

The Main Reasons Why Union Women Joined the Civil War

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Professor Allan Lerner
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[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.¹

On April 12, 1861, at approximately 4:30 in the morning, Confederate gun shots rang out at Fort Sumter, a sea fort located in Charleston, South Carolina. These initial gun shots by the Confederacy developed into a battle between the Union and the Confederates (the North and the South) that would end up lasting two days, which would later be known and remembered as the Battle of Fort Sumter. This would also become the battle that started the American Civil War. The Civil War was fought for four years from 1861-1865 and it was between the North and the South. The war determined whether or not the southern states would receive independence from the rest of the country. Throughout the course of the war, more than two million men of military age fought for the Union, while less than a million men of military age fought for the Confederacy.² Women also fought in the war alongside the men as spies, nurses, and soldiers. There is a conservative estimate that the number of women who served in both the Union and Confederate armies is 250 by the time the war ended.³

I have constructed my paper in a way that solely focuses on why Union women decided to join the Civil War. I rely primarily on letters, memoirs, and other scholarly secondary sources such as books in order to obtain information relating to the means and motivation women had for joining the war. I focus on white Northern middle class women because there are more surviving artifacts and additional background information on them as a whole. A weakness of my research is that it may not be representative of every woman who fought, but it is representative of the ones who left behind evidence. Union women enlisted in the Civil War because they wanted to escape from the strict social norms society placed on them and they were patriotic.

In the nineteenth century, females had to be completely separate and different from the males in pretty much every aspect of life.⁴ Even at childhood, girls had to behave politely, be neat, and non-violent.⁵ Girls were to submit themselves to their father because he was the head of the household.⁶ As they grew up, women were allowed to partake in charitable, domestic, or salaried employment.⁷ Charitable employment included volunteering; domestic jobs meant housework, while salaried employment included working in a factory. In those days, society thought that the women should mostly engage in domestic jobs and activities.⁸ However, it was also ideal for women to become a teacher or even work as a nurse.⁹ Most middle class women took care of children, cooked, and cleaned the house.¹⁰ If women did work in a factory or as a similar salaried employee, they worked anywhere from fifty to eighty hours a week.¹¹ Despite the many hours women worked, they did not receive one fourth of the wages that men were awarded.¹² It was tough for working women because with all the hard working labor they endured, they still lived under miserable circumstances. Throughout this time, women were under men's control. Married women were not allowed to vote, they could not own property, and they had no legal rights.¹³ There were also a large number of women who did not even marry because of this reason, but even single women were dependent upon a male, whether it was a father or a male employee at a mill or a factory.¹⁴ There's no doubt a woman had it rough in this time period in comparison to today. Females were to act a specific way, allowed to partake in only a couple of jobs (with low pay), and had to submit to a male figure. Roles for women and roles for men were completely disconnected.

Escaping social norms was a main reason why women enlisted in the Civil War. Sarah Emma Edmonds is a great example of a woman who joined the Civil War to escape from social norms. Sarah felt at a very young age that her father favored boys more than girls which resulted

in a bad relationship between the two.¹⁵ As a girl, Sarah was given a book titled *Fanny Campbell, The Female Pirate Captain, A Tale of the Revolution!* The story was about Fanny Campbell, a girl who dressed as a man in order to run after adventures that she had always longed for. This book is what inspired Sarah to dress as a man in order to win her father over. At the same time, this book had also influenced her to escape from her father.¹⁶ She rebelled against society's ideas of what women should and should not do. Sarah became a marksman, hunted, and wore trousers.¹⁷ There was a time when Sarah was being forced to marry a man next door, but she was not interested in submitting herself to a man. Sarah left the Edmondson house shortly after hearing of a potential marriage with an old friend of her mother's.¹⁸ Sarah made even more of a transformation; she cut her hair short and sold Bibles in order to make a living.¹⁹ She would later enlist in the Union army. In *Memoirs of A Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army*, before Sarah headed to Washington to start her war experience she wrote, "While I stood there and beheld those manly forms convulsed with emotion, and heard the sobs of those whom they were leaving behind, I could only thank God that I was free and could go forward and work, and was not obliged to stay at home and weep."²⁰ Enlisting in the war suggests Edmonds was free from having to submit to her demanding father or even a husband for that matter. She was able to work in a way women were not allowed to work in, so she could further rebel from such social restrictions. Sarah later stated in the *Detroit Post and Tribune* that she had "some dormant antagonism toward man," and had a "hatred of male tyranny."²¹ She dressed as a man and volunteered in the war because she despised their authority, and that was one of the ways that she could flee from such cruel and oppressive rule by man. It's also likely that Edmonds joined the Civil War in order to get money, although she never stated anything of that sort in her memoir. However, there were applications signed by Edmonds for an

increase in pension.²² These documents proved that Edmonds wanted to gain even more money in the military because it was an even further form of rejection against how society viewed women. Edmonds was a woman who joined the war because it was an opportunity to go against America's view on women at this time.

