

Her War, Too: The Women Who Helped Save the Union

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When we picture the American Civil War, our minds naturally turn to soldiers. We see men in Union blue marching beneath the flag. We remember Gettysburg, Antietam, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Appomattox. We remember generals and regiments, battlefield courage and terrible sacrifice. And we should remember them.

But if we tell the story of the Civil War only through the men who carried rifles, we tell only part of the story. Behind the armies, beside the wounded, in hospitals and kitchens, on farms and in businesses, through soldiers' aid societies, and sometimes even on the battlefield itself, women served the Union cause. Some became famous. Thousands did not. Yet the Union war effort depended in countless ways upon their labor, organization, sacrifice, courage, and patriotism.

Women kept families and farms functioning, organized relief efforts, raised money, collected supplies, nursed wounded soldiers, taught formerly enslaved people, gathered intelligence, and cared for soldiers far from their families. A small number even disguised themselves as men and entered the ranks. Their stories remind us of an important truth: **the Union was preserved on the battlefield, but it could not have been sustained by the battlefield alone.**

The Civil War was their war, too.

An Army on the Home Front

When men left home for military service, everyday life did not stop. Crops still had to be planted and harvested. Children had to be raised. Bills had to be paid. Family businesses had to continue. Women frequently found themselves assuming responsibilities that nineteenth-century society traditionally associated with men.

At the same time, women transformed skills associated with home and family into organized patriotic service. Across the North, women formed and joined soldiers' aid societies. They sewed clothing, knitted socks, prepared bandages, collected food and medicine, raised money, and packed supplies for soldiers in camps and hospitals.

Historian Judith Ann Giesberg demonstrates how women's wartime relief efforts developed into an extensive network connected with the United States Sanitary Commission. Northern women organized local societies, coordinated donations, corresponded with larger relief organizations, raised substantial sums of money, and helped move supplies from Northern communities to military camps and hospitals. Sanitary fairs became major civic events where communities raised money for Union

relief.¹ Their work also brought women into public fundraising, administration, and dealings with military and government agencies. Wartime necessity widened the scope of women's civic activity, even though it did not erase the limits placed on them in nineteenth-century society.

A pair of socks may not sound as dramatic as a charge across a battlefield. A box of bandages will never receive a battle streamer. But armies cannot remain in the field on courage alone. Soldiers require food, clothing, medicine, sanitation, hospitals, transportation, and functioning systems of supply and relief. Women's work did not replace the sacrifice of the soldier. It helped sustain the soldier who was making that sacrifice.

Pennsylvania women were very much part of this effort. Philadelphia became an important center of wartime relief. Women organized aid societies, gathered supplies, raised money, and participated in sanitary fairs and other efforts to support Union soldiers. Philadelphia's Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon offers one concrete example. At this railroad hub, volunteers provided traveling Union soldiers with meals, places to rest, medical attention, and washing facilities. Women's service there helped turn a stop between trains into practical support for men on their way to and from the war.¹ Then, in the summer of 1863, the war itself came to Pennsylvania.

When War Came to Gettysburg

The Battle of Gettysburg provides a powerful example of how quickly the distinction between the home front and the battlefield could disappear. When the armies converged on Gettysburg in July 1863, civilians suddenly found themselves surrounded by suffering on an almost unimaginable scale. Homes, churches, barns, schools, and other buildings became temporary hospitals. Women who had never expected to become nurses found wounded and dying soldiers practically at their doors.

Fifteen-year-old **Tillie Pierce** experienced the battle firsthand. She left Gettysburg with neighbors as fighting approached and found herself near the battlefield, where she witnessed the wounded and assisted in their care. Her later memoir records both the fear of a young civilian caught in battle and the suffering she witnessed afterward.² Historian Margaret Creighton places stories such as Pierce's within the broader experience of Gettysburg's civilians, showing how women became caregivers amid the devastation that followed the armies.³

Gettysburg reminds us that women's Civil War service was not always planned. Sometimes history arrived at the front door, and women simply did what had to be done.

Caring for the Boys in Blue

The tremendous casualties of the war created an urgent need for nurses and hospital workers. Approximately 20,000 women volunteered in military hospitals during the Civil War. This scale reminds us that Barton and Bickerdyke represent a much larger body of

caregivers, many of whom are now little known.⁴ Dorothea Dix served as Superintendent of Female Nurses for the Union Army, while other women worked through the Sanitary Commission or independently to provide care.

