, it is one of the most iconic, and most-reproduced, images of Civil War women.
- 5- Clara Barton, individual nurse and philanthropist, who founded the American Red Cross *after* the war.



- 1- Unidentified woman correspondent in illustration from the American Fashionable Letter Writer, Merriam, Moore, Troy, New York, 1850.
- 2- "Reply to the Volunteer Zouave by a Baltimore Lady", pamphlet and poem by Fannie Harwood or Miss. N. Lemmon, 1862.
- 3- "Maryland, My Maryland", anthem and later, Maryland state song, composed by Jennie and Hettie Cary of Baltimore, 1861.
- 4- Secessionist-supporting Baltimore woman wearing a patriotic apron-version of an early Confederate flag while walking past Federal troops. Cover of Harper's Weekly magazine, 7 September 1861.



- 1- Some of nearly 400 women mill workers of Roswell, Georgia, taken prisoner by LTG Sherman in July 1864 and permanently deported to federally-controlled territory in the north. Women and children ordnance workers in both nations were subject to injury and death from explosions.
- 2- Maria Mitchell, scientist, astronomer and professor. She was the Astronomy Editor for Scientific American magazine, the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Science, and, beginning in 1849, the first US woman federal civilian employee.
- 3- Elizabeth Jarvis Colt, widow of Samuel Colt. Mrs. Colt was the real genius behind Colt weapons manufacturing and ran the company on her own after Mr. Colt's 1862 death.

4-Women federal civilian employees of the US Treasury Department, shown in an 18 February 1865 Harper's Weekly magazine illustration. Women served in the same role for the Confederate States, hand-signing currency.



- 1- Rose O'Neal Greenhow, widowed Confederate spy whose intelligence provided to Confederate forces was perhaps the most important factor in their victory at First Manassas/Bull Run. She and her young daughter were imprisoned in the Old Capitol Prison in Washington. She was later killed in a shipwreck while smuggling gold to the Confederate States: when her blockade-running ship was captured by the US Navy, she attempted to reach shore by a small boat and was drowned by the weight of the gold.
- 2- Believed to be Kate Warne, senior Pinkerton agent and head of Pinkerton's Female Detective Bureau. She discovered the Baltimore plot to assassinate President-elect Lincoln on his way from Illinois to his inauguration and escorted him and his family to safety in Washington.
- 3- Harriet Tubman, federal spy, guide, and Underground Railroad conductor.
- 4- Unidentified Confederate women smugglers.
- 5- US Army laundress, sometimes identified as Mary Kilraine Craven Comuskey, assigned to the 5th US Artillery Regiment, with her soldier husband and children in the field. One of the most iconic images of women military employees.



- 1- US Sanitary Commission logistics center, operated by the Soldiers' Aid Society of Northern Ohio, in Cleveland, Ohio, 1865.
- 2- Women knitting socks and sewing shirts for soldiers, in a detail from Winslow Homer's illustration *"The Influence of Woman"*, Harper's Weekly, 6 September 1862. The collage-style engraving, showing a variety of contributions, is one of the most famous illustrations of the Federal war effort.
- 3- Aid society members delivering food and comfort supplies to a hospital in Hagerstown, Maryland, in an illustration from Harper's Weekly, 11 October 1862.
- 4- US Sanitary Commission post-war Baltimore Sanitary Fair fundraiser, 1864, illustration from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 14 May 1864.

Primary sources for images:

US Archives

“Women on the Border: Maryland Perspectives of the Civil War” <http://www.lib.umd.edu/civilwarwomen/index.html>

“Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877” <http://civilwarwomenblog.com/>

“Soldiers' Aid Society of Northern Ohio”, The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History <http://ech.case.edu/cgi/article.pl?id=SASONO>

“Hospital Nuns: From the Civil War to Today”, Irish America <http://irishamerica.com/2013/08/hospital-nuns-from-the-civil-war-to-today/>