War Between the Sexes:
Civil War Women Who Shaped a Nation

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History 4455: American Civil War & Reconstruction

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The year is 1848. On July 19 and 20, women from all around the United States are meeting in a little town on the Seneca River called Seneca Falls. They are going to the Wesleyan Chapel to see the first Convention on Women’s Rights. This convention would soon become one of the most important pushes towards reform and obtaining rights for women in the history of the Women’s Rights Movements and the Women’s Suffrage movements.\(^1\) It was not just this momentous event at Seneca Falls that brought about the amendments that gave women the rights they so desperately wanted. Another event that helped to push the Women’s Rights Movement was the Civil War and the period after known as the Reconstruction period. These time periods helped to push the Women’s Rights Movement along because throughout the war and after, women were constantly pushing and breaking gender stereotypes, roles, and ideals. Women have always played an important role in history. While often sidelined, erased, glanced over, forgotten, or even belittled, the fight for their beliefs and rights that women have shown throughout history is significant. As Joan E. Cashin, a professor at Ohio State with a Ph.D. in American History from Harvard University states in her essay, *American Women and the American Civil War:*

> In every modern conflict, in every part of the world, women have participated in war-making. They have debated the causes of war, supported war, and opposed war. They have fought in battle in disguise, and, in recent times, openly in combat. They have engaged in espionage, and they have created propaganda. They have managed businesses on the home front, and they have treated the sick and wounded. They have served as symbols of the causes their nations represent. They have helped shape collective memory by preserving artifacts, raising money for monuments, and founding memorial organizations. There is an abundant scholarship on all of these topics, for many countries.\(^2\)

The “war” that women participated in the most and put most of their energy and fight into was their fight and battle for women’s rights in the mid-1800s until 1920, when they gained the right

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\(^1\) "Historic Seneca Falls, NY." Seneca Falls, NY - Historic Gateway to the Finger Lakes.

to vote. The start of this “battle” really began in 1848 with the meeting at Seneca Falls to discuss Women’s Suffrage. It was after this momentous meeting that many suffragettes followed Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others on their quest. The fight for their rights lasted for around 50 years. These women broke out of their stereotypical gender roles like the housewife and the submissive mother or wife whose goal in life was to care for the household, take care of her husband, clean, cook, and create a nurturing environment for the men and her children. Instead, these women donned a new role. They became leaders, protesters, women’s rights pioneers, and most importantly, suffragettes. The right to vote was the way to gain the freedoms women so desperately desired. After years of petitions and protests, the multiple women’s activists’ groups were able to be a part of something amazing. Their efforts are what enabled the 19th amendment of the Constitution to be ratified in 1920.³

The American Civil War was a period of great loss for the United States. It lasted from 1861 to 1865. After years of political measures and disagreements between the North and the South, seven states in the South seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. With the election of Abraham Lincoln 1861, and the attack on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, four more states seceded from the Union and joined the Confederates. Small skirmishes and fights continued, but in 1862, the bigger battles began to happen. These battles killed hundreds and thousands of men, it was a very bloody war. Antietam alone in 1862, was the bloodiest day in military history with around 20,000 total casualties. It would only get worse from here with large battles and campaigns like Gettysburg, Spotsylvania, Atlanta, The Wilderness, and Vicksburg. The American Civil would not end until April 9, 1865, when General Robert E. Lee was forced to sign for peace at the Appomattox Courthouse. This ended

the long four-year war and began the period known as Reconstruction. It was a time period to try and rebuild the torn apart nation and bring peace to the states. Reconstruction was a time of reform and change. It brought about multiple amendments to the Constitution, and another push towards the eventual Women’s Suffrage in the 1920s.

