
“Warrior Queens:” Gender and Female Soldiering During the Civil War

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Lauren Cook stepped out onto the battlefield. She looked around and realized she was the only woman present. Dressed in her Union fatigues, she faced the Confederate enemy courageously. Between battles, she excused herself to the restroom. When she exited the ladies room, she was greeted by a security guard. He said the other male soldiers had requested she leave, because no women had fought in the original Civil War battles. Ms. Cook was not in fact participating in the Civil War, but a re-enactment in 2002, as the *New York Times* reported in an article called “When Janie Came Marching Home.” Even as recently as nine years ago, history has neglected to give female Civil War soldiers the recognition they deserve.

Antonia Fraser contributed to these feelings in the 1990s, writing, “almost every culture throughout history had its Warrior Queens...the U.S. is so far one of the significant exceptions.”¹ I will argue in this paper that the United States did in fact have warrior queens, for they were the women who fought for equality in the 19th and 20th century. Female Civil War soldiers were an example of these high spirited, daring women willing to put their lives on the line for their country; a country that denied them equal rights. A number of women used the Civil War as a weapon of gender warfare, challenging 19th century gender norms, which prescribed women to be confined in the home’s private sphere. Public sphere job opportunities were restricted to men. This Victorian ideology translated to American gender relationships. These gender norms will be analyzed in the context of female Civil War soldiering, as well.

Due to women being poorly educated and unable to read or write during the Antebellum period, few primary sources exist providing information about female soldiers. Most primary source information must be derived from a female soldier’s direct descendent, and some of this work has been compiled by historians like Lauren Cook. Secondary literature on the topic can easily be accessed but this type of analysis is based mostly on male accounts of women in the regiments. These accounts are useful, however, because they still provide valuable insight. They are mostly letters written by male soldiers home to their families.

¹ DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 306.

This paper will analyze women as soldiers and its relationship to gender norms of the 19th century. In addition, it will prove that women broke through gender barriers as Civil War soldiers with long lasting effects. This will be established through individual women's stories explaining why they joined, what happened to them during and after their service, and how their experiences affected the fight for women's rights. I will be using the small amount of primary sources available, including a book by Lauren Cook Burgess, who compiled the diary of Rosetta Wakeman.² Secondary sources will be the prime source of information for this paper.

First of all, when examining the entrance of women under the guise of men into the military, gender norms of the 19th century must be analyzed. For the use of this paper, the 19th century will be split into two periods, Antebellum (pre-Civil War, 1800-1861) and Civil War to the 20th century (1861-1900). The Antebellum period will be analyzed for context, framing the ideology of women who participated in the Civil War. As mentioned above, women were not allowed into the public sphere of education as readily as men. Only elite women would have been educated beyond the home.³ Sex discrimination by educational institutions during the Antebellum period was often an impetus for women to fight for rights.

Northern Antebellum women had more opportunities than Southern women. Northern industrialization had opened the door for working-class women to work in factories, mainly textiles, for the industry employed about 240,000 women, or 24% of the workforce.⁴ Eleanor Flexner argued in her book, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, that Southern women were restricted from industrial jobs because of the institution of slavery, which prevented wage labor job creation.⁵ A careful reading of Flexner's book, first published in 1959, provides a sturdy construct of Antebellum women, both Northern and Southern.⁶ She contextualized women's

² The information Cook-Burgess compiled was collected from living descendents of Rosetta Wakeman. They found her trunk in the attic after she passed away, which contained her diaries. Her family did not know she had served as a man or her stories until the trunk was found. See Lauren Cook Burgess' book, *An Uncommon Soldier* for more information.

³ There were exceptions to this rule, of course. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 19th century abolitionist and women's suffrage activist, was educated at the Johnstown Academy, where she studied math, Greek, and Latin until the age of 16. She was unfortunately denied admittance to Union College on the basis of sex; instead she attended a girls-only seminary.

