

**The Women of the North:  
Contributions of Northern Women on the Homefront and on the Battlefield during  
the American Civil War**

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## **Abstract**

During the American Civil War, the roles and responsibilities of women were shifting. The previous expectations of women were being greatly challenged due to the absence of their husbands and sons in the household. For the sake of themselves and their family's survival, it was imperative that women overcome the obstacles which were faced daily. Women not only had to continue with their prior roles, but also learn new responsibilities and adjust accordingly to live. Women were tested on their abilities to maintain a family without a husband. Along with raising the families, they had to support their soldiers as well. This paper examines the many roles Northern women kept to, literally and figuratively, feed the spirit of the Union Army: how farming families, led by women, were able to sustain and feed the Northern Union army, how manufacturers were able to keep the Union soldiers clothed and armed, and how nurses cared for and risked their lives for the sake of the troops. The actions made by Northern Women, whether it be on the home front or on the battlefield, significantly contributed to the success of the Union Army during the American Civil War. Without their help, the Union Army would have lost the war.

## Historiography

Regarding the topic of the Civil War, specifically the contributions made by Northern women to support the Union army, the amount of sources on the topic was sufficient. There were plenty of secondary sources that helped paint a picture of women and their responsibilities during the years of 1861 to 1865. Two historians that discuss Northern women in the Civil War were Judith Giesberg and Matthew Gallman. These two managed to incorporate the perspective of life for Northern women and life of the general public during the Civil War.

Judith Geisberg, author of *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*, examined the lives of the working-class women of the North. She wrote about the struggles of working-class women having to manage the farms after their husbands and sons left for battle. Giesberg also includes the other roles women took up including; working in munition factories, making uniforms, and caring for the injured soldiers. She argues that as women became more active in their new opportunities, this began to open doors to civil movements and political activists. These women began writing letters, signing petitions, and confronting civilian and military officials about the gender inequalities they were facing. Geisberg writes about women who fought against early forms of societal segregation in the North and demanded proper living wages, along with safer working environments. Giesberg argues that Northern women that were amidst the Civil War conflict, rather than stand idle, went ahead to make a difference for the good of the Union Army. Her goal is to create a reinterpretation of the Civil War era

and how these events reshaped the idea of race and gender, along with the changes to the American working-class family.

Matthew Gallman focuses more on Northern society during the Civil War and gives an overview of the transformation of the North due to the war itself. He examines the lives of individuals, which helps him construct the happenings of the Northern life during the years of 1861 to 1865. He uses strong comparison between the North and South regarding economics, military tactics, patriotism, and overall successes and failures of each army. In comparison to Northern to Southern women, Gallman writes on their differences in contributions for supporting either the Confederate or Union Armies. Gallman uses a vast number of primary sources written throughout the years of the war, society during the war, and local topics that pertain to the Civil War. He takes an in depth look on the differences between the successes and failures of the Northern and Southern armies. He argues that the South, despite their countless faming plantations, the North was far more successful in terms of crop production and output. The North also had an advantage in number of immigrants comparative to the number of slaves in the South, which added to their soldier count. When it came to addressing the economic might of the North, he emphasized the importance of women. The North's economic might grew and began to transform during the Civil War. Textile along with food production all contributed to the Northern victory. Gallman makes a point that women played a crucial role in the Northern US economy, filling the spots on the farm and in the factories that were originally held by men. He writes about the deplorable treatment of women in the Northern factories and how that eventually led reformers in manufacturing to push for better working conditions.

Although Gallman's focus wasn't primarily on women during the Civil War, he introduced many other topics like patriotism, civil activism, and economic production which was led strongly by women. Gallman's work did not focus primarily on the actions made by women, luckily Geisberg was able to make up for it in her book. Gallman was a great tool and guideline for the areas that are focused in this paper. He was able to draw on important aspects of the war that are sometimes forgotten. Giesberg was able to bring in the contributions made by women, that Gallman neglected to mention, but combining their two works made it possible to start introducing women in to the Civil War scene. The topic of women and the Civil War is growing and has caught the attention of many historians. Recent historians like Marianne Monson and her recent book, *Women of the Blue and Gray: True Stories of Mothers, Medics, Soldiers, and Spies of the Civil War*, is a perfect example of authors shedding light onto a history that is rarely discussed. Monson creates thematic chapters that highlight the stories of female individuals during the Civil War. These biographies are told through an entertaining, along with educational, persona of the contributions made by Northern and Southern women. Unlike Gallman and Giesberg, these chapters cover a greater variety of topics that include: cross-dressing women who served as soldiers, medical care, and the experiences of enslaved people. Her writing made it clear that women had a strong and helpful impact on the Civil War.