During the time of the Civil War, women were not allowed to fight in a war. A woman’s duty was to her house and her family. As Joan E. Cashin explains, “Before 1861, all American women had to contend with the idea that they should stay out of politics and concentrate on domesticity.” There were jobs that helped the war effort that a woman was allowed to do, and these jobs included matrons, laundresses, cooks, and nurses on and off the battlefield. Women also wrote to the men, cared for wounded soldiers, kept their homes in order in the absence of the head of the household (the husband), sewed clothing and supplies for the men, collected supplies for the men, and many more jobs. For about four hundred women, however, just helping these men, cooking, cleaning, or being a nurse was not enough for them. Mary Livermore, from the United States Sanitary Commission in 1888, commented on the number of women in the war. She states:

"Someone has stated the number of women soldiers known to the service as little less than four hundred. I cannot vouch for the correctness of this estimate, but I am convinced that a larger number of women disguised themselves and enlisted in the service, for one cause or other, than was dreamed of. Entrenched in secrecy and regarded as men."

Many women wanted to do more and be more. These women would take on a man’s name, cut their hair, bind their chests, obtain bigger clothing to obscure their feminine figure, and go to join

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4 "A Brief Overview of the American Civil War." American Battlefield Trust.
6 "Women in the Civil War." History.com.
7 "Women Soldiers of the Civil War." National Archives and Records Administration.
up with their local regiments. This led to them breaking gender norms, disguising themselves as men, leaving their lives behind, and joining the military in order to fight for their beliefs and for the cause of the war.

Two of these women in disguise were Sarah Emma Edmonds, who disguised herself as a man known as Private Franklin Thompson who fought for the Union army, and Loreta Janeta Velazquez, who disguised herself as a Lieutenant named Harry T. Buford and fought for the Confederacy. Sarah Emma Edmonds and Loreta Janeta Velazquez fought in the war in order to “escape the confines of their sex.” These two women, along with the numerous other disguised women of the Civil War, disguised themselves not only to escape their home lives and responsibilities, but to also participate in the biggest event of their lifetime. They wanted to help shape the country and be a part of the change that was sweeping the nation.

Sarah Edmonds disguised herself as a man a couple years before the Civil War even started. She grew up in New Brunswick, Canada, on a farm. Due to her upbringing, she often wore boys’ clothing in order to move freely while doing chores on the farm. In 1859, Edmonds ran away from her home and controlling father, disguised as a man. She ended up in the United States where she lived her daily life as Franklin Thompson, a bookseller and publisher’s agent. These two jobs were normally denied to women during this time period, but because of her disguise, Edmonds was able to live freely and do as she pleased. When the Civil War started, she enlisted in the army. She became a private in the Second Michigan Infantry and worked as a nurse and field medic during the war. Edmonds was in the army for two years. During her time in the army, she fought in battles, ran letters from regiment to regiment as a postmaster (a very

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dangerous and deadly job that she performed expertly), and as a spy. After her time in the war she wrote a memoir titled *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*. She detailed her time in the war and the people that she met along the way. Her memoir not only served as a means of recognizing the deeds she did as a woman fighting in the Civil War, but also as a way of breaking gender stereotypes for all sexes, not just female. Edmonds described her friend Lieutenant James V. in a way that makes him almost seem genderless due to the fact that she uses feminine and masculine terms to talk about him. In her memoir, Edmonds states that "His heart, though brave, was tender as a woman's. He was noble and generous, and had the highest regard for truth and law. Although gentle and kind to all, yet he had an indomitable spirit and a peculiar courage and daring, which amounted to recklessness in time of danger." In a time where women were just starting to seek rights and men were only to be seen as the head of the house and supposed to be strong and manly, the opposite of a woman of the time, Edmond’s descriptions are progressive and a fresh look on the old mindsets of the time period.

Loreta Janeta Velazquez was born in 1842 and lived in the territory of Texas. Her idol was Joan of Arc and she longed to fight in battles and to be a hero. She escaped an arranged marriage that her father was going to force her into by marrying the man she loved and moving to New Orleans. There she lived with her husband, who taught her to shoot and other acts that were not necessarily proper for a lady of the time. Once the war started, her husband enlisted, and against his wishes, Velazquez left to join the Confederate army. She disguised herself as Lieutenant Harry T. Buford and created her very own regiment. She was a successful leader and

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her soldiers loved her. During her time in the military, Velazquez fought in battles, worked as a counterfeiter, a blockade runner, and as a spy in the later and final years of the war. After the war she wrote her memoir, *The Women in Battle*.

