

Civil War Research: Tracing Union & Confederate Ancestors

Class 3: Women in the Civil War

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Roles Available to Women

- Prior to June 1861, women primarily could serve as cooks and laundresses, remaining in the domestic sphere.
- Nursing was limited to males who had some medical training.
- When there was a need for more medical staff, the Sanitary Commissions and Relief Societies started recruiting women to work in the hospitals as nurses.
- Dorothea Dix was selected as the first superintendent of the U.S. Army Nurses in June 1861. She oversaw over 3,000 nurses working for the Union.

U.S. Army Nurse Requirements

- Between the ages of 35 and 50 years old
- Good health
- Good moral standards
- "Not too attractive"
- Willing to dress "plainly"
 - No hooped skirts
 - Black or brown dresses
 - No cosmetics or jewelry
- Commit to 3 months service minimum
- Follow regulations and directions of supervisors

Women could also be contracted to work directly with a surgeon who requested them or serve on a temporary basis at one of the hospitals.

Catholic Nuns

- It was estimated over 600 Catholic nuns served in military hospitals throughout the Union and Confederacy.
- They came from 21 religious orders, which included Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, and Sisters of the Holy Cross

- They did the cooking and cleaning, dressed wounds, assisted in surgeries, and kept the hospitals running.
- Records regarding the nuns who served can be found the provincial archives for each religious order.
 - Ex. Provincial Archives of the Daughters of Charity

U.S. Sanitary Commission

- A national version of the WCAR (Women’s Central Association of Relief), founded by Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Dr. Emily Blackwell.
- Oversaw nurse training, coordinated volunteer efforts, and provided hospital and kitchen services at the battlefield
- Most of the officers and agents were men
- Women were mostly volunteers
- Records for the U.S. Sanitary Commission as well as the WCAR can be found at the New York Public Library:
 - United States Sanitary Commission Records (1861-1879) - MssCol 3101 - <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/3101>
 - Digitized records available at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>
 - United States Sanitary Commission Records. Women’s Central Association of Relief Records (1861-1866) - MssCol 222666 - <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/222666>
- Branch records may be found in other repositories around the country
 - Ex. The Western Reserve Historical Society has the Cleveland Branch (Soldiers’ Aid Society of Northern Ohio) Records <http://rave.ohiolink.edu/archives/ead/OCLWHi0850>

How Did Women Disguise Themselves?

- Both the Union and Confederate armies forbade women from enlisting. Recruiters did not require proof of identity.
- Women assumed masculine names and dressed as men.
- This involved binding their breasts, padding the waists of their pants, and cutting their hair short.
- Physical exams were rarely conducted where women would be discovered for their “sexual incompatibility” (being female).
- Victorian standards for men also included modesty, including bathing in underwear, sleeping in clothes, not using communal latrines.

Records at the National Archives

- Office of the Surgeon General (Army) - Record Group (RG) 112
 - List of Female Nurses, Cooks, and Laundresses Employed in Army Hospitals During the Civil War - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/28277783>
- Adjutant General's Office – RG 94
 - Carded Service Records of Hospital Attendants, Matrons and Nurses, 1861-1865 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/655658>
 - Service Records
- Bureau of Naval Personnel – RG 24
 - Muster Rolls of Naval Ships, January 1, 1860 – June 9, 1900
 - Muster Rolls of Various Ships including the U.S.S. Red Rover - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/134442589>
- Records of the Bureau of Pensions – RG 15
 - Pension Files
- War Department of Confederate Records – RG 109
 - Hospital record books – <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/109.html>
 - Service Records – available on Ancestry.com at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2322>

Personal Papers of Notable Women

- Dorothea Dix
 - Duke University - <https://archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/trent-dixdorothealyndepapers>
 - Harvard University - <https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/1324>
- Clara Barton - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/clara-barton-papers>
- Blackwell Family Papers - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/blackwell-family-papers/about-this-collection>
- Mary Edward Walker – https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/guides/w/walker_me.htm
- Elizabeth Van Lew
 - Library of Virginia - <https://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=lva/vi04990.xml>
 - New York Public Library - <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/3135>

Publications

“African American Nurses in the Civil War”, Nov. 2014, History of American Women Blog (<https://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2014/11/black-civil-war-nurses.html>)

Betty Ann McNeil, *Balm of Hope: Charity Afire Impels Daughters of Charity Civil War Nurses* (Chicago, Illinois: DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute, 2015).