## Introduction

“Tell me if he is dead!” These were the heart wrenching words of Cordelia Perrine Harvey concerning the well-being of her husband, Governor Louis Harvey of Wisconsin.<sup>1</sup> On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1862 in Madison, Wisconsin, Cordelia received news any wife during the Civil War dreaded hearing; the death of a loved one. Her husband was away on government business and tragically drowned in the Tennessee River. Men were able to retrieve his body and return it for a proper service and burial in Madison’s Forest Hill Cemetery.<sup>2</sup>

Widowed at age thirty-seven, with no children to occupy her time, many of Cordelia’s friends worried for her well-being. They were adamant that Cordelia take up a hobby or engage in a “distraction” to avoid the chances of her from falling into a hole of despair. Many suggested that she open up a school for young ladies or help with the ill and injured in the hospitals. The options given to Cordelia were ones that were deemed appropriate for women to participate in during this time. Typically, these roles that women would partake in were not dangerous. The suggestions offered to Cordelia were taken with gratitude, but she had other intentions. Cordelia found great interest in the Western Sanitary Commission in St. Louis and wanted to specifically help Wisconsin soldiers in the Union Army. The Western Sanitary Commission was a private agency based in St. Louis that rivaled the larger US Sanitary Commission. Its purpose was to

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<sup>1</sup> *Janesville Daily Gazette*, April 22, 1862, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, Anne Beiser. “Wisconsin’s Reluctant Heroine: Cordelia Perrine Harvey.” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 95, no. 2 (2011), 5.

help the US Army deal with sick and wounded soldiers. Cordelia Harvey wrote a request to the new Governor of Wisconsin, Edward Solomon, to become the next appointed Wisconsin's sanitary agent. Governor Solomon was in support of her demands and sent Cordelia down to St. Louis. Her arrival in St. Louis was the beginning of her legacy.



*Figure 1: Wisconsin's Nightingale, Cordelia Harvey*

Cordelia Harvey was only one of the many women who wanted to make a difference for her country. She, like so many other women, felt an obligation to the Union army. Many women worked relentlessly and risked their lives for the greater good. Women were not only accepting of the new and difficult challenges ahead, they were devoted and successful. The Civil War was a gruesome, but without the continuous

effort from Northern women, the Union Army would not have been as successful as they were. Women were able to feed and clothe the soldiers, along with helping the wounded at camp hospitals. The Northern women of the United States contributed to more than just food and clothing to the soldiers, they gave them a strong will to fight and added to their patriotism. Thanks to the actions of the Northern farmers, manufacturers, and nurses, the Union would not have been victorious over the Confederate South.

### **The Farmers**

During the Civil War, familial structures and roles, were going through drastic changes. With the draft and removal of fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons, many women realized it was their responsibility to not only continue their tasks, but also the tasks of those that left. As Giesberg noted, “When a husband left for war, women faced an altered set of domestic circumstances.”<sup>3</sup>

Many families within North America lived on farms. . In the 1830s, many Wisconsin immigrants were eager to find prosperous farm sites.<sup>4</sup> The influx of German and French immigrants increased by the decade, nearly 5,000 farms a year were founded in Wisconsin by the 1840s.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that over half of the soldiers in the US Army were farm laborers or farmers.<sup>6</sup> When the men left the farms to fight in the Civil War,

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<sup>3</sup> Giesberg, Judith. (2012). *Army at Home*. Chapel Hill: Univ Of North Carolina Pr., 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Farming and Industry*. Madison, WI. 2018. Wisconsin Historical Society, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Giesberg, J. (2012). *Army at home*. Chapel Hill: Univ Of North Carolina Pr., 21.

women were responsible for taking over their roles of plowing, planting and harvesting. Even with the significant loss in labor force, regarding the male participants, the “agricultural output remained high and employment in agriculture constant.”<sup>7</sup> Annual reports made by the commissioner of agriculture in 1863 stated, “Although the year just closed has been a year of war on the part of the republic over a wider field and on a grander scale than any recorded in history ... strange as it may appear, the great interests of agriculture have not materially suffered in the loyal states.”<sup>8</sup> The commissioner, Isaac Newton, made no mention of the laborious efforts made by women that kept the strong output of crops consistent. According to the findings of Giesberg, “The expert of agricultural affairs remained silent about women’s farm work.”<sup>9</sup> There were some cases in which families could afford to hire extra workers for the farms, but this was rare since many farming families could not afford these expenses. As a result, women and their children had to work together to survive while managing the farm.