The actions taken by these two women and the hundreds of others was a form of empowerment for the Victorian women. Scholars have stated that “by distinguishing themselves on the front lines of battle the female soldiers challenged American society's conception of womanhood and empowered themselves, demonstrating the physical, mental, and emotional strength that many men assumed women lacked.”¹¹ With the lessons they learned from fighting, such as self-reliance, courage, and confidence, the female soldiers were also able to publish their memoirs after the war and “assert themselves as authoritative, speaking subjects” by breaking the male oriented society of book writing and military memoir writing.¹² These accomplishments meant big things for women. They were now getting the recognition, sometimes even support, that they deserved for sacrificing so much in order to fight for their beliefs and join the army. These were things that Edmonds and Velazquez desperately wanted. Both women wanted nothing more than to just be able to go about life with the privileges and opportunities presented to men, but they wished to do so when they were not disguised as men but as independent and respected women. The message on women and equality in their memoirs were progressive and helped to fuel the Women’s Rights Movement. The main message in both *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* and *The Women in Battle* was basically that “the best soldiers and the best human beings should be defined by their character and ability not their sex.”¹³

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¹¹ Matthew Teorey. “Unmasking the Gentleman Soldier in the Memoirs of Two Cross-Dressing Female US Civil War Soldiers.” Pg 75.
¹² Ibid
¹³ Ibid pg 77
It was not just the females on the battlefield that helped push the ideals of the Women’s Rights Movement. There were women off of the Civil War battlefields that were embodying the ideals through their actions against the government.

On April 2, 1863, the Richmond Bread Riot started. During this riot, about three hundred armed women marched down the streets of Richmond and broke into stores. They then stole thousands of dollars’ worth of goods that they lacked at home due to “inflation, overpopulation, disease, hunger, crime, speculation, and government impressment of supplies.” These women were mostly the wives of soldiers, mothers of soldiers, and more often than not, they were poorer citizens. The women of the Bread Riots did not just steal food and items necessary for survival. They also stole items that they had been deprived of due to the war. These items included jewelry, “baubles of Victorian refinement,” and the “markers of respectability, dignity, and southern womanhood that had eluded them during the conflict.” The power that these women displayed during the riots showed the men of the time that women were not going to sit back and let bad things happen to themselves. In From Women’s History to Gender History: Revamping Interpretive Programming at Richmond National Battlefield Park, authors Ashley Whitehead Luskey and Robert M. Dunkerly comment that “Rioters trespassed against traditional gender roles, seizing power in the democratic spaces of the street and the capitalistic spaces of stores and upending male leaders’ perceptions of them as ‘powerless’” While at home, women were breaking stereotypes by standing up for what they wanted. These women broke from their standard gender roles in order to obtain supplies for themselves and their families. All around the country, women were slowly getting the opportunities to experience events that they had never

15 Ibid pg 155
16 Ibid
been able to before the war and participate in events that did not quite fit into the role that women of the Victorian era were supposed to follow. These events and opportunities gave the women of America a sense of freedom in what seemed like the first time ever. It was these event and opportunities that accumulated and eventually led to the passing of the 19th amendment and also led to women gaining the many freedoms that they dreamed of. The Bread Riot also served as a threat to men and their authority over women. When reporting about the events and the women rioting, many male journalists and bystanders described the women as “a handful of prostitutes, professional thieves, Irish and Yankee hags, gallow-birds from all lands but our own,”17 others stated that the women were “amazons, strapping viragos, myrmidon viragos, plump cheeked, well-dressed women, courtesans and thieves and Mississippi wharf rats—people full of vice, profligacy—people who wage eternal war on society and against which society must wage eternal war.” One man described a woman as having “the eye of the Devil.”18 These men sought to diminish the importance of the riots and to “reclaim his own masculinity” by depicting the rioting women as thieves and demons. By defeminizing the women, the men were aiming at hiding the social and gender issues that the rioting women had unearthed within the Victorian society and how just a handful of women were able to throw the male authorities of the city into chaos in just one night of riots. 19

