

## Library Resources Statement

Before approaching this term paper, I had already determined that I would focus my research on women and their role in the American Civil War. I was inspired to do so after watching the movie version of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. As a historically marginalized group, women are often left out of most narratives concerning the Civil War, and I was determined seek out more information. I was also concerned with highlighting how the Civil War affected women of various socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. I feel that it is important to examine how intersectionality (various combinations of gender, race, wealth, sexuality, etc.) determines the unique experiences of individuals, especially women.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic forced students and faculty out of academic buildings, I was unable to utilize Drake Memorial Library's physical sources. However, I knew that there was a plethora of digital resources available through the library's online database collection. This is where my research began. When looking for sources, I wanted to incorporate a balance of primary and secondary sources in order to examine older and newer perspectives regarding the American Civil War. Primary sources offer great insight into the thoughts and behaviors of people from the past, while secondary sources provide thorough interpretations and analysis. My go-to database for primary and secondary sources is JSTOR, and most of my sources for this paper were obtained from this database. My research started out in very basic means, just so I could get an idea of the direction that I wanted to take my paper in. This allowed me to create a general outline for guidance. I also utilized outside sources such as the University of Maryland's library for primary sources regarding women and the war, and the National Park Service's website for general information about the Civil War. As my research began to take shape, I was

able to search for more specific information and resources, such as Louisa May Alcott's "Hospital Sketches" and her book, *Little Women*.

When consulting sources, my biggest priority was ensuring that enough of my research would be based off of the perspectives and interpretations of various women in order to get the most accurate idea of what it was like to be a woman in Civil War America. Most of my sources come from female historians, nurses, and civilians. I did take interest in a few resources about or written by men, including Eugene Becklard's *The Marriage Guide: Mysteries and Revelation in Love, Courtship, and Marriage; An Infallible Guidebook for Married and Single Persons*. This marriage guide, written from a man's perspective, offers excellent insight into the role that nineteenth century American women were expected to fulfill.

Overall, my research proved to be informative and enlightening. The process was made significantly less intimidating with the help of the databases available to me, and I was able to utilize a wide variety of sources in order to supplement and support my research. While conducting research exclusively online can be difficult, I appreciate the resources provided by Drake Memorial Library in order to afford students the opportunity to continue their education.

A Woman's Place:

How the Civil War Redefined the Roles of Nineteenth Century American Women

HST 419

Dr. Daly

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History is notorious for failing to remember the stories and existence of women, especially when it comes to United States history and the contributions that American women have made to the progress of the country. American military history, in particular, consistently forgets the roles that women played in both domestic and foreign-based wars in which the U.S. was involved. Because of the violent nature of war and the fact that women were banned from combat roles until very recently, war has long been associated with men and masculinity. Fighting for one's country is considered one of the most honorable services a person can offer, and this honor has strictly been reserved for men since the start of the United States' history.

The American Civil War is one of, if not the most, critical turning points in the country's history. It emphasized the geographical and ideological differences of the northern and southern regions, and it built the foundations for the cultural divide that continues into contemporary American society. This turning point also altered and redefined social structures that existed within both regions, particularly gender roles and the expectations for women of all socioeconomic statuses. As husbands and fathers left to fight in the war, women filled new roles that required them to support families, run plantations, and care for wounded or sick soldiers. The Civil War presented women with new challenges and opportunities both on the home front and on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

Gender norms of the nineteenth century confined women from all socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds to the male ideals of femininity and womanhood. For the most part, women were afforded little occupational opportunities and depended on the male head of the household to provide for the family financially. This was enabled by the fact that women were

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<sup>1</sup> Susan-Mary Grant. "To Bind Up the Nation's Wounds: Women and the American Civil War" in *The Practice of U.S. Women's History: Narratives, Intersections, and Dialogues*, ed. S. Jay Kleinberg, Eileen Boris, Vicki L. Ruiz. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007). 106.