Contrary to the lack of acknowledgment from Newton, Geisberg mentions the work of Mary Livermore who was, at the time, chair of the Chicago Branch of the United States Sanitary Commission. Livermore was highly impressed with the relentless efforts made by the farming women, “She [Livermore] was shocked when she first saw women engaged in such strenuous work ... nonetheless, once she ‘observed how skillfully they

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<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin State Agricultural Society. *Transactions of the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society: Together with ... Report of Annual Convention*, 1860, C.1 V.6 1860, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Giesberg., 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 18.

drove the horses round and round the wheatfield.”<sup>10</sup> Livermore was proud and appreciative of the courage and strength shown through the efforts of the Northern women. She claims that women are doing just as much at home, as men are on the battlefields, “we’re [women] are serving the country just as much here in the harvest-field as our boys on the battle-field.”<sup>11</sup> Livermore appreciates and acknowledges the actions done by women, because she is a woman who actively contributed to the Union Army. Women at this time had to adjust accordingly to the changes at hand. Contrary to the idea of gender ‘enlightenment,’ specifically with the temporary integration of male into female roles, many women were upset with the imbalance of domestic traditions in the household. Women felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities at hand and were known to write their complaints to their husbands. Regardless of their anxieties, women had to become flexible with managing all their previous responsibilities on top of the new. It was a struggle for women to prioritize all their tasks equally. Their greatest priority was to make sure that families were being fed. Giesberg writes, “women had to take considerable time away from other tasks – such as childcare and commodity production – to focus on planting and tending the fields.”<sup>12</sup> Children were not neglected by their mothers due to their extensive responsibilities, but rather helped around the house and farm. Prior to the Civil War, children helped around the household with chores that were assigned by their parents. When the husbands left, the mothers assigned tasks for her

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Giesberg., 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 25.

children to do such as cleaning out the stables, caring for the livestock, and bringing in the crop.<sup>13</sup>

Time management was a skill that was critical to the success of the farm and survival of the family. When it comes to growing, tending, and harvesting crops timing is crucial. Any mistake in those activities could have cost them and their children's livelihood. Luckily many women were able to communicate with their husbands, via letters, which acted as a guidebook to running the farm. "Women sought advice from their husbands on planting and harvesting."<sup>14</sup> From the helpful guidance of their husbands, women would report the status of crops, along with purchases and sales made with their livestock. These letters gave soldiers an opportunity to focus on something other than the war. Many women were brutally honest with their husbands regarding their new lifestyle. Wives wrote of, "extensive and physically demanding work they performed ... they filled their letters with evidence of emotional and physical stress resulting from the prolonged absence of their husbands."<sup>15</sup>

Letters also communicated the heartfelt messages to and from family members, along with spouses. Some letters contained exciting accomplishments, while others contained the many hardships of war, injury, disease, and death. Many family members were left uninformed on the statuses of their loved ones. Wives, especially, had tremendous amount of stress when it came to hearing about the conditions of their husbands. Many times, the wives had updates on their loved ones in the local newspaper.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Giesberg., 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

“Sarah Chapin of Michigan read in a local newspaper that her husband had been wounded.”<sup>16</sup> Chapin did not hear word about her husband’s condition for over a month. She expressed mental exhaustion saying, “It seems to me sometimes as though I cannot possibly wait much longer without knowing...”<sup>17</sup> Later reports stated that her husband was alive but dying in a hospital in Nashville. “She ached to be by her husband’s side but had to be content with regular letters back and forth.”<sup>18</sup> Sarah Chapin’s circumstances resonated with many families of soldiers.

