

Antietam Battlefield

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Antietam National Battlefield
P.O. Box 158
Sharpsburg, MD 21782



“Women in the Civil War” Lesson Plan

Introduction

Grade Level: 9th - 12th grade

Skills: Reading, writing, utilization and analysis of primary sources

Essential Question: How did women contribute to the war effort, both on the battlefield and at home?

Length: Two class periods

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Students will be able to name four roles that women had during the Civil War.
- Students will be able to name four contributions women made to the war effort.
- Students will be able to name three difficulties women faced during the Civil War.

National Education Standards

This lesson correlates to Common Core Standards, CCSS.ELA.RH. and National Center for History in Schools Standards. Era 5 Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877) Standard 1: The causes of the Civil War and Standard 2: The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people.

Procedure

This lesson plan can be used to help your students explore some of the important roles that women had during the Civil War. Students will read the following three pages “Women on the Battlefield and on the Home Front,” “Clara Barton at Antietam,” and a “Woman’s Recollection of Antietam.” Afterwards students will complete two writing assignments: 1) They will assume the role of a Civil War nurse and write a one page letter for a soldier to his family at home. 2) They will then write a diary entry from the viewpoint of a woman on the battlefield at Antietam.

Discussion Questions

How was Clara Barton’s role during and after the Civil War not typical of a 19th century women?

What were some of the difficulties women faced during the Civil War?

What were their contributions?

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Women on the Battlefield and on the Homefront

"I may be compelled to face danger, but never fear it, and while our soldiers can stand and fight, I can stand and feed and nurse them." Clara Barton

During the Civil War women played an important role both on the battlefield and on the home front. They helped after battles as nurses, ran businesses and farms and worked in munitions factories while their fathers and brothers were off at war, supported the war effort by contributing to organizations like the United States Sanitary Commission, and in rare cases even disguised themselves as soldiers and participated in battles.

Aid Organizations

Some women worked as volunteers for soldier aid organizations such as the United States Sanitary commission and the United States Christian Commission. They raised money and distributed food, supplies, and clothing to soldiers in need.

Civil War Soldiers

Approximately 400 women disguised themselves as soldiers during the Civil War. Sarah Emma Edmonds, a Canadian citizen, ran away from home, disguised herself as a man named Franklin Thompson, and served as a mail carrier, nurse, and spy for the Union Army. During the battle, Sarah helped the wounded. Another soldier was Mary Galloway who was wounded in the chest during the battle. A doctor discovered she was a woman and summoned Clara Barton, who helped tend to her wounds. Mary Galloway named her first daughter after Miss Barton.

Laundresses

One important job that women had in camp was that of laundress. According to the official army manual laundress had to be of good moral character. They made about \$40.00 a month and had the laborious job of washing the soldiers' uniforms by hand in a washtub with a scrub board and lye soap.

Munitions Workers

Many young girls and women in both the North and South worked in munitions factories during the war making ammunition. This dangerous hard work paid little money. On the same day as the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, the munitions factory at the Allegheny Arsenal in Pennsylvania exploded, killing over 70 people.

Nurses

After the Battle of Antietam, there were thousands of wounded soldiers. Temporary hospitals were made in local family's houses, barns, and churches. In many cases local women helped take care of these wounded soldiers; nursing them back to health, reading to them, feeding them, and writing letters home for them.

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Clara Barton at Antietam

"A ball has passed between my body and the right arm which supported him, cutting through his chest from shoulder to shoulder. There was no more to be done for him and I left him to his rest. I have never mended that hole in my sleeve. I wonder if a soldier ever does mend a bullet hole in his coat?" Clara Barton at Antietam

Arriving at the northern edge of the infamous "Cornfield" at about noon, Clara Barton watched as harried surgeons dressed the soldiers' wounds with cornhusks. Army medical supplies were far behind the fast-moving troops at Antietam Battlefield. Miss Barton handed over to grateful surgeons a wagonload of bandages and other medical supplies that she had personally collected over the past year.

