



A Culture Transformed – Women in the Civil War



Women, both North and South, saw their cultural and social structures turned upside down during the Civil War, and scholars generally agree the war was as important a watershed in the history of American women as it was in the history of the nation. Suddenly left behind to wait and worry when husbands, sons, and brothers were quick to join the military, women saw class lines and attitudes fall away, and found themselves rising to unfamiliar levels of responsibility and leading lives undreamed of in the past. The duties women undertook, the jobs they held, the privations they endured, and the heartbreak and sorrow they suffered, changed them at least as much as war transformed the country.

A Costly War



Civil War women were far from weak – they were lively, self-reliant, truculent, and brave. They stepped to the forefront to take the place of absent men, supporting families by running farms and businesses, or taking paid employment outside the home. Some went even further, and fought for their countries directly or indirectly, doing their best to defend their homes and property against marauding forces.

Ladies of the South were forced to work their plantations and farms with the help of only the very elderly or very young. And to make matters worse, these rural holdings often ran short of tools and implements, as items were quickly requisitioned by the army. The burdens and privations of the war fell heavily on these women, and those who refused to leave their property in spite of reiterated warnings, soon found themselves either in the middle of battle, or behind enemy lines.

Hoping to protect their property, these women found instead that soldiers from both sides commandeered anything they could carry. And what was not taken, was most often destroyed to keep it out of enemy hands. Southern women were at the epicenter of a “total war,” such as had never been seen before. They soon discovered that management and cultivation of plantations and farms entailed hard work and long days, especially when added to their usual household duties. Some did derive satisfaction from the responsibility of building a home, caring for livestock, clearing land, and raising the family’s food.

But, it was less the fact of hard work that broke a woman’s spirit, than the working of long hours under serious handicaps and having little to

show for it. And in the end, many simply gave up the struggle, and attempted to sustain their families on paltry relief funds handed out by some state governments. Having been left to fend for themselves, many women began to question the wisdom of waging a war proving so costly in so many ways.

One such Southerner was Kate Stone, living with her widowed mother on a large cotton plantation called Brokenburn. Located thirty miles northwest of Vicksburg, in Madison Parish, Louisiana, her home seemed far removed from the horrors of war. Initially viewing the conflict as a romantic adventure of dashing young officers in splendid uniforms going off to battle, Kate’s optimism turned to fierce hatred of the enemy when the struggle was brought close to her Louisiana home in 1862.

Through this turmoil, and the family’s eventual exile in Texas, Kate recorded the events and attitudes of a people whose determination got them through a time that brought shortages, defeat, death, and the return to a devastated homeland to face the struggle against poverty after the war ended. Soon after the surrender of Vicksburg in July 1863, Kate’s diary simply stated,

*“We must bear our losses as best we can.
Nothing is left but to endure.”*

Many Southern women in the cities sought work for pay. But because of the region’s blighted agricultural economy and lack of industry, their opportunities were seriously limited. Some served as nurses and teachers, positions normally held by men, and others found work as clerks for the Confederate government – jobs unfortunately surrendered with Lee’s army in 1865.



Kate Stone

No Longer a Life of Ease



Northern women, who rarely had to face the enemy on their doorstep, also found drastic changes taking place in their lives. The Northern industrial machine, deprived of male labor, offered more women employment as factory workers, in addition to positions in hospitals and schools. And, unlike their Southern counterparts, jobs as civil servants did not disappear at war's end, and women became a permanent presence in the Federal government.

Many women, both North and South, took on direct roles in the war. Though not as numerous as those who shouldered the responsibility of maintaining the family home, their courage and determination was no less amazing, as they chose to serve as soldiers, couriers or spies for both armies. As a penalty of war, however, these women soon learned that their sex did not make them immune to punishment. Having stepped outside their traditional roles, they were shocked and outraged to discover themselves no longer treated as ladies, particularly when their activities led to arrest and confinement by both governments.

Still, even as the bitter nature of war became clear, women expected that they would be accorded the respect and gentle treatment that had been theirs in peacetime. No wonder then, that they were continually outraged by the behavior of Yankee and Confederate troops, such as were the incredulous ladies of Vicksburg when Federal forces continued their bombardment of the city in spite of the presence of the fairer sex.

As the Union army pushed the Southerners back toward Vicksburg, Lt. General John C. Pemberton ordered all non-combatants to leave the city. But many, in particular the women, refused to go. They later suffered for their decision, when General U.S. Grant refused a request to let women and children be escorted from the city once he had surrounded the town. Civilians of Vicksburg experienced war in all its horrors during the grueling 47-day siege.