⁴ Thomas P. Lowry. *Confederate Women: 120 Southern Women Convicted by Union Military Justice* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006, vii.

⁵ Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959, 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*

roles (mostly as suffragists and abolitionists) as a prelude to women's actions during the Civil War. Her chronological narrative serves as a concise women's history sourcebook crucial for any study.

In 1848, a group of women led by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, met in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss women's rights.⁷ This meeting gave birth to the women's suffrage movement, which was concentrated in the North. This meeting was unrivaled in the South, for they lacked women's rights leaders like Stanton and Mott. Mott and Stanton, who were later joined by Susan B. Anthony and Mary Livermore, crusaded for a woman's ability to express herself publically, as men did. Until 1861 and the outbreak of the Civil War, these women met annually to discuss progress on women's rights.⁸

Southern women did not enjoy the same opportunities as Northern women when it came to exercising their rights during the Antebellum period. The 19th century South was extraordinarily hierarchical and patriarchal. Women were often confined to their homes, especially upper class women.⁹ The lack of women's rights leaders like Anthony, Stanton, Livermore, and Mott denied Southern women public agency. Southern women often expressed an identity crisis that formed before the war and continued throughout, according to Drew Gilpin Faust, women's historian and author of *Mothers of Invention*.¹⁰ This psycho-historical analysis by Faust provides insight into Southern women, but lacks a comparison to Northern women, who could have experienced the same identity crisis. Faust did explain, however, that Southern women had a different war experience than Northern women due to most of the war being fought on Southern soil.¹¹

The Northern and Southern women who decided to become Civil War soldiers had several commonalities, even though they had been raised in polarized Antebellum societies. They were from mostly agrarian working or middle class families and white.¹² According to historian Richard Hall, author of *Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War*, women from across the economic spectrum, ranging from

⁷ This meeting was the first of its kind. Stanton and Mott had met previously at an abolitionist conference closed to women in England. They discussed sex discrimination and decided to hold a women's rights convention. This meeting produced the "Declaration of Sentiments", outlining desired women's rights in the United States.

⁸ Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 75.

⁹ Lowry, *Confederate Women*, viii.

¹⁰ During the Civil War, Faust argued that Southern women felt as if they had to perform both male and female duties while their husbands were away. Before the war, some desired to be more than housewives, but had no way of expressing it until given the opportunity to serve their country during the war. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention* Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 17.

¹¹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 17.

¹² Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons*, 2.

poor and illiterate to highly-educated upper class women, served. This is not the historical consensus, however, and my research has found it also untrue.¹³ If highly-educated women had served, more primary sources would exist, because they would have had the ability to write about their experiences.

Scholars agree on five main reasons why women joined the Civil War as soldiers: to be with loved ones, to get away from home, for bounties and pay, for the perceived adventure and romance of war, and because they were patriotic.¹⁴ There were exceptions to these five reasons, including women who were transvestites, living as men before, during and after the Civil War. The following are stories of extraordinary women who put their lives on the line to change the perception of women forever.

It was a crime in the 19th century for a woman to impersonate a man. Albert D.J. Cashier had been a transvestite since a young age, when she ran away from home and joined the military. She was born Jennie Rodgers, from a family of Irish immigrants residing in northern Illinois.¹⁵ Her enlistment papers were lost, but documents revealed she was mustered out on August 17, 1865.¹⁶ During her military career she had fought at the battles of Vicksburg, the Red River Campaign, and Nashville.¹⁷ After finishing her military career, she continued to live as a man and in 1899, she applied for a military pension and it was granted.¹⁸ In 1911, Cashier was hit by a car, injuring her hip; a doctor's examination showed her to be a woman.¹⁹ Not long after her treatment for the broken hip, she was placed in an insane asylum for unknown reasons, possibly for impersonating a man.²⁰

While in the mental hospital, she was forced to wear a skirt and had great difficulty walking in it; as a result, she tripped, re-injured her hip, could not recover, and died in 1914.²¹ Before her passing, some of her fellow military comrades visited her at the asylum, for they had never known her true identity as a woman.²² The veterans that visited her made sure that she had full military rites at her funeral and was

¹³ Blanton discounts this by stating that most women were from poor families. Cook-Burgess also mentioned that women who wrote other remaining primary sources were not soldiers, but spies.