DeAnne Blanton, “Confederate Medical Personnel”, *Prologue Magazine*, National Archives, Spring 1994, Vol. 26, No. 1 (<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1994/spring/confederate-medical-personnel.html>)

DeAnne Blanton, “Women Soldiers of the Civil War”, *Prologue Magazine*, National Archives, Spring 1993, Vol. 25, No. 1 (<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1993/spring/women-in-the-civil-war-1.html>)

Gillian Brockell, “The Most Audacious Confederate Spies – And How They Got Away With It,” *The Washington Post*, 23 May 2022 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/05/23/confederate-spies/>)

History.com, “Secret Agents in Hoop Skirts: Women Spies of the Civil War,” 3 Sep. 2013, Updated 20 May 2020 (<https://www.history.com/news/secret-agents-in-hoop-skirts-women-spies-of-the-civil-war>)

Holly Hurd-Forsyth, “Good Women, Noble Women: The National Association of Army Nurses of the Civil War”, 9 June 2020, Fifth Maine Museum (<https://www.fifthmainemuseum.org/2020/06/09/good-women-noble-women-the-national-association-of-army-nurses-of-the-civil-war>)

L.P. Brockett, *Woman’s Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Zeigler, McCurdy and Co., 1867). Available on Ancestry.com as a database at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7472/>

Mary A. Gardner Holland, *Our Army Nurses: Interesting sketches, addresses, and photographs of nearly one hundred of the noble women who served in hospitals and on battlefields during our civil war* (Boston, Massachusetts: Lounsbury, Nichols & Worth, 1897). Available on Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/ourarmynursesint00holl>

Megan Kessler, “Angels Amid a Sea of Blood: The Experience of Catholic Sister Nurses in the American Civil War,” 2015 (<https://www.eiu.edu/historia/Kessler2015.pdf>)

New York Genealogical & Biographical Society, “Little-Known Civil War Era Collection: The United States Sanitary ‘Commission,’” 6 June 2017 (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/blog/little-known-civil-war-era-collection-united-states-sanitary-commission>)

Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Elizabeth Van Lew: A Spy in Plain Sight,” (<https://www.intelligence.gov/evolution-of-espionage/civil-war/union-espionage/elizabeth-van-lew>)

Paige Gibbons-Backus, “Female Nurses During the Civil War: Angels of the Battlefield”, 20 Oct. 2020, Updated 1 June 2021, American Battlefield Trust (<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/female-nurses-during-civil-war>)

U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center, “Women Nurses in the Civil War” Exhibit (https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/exhibits/CivilWarImagery/Civil_War_Nurses.cfm)

Web Sites

- American Ancestors Digital Library & Archives – <https://digital.americanancestors.org>
- Ancestry <https://www.ancestry.com>
- Antietam Medical Personnel Database (National Museum of Civil War Medicine) - <https://www.civilwarmed.org/civil-war-surgeons/>
- ArchiveGrid – <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid>
- FamilySearch - <https://www.familysearch.org>
- Library of Congress - <https://loc.gov>
- Library of Virginia - <https://www.lva.virginia.gov>
- National Archives - <https://www.archives.gov>
- New York Public Library - <https://www.nypl.org>
- National Park Service – <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar>
- Provincial Archives of the Daughters of Charity - <https://www.daughtersofcharity.org/provincial-archives-of-the-daughters-of-charity>