Then Miss Barton got down to work. As bullets whizzed overhead and artillery boomed in the distance, Miss Barton cradled the heads of suffering soldiers, prepared food for them in a local farm house, and brought water to the wounded men. As she knelt down to give one man a drink, she felt her sleeve quiver. She looked down, noticed a bullet hole in her sleeve, and then discovered that the bullet had killed the man she was helping.

Undaunted, the unlikely figure in her bonnet, red bow and dark skirt moved on—and on, and on. Working non-stop until dark, Miss Barton comforted the men and assisted the surgeons with their work. When night fell, the surgeons were stymied again—this time by lack of light. But Miss Barton produced some lanterns from her wagon of supplies, and the thankful doctors went back to work.

Miss Barton's timely arrival at the battlefield was no easy task. Only the day before, her wagon was mired near the back of the army's massive supply line. Prodded by Miss Barton, her teamsters drove the mules all night to get closer to the front of the line.

Within a few days after the battle, the Confederates had retreated and wagons of extra medical supplies were rolling into Sharpsburg. Miss Barton collapsed from lack of sleep and a budding case of typhoid fever. She returned to Washington lying in a wagon, exhausted and delirious. She soon regained her strength and returned to the battlefields of the Civil War.

Dr. James Dunn, a surgeon at the Battle of Antietam said of Clara Barton: *"In my feeble estimation, General McClellan, with all his laurels, sinks into insignificance beside the true heroine of the age, the angel of the battlefield."*

Later in the war, she helped with the effort to identify 13,000 unknown Union dead at the horrific prisoner-of-war camp at Andersonville, Ga. This experience launched her on a nationwide campaign to identify soldiers missing during the Civil War. She published lists of names in newspapers and exchanged letters with veterans and soldiers' families.

After the Civil War, Miss Barton will help found the American Red Cross.

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“A Woman's Recollections of Antietam,” September, 1862

“As night drew near, whispers of a great battle to be fought the next day grew louder, and we shuddered at the prospect, for battles had come to mean to us, as they never had before, blood, wounds, and death.”

Mary Bedinger Mitchell was eleven years old at the time of the Battle of Antietam. She lived across the Potomac River from when the battle took place. Afterwards she helped care for the wounded. The following quotes will help you learn about the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam in her own words.

“Then there was the hunt for bandages. Every housekeeper ransacked her stores and brought forth things new and old. I saw one girl, in despair for a strip of cloth, look about helplessly, and then rip off the hem of her white petticoat. The doctors came up, by and by, or I suppose they did, for some amputating was done. Rough surgery, you may be sure. The women helped, holding the instruments and the basins, and trying to soothe or strengthen.

“They stood to their work very nobly; the emergency brought out all their strength to meet it. One girl who had been working very hard, helping the men on the sidewalks, and dressing wounds afterwards in a close, hot room, told me that at one time the sights and smells (these last were fearful) so overcame her that she could only stagger to the staircase, where she hung, half conscious, over the banisters, saying to herself, ‘Oh, I hope if I faint someone will kick me into a corner and let me lie there!’ She did not faint, but went back to her work in a few moments, and through the whole of what followed was one of the most indefatigable and useful. She was one of many; even children did their part.

“On our side of the river there were noise, confusion, dust; throngs of stragglers; horsemen galloping about; wagons blocking each other and teamsters wrangling, and a continued din of shouting swearing, and rumbling, in the midst of which men were dying, fresh wounded arriving, surgeons amputating limbs and dressing wounds, women going in and out with bandages, lint, medicines, food. An ever-present sense of anguish, dread, pity, and, I fear, hatred - these are my recollections of Antietam.

“On Thursday, the two armies lay idly facing each other, but we could not be idle. The wounded continued to arrive until the town was quite unable to hold all the disabled and suffering. They filled every building and overflowed into the country round, into farmhouses, barns, corn-cribs, cabins - wherever four walls and a roof were found together. Those able to travel were sent on to Winchester and other towns back from the river, but their departure seemed to make no appreciable difference. There were six churches and they were all full; the Odd Fellows' Hall, the Free Masons, the little Town Council room, the barn-like place known as the Drill Room, all the private houses after their capacity, the shops and empty buildings, the school-houses, - every inch of space, and yet the cry was for more room.