¹⁴ Blanton, Massey, Hall, Lowry.

¹⁵ Lauren Cook Burgess, preface.

¹⁶ Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), preface.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Richard Hall, *Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War* (Marlowe & Company: New York, 1994), 69.

buried in her Union fatigues.²³ It was women like Cashier that allowed men to see the full potential of women and encourage the extension of rights to women because of their vast abilities to perform men's duties.

Other women joined due to the economic confines women experienced in the 19th century. Soldiering paid more than many jobs available to women. Rosetta Wakeman joined to help her family with economic burdens. Lauren Cook Burgess compiled her letters in *An Uncommon Soldier*; they are some of the only surviving primary sources from female Civil War soldiers. In 1994 when the book was published, Burgess cited in the introduction that "this is the first, and so far, only collection of letters by a female soldier."²⁴ Ms. Wakeman was an exception to many other female soldiers because she could read and write.

She volunteered for the 153rd regiment, New York State Volunteers.²⁵ She often sent money home to her family when she wrote to them. She was paid \$52 when she enlisted and \$13 a month for every month she served.²⁶ She was paid in four-month increments, and no comparison wage is listed in the book for women working in other industries, but it was assumed by the author that this wage was higher than that of a working, industrially employed woman. Obviously, women had to look outside of gender norms to help their families during lean financial times. This also proved, however, that women were capable and eager to work and earn equal pay to men.

It was not difficult for women to join the military. Because of the vast divergence in men and women's clothing during the 19th century (men wore pants, women wore skirts/dresses), differences in physical features were less noticeable, as Burgess argued.²⁷ If an individual wore pants, they were assumed to be a man and vice versa, if an individual wore a skirt or dress, they were considered a woman without question. It was simple for women to pass as men, as long as they wore pants. This obvious divergence in clothing reiterates the polarities between men and women's spaces in the 19th century.

Identification was difficult to come by in the 19th century. Birth certificates were not issued, and pressure to fill ranks caused many oversights by regiments.²⁸ Physical examinations were required, but were often poorly executed, although some women were discovered through this process. Hall cited that many women were caught before entering the ranks due to the physical exams, but there were no records

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier*, xii.

²⁵ Ibid., 25.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

²⁷ Ibid., preface.

²⁸ Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons*, 27.

kept of the exams, providing little evidence for this claim.²⁹ Women were discovered while serving in other ways, however, many of them astonishing to their comrades.

Examples of wives serving alongside their husbands abound throughout secondary literature. Some women feared being alone, others sought adventure, and in some cases, husbands were scared to go alone. Lucy Thompson Grass was one of the women who accompanied her husband to war. They joined the 18th North Carolina regiment and served from August 1861-December 1862, when she was forced to muster out due to advanced stages of pregnancy.³⁰ Another couple, Keith and Sarah Melinda Black³¹ enlisted together because Keith would not join without her. He was a Union sympathizer living in the South and they planned to desert together after joining.³² He wanted his wife to go with him, so they volunteered instead of being drafted. Deserting proved to be difficult, and he voluntarily rolled in poison ivy to earn a disability discharge and Sarah admitted her identity.³³ They fled to the Union afterwards. If husbands and wives joined together and the husband was killed in the line of duty, women often continued to serve.

While some women met the challenges of war in support of their husbands, others joined independently. Molly Mooney left her husband to join the 7th Iowa Infantry.³⁴ It was suspected her husband was abusive and she escaped to the military. Charlotte Hope of Fairfax, Virginia, conversely, joined for revenge. She joined the Confederate army in summer, 1861 and was determined to kill twenty-one Union soldiers, one for each year her fiancé lived before being killed on the battlefield.³⁵ It is unknown if she completed her task.³⁶

Women, on average, served sixteen months before being discovered. Discoveries were broken down into categories by historians, including Blanton, who cited that 72% were discovered as casualties or injuries, 17% served openly as women, and 10% were never

²⁹ Hall, *Patriots in Disguise*, 56.