mostly limited to a secondary level of education since compulsory schooling was not mandated by all 50 states until 1918.<sup>2</sup> Women did not have access to the same quality of higher education as men did, with most “normal schools” and independent, nonprofit women’s colleges only offering liberal arts educations, training in domestic skills, and vocational training in the field of teacher preparation.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note that higher education was a privilege mostly afforded to daughters of elite families who were expected to be poised and refined in hopes of attracting a wealthy, respectable husband.<sup>4</sup> This being the typical form of education for women prevented them from aspiring to be independent thinkers and intellectuals, which reflected the idea that women had no place in the professions (other than teaching), and that a woman’s skills and maternal nature were better suited for marriage, homemaking and child rearing. In his 1865 book, *The Marriage Guide: Mysteries and Revelation in Love, Courtship, and Marriage; An Infallible Guidebook for Married and Single Persons, in Matters of the Utmost Importance to the Human Race*, Eugene Becklard claims that the ultimate goal of every woman’s life is to be married, stating that “Longing for Marriage; Young unmarried women, from the time they arrive at the age of puberty, think and talk about little besides love and its attributes.”<sup>5</sup> Becklard even goes as far to say that “One of the most active causes of laborious or obstructed menstruation, is disappointment in love, and a transfer of the affections would work a cure without any other remedy.”<sup>6</sup> In her 1882 book, *Eve’s*

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Rauscher. “Study Finds Early U.S. Compulsory Schooling Laws Benefitted Minorities”. (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas, 2014). <https://news.ku.edu/2014/04/24/study-finds-early-us-compulsory-schooling-laws-produced-hidden-gains-minority-students>.

<sup>3</sup> Patsy Parker. “The Historical Role of Women in Higher Education” in *Administrative Issues Journal*, vol. 5. (Weatherford, OK: Southwestern State University, 2015). 6.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas E. Rodgers. “Hoosier Women and the Civil War Home Front” in *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 97. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001). 109.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Becklard. *The Marriage Guide: Mysteries and Revelation in Love, Courtship, and Marriage; An Infallible Guidebook for Married and Single Persons, in Matters of the Utmost Importance to the Human Race*. (Philadelphia, PA: W.A. Leary, Jr., 1865). 31.

<sup>6</sup> Becklard, 34.

*Daughters: Or Common Sense for Maid, Wife, and Mother*, Mary Virginia Terhune examines the value of women and their role in society, claiming that women are to be ‘valued according to the amount of hard usage she will endure’ and ‘treasured in a windowed cabinet’.<sup>7</sup> Guides like these served to educate future and current wives of their duties in marriage and motherhood, which reinforced the gendered role of women as domestic servants.

Gender stereotypes of the nineteenth century were also often perpetuated by the men in women’s lives. Women were expected to live with adult males be it a father, husband, or relative with the idea being that women needed to be protected from the many troubles of the world.<sup>8</sup> Women were believed to lack the “will, strength, aggression, and rationality” possessed by men that were necessary for survival.<sup>9</sup> Daughters were treated much differently from their brothers and were expected to stay hidden from the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> In letters to his college-aged children, Judge Elisha Huntington provides advice on embodying ideal elite male and female identities. When addressing his son, Huntington fills his letters with “discussions of politics, war, current events, and admonitions to pursue sobriety, thrift, and other standard Victorian values for men”.<sup>11</sup> When addressing his daughter, Marie, Huntington advises her to ‘never volunteer your opinions about matters which are the subject of conversation among others, unless your opinions are invited, and never interpose your views, while others are conversing. It is very graceful in a young girl to be a good listener rather than a ready talker’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Virginia Terhune. *Eve’s Daughters: Or Common Sense for Maid, Wife, and Mother*. (New York, NY: John R. Anderson & Henry S. Allen, 1882). Quoted in Will Wyse. “19<sup>th</sup> Century Gender Roles for Women”. (Los Angeles: CA, California State University Northridge, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Rodgers, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Rodgers, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Rodgers, 108.

<sup>11</sup> Rodgers, 108

<sup>12</sup> Elisha Huntington to Marie Huntington, January 22, 1861. *Elisha M. Huntington Letters*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, Lilly Library) quoted in Thomas E. Rodgers. “Hoosier Women and the Civil War Home Front” in *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 97. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001). 109.

