

## Civil War: Not Just a Man's Fight

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Most Americans believed, and continue to believe, that the American Civil War was a man's fight. Men were the ones who fought and bled while the women stayed home, tended the house, or nursed the wounded. This was one of the only things both sides agreed on. At least, the men did. Some women, however, did not. Over 700 women fought in the Civil War on both sides, as soldiers and as spies (Blanton). Women proved that they could fight and die for their country, helping to address the stereotypes surrounding women that were in play at the time.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were very strict social spheres that governed the sexes. The men were seen as the protectors, the fighters and the ones who supported the house (O'Day). The women were seen as weak and frail. Women were meant to manage the house, to do laundry, sew, and all other things that were considered "women's work" (O'Day). Women who were married stayed at home. Women who were unmarried or widowed had to work. But the only way they could work was in sewing or laundry, which didn't pay all that much, with a maximum of \$10 a month to a man's minimum \$15 (O'Day). Any woman who wanted to escape these social constructs was considered weird and called a range of names from prostitute to freak. Women had lives that did not allow them to do anything, to go anywhere or to earn an income on their own (Blanton).

When the Civil War broke out, however, women were affected too. Their sons and husbands were the ones fighting and dying. They loved their country as much as the men did, but they were not allowed to fight for it (Faust). They had to stay at home while there was a war going on, hoping for a letter. Life wasn't easy for the women who stayed behind. The army sometimes raided homes, "In one of the first raids the Rebels came into our place in search of

horses; the horses had been previously sent away. A squad (of) three or four called father out and demanded that he tell them where the horses were. He told them he could not tell, as he did not know, which was true, because he did not know where the men had taken them. Then they said if he did not tell they would shoot him” (Hunsucker). People could have anything taken away and could be shot if they did not comply.

As desperate times called for desperate measures, some women wanted to fight back. Both armies refused to accept women as soldiers, so some women decided to cut their hair, change their names and enlist in the army (Faust). The women who did enlist had to fight in battles and kill. They acted like the male soldiers, and fought like them (O’Day). There weren’t that many women soldiers compared to the men, and they didn’t turn the war. But there were women who fought, challenging the ways of how women were viewed. If the so-called frail gender fought as well as the men, then it couldn’t be the frail gender (O’Day).

Women who fought in the Civil War joined the army for different reasons. Some needed money, as women’s work did not pay very much. Others, like Sarah Edmonds, wanted adventure and action, something fighting a war definitely provided (Bryant). Some did not want to wait at home for a letter and chose instead to fight alongside their husbands. Some wanted to fight for their country and defend it, just like men did (Bryant), some going to extremes like putting on fake mustaches (Valasquez, Blanton). To enlist in the army disguised as men was much easier than it would be today for women. The physical exam for enlistment consisted of checking for rotten teeth in a prospective soldier’s mouth (O’Day). Most of the other physicals in the army were simply just a look-over to see if a soldier had any visible injuries that might prevent him from fighting (Blanton). Most people went to the bathroom in the woods, and most slept with a good amount of clothes on (O’Day). This helped women avoid suspicion and keep their true

identities hidden. Generally, women were only discovered after an injury or sickness that forced them to be hospitalized (Blanton).

During the Civil War, women were at the battles, fought alongside the men, took dangerous spying jobs, and were good soldiers. Some women soldiers became famous after the war by publishing memoirs or diaries. Sarah Edmonds is a well-known example. She had been dressing as a man before the war, after running away from her father, who wanted to put her through an arranged marriage. She joined the Union army, working as a male nurse under the alias of "Franklin Thompson" (O'Day). After coming face-to-face with the harsh realities of war, Sarah began to branch out "A lost friend. Death of lieutenant James V. His burial...My disguise as a spy. I am metamorphosed into a contraband. Hired as a cook" (Edmonds). She became a spy for General McClellan, helping scope out a Confederate fort and noting its weaknesses, or going undercover in a Confederate camp. However, when she became sick with malaria, she had to leave the army, or else she would be found out (O'Day). She checked into a hospital as a female. Frank Thompson was labeled a traitor and deserter, until Sarah told her story after the war and received an honorable discharge and veteran's pension (O'Day).

Women spied and fought for the Confederacy as well. Rose Greenhow is one of the most well-known women spies, who changed how the war looked at women. Greenhow was raised mostly in Washington D.C., where she made many connections that would help her when she was spying (Stevenson). Since the fashion for women at the time was hoopskirts and long hair, women could smuggle information, medicine and supplies in their skirts or even braided into their hair. At the beginning of the war, women weren't searched, especially in their skirts (Stevenson). Greenhow and her activities changed that. The Confederacy won the first real battle of the war, because of Greenhow. She sent an encrypted message that said that McDowell was

marching toward Manassas with 55,000 troops, braided into a courier's hair and sent to P.G.T. Beauregard (Stevenson). Greenhow continued to send messages until she was arrested in front of her own home. Her house was then called "Fort Greenough" and many women were imprisoned there, not just Rose Greenhow: "There was a chair before the front of the door, but the door was closed, the lower windows looked uncommonly dirty, and there were no bars at all. The women are restricted to the second floor, and as I passed some of them were visible" (Greenhow Papers). Greenhow was not allowed to leave her house. However, even under house arrest, and from prison, she was still able to send messages to the Confederacy (Stevenson). After being freed as part of a prisoner exchange, she was used as an ambassador to the Confederacy in Europe, but drowned on the way back (Stevenson). At her funeral, she was hailed as a hero, "At the last day, when the martyrs who have with their blood sealed their devotion to liberty shall stand together firm witnesses that truth is stronger than death, foremost among the shining throng, coequal with the Rolands and Joan d'Arcs of history will appear the Confederate heroine, Rose A. Greenhow" (The Late Mrs. Rose A. Greenhow).

Women didn't only spy, however. Loretta Valazquez dressed as a male soldier and fought at Bull Run. She fled from her home and father to escape an arranged marriage. She ran away to get married to William Rouch, and they had three children, who all died before they reached seven years of age (O'Day). She tried to enlist in the army with her husband, but he didn't agree and sent her back multiple times. When he died on the shooting range, she joined the Confederate Army for good. She fought at the battle of Bull Run, and took command of a company whose general had been killed (O'Day). Valazquez had to kill Union men too, and that affected her "I was willing to fight them to death's door in the open [field], to ask no favors, taking the same chances for life as they had; but I had no heart for their ruthless slaughter"

(Valazquez). Valazquez would fight in the war, but had a strong revulsion for killing without thought or feeling. She started to spy on the North, hoping that spying would bring the war to a close faster, with less bloodshed. The Union never caught her (O'Day)

Women soldiers weren't that common, with estimates of several hundred (Blanton). There may have been more, as many died or did not write their memoirs. But the real marvel was that they were present on the field of battle. Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century defied the constructs of society and fought and became soldiers, just as the men did. Women who had fought in the war were not always regarded as heroes either (Blanton). Even if they survived the war, they had to go straight back to the woman's work they had enlisted to get away from. But these women who fought in the Civil War, as bravely as the men, began to pave the way for women's equality movements and helped women start to fight back against class structures (Stevenson).

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