Newspapers brought the news of the battlefield back home for many families. For Sarah Chapin it brought devastating news, but important information nonetheless. Newspapers also brought sense of community to rural towns. Examining the state of Wisconsin, specifically the city of Eau Claire, the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* writes about the happenings of the war for its citizens. The newspaper articles include weekly updates of the Civil War, specifically the ongoings in the hospital, those being transferred and deaths of soldiers. One of the pieces titled *Army Correspondence*, dated in February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1865 at Camp Randall in Madison wrote, “We are to have quite a change at Camp and Harvey hospitals today. Most of the wounded and some of the permanent invalids are to be transferred to the Prairie du Chien Hospital.”<sup>19</sup> The segment continues with the steps needed to make more room for injured soldiers coming from Washington. Camp

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Gallman. *The North Fights the Civil War : The Home Front*. American Ways Series. Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1994, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, 20 February, 1865, 2.

Randall was renowned for their medical treatments and facility, compared to other hospitals in the state. The *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* also includes descriptors such as the reported weather on the battlefield, along with visitors of soldiers, and how the soldiers occupy themselves during their free time. Relating to the use of expression in letters, many newspaper articles were used as a platform for emotion of the Eau Claire citizens and their opinions of the war. Many women utilized this and were able to bond over similar experiences with one another. Articles also included volunteer positions for women, such as seamstresses, down in the Madison area. The local newspapers were a way for citizens to build community with one another and keep the town posted on the events of the war. The letters and newspapers gave many historians powerful insight to the various successes and struggles of Northern families during the Civil War.

Many women were able to keep their household sustained, but in some cases, there was major struggle within families without the financial help of their husbands or other male figures. Women and families in these circumstances would reach out to their state representatives via letters. They would ask for any financial compensation since a lot of their husband's payments were rarely sent home on time. There are personal accounts of wives writing to the state governors, one comes from Giesberg's work about Esther Jane Campman from Pennsylvania. She writes to the state governor, Andrew Curtin, about her hard labors which have caused her to become ill. Campman worries for the sake of her children and herself in how she is going to be able to provide for her children. "I truly hope you will Do something four me,' she asked Governor Curtin."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Giesberg., 19.

Campman had no family or friends to turn to, so she then applied to the county for relief money offered to families of soldiers. Many struggling families turned to the government for support, but a lot of times they were denied any funds. Sadly, for Campman like so many, her application for aid was denied.<sup>21</sup>

Families in Northern rural communities dealt with many struggles, but their resilience and endless effort not only kept them alive, but also the soldiers on the battlefield. The women faced extreme adversity throughout the years of the Civil War. Their struggles were overcome thanks to their determination to provide for their loved ones, through the extreme adjustments of everyday life and relentless hard work. Their efforts are remembered through letters, articles, and loved ones.

### **The Industrials and Activists**

During the Civil War era, many doors of occupational opportunity opened for women. Majority of women, but not all, were immersed with various choices of helping with the war efforts, rather than just raising and harvesting crops. For Northern women, some options included factory workers and nurses. Many women were able to work together to aid in supplying troops with food, money, clothing and medical supplies. The roles of women were directly affected by the progression of the war. Before the war began, Northern women were already exposed to various industries that involved the production of clothing and textiles. As the war progressed, women began to take on

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Giesberg., 19.

other jobs in the field along with civil service.<sup>22</sup> The number of women working in industries began to increase, “as men entered the Union army, women’s proportion of the manufacturing work force went from one-fourth to one-third.”<sup>23</sup> These new opportunities allowed women to have a stronger sense of purpose than ever before. Although they weren’t soldiers, like the men on the frontlines, the dangers within their occupations were still present.

Many women worked in positions within arsenal factories, where they would assemble weaponry for the Union soldiers. One of the larger factories was found in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, which employed over 158 workers. Before the war began, it was the societal norm for urban working-class families to live on traditional values. Men were the ones with the jobs, while women “kept order in the home and maintained appearances in the neighborhood, helping realize the family’s claim to respectability and improving men’s employment options.”<sup>24</sup> Employment patterns during the war fit well within the traditions of working-class regarding women moving in and out of the workforce to meet the fiscal needs of the family when the time came. The reason many women were granted positions at the arsenal was because their predecessors were their husbands or fathers. Particularly the Allegheny arsenal, employment of their workers leaned to be more of a family affair. “Men who were held positions at the arsenal