The emergence of the American Civil War redefined these gender expectations. With Civil War soldiers making up 13% of the U.S. population, women were forced to help keep the country's familial and economic structures intact.<sup>13</sup> Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Little Women*, serves as a solid example of the change in gender and family dynamics that occurred during the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Alcott's book examines a fictional, lower class Massachusetts family that is forced to adjust to life without a male head of the household when the family's father leaves to fight for the Union Army. Despite the novel's fictionality, the experiences of the characters highlight the realities that women faced during the Civil War, with a few of the female characters finding ways to bring income into the house and the ultimate revelation that the women of the family were able to get along fine with a greater degree of independence, rather than being victims of dependence.<sup>15</sup> *Little Women* also does well to demonstrate the ways in which many nineteenth century women began to question their assigned roles in American society. Alcott created a defiant female character, Jo, that was capable of finding a man to love her despite dressing like a tomboy and becoming an insightful, thoughtful, and published author. This kind of character suggested that a woman could still find love and fulfillment without confining themselves to typical, feminine ways, which was a revolutionary concept at the time that Alcott's book was published.

Similar to the experiences of the characters in *Little Women*, many northern middle and upper-class women were able to find empowerment and fulfillment in the absence of husbands and fathers. Out of financial necessity and the need to keep communities running, women found

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. National Park Service. "The Civil War: Facts". (NPS.gov, 2015). <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/facts.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women*. (Boston: MA, Roberts Brothers, 1880).

<sup>15</sup> Alcott, *Little Women*.

employment in jobs that were usually reserved for men and took over family businesses.<sup>16</sup> Before the war, public affairs and politics were a realm reserved for men, as observed in Judge Huntington's letters to his son. Many of the concerns raised in the sphere of public affairs were deemed morally inferior, a characteristic that was not to be associated with women. At this time, women's contributions to public affairs were limited to activities that were related to organized charity and social reform movements like temperance.<sup>17</sup> During the war, however, women's roles in public affairs were less restricted, and women engaged in activities that supported the Union cause, including providing materials and raising money for soldiers and their families.<sup>18</sup>

While *Little Women* and the experiences of white middle class and upper-class American women does well to showcase the empowerment and resilience of northern women during the Civil War, this narrative does not represent the experience of all women at the time. White women living in the South struggled with the implications of the Civil War, as it called into question their identities and their understandings of womanhood. Southern white women whose husbands owned slaves "accepted their subordination in return for class and racial superiority".<sup>19</sup> Before the war, slaveholding women compromised independence and shared household responsibilities for economic security and social status, with the idea that no matter how inferior one was to men, being white and wealthy still made them superior in society in comparison to poor whites, free blacks, and slaves. During the war, however, wealthy women grappled with their changing roles as plantation managers and the thought of losing their socioeconomic status. The anti-violent nature of southern femininity limited their ability to control slaves who were previously kept in-

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<sup>16</sup> Peggy Brase Seigel. "She Went to War: Indiana Women Nurses in the Civil War" in *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 86. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990). 1.

<sup>17</sup> Rodgers, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Rodgers, 115-116.

<sup>19</sup> Grant, 113.

check by the threat of violence at the hands of their masters, which threatened white women's safety, superiority, and rank in the social hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> After the war and Emancipation, wealthy southern women were forced to create "new understandings of themselves and toward reconstructions of the meanings of southern womanhood" after building their identities and sense of worth on the social and racial hierarchies of the plantation system economy.<sup>21</sup> Many slaveholding women coped with this loss of status by mourning the Confederacy and the southern way of life, claiming themselves to be "victims of the war" and refusing to be slaves of the North.<sup>22</sup> In a passage from her diary, Mary Boykin Chesnut demonstrated this resistance to northern victory, saying that 'I shut my eyes and made a vow that if we were a crushed people, crushed by weight, I would never be a whimpering, pining slave'.<sup>23</sup>