For those ladies trapped in the city, daily existence quickly went from a life of ease and abundance to one of scarcity and near-starvation, as Grant tightened his stranglehold. Life translated into existence underground, as townspeople and soldiers alike dug deep into the loess hills.

"We are all caught in a rat-hole..."

were Vicksburg citizen Emma Balfour's despairing words.

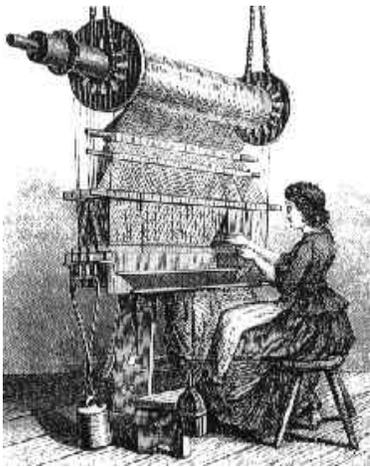


Emma Balfour

Still, the women of Vicksburg remained defiant, and stood as inspiration to the rapidly deteriorating hopes of the Confederate troops, as so forcefully stated by Emma Balfour,

"The general impression is that they fire at this city, in that way thinking that they will wear out the women and children and sick, and Gen. Pemberton will be impatient to surrender the place on that account, but they little know the spirit of the Vicksburg women and children if they expect this."

These women contributed greatly to the defense of the city and welfare of the troops, preparing hospital supplies, making rifle cartridges, and tending to the wounded and sick, believing they would yet triumph over the enemy. And though, in the end, they lost most everything but life itself and the will to survive, the women of Vicksburg did endure, through the ravages of war, the humiliation of occupation, and the pain of Reconstruction. Their determination is unmistakable in the expressions of these anonymous faces photographed following the surrender of the city.



They Fought As Men



Pauline Cushman



Frances Clayton

Women also played a role directly on the battle lines, as there are numerous recorded instances where women disguised themselves as men and enlisted in the armies. Many were devoted wives and sweethearts who followed their loved ones into the ranks, but many had reasons for fighting that mirrored those of men – patriotism, honor, heritage, and a desire for excitement and adventure that they imagined the life of a soldier

would bring. It is estimated that approximately 400 women served as soldiers in both armies, and the Vicksburg Campaign was no exception.



Sarah Edmonds



Loreta Velazquez

Albert D.J. Cashier



Jennie Hodgers –
'Albert D.J. Cashire'

Private Albert D.J. Cashier, an Ireland native born Jennie Hodgers, mustered into the 95th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, Company G, in August 1862. Serving faithfully for three years, including during the Vicksburg Campaign, Private Cashier was known as a good and brave soldier, admired for 'his' heroic fighting. Often selected for foraging and skirmishing duties by commanding officers, Albert maintained a reputation as a hardworking soldier. Exploits included capture at a Confederate outpost during reconnaissance around Vicksburg, only to escape by seizing a gun from one of the guards, knocking him down, and outrunning the others. Fellow soldiers also recalled Cashier's climbing to the top of their fieldworks to taunt the enemy into showing himself, and exposure to sniper fire while climbing a tall tree to re-attach the Union flag that was shot down by the enemy.

Maintaining the disguise after the war, Albert's true identity was not discovered until 1911, following treatment for a broken leg suffered in an

automobile mishap. His/her secret was guarded by doctors and comrades until 1913, when after years of deteriorating health, Albert/Jennie was judged insane, and sent to the Women's Ward of the State Hospital for the Insane in Illinois. Here, she was forced to wear a dress for the first time in over fifty years, resulting in tragic consequences. A frail, seventy-year-old, who did not know how to walk in such apparel, Jennie tripped, fell, and broke her hip. Never recovering from this injury, she spent most of the rest of her life confined to bed. Upon discovery of her true gender, the U.S. Pension Bureau began an investigation into whether the soldier known as Albert Cashier had defrauded the government with his pension claim. Outraged comrades of the 95th Illinois, former employers, and residents of Saunemin, IL, where Cashier had settled after the war, rallied around the invalided veteran. Through their depositions, the Bureau was convinced of Cashier's identity, determining no fraud was involved, and continued the veteran's pension for service rendered during the Civil War.

James Strong



Almeda Summer
Butler Hart –
'James Strong'

Private Albert Cashier may not have been the only woman soldier to fight with Union troops at Vicksburg. Almeda Summer Butler Hart, fighting as James Strong, penned the following letter from on board the transport vessel Westmorland, moored in the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg.