³⁰ Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons*, 27.

³¹ Registered as "Sam Black."

³² Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons*, 33.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁶ I am not drawing distinct lines between the stories of women who served in the Confederacy and those who served in the Union. Secondary literature does not emphasize this difference, even though the war experience of Northern and Southern women was different on the home front, there were no distinct differences between female soldiers from the North or South. Their stories are meant to prove they bent gender barriers in spite of Antebellum ideology and contributed to the fight for women's equality.

discovered.³⁷ Blanton also wrote that some historians believed that women had higher casualty rates than men, but those statistics cannot be known due to uncounted deaths and women who were undiscovered. The proof that female soldiers were as capable as men is apparent in the statistics that Blanton offered about women prisoners of war: only 8% of women were taken as prisoners as opposed to 16% of men.³⁸

Women soldiers were captured and taken to enemy camps as prisoners at the Battle of Shiloh, Richmond, Perryville, Murfreesboro, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Green River, Lookout Mountain, Peachtree Creek, Allatoona, and the Wilderness.³⁹ It is also unknown how many women perished, but female remains have been located on the sites of the First at Manassas, Second Manassas, Shiloh, Gettysburg, Resaca, Dallas, and the Crater, and along the front lines at Appomattox and Petersburg.⁴⁰ Due to poor record keeping, many of these remains were discovered during archeological missions at the battle sites many decades later. The skeletal discoveries obviously do not disclose whether the women fought for the North or South, but they do prove that women were equally as committed to their cause as men.

Women who soldiered during the Civil War had to meet not only the call to duty from their country, but also battled 19th century gender norms to serve. Challenges arose when women were discovered dressed as men for the purpose of soldiering, for it was a crime to impersonate a man. Discharges due to “congenital peculiarities” were common for women who were discovered within the ranks.⁴¹ After researching both primary and secondary sources, it is apparent that these women were not only fighting for the Union or Confederacy, they were fighting for their rights as women. Immediately after the war, women were continually denied war pensions for their service. In a few instances, though, women were granted pensions for soldiering. In the case of “Aunt Lucy” Nichols as reported in the December, 1898 edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a special act of Congress was passed allowing her to receive \$12 monthly for having “served through the war with the Twenty-third Indiana, participating in twenty-eight battles.” She had ran away from her master, and after being discovered as a woman, was protected by the soldiers and served with them until they were mustered out.

³⁷ Among the women who were never discovered, they served an average of two years. As for Blanton's figures, the 17% that served openly as women were never addressed. Were they nurses or soldiers? This is not answered in her book.

³⁸ Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons*, 207.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

While special acts of Congress were required for women to receive their rightful war pensions, they did occur. Post-war stories of women like “Aunt Lucy” and Albert D.J. Cashier, who received their pension or proper military burial and respect from fellow male soldiers, prove that steps in the right direction were being made for women’s rights because of female service. Undoubtedly, the Civil War could have been resolved without the small amount of female soldiers that served, but the crucial aspect of Civil War female soldiering lies in what happened after the war. The Gilded Age that followed the war ushered in a new sense of equal rights. The passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, providing black men with citizenship and universal male suffrage, pushed women to continue their fight for equal rights through political action.

Inspirational stories of valiant women breaking through 19th century gender norms to serve their country on the battlefield were told by men and women long after the war had ended. These stories are their legacies and their link in the chain of women’s rights. Soldiering as a woman was a private decision, an independent action. Earlier attempts at women’s rights had been organized by women’s groups in public settings. This paper proves it was both these private and public decisions that strengthened the women’s rights movement, and these “warrior queens” were nothing less than heroines; war heroines for women’s rights.

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