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<sup>22</sup> “Civil War: Women in the North.” Washington State University.  
[http://digitalexhibits.wsulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/civilwar/women---civilians/women-in-the-north#\\_ftn1](http://digitalexhibits.wsulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/civilwar/women---civilians/women-in-the-north#_ftn1).  
(accessed October, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Giesberg., 73.

arranged positions for their daughters and wives.”<sup>25</sup> The arsenal wages were high compared to other jobs. One arsenal, that was operated by the US Army, which was located in Watertown, Massachusetts paid their workers \$14 to \$25 a month.<sup>26</sup> These salaries made the arsenal job more desirable over the textile manufacturing jobs. These wages helped fill the gap of inadequate soldier payments to the families back home, “Soldier wages were notoriously unreliable and, with wartime inflation, often woefully inadequate to support their families.”<sup>27</sup> The tasks of the women working in the arsenal was to assemble paper cartridges. This demanded a steady head to carefully fill thin paper tubes with gunpowder. Once filled, the women would add another paper tube containing a bullet. The final step was sealing the cartridge with a series of complicated folds at the end. Being a cartridge maker was simple, but the task needed to be completed with absolute care.<sup>28</sup> The dangers of severe accidents occurring in an arsenal were not likely, but possible.

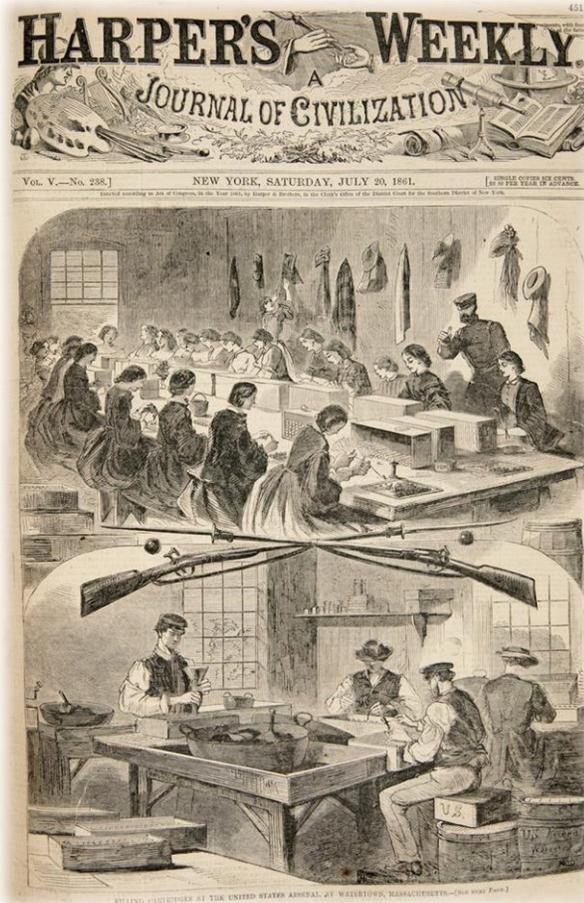
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<sup>25</sup> Judith Giesberg., 72.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>28</sup> Maggie McClean. “Civil War Women in the Arsenals.” Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/allegheny-arsenal-explosion/>. (accessed October 12 2018).



*Figure 2: Illustrated cover on the front of Harpers Weekly on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1861.*

On September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1862 at the arsenal in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, one of the greatest tragedies occurred within the urban women workers community. At around two o'clock in the afternoon, a series of explosions ripped through the city's arsenal which could be heard all the way to Pittsburgh. People around the area believed that it was a Confederate invasion. As more bursts of explosions continued, people began to gather around the source of the noise and soon realized the arsenal was on fire. Residents who were witnessing the event described it as a haunting scene. "Girls ran screaming in terror and agony from the building with their clothes on fire and their faces blackened and

unrecognizable.”<sup>29</sup> As the building continued to burn women were spotted jumping from windows to escape the flames, while others were being trampled by panicked women trying to run from the building. A personal account from one of the witnesses, named Mary Jane Black, stated, “two girls behind me; they were on fire; their faces were burning and blood running from them. I pulled the clothes off one of them; while I was doing this, the other one ran up and begged me to cover her.”<sup>30</sup> The exploding cartridges tore apart the women’s bodies as they were thrown from the blasts. Traces of their body parts were found in the streets, dangling from surrounding trees, and floating in the Allegheny River.