Women’s rights activists were also helping in the war effort, giving them the foundation that they needed after the war in order to fight or their rights on a bigger scale. At the time of the Civil War, the main focus of many, including women’s rights activists, was to end slavery and the evils that came with it. Two of the more well-known activists, Susan B. Anthony and

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17 Ibid pg 157
18 Ibid pg 156-157
19 Ibid pg 157
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, created the group, Women’s Loyal National League. The women of the Women’s Loyal National League were focused on ending slavery. They felt that the Emancipation Proclamation, given by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, did not fix the problem because it only freed slaves in states that were in open rebellion against the Union. WLNL wanted all African Americans to be free, no matter if they were in the north or the south. To combat slavery, WLNL created a petition and collected about half a million signatures that they then sent to Senator Charles Sumner, a supporter of the WLNL’s mission. In a letter about the petition he thanked the WLNL. In a presentation from Sumner titled *The Prayer of One Hundred Thousand*, Sumner described the thousands of men and women who signed the petition.

This petition is signed by one hundred thousand men and women, who unite in this unparalleled number to support its prayer. They are from all parts of the country and from every condition of life. They are from the sea-board…and from Mississippi and the prairies of the West…They are from the families of the educated and uneducated, rich and poor, of every profession, business, and calling in life, representing every sentiment, thought, hope, passion, activity, intelligence which inspires, strengthens, and adorns our social system. Here they are, a mighty army. One hundred thousand strong, without arms or banners; the advance-guards of a yet larger army.

Sumner’s statement grouped men and women together which creates a sense of equality. Instead of referring to each gender, Sumner refers to the men and women as “they,” and instead of characterizing the individuals and their gender, he describes what their background is and refers to all of the men and women as a strong and courageous army fighting for a great cause. In a time where men and women were not seen as equal, his descriptions are beneficial to women.

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For the longest time, women were being characterized by stereotypes and they were not being recognized for their actions and achievements. Finally, in this presentation from Sumner and in society itself, women were starting to gain the recognition that they craved. The recognition of their achievements and being praised alongside men like equals.

It was groups like the Women’s Loyal National League, who disbanded after the Civil War ended, and the United States Sanitary Commission, who sent supplies to the Union soldiers and raised money for the war, that provided women with the tools to rally together and push the Women’s Rights Movement along after the war. The Civil War caused women to join these groups and other groups like these in order to fight for the end of slavery and to help the war effort. The knowledge that they gained and the feelings that they were able to experience from helping and taking charge was one of the reasons the Civil War created such a strong foundation for the Women’s Rights Movement and the Suffrage Movement.23

One woman who brought about change and sought reform was a young woman by the name of Clara Barton. Born in 1812 in Massachusetts, Barton was independent from a very young age. Despite her many suitors, Barton decided to not marry and instead, she became an outstanding teacher. She moved to New Jersey after a while and helped her school in many ways. The students and their families loved Barton, but that was not enough. She was demoted to female assistant at the school and because of this she left for Washington D.C. Here, she became a clerk at the Patent Office. It was here that she made history. Barton is speculated to be one of the first women to be paid the same amount of money as a male clerk. Once the Civil War started and wounded soldiers began coming into Washington, Barton began to shine. She immediately

