

EXAMPLE

Ordinary People Research Project

Mrs. Walden
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Women of the Civil War

Photographs



Primary Source: Mary Boykin Chesnut Diary Entry regarding Ft. Sumter

April 8th [[CHARLESTON, 1 861](#)]. Yesterday Mrs. Wigfall and I made a few visits. At the first house they wanted Mrs. Wigfall to settle a dispute. " Was she, indeed, fifty-five? " Fancy her face, more than ten years bestowed upon her so freely. Then Mrs. Gibbes asked me if I had ever been in Charleston before. Says Charlotte Wigfall (to pay me for my snigger when that false fifty was flung in her teeth), " and she thinks this is her native heath and her name is McGregor." She said it all came upon us for breaking the Sabbath, for indeed it was Sunday.

Allen Green came up to speak to me at dinner, in all his soldier's toggery. It sent a shiver through me. Tried to read Margaret Fuller Ossoli, but could not. The air is full of war news, and we are all so restless.

Went to see Miss Pinckney, one of the last of the old-world Pinckneys. She inquired particularly about a portrait of her father, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, which she said had been sent by him to my husband's grand father. I gave a good account of it. It hangs in the place of honor in the drawing-room at Mulberry. She wanted to see my husband, for " his grandfather, my father's friend, was one of the handsomest men of his day." We came home, and soon Mr. Robert Gourdin and Mr. Miles called. Governor Manning walked in, bowed gravely, and seated himself by me. Again he bowed low in mock heroic style, and with a grand wave of his hand, said: " Madame, your country is invaded." When I had breath to speak, I asked, " What does he mean? " He meant this: there are six men-of-war outside the bar. Talbot and Chew have come to say that hostilities are to begin. [Governor Pickens](#) and [Beauregard](#) are holding a council of war. Mr. Chesnut then came in and confirmed the story. Wigfall next entered in boisterous spirits, and said: " There was a sound of revelry by night." In any stir or confusion my heart is apt to beat so painfully. Now the agony was so stifling I could hardly see or hear. The men went off almost immediately. And I crept silently to my room, where I sat down to a good cry.

Mrs. Wigfall came in and we had it out on the subject of civil war. We solaced ourselves with dwelling on all its known horrors, and then we added what we had a right to expect with Yankees in front and negroes in the rear. " The slave-owners must expect a servile insurrection, of course," said Mrs. Wigfall, to make sure that we were unhappy enough.

Suddenly loud shouting was heard. We ran out. Cannon after cannon roared. We met Mrs. Allen Green in the passageway with blanched cheeks and streaming eyes. Governor Means rushed out of his room in his dressing-gown and begged us to be calm. " [Governor Pickens](#)," said he, " has ordered in the plenitude of his wisdom, . seven cannon to be fired as a signal to the Seventh Regiment. Anderson will hear as well as the Seventh Regiment. Now you go back and be quiet; fighting in the streets has not begun yet.

So we retired. Dr. Gibbes calls Mrs. Allen Green Dame Placid. There was no placidity to-day, with cannon bursting and Allen on the Island. No sleep for anybody last night. The streets were alive with soldiers, men shouting, marching, singing. Wigfall, the " stormy petrel," is in his glory, the only thoroughly happy person I see. To-day things seem to have settled down a little. One can but hope still. [Lincoln](#), or [Seward](#), has made such silly advances and then far sillier drawings back. There may be a chance for peace after all. Things are happening so fast. My husband has been made an aide-de-camp to [General Beauregard](#).

Three hours ago we were quickly packing to go home. The Convention has adjourned. Now he tells me the attack on Fort Sumter may begin to-night ; depends upon Anderson and the fleet outside. The Herald says that this show of war outside of the bar is intended for Texas. John Manning came in with his sword and red sash, pleased as a boy to be on [Beauregard's](#) staff, while the row goes on. He has gone with Wigfall to Captain Hartstein with instructions. Mr. Chesnut is finishing a report he had to make to the Convention.

Mrs. Hayne called. She had, she said, but one feeling; pity for those who are not here. Jack Preston, Willie Alston, the take-life-easys, as they are called, with John Green, " the big brave," have gone down to the islands volunteered as privates. Seven hundred men were sent over. Ammunition wagons were rumbling along the streets all night. Anderson is burning blue lights, signs, and signals for the fleet outside, I suppose.

To-day at dinner there was no allusion to things as they stand in Charleston Harbor. There was an undercurrent of intense excitement. There could not have been a more brilliant circle. In addition to our usual quartette (Judge Withers, Langdon Cheves, and Trescott), our two ex-Governors dined with us, Means and Manning. These men all talked so delightfully. For once in my life I listened. That over, business began in earnest. Governor Means had rummaged a sword and red sash from somewhere and brought it for Colonel Chesnut, who had gone to demand the surrender of Fort Sumter. And now patience we must wait.