It was a horrendous event that rippled a shock throughout the North. The death of the women workers was known as one of the greatest sacrifices made by the “noble Union girls.” This incident raised controversy if women should be allowed in the working scene, along with national identity and gender. “Rumors and gossip swirled around promiscuous workplaces, expressing contemporary fears of women who were out of place.”<sup>31</sup> The misconceptions of women and how they were not suitable for the workplace angered many in the community. Another rumor that upset women was their loyalty to their country and its soldiers. Women began to come together, discuss and fight against the rumors that they faced. Many women war workers prepared petitions that addressed the unfair treatment.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Judith Giesberg., 68.

<sup>30</sup> “The Arsenal Catastrophe: Coroner’s Investigation,” *Pittsburgh Post*, September 20, 1862, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Giesberg., 70.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Giesberg., 70.

The Northern public opinion about where female loyalties lied was greatly shaped because of the rebellious actions made by Southern women towards the US Army occupation.<sup>33</sup> Northern women made considerable effort to prove their loyalties to their country and its soldiers. One source that helped portray the strong loyalties of the North was using newspapers, “newspapers helped by printing stories ridiculing women’s loyalty to the Confederacy and portraying southern gender relations as degenerate.”<sup>34</sup> *Harper’s Weekly* and *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* published stories of sentimental mothers and their support of their sons in the war. The writings praised women for supporting men’s enlistment, often connecting similar actions to that of the revolutionary mothers.<sup>35</sup> Mothers specifically were a link to the private and public realms that helped personalize the nation. It helped paint a picture of mothers at home;

the good mother seated at the window from which floats the household flag, and watching intently the passing regiment, and waving her handkerchief to some friend or kinsman ... The sight of her and her daughters brings the whole country nearer to us, and the great continent seems to rise before us in living personality, and to speak with her voice, and to glow with our affections. The nation seems to live in the person of its queen.<sup>36</sup>

Excerpts such as these could be read across the country but were heavily found in the Northern portion of the United States. Women were inspired and began forming civil activist groups to prove their patriotism to their country. In 1863, one group of urban

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Giesberg., 123.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Alice Fahs. "The Feminized Civil War: Gender, Northern Popular Literature, and the Memory of the War, 1861-1900." *Journal Of American History* 85, no. 4 (1999): 1461-494., 1465.

<sup>36</sup> “The Home and the Flag,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. 26 April 1863, 664.

women began the National Women's Loyal League in New York. Their targeted goal was to "rally and organize women's political loyalties and enlist them in combating disaffection sentiments in their communities."<sup>37</sup> The members also acted as abolitionists for slavery, attacking southern women and their beliefs in condoning this system. Their words were heard through their organization's pamphlet, which acted like a weekly newspaper.<sup>38</sup> These pamphlets encouraged women to stand up for what is right, along with defining what it meant to be loyal or disloyal to one's country.

Northern women in urban cities did not experience the same type of risk like their men on the battlefield, regardless women such as those that worked in the Allegheny arsenal sacrificed their lives just like many soldiers. The case in Allegheny was extreme but many women faced other types of hardships. Their struggles lied within financially providing for their families. They sought out job opportunities in arsenals and began civil activist groups to have their voices heard. The Civil War brought new opportunities for women in the workforce, but also many obstacles. They had to prove their loyalties to their country and countrymen through their work and citizenry. The urban women workers of the North were persistent and strong when it came to the relentless challenges faced.

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<sup>37</sup> Giesberg, J. (2012). *Army at home*. Chapel Hill: Univ Of North Carolina Pr., 124.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Nurses

Along with farmers, factory workers, and civil rights activists during the Civil War, many women joined the Army Nursing Service. The superintendent of the Union Army nursing service was Dorothea Dix.<sup>39</sup> Dix organized hundreds of women volunteers into a nursing corps, established and managed hospitals, along with raising money for medical equipment. Any woman that was interested in becoming a Union nurse, had to meet the strict qualifications of Dix. Many women at the time were dealing with stereotypes directed at their gender, which gave the misconception of being underqualified. Women at the time were house keepers, who were meek and docile, in other words unfit to be on or any part of the war. Dix was aware of this and made it a top priority to hire women that were not “flighty and marriage-minded young women, only accepting applicants who were plain looking and more than 30 years old.”<sup>40</sup> Dix wanted her nurses to be dressed plainly almost to repulsion to avoid any personal attractions. Her nurses were expected to cook various kinds of low diet meals and avoid any dress that would draw attention to themselves. Any association with surgeons or patients was strictly forbidden. Dorothea Dix was known to be a sensitive and selfless person but overall her nurses feared her.

