

Women of the Civil War

During the Civil War, northern and southern women found their lives greatly changed. Proving they were not as delicate and dependent as many had believed, they took on new roles and challenges. In addition to carrying on the responsibilities of men in their families who had left for the battlefields, large numbers of women took an active part in the war effort.

Eager to help the Union, women throughout the North formed soldiers' aid societies. At gatherings in homes and churches, they made uniforms, knit socks, and packed up donations of food and medicines. In Chicago and other northern cities, women organized fairs that raised thousands of dollars for the war. In the South, women rolled bandages, sewed clothes, and raised money for the Confederate Army. Some took meals and cold drinks to their troops at train stations. Others wrote encouraging letters to all the soldiers they knew.

Many women on both sides of the conflict left their homes to become nurses. Exposed to the horrors of war, these women cleaned bloody wounds, wiped feverish faces, and comforted the dying. Most had little training and worked long hours under difficult conditions. Some, like Mary Ann Bickerdyke (above), worked in field hospitals that were close to the fighting. "Mother" Bickerdyke, as she was called, tenderly cared for injured Union soldiers at 19 different battle sites. At night, she often went to the battlefields to search for wounded men.

Although only males were allowed to enlist, at least 400 women became soldiers by disguising themselves as men. Jennie Hodgers served as a Union soldier for three years using the name Albert Cashier. Fighting with as much **valor** as the men, she faced enemy fire in more than 35 battles. Some women joined the troops looking for excitement and adventure. Others, like Malinda Blalock, wanted to be near their husbands. She enlisted in the Confederate Army posing as her husband's brother Samuel.

A surprising number of women risked punishment by acting as spies. One of the South's most **celebrated** spies was Rose O'Neal Greenhow. A popular hostess in Washington, D.C., she knew many Union government and military leaders. She learned all she could from them and then sent the information in code to Confederate officers. Sarah Edmonds, a spy for the North, was a master of disguises. One time she went to Confederate camps dressed as a peddler. She gathered information from the soldiers as she sold them her goods.

By the end of the Civil War, many women had gained confidence in their abilities and a sense of pride in having taken on new responsibilities. Whether they lived in the North or the South, these women had exhibited determination and courage in helping to support a cause in which they believed.



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