Headquarters on board the Boat Westmorland near Vicksburg...

"We are within 4 miles of Vicksburg and are going to land and attack this evening. I expect before night comes again some of our numbers will be killed. They are making all preparations for a battle. This morning the enemy is seen in large numbers on every side but Dear Mother do not let this startle you in the least for we may live to see you again. Henry is quite well now but he may fall but if the troops all have as much courage as they do now appear to have we will in all probability gain the day. We are fifty thousand strong and well armed besides 4 thousand cavalry and 40 iron clad gun boats and if God is willing we will return safe again.

"Mother, I am in more eminent danger than Henry is for I am Brigadier General Stuart's orderly mounted. I have to carry messages from one part of the battle to another. You would be surprised if you were to see me for I have turned from Henry Hart's wife to a nice young man and I will sign my name so you can see who I am but Henry is here with me. He

is Brigade Blacksmith. I shall be away from him some of the time but most of the time after the battle is over I will be with him. All women are prohibited from going. Dear Mother I will write to you again after the engagement is over. I will take good care of myself. I have got 2 good braces of pistols and a good sabre and I think that I can defend myself but we are going to have a big battle. I will write to you again soon. I must close for I have orders to carry from one point to another and they are nearly ready to carry on. Dear Mother goodbye till the pen speaks again. I will now close by wishing you a good day. We had a good Christmas Dinner yesterday. How did you spend it? Write soon to James Strong for that is my name now Dear Mother. Henry sends his love to you and bids you good day.

*"Direct to James Strong
Brigadier General Commanding, Stuart Brigade
Headquarters near Vicksburg, Mississippi.*

"I will have you direct to Memphis, Tennessee for we have not got Vicksburg yet. Direct to James Strong, Memphis, Tenn. Care of Brigadier General Stuart Commanding 4 Brigade 2 Division, Sherman's Army Corps.

"Write soon mind the direction."

James Strong to Mother

Women in Grey



Camp Morton

Among the Southern troops who marched from Vicksburg following its surrender, was Ellen Levasay, a private in the 3d Missouri Cavalry. Sent to either the Gratiot or Myrtle Street Prison in St. Louis, MO, she was transferred to Camp Morton, IN, on August 1, 1863, arriving on August 14.

A soldier named William Levasay, also of the 3d Missouri Cavalry, arrived at Camp Morton the same day – spouse, brother, or cousin is unknown – but most probably he was related to Ellen.

William immediately renounced the Confederacy and enlisted in a Union regiment. Ellen, however, remained a prisoner at Camp Morton for eight months. After a winter in the overcrowded facility, living in unheated, ramshackle buildings intended for livestock at what was originally the Indiana State Fairgrounds, Ellen Levasay apparently could not tolerate being held prisoner any longer. On April 19, 1864, she took the oath of allegiance to the United States, and was freed.

A New Era Begins



Many of the new wartime opportunities for American women disappeared with the Civil War's end in 1865. Returning men, victorious or defeated, expected their women to resume their antebellum lives without complaint. Widows and wives of disabled soldiers, who desperately needed to keep their paying jobs, found themselves forced out in favor of returning male veterans. Politicians who had started the war did little or nothing to alleviate the troubles of those women and families whose men had borne the brunt of the fighting, and most women resented the fact that their sacrifices and contributions were easily dismissed and forgotten. Still others specifically missed the excitement the war had brought.

These factors, along with numerous others, most likely contributed to the unexpected politicization of American women following the Civil War. Never the same after the four years of conflict, and realizing that silent partnerships and quiet sacrifices would not get them the rights and privileges they craved, women of the post-war era soon learned to make themselves heard, a fact well evidenced by the growing strength of the suffrage and temperance movements of the late 19th- and early 20th centuries. A strength that has continued to grow over the succeeding years.



Suffrage Parade – ca. 1912



Sixty-sixth Congress of the United States of America;

At the First Session,

Begun and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the nineteenth day of May, one thousand nine hundred and nineteen.

JOINT RESOLUTION

Proposing an amendment to the Constitution extending the right of suffrage to women.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled (two-thirds of each House concurring therein), That the following article is proposed as an amendment to the Constitution, which shall be valid to all intents and purposes as part of the Constitution when ratified by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several States.

"ARTICLE ————

"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

"Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

F. H. Lilette

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Thos. A. Marshall

Vice President of the United States and
President of the Senate.