Why did that green goose Anderson go into Fort Sumter? Then everything began to go wrong. Now they have intercepted a letter from him urging them to let him surrender. He paints the horrors likely to ensue if they will not. He ought to have thought of all that before he put his head in the hole.

Secondary Source: Women in the Civil War

Background

In the years before the [Civil War](#), the lives of American women were shaped by a set of ideals that historians call "the Cult of True Womanhood." As men's work moved away from the home and into shops, offices and factories, the household became a new kind of place: a private, feminized domestic sphere, a "haven in a heartless world." "True women" devoted their lives to creating a clean, comfortable, nurturing home for their husbands and children.

During the Civil War, however, American women turned their attention to the

world outside the home. Thousands of women in the North and South joined volunteer brigades and signed up to work as nurses. It was the first time in American history that women played a significant role in a war effort. By the end of the war, these experiences had expanded many Americans' definitions of "true womanhood."

Fighting for the Union

With the outbreak of war in 1861, women and men alike eagerly volunteered to fight for the cause. In the Northern states, women organized ladies' aid societies to supply the Union troops with everything they needed, from food (they baked and canned and planted fruit and vegetable gardens for the soldiers) to clothing (they sewed and laundered uniforms, knitted socks and gloves, mended blankets and embroidered quilts and pillowcases) to cash (they organized door-to-door fundraising campaigns, county fairs and performances of all kinds to raise money for medical supplies and other necessities).

But many women wanted to take a more active role in the war effort. Inspired by the work of Florence Nightingale and her fellow nurses in the Crimean War, they tried to find a way to work on the front lines, caring for sick and injured soldiers and keeping the rest of the Union troops healthy and safe.

In June 1861, they succeeded: The federal government agreed to create "a preventive hygienic and sanitary service for the benefit of the army" called the [United States](#) Sanitary Commission. The Sanitary Commission's primary objective was to combat preventable diseases and infections by improving conditions (particularly "bad cookery" and bad hygiene) in army camps and hospitals. It also worked to provide relief to sick and wounded soldiers. By war's end, the Sanitary Commission had provided almost \$15 million in supplies--the vast majority of which had been collected by women--to the Union Army.

Nearly 20,000 women worked more directly for the Union war effort. Working-class white women and free and enslaved African-American women worked as laundresses, cooks and "matrons," and some 3,000 middle-class white women worked as nurses. The activist Dorothea Dix, the superintendent of Army nurses, put out a call for responsible, maternal volunteers who would not distract the troops or behave in unseemly or unfeminine ways: Dix insisted that her nurses be "past 30 years of age, healthy, plain almost to repulsion in dress and devoid of personal attractions." (One of the most famous of these Union nurses was the writer Louisa May Alcott.)

Army nurses traveled from hospital to hospital, providing "humane and efficient care for wounded, sick and dying soldiers." They also acted as mothers and housekeepers--"havens in a heartless world"--for the soldiers under their care.

Women of the Confederacy

White women in the South threw themselves into the war effort with the same zeal as their Northern counterparts. The Confederacy had less money and

fewer resources than did the Union, however, so they did much of their work on their own or through local auxiliaries and relief societies. They, too, cooked and sewed for their boys. They provided uniforms, blankets, sandbags and other supplies for entire regiments. They wrote letters to soldiers and worked as untrained nurses in makeshift hospitals. They even cared for wounded soldiers in their homes.

Many Southern women, especially wealthy ones, relied on slaves for everything and had never had to do much work. However, even they were forced by the exigencies of wartime to expand their definitions of “proper” female behavior.

Slaves and Freedwomen

Slave women were, of course, not free to contribute to the Union cause. Moreover, they had never had the luxury of “true womanhood” to begin with: As one historian pointed out, “being a woman never saved a single female slave from hard labor, beatings, rape, family separation, and death.” The Civil War promised freedom, but it also added to these women’s burden. In addition to their own plantation and household labor, many slave women had to do the work of their husbands and partners too: The Confederate Army frequently impressed male slaves, and slaveowners fleeing from Union troops often took their valuable male slaves, but not women and children, with them. (Working-class white women had a similar experience: While their husbands, fathers and brothers fought in the Army, they were left to provide for their families on their own.)

A Women's Proper Place?

During the Civil War, women especially faced a host of new duties and responsibilities. For the most part, these new roles applied the ideals of Victorian domesticity to “useful and patriotic ends.” However, these wartime contributions did help expand many women’s ideas about what their “proper place” should be.¹

Statistic

Estimated number of white women widowed because of the Civil War: 200,000
(African-American widows were not counted)

Museum

<http://www.civil-war-museum.org/about.html>

¹ The History Channel, "Women in the Civil War." Accessed September 19, 2012.
<http://www.history.com/topics/women-in-the-civil-war>.