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<sup>39</sup>Patricia D’Antonio. “Nurses in War.” *The Lancet*. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(02\)11798-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(02)11798-3/fulltext). (accessed October 28, 2018.)

<sup>40</sup> Maggle Maclean. “Dorothea Dix.” *Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877*. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/dorothea-dix/>. (accessed October 28, 2018.)

“People called her ‘Dragon Dix’ because of her strict rules concerning the appearance and behavior of the Union army nurses.”<sup>41</sup>

During this time, the creation of the United States Sanitary Commission was established in 1861. The purpose of this organization was to monitor the camps in the field, routinely check the quality of food and the maintaining the appropriate amount of medical supplies and clothing for the troops. The sole purpose was to advise officials, like nurses, in proper forms of hygiene and sanitation. The amount of money used to keep up with the demand for supplies for the Union army totaled \$15 million. Women were encouraged to become nurses because of their “mother-like” instincts to care and nurture the ill and wounded.

Nurses came from all different places and were from all levels of society.<sup>42</sup> Thousands of women applied and offered themselves to become part of the nursing organization, but many were rejected because of their youth. For the women that were chosen by Superintendent of Nurses and then commissioned, the pay was \$12 per month. Many hired women were lacking in any practical training, but some were able to use previous hospital experience to their advantage. It has been noted by historians that some Union nurses outperformed male nurses, “While these were often women of less refinement, they frequently managed the male nurses better than did those from the higher ranks of society.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Maggle Maclean. “Dorothea Dix.” *Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877*. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/dorothea-dix/>. (accessed October 28, 2018.)

<sup>42</sup> Oberly, James W. “*The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted. Volume IV. Defending the Union: The Civil War and the Sanitary Commission, 1861-1863* (review).” *Civil War History* 33, no. 2 (1987): 182-84.

<sup>43</sup> Oates, Louise. “Civil War Nurses.” *AJN, American Journal of Nursing* 28, no. 3 (1928.), 208.

The duties of the nurses were dependent on where they were placed. Generally speaking, nurses were responsible for attending wounds, performing minor surgeries, and administering treatments. They had to endure hard physical labor, worked under horrific conditions, were understaffed, and always exhausted. Many nurses were obligated to keep a cheerful demeanor and act as a mother figure to the soldiers.<sup>44</sup> The specific tasks involving the general ward and frontline nurses varied. Ward nurses demands included, “the general order of her ward and the direction of male nurses, ministered to the wants and comforts of her patients as far as possible, assisted them in their correspondence with friends at home, supervised the special diets of weaker patients, and had charge of drugs and stimulants which later played an important part in treatment during the Civil War.”<sup>45</sup> For frontline nurses they were in the midst of battle at times. Clara Barton was a nurse that served in the field hospitals in Antietam, Maryland. Barton found herself multiple times reaching the battlefield before the fighting had ceased. “She treated the wounded on the field by removing bullets with her pocketknife ... when she ran out of bandages, she wrapped their wounds in cornhusks.”<sup>46</sup> The efforts made by Clara Barton was essential to the war effort in more ways than one. It challenged the stereotypes regarding the capabilities of women at the time, specifically with the risk women were putting

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<sup>44</sup> Maclean, Maggie. “Union Nurses of the Civil War.” *Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877*. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/dorothea-dix/>. (accessed October 28, 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

themselves in in order to help the soldiers. Women were becoming headstrong and more daring than ever before.