For the lower-class, urban women of the North, the consequences of war were just as demoralizing as they were for wealthy southern women. When their husbands went to war, poor urban women were left without a steady income to support their families. There were little opportunities for employment due to the fact that in most cities, manufacturing sectors offered employment almost exclusively to men.<sup>24</sup> Mothers and wives had to rely on acts of charity from organizations, relief aid from government agencies, and money sent to them from husbands and fathers in order to survive.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Grant, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Grant, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Will Kaufman. "The Regendered Civil War" in *The Civil War in American Culture*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). 100.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Boykin Chesnut. "Camden, S.C. May 2, 1865" in *A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chesnut, Wife of James Chesnut, Jr., United States Senator From South Carolina, 1859-1861, and Afterward an Aide to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army*. (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1905). 384. Quoted in Will Kaufman. "The Regendered Civil War" in *The Civil War in American Culture*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). 100.

<sup>24</sup> Rodgers, 114.

<sup>25</sup> Rodgers, 114.

While the stories of white women are often downplayed or misremembered in history, the experiences and roles of African American women are almost completely non-existent. Black women, especially those who were former slaves or lived in the South, endured the worst consequences of the war out of any other demographic. During the war and following Emancipation, black women struggled to form an understanding of identity much more than their white counterparts. Their race made them inferior to whites, and their gender made them inferior to men, putting them at the lowest position within the social hierarchies of both the North and the South. Black women did not fit the mold of white-washed ideals of femininity and womanhood, but their gender and race kept them dependent on black men and plantation owners for survival.<sup>26</sup>

Black women were confined by the restraints of both gender and race. Enslaved women bore the brunt of the War's effects; forced to choose between slavery or freedom. Those who couldn't afford to leave their families behind and stayed, while their partners fled to join the Union had an increased expectation of caretaking and labor, while those who followed their partners to war were met with very little enthusiasm.<sup>27</sup> Because of negative gender and racial stereotypes, work was extremely difficult to find, and black women on the Union frontlines were often victims of "flagrant and sadistic sexual abuse" at the hands of white Union soldiers.<sup>28</sup> The experiences of African American women both in the North and the South demonstrate the challenges that were brought about by the war, leaving them to try to understand their identities as blacks and as women. Their attempts to help the war effort in the North were often rejected and their status in the South confined them to physical and social submission. For black women during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the ideals of freedom were rarely guaranteed.

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<sup>26</sup> Grant, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Grant, 116.

<sup>28</sup> Grant, 116.

For the women on the home front, the Civil War meant re-examining their identities and traditional roles and adjusting to a new life in the absence of men, which was considered either a blessing or a curse depending on one's socioeconomic status and geographic location. For the women who were on the frontlines, gender dynamics and expectations were also altered. However, the chaos and sacrifice that constitute warfare was felt much more directly. While tending to mutilated and diseased soldiers, both Union and Confederate on-site and military hospital nurses and doctors undermined the previously held belief that women had no place in military hospitals or battlefields.<sup>29</sup> Volunteers made clothes by hand, washed and mended soldiers' uniforms and dressings, and collected food and supplies to be provided to troops. Women whose homes were located at the forefront of battle housed soldiers, stored supplies and ammunitions, and faced the threat of destruction or attack from enemy forces. Women even participated in battle and espionage alongside their male counterparts, acting as spies and disguising themselves as male soldiers. The typical and well-known roles of women on the battlefield are depicted by Winslow Homer's engraving, "Our Women and the War". In the illustration, women are seen doing the typical duties of female volunteers; including doing laundry and mending clothing, tending to the injured, and praying with a sick and dying soldier.<sup>30</sup> Despite the classic history of the American Civil War only recognizing the frontline efforts of female nurses and volunteers, modern research has made it evident that women had a much greater presence on the battlefield than what was previously believed.

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth A. Novara, Lauren R. Brown, Cassandra Berman, Trevor Wylie. "On the Front" in *Women on the Border: Maryland Perspectives of the Civil War*. (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, n.d.). <https://www.lib.umd.edu/civilwarwomen>

<sup>30</sup> Winslow Homer. "Our Women and the War" from *Harper's Weekly*, September 6, 1862. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum).