Among the most famous was **Clara Barton**. When the war began, Barton was working at the United States Patent Office in Washington. She began by collecting supplies for soldiers but eventually carried those supplies closer to the fighting and personally cared for wounded men. At Antietam in September 1862, Barton worked among the wounded during and after what became the bloodiest single day in American military history.⁴

Another remarkable Union caregiver was **Mary Ann Bickerdyke**, affectionately known to soldiers as “Mother Bickerdyke.” Bickerdyke traveled to Cairo, Illinois, in 1861 with medical supplies and became deeply involved in improving hospital conditions. She followed Union armies through the Western Theater, working among the sick and wounded and becoming associated with the armies of Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. Her service was part of a larger transformation in which women entered military hospitals and wartime relief work in unprecedented numbers.⁵

For Barton, Bickerdyke, and many less famous women, care for Union soldiers was not simply an act of charity. **It was patriotic service.**

African American Women and the Cause of Freedom

African American women also played vital roles in the Union war effort. Some had been free before the war. Others escaped slavery as Union armies moved into the South. They worked as cooks, laundresses, nurses, teachers, relief workers, guides, scouts, and sources of intelligence.

Few stories demonstrate this more dramatically than that of **Harriet Tubman**. Most Americans know Tubman because of her work on the Underground Railroad, but during the Civil War she also served the Union cause as a nurse, scout, and intelligence operative.

Her most remarkable wartime achievement came with the Combahee River Raid in South Carolina in June 1863. Tubman and her network of scouts and spies gathered information that helped her and Union officers plan the expedition. Tubman then took part in the raid alongside Colonel James Montgomery and Black Union soldiers. Their forces struck Confederate plantations and liberated more than 700 enslaved people.⁶ A woman who had escaped slavery willingly returned to dangerous territory during wartime and helped others reach freedom.

Tubman’s service reminds us that emancipation was not simply something done *for* enslaved people by the Union government or army. African Americans actively participated in transforming the war into a struggle for freedom, and women were part of that struggle.

Another extraordinary example was Susie King Taylor. Born enslaved in Georgia in 1848, Taylor secretly learned to read and write. During the war, she served with the First South Carolina Volunteers, later redesignated the 33rd United States Colored Troops. Although

connected to the regiment as a laundress, Taylor's responsibilities went far beyond washing clothes. She cared for sick soldiers and taught members of Company E to read and write. In her memoir, Taylor wrote, "I taught a great many of the comrades in Company E to read and write, when they were off duty." She served the regiment for more than four years without pay.⁷

Taylor's service joined several great themes of the Civil War together: Union, freedom, education, military service, and the transformation of formerly enslaved people into citizens claiming their own future.

Women Who Wore the Uniform

Some women crossed an even greater barrier. They became soldiers.

Both the Union and Confederate armies prohibited women from enlisting. Women who entered the ranks therefore assumed male names, dressed as men, and concealed their identities. For that reason, **we do not know exactly how many women served as Civil War soldiers**. DeAnne Blanton, writing in the National Archives' *Prologue*, explains that because these women passed as men, their number cannot be known with certainty. She also notes that an unknown number completed all or part of their military service without ever being identified as women.⁸

We sometimes encounter estimates for the number of women who fought in the Civil War, but an estimate should not be mistaken for an exact count. What we can establish is that women soldiers were real. Surviving records document women who enlisted, marched, fought, became sick or wounded, were captured, and in some cases died while serving.⁹

One of the best documented Union examples was Sarah Emma Edmonds. Edmonds enlisted in the Second Michigan Infantry under the name Franklin Thompson on May 25, 1861. Her duties included serving as a regimental nurse and carrying mail and dispatches. Her regiment participated in the Peninsula Campaign and fought at First Bull Run and Fredericksburg.¹⁰

When Edmonds contracted malaria in 1863, she feared that hospitalization would reveal that she was a woman and left the army. In 1886, the federal government granted her a military pension, and the Secretary of War acknowledged her as a female soldier who had faithfully served as a private.¹¹

Compared with the millions of men who served, women soldiers were few. Their significance lies not in their numbers but in the fact that they were there at all. They challenged contemporary assumptions about what women could do and demonstrated that patriotism, courage, and willingness to sacrifice were not exclusively male characteristics.

The Women Whose Names We Do Not Know

History naturally remembers extraordinary names: Clara Barton, Mary Ann Bickerdyke, Harriet Tubman, Susie King Taylor, and Sarah Emma Edmonds. Their stories deserve to be told. But perhaps the women who best represent women's Civil War service are the thousands whose names we will never know.

They were mothers who watched sons leave for war and wives who suddenly became responsible for farms and families. They knitted socks for soldiers they would never meet, collected food and medicine, rolled bandages, organized relief societies, and wrote letters for wounded soldiers who could no longer write for themselves. Some sat beside dying young men whose mothers were hundreds of miles away. In Pennsylvania, women opened homes, churches, and barns after Gettysburg and cared for wounded strangers.