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23 “Civil War Activism.” History of U.S. Woman's Suffrage.
went to the soldiers and began caring for them in any way that she could. She was a natural and the soldiers loved her and the help that she provided for the injured and dying men. In an amazing feat for a woman at the time, Clara Barton was allowed to travel with the Army of the Potomac. She was able to care for and aid the soldiers in their time between the battlefield and the hospital. The war went on, however, and she was removed from her volunteer job. She was devastated and felt lost. Barton did not let this top her. She ended up being the first woman to be in charge of a federal agency by creating the Missing Soldiers Bureau. She was again eventually removed from her position due to disagreements with the army and left the country for Europe. It was here that she started the Red Cross with a mission which “promised to accommodate the organization’s efforts to aid victims during wartime,” and was expanded to “include victims of natural disasters.” Clara Barton’s lobbying campaign was a long one. She wanted to start the Red Cross so badly, but many did not support it because they did not think it was necessary or because they wanted to avoid entanglements with foreign nations. However, Barton was successful and became the first woman to lead a lobbying campaign that was this big and also succeed in bringing it to life. Sadly, she was forced out of the Red Cross at the age of 83 and she lived the rest of her life bitter and upset because of the disrespect and barriers that she was forced to endure during her lifetime.

Barton was an inspiration to many. She is described as “Sensitive by nature, refined by culture, she has nevertheless taken unaccustomed fields of labor, walked untrodden paths with bleeding feet, and opened pioneer doors with bruised fingers, not for her own aggrandizement but for that of her sex and humanity.” Barton showed that if women pushed hard enough, they

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25 Ibid
26 Ibid
could succeed in creating change. Barton served as an example to all at what could happen if women came together and fought for the rights that they lacked. The Civil War pushed Barton, it provided her with work that would help her to create a well-known organization like the Red Cross. Due to the war, Barton was able to shine and to show that women had important roles to play in the war. One author writes that “If she hadn’t grown that enormous chip on her shoulder by forced subservience to men far less capable than she, it’s possible she’d have enjoyed a productive but historically insignificant career, like millions of other women.”27 By not backing down from the barriers and obstacles of the male oriented society during the Civil War, Barton was able to inspire and lead. Her advances through society are another important factor in the push for women’s rights.

The Reconstruction period was another factor in the fight for women’s rights. During this time, the Fifteenth Amendment was being pushed. This would grant the right to vote to the African American men in the United States. The women’s activists saw this as an opportunity to combine the two movements together in order for everyone, no matter their race or gender, to be able to vote. In a debate between Frederick Douglas and Susan B. Anthony, the two debate over which group (women or African American men) should gain the right to vote if universal suffrage was not possible. Their exchange goes like this:

[Susan B. Anthony is quoted first.] There is not the woman born who desires to eat the bread of dependence, no matter whether it be from the hand of the father, husband, or brother; for any one who does so eat her bread places herself in the power of the person from who she takes it…Mr. Douglas talks about the wrongs of the negro; but with all the outrages that he to-day suffers, he would not exchange his sex and take the place of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Mr. Douglas- I want to know if granting you the right of suffrage will change the nature of our sexes?

27 Ibid
Miss Anthony- It will change the pecuniary positions of woman; it will place her where she can earn her own bread…She will not then be driven to such employments only as man chooses for her.28

While universal suffrage did not happen, and many freed male African Americans felt that their right to vote was more important than the women’s right to vote, the efforts of the women’s rights activists still unified the women of the time and helped them to further push for their desire for rights and suffrage.

The 19th amendment did not come around until 1920, over 50 years after the end of the Civil War. Despite the long time between the Civil War and the ratification of the 19th Amendment, the Civil War played an important role in the fight for women’s rights. It provided women with an outlet for their desire to work and help with the war efforts. Women even defied social norms by disguising themselves and fighting in the war. All of the efforts, drive, fights, riots, and pushes from the Victorian women is what helped to bring about the results that they wanted: equality and the right to vote. Their fight still lives on, and their courage is what drives women to fight for their freedoms. The right for women to enlist in the military came about similarly in the 1940s from the rallying of women fighting for what they believed in. Even in today’s society, women embody courage and strength in order to stand up for others and to fight for what they believe is right and to protect their rights. The Civil War changed the way women fit in society, and because of that, changed history for the better.

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Bibliography

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