Winslow Homer. "Our Women and the War" from *Harper's Weekly*, September 6, 1862. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum)

Female nurses did not engage in battle themselves, but they witnessed the same horrors and carnage that soldiers did during the Civil War, and it was their responsibility to alleviate the sufferings of soldiers as best as they could.<sup>31</sup> In her book, *Hospital Sketches*, Louisa May Alcott describes her experience as a Civil War nurse, tending to wounded and sick soldiers. In one passage, Alcott discusses her efforts to comfort a dying soldier, recalling that "...He never spoke again, but to the end held my hand close, so close that when he was asleep at last, I could not draw it away. Dan helped me, warning me as he did so that it was unsafe for dead and living flesh to lie

<sup>31</sup> Novara, et. al. "On the Front".

so long together; but though my hand was strangely cold and stiff, and four white marks remained across its back, even when warmth and color had returned elsewhere, I could not but be glad that, through its touch, the presence of human sympathy, perhaps, had lightened that hard hour”.<sup>32</sup> Clara Barton, perhaps the most notable Civil War nurse, earned her nickname, “Angel of the Battlefield” by changing the way that nurses cared for wounded and sick soldiers.<sup>33</sup> Her efforts and initiatives to bring medical care straight to the battlefield despite the risk of physical harm embody the sacrifice and dedication of female nurses during the American Civil War.

While Civil War nurses embodied female gender roles as nurturers and caretakers, female soldiers embodied the anti-woman; dressing and acting like men, participating in violent conflict and murder, and involving themselves in the intelligence matters of warfare. The American Civil War is often referred to as a “brother’s war”, with the concept being that the war was fought between actual brothers, cousins, friends, and enemies, but that all were American men, which metaphorically made them brothers.<sup>34</sup> However, it has been discovered that between 400 and 750 females served as soldiers in the Civil War, which challenges the notion of a “brother’s war”.<sup>35</sup> Women who served in disguise as male soldiers may have done so to serve their country in the most honorable way, but most did it to escape the confines of femininity and traditional gender roles.<sup>36</sup> Disguising themselves as male soldiers allowed women to access the economic and social opportunities that were strictly reserved for men in the nineteenth century. Women were able to

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<sup>32</sup> Louisa May Alcott. *Hospital Sketches*. (Boston, MA: James Redpath, 1863). 64.

<sup>33</sup> “Clara Barton”. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Grant, 106.

<sup>35</sup> “Female Soldiers in the Civil War”. (American Battlefield Trust, n.d.).

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/female-soldiers-civil-war>.

<sup>36</sup> Kaufman, 105.

secure the power and independence that they were deprived of before the war, and many masked their identities long after the war in order to maintain their newfound empowerment.

It is evident that the American Civil War caused an upheaval of social constructs, especially in regard to gender and the ideals of nineteenth century femininity. Conflict not only appeared on the battlefield and in the political realm, it appeared in the realm of gender roles and identity as well. As a large number of American men left for war, women were left to maintain the domestic and social spheres, forcing them to adapt to changes in power, responsibility, and opportunities. Many women struggled with the shift in economic, political, and social dynamics, especially wealthy, white planter-class women, poor urban white women, enslaved black women, and newly freed black women; while other women, such as white, northern elite and middle class wives and daughters, enjoyed new opportunities and the expansion of gender roles. The experiences and contributions of women during the American Civil War are an important reflection of the confines that patriarchal society instill upon women, and of the indirect repercussions faced by civilians during periods of conflict. The American Civil War serves as a turning point in United States history and as an ideal period for the study of gender dynamics because of its revolutionary nature. It was at this point in time that women began to demonstrate a need for autonomy and independence and an ability to survive without complete dependence on men. The Civil War also demonstrates the intersectionality of race, gender, and class identities as enslaved women suffered the consequences of being both black and female in a white supremacist, patriarchal society. While the stories of women in general often get lost and forgotten, it is vital that modern examinations of history investigate how social dynamics impacted the lives of various groups of women, and how the experiences of those women reflect the values and beliefs of the societies in which they existed.

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