Their names may not appear on monuments, but their work mattered. The Civil War was fought on battlefields, but the Union was sustained by a network of human labor and sacrifice extending far beyond those battlefields. Women were an indispensable part of that network.

From Service to Remembrance

When the fighting ended, women's work did not. Veterans returned home wounded, disabled, or suffering from illnesses that remained with them for the rest of their lives. Families mourned sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers. There were veterans to assist, widows and orphans to care for, pension claims to pursue, graves to mark, and memories to preserve.

Women continued serving. Susie King Taylor later became active in the **Woman's Relief Corps**, an organization closely associated with the Grand Army of the Republic, and devoted part of her memoir to that work.¹² Women throughout the country participated in veterans' relief and memorial activities, cared for former soldiers and their families, decorated graves, preserved wartime memories, and taught younger generations about the sacrifices of the Civil War generation.

This postwar work represents another stage in women's service to the Union.

During the war, women helped sustain the men who fought. After the war, women helped sustain the veterans who returned. And as that generation began to pass away, women helped sustain their memory.

The battlefield eventually grew quiet, but the responsibility to remember remained.

That history should have particular meaning for us as members of the **Auxiliary to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War**. More than 160 years later, there is a recognizable thread connecting their work to ours. The forms of service have changed, but the responsibility has not.

Today, we honor Union veterans. We preserve graves and monuments. We teach history. We promote patriotism. We preserve stories and participate in commemorations. We help ensure that another generation understands what was required to preserve the United States during its greatest internal crisis.

That makes our work more than nostalgia. **It is stewardship.**

We have inherited names, stories, graves, monuments, records, and memories from people who can no longer speak for themselves. Our responsibility is to preserve them faithfully and pass them to those who come after us.

When we remember the Civil War, we should always remember the soldier in blue. We should remember the young man who shouldered his musket and marched away from home. We should remember those who returned, and reverently remember those who did not.

But we should also remember the women who sustained them.

Women kept farms and families together. They collected food and medicine. They organized relief societies. They entered hospitals and walked onto battlefields. They taught soldiers to read. They gathered intelligence. Some even put on the uniform themselves. When the fighting was over, women helped care for those who returned and preserve the memory of those who did not.

Their service reminds us of something important:

Patriotism has never had only one uniform.

Sometimes it wore Union blue. Sometimes it wore a nurse's apron. Sometimes it carried a basket of bandages or stood beside a hospital bed. Sometimes it taught a newly freed person to read. Sometimes it quietly kept a family together while someone it loved was far away fighting for the Union. And sometimes it simply refused to allow the sacrifice of another generation to be forgotten.

The women who came before us served their generation in the ways available to them. Our task is to serve ours by preserving the memory entrusted to our care.

Let us continue that work in our own communities. Let us seek out the stories still waiting to be told, teach them faithfully, care for veterans and their families, and tend the graves and memorials entrusted to us. In fraternity, charity, and loyalty, let us make remembrance an act of service. Let us ensure that the women and men who preserved the Union are known to the generations who follow us.

Because the history of the Union cannot be fully told until **her story is told, too.**

Notes

1. Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 31–84. See also Smithsonian National Museum of American History, "View of the Philadelphia Volunteer Refreshment Saloons," https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_326147.
2. Tillie Pierce Alleman, *At Gettysburg, or What a Girl Saw and Heard of the Battle: A True Narrative* (New York: W. Lake Borland, 1889), 55–63, 71–74.
3. Margaret S. Creighton, *The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg's Forgotten History: Immigrants, Women, and African Americans in the Civil War's Defining Battle* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 145–62.
4. Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 99. For the estimate of women hospital volunteers, see National Archives, "Louisa May Alcott's Civil War Service," Prologue 40, no. 3 (Fall 2008), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2008/fall/louisa-may-alcott-hospital-muster-roll>.
5. Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 194–221.
6. Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 212–17. See also National Park Service, "We Called Ourselves Combee: Freeing the Enslaved Along the Combahee River," <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/we-called-ourselves-combee.htm>.
7. Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers* (Boston: Published by the Author, 1902), 21.
8. DeAnne Blanton, "Women Soldiers of the Civil War," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1993).
9. Blanton, "Women Soldiers of the Civil War."
10. Blanton, "Women Soldiers of the Civil War"; Compiled Military Service Record of Franklin Thompson, Second Michigan Infantry, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration.
11. Blanton, "Women Soldiers of the Civil War."
12. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 59–61.

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