Being a nurse during the Civil War was emotionally draining, along with life threatening. Communicable diseases were rampant throughout the camps and hospitals. The predominant illnesses included: pneumonia, typhoid, diarrhea/dysentery, and malaria. These uncontrolled infectious diseases altogether, attributed to two-thirds of the approximately 660,000 deaths of soldiers.<sup>47</sup> Many of these formidable diseases took the lives of some Union nurses. The most common way these diseases were contracted was through contact between nurse and patient. The nurses were devoted enough in helping the patients that they risked their lives daily. Nurses would question which took more courage: a man stepping out onto battle or a nurse aiding patients with small pox.<sup>48</sup> Many nurses were selfless and fought through their ailments to focus on the health of others. Here is a letter from one of the Union nurses, Emily Parsons, who shows that treating the soldiers comes before her own health,

I am better than I have been; my cough is very slight, and I am stronger. For some time, I had coughed very badly with a sort of intermittent fever every other day. I did not give up work for it. I am very glad to feel more comfortable, and more able to work. I will be busier now that I will be overseeing and teaching new nurses.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Maggle Maclean. "Dorothea Dix." *Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877*. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/dorothea-dix/>. (accessed October 28, 2018.)

<sup>48</sup> Maggle Maclean. "Dorothea Dix." *Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877*. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/dorothea-dix/>. (accessed October 28, 2018.)

<sup>49</sup> Emily Elizabeth Parsons. *Memoir of Emily Elizabeth Parsons* (Boston: 1880), 88-89.

From this diary excerpt, the dedication from Emily Parsons was strong. Her commitment to helping the sick and wounded was something that benefitted the Union Army. When soldiers had adequate and proper care from the medical professionals, their likelihood of survival increased. The tireless efforts made by the Union nurses and care they provided to the soldiers was one of the reasons the Union army was so successful during the Civil War. It was clear that these women dedicated their lives to their countrymen and country. Also, the work of the Union nurses was a spark that helped develop the nursing profession, as well as women's rights. The American Medical Association later authorized the establishment of a nurses' training academy. In the cities of Boston and Connecticut the founding of their training schools were open to the public in the 1870s. The efforts made by nurses in the Civil War created new opportunities for future generations.<sup>50</sup>



*Figure 3: Photograph of Nurse Emily Elizabeth Parsons.*

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<sup>50</sup> Maclean, Maggie. "Union Nurses of the Civil War." *Civil War Women: Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849-1877*. <https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/dorothea-dix/>. (accessed October 28, 2018)

## Conclusion

It was clear that women played a crucial role in aiding the Union army, which ultimately led to their victory over the Confederates. Women when faced with adversity took in stride and were determined to survive. Women like Cordelia Harvey, who faced tragedy early on during the Civil War, saw this hardship as an opportunity rather than giving up. She was a great help to the Northern army. Cordelia communicated with the Wisconsin governor regularly on the needs of the soldiers in the camps she visited. She would record the supplies, such as socks, blankets, shirts, food, and other items of the like to be replenished in the camps. She also took it upon herself to record the names of those who had died and campaign for those fighting for their life for better treatment. She was known as “Wisconsin’s Angel.” During the spring of 1863, she contracted malaria and became deathly ill. Luckily, she was able to recover to full health back home during the summer months.

After this experience, Cordelia had an epiphany. She proposed that opening a hospital in the North would help the increase the survival rate of the wounded Union soldiers in the South. She argued to President Lincoln that “Wisconsin soldiers were not recovering properly in the army’s southern hospitals, where they were subject to heat and humidity, as well as diseases like malaria and yellow fever.”<sup>51</sup> Lincoln later granted her

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<sup>51</sup> Allen, Anne Beiser. "WISCONSIN'S RELUCTANT HEROINE: CORDELIA PERRINE HARVEY." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 95, no. 2 (2011), 5.

requested and Cordelia manage to open a hospital in Madison, Wisconsin. Her hospital held over 300 patients and, as predicted, had a great turnover rate compared to the hospitals in the south. Through her actions, Cordelia Harvey was able to save many lives during the Civil War. She used her talents to help her fellow countrymen and worked for the greater good. Her tireless efforts were impactful and influential to many women after the Civil War. She made a difference.

Just like Cordelia Harvey, many women learned to adjust their usual way of life to provide for their children and their loved ones on the frontlines. Women were able to adapt to their new roles in life, while simultaneously contributing aid to the Union army throughout the war. The Civil War was a gruesome conflict, but without the continuous effort from Northern women, the Union army would not have been as successful as they were. The Northern women of the United States contributed more than just food and clothing to the soldiers, they gave them a strong will to fight and added to their patriotism. Thanks to the actions of the Northern farmers, manufacturers, and nurses, the Union would not have been victorious over the Confederate South.

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