Another woman who rejected such roles was Rosetta Wakeman. Wakeman was born and raised into a working class family, but obtaining money was definitely a struggle within their household.²³ Originally she had a job as a domestic, but in her early adult years, Wakeman dressed as a man and worked as a Chenango Canal boatman. Working as a boatman, she encountered army recruits who probably persuaded her further to join the war.²⁴ In *An Uncommon Soldier*, letters written by Rosetta Wakeman to her family, her first letter is written taking about her previous job as a boatman, "I work half a month for 4\$ in money."²⁵ Her third letter wrote "I got when I enlisted 100 and \$52 in money." She later wrote, "They promised to pay me when we get [a] month's pay. We have not got it yet. They gave me their note on interest. When I get it I will send it home to you and the family."²⁶ Wakeman worked as a boatman to acquire money so she could help out her family, if she had worked a job anywhere else dressed as a women, she would had not been payed such money. She later realized if she signed up for the war, she would earn even more money so she could send it back home to her family. In her first letter, Wakeman wrote about her meet with recruits, "When I got there I saw some soldiers. They wanted I should enlist and so I did."²⁷ Wakeman was probably peer pressured by the soldiers to join the war because they thought she was a man. During this time period, the public mocked and laughed at men who did not sign up for military service. The peer pressure Wakeman most likely experienced developed into an even bigger opportunity to for her to reject social norms than the job of being a boatman as a means to earn money. She too,

thought enlisting in the war was a great way of saying “no” to society’s restrictions on women. To Wakeman and many other women, they viewed domestic roles as restrictive.

Louisa May Alcott was another woman figure who joined the war because of society’s rigid roles. While different from actually dressing and living as a man and soldier, she sought to defy roles. Alcott was a part of the war effort when the war first broke out because she sewed and worked other production activities at that time.²⁸ In 1862, Alcott planned to travel to South Carolina as a teacher because of her early literacy career. She noted in her journal she was, “chosen to go from Concord before the word came that unmarried women were forbidden.”²⁹ She later wrote, “I offered to go as [a] teacher on one of the Islands but Mr. Philbrey objected because I had no natural protector to go with me, so I was obliged to give that up.”³⁰ Alcott was denied teaching unless she had a man with her to be her protector, because women had limited opportunities. As I had mentioned earlier women were to be under men’s control, either married or single. Alcott also wrote in her journal, “I long to be a man...” and “If I was only a boy I’d march off tomorrow.”³¹ It is clear that Alcott wanted to be a man because women could not do the things that men could unless they had a man by their side, and this is what prompted her to enlist in the Union army as a nurse. The only way for Alcott to oppose what everybody else wanted women to do, was to join the Union Army as a nurse. This way, Alcott could live a life with more freedom.

Not only did these three women reject this forced lifestyle placed upon them, there were many others as well. Charles H. Williams enrolled in the war because she was able to receive money that women could not obtain.³² Williams wanted money that females couldn’t get. Just like Rosetta Wakeman, Jennie Hodgers (Albert Cashier) was living as a man prior to the war, and a group of soldiers persuaded her to sign up for “three years or the duration.”³³ This too,

opened up an even greater opportunity and thus further rejected social norms. Lizzie Cook enlisted in the Union because she claimed the life of a woman was dull and she was tired of the “monotony of a woman’s life.”³⁴ Cook needed to turn away from women roles because life as a woman meant almost participating in nothing. There were too many limitations placed on women so the war was an opportunity to refuse those social norms.

There were quite a few women who joined the war as a means of rejection, but patriotism for their country was also another major reason. Women, of course, were not required to defend their country, so when they did it was a major sign of patriotism.³⁵ Women faced objection if and when they volunteered to fight in the war.³⁶ Thousands of women were patriotic even though they did not actually fight in the war. Many women displayed patriotism by providing supplies and clothing or even joined the war effort to become nurses, cooks, or laundresses. Women of the Union specifically fought in order to “preserve the Union” and fight against slavery.³⁷ Women had a strong sense of allegiance to their country during the civil war.

Sarah Emma Edmonds is also a good example of a patriot. In her memoirs, Edmonds was appreciative of the fact that she was, “permitted in this hour of my adopted country’s need to express a tithe of the gratitude which I feel toward the people of the Northern States.”³⁸ For her, joining the war was a way that she could show an appreciation for the North and its people as well. Edmonds was later interviewed about the patriotism she conveyed, saying it was, “a time for entire self-sacrifice, entire self-forgetfulness.” She later stated that she “could best serve the interests of the Union cause in male attire.”³⁹ She felt like she could offer herself into the war and fight a strong fight. It’s obvious she displayed an emotional attachment to the Union. Edmonds not only displayed patriotism just by signing up to join the war, but she said herself that she needed to sacrifice herself on behalf of all the Northern States.

Although Rosetta Wakeman was encouraged to join by soldiers, she displayed patriotism to the Union as well. In Wakeman's letters to her family back home, she once wrote, "I would like to see some of them Copperheads come down here and get killed. It would do me good to see it done."⁴⁰ Wakeman had so much devotion for her country that she was prepared to protect and defend it against the enemies. In an earlier letter, she admitted, "I like to be a soldier very well."⁴¹ This statement presented the idea that Wakeman had patriotism. She liked to be a soldier, so she had a strong love for her country. She had wanted the soldiers of the opposite side to perish and she enjoyed the life of being a soldier, a great sense of patriotism.

Mary Livermore showed a deep sense of patriotism as a volunteer to the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), which was a relief agency to support sick and wounded soldiers of the U.S. Army. Livermore had spent three years in the south at the Henderson plantation which she later claimed in her journal, "was to change and shape my future career."⁴² There she was taught more about history and literature from Mr. Henderson. Livermore witnessed cruelty and inhumanity that whites committed on slaves when being exposed to life on the plantation. After three years in the south, she returned to New England and then considered herself to be "a pronounced abolitionist."⁴³ Shortly after, Livermore played a part in the Civil War by being involved in the USSC. Near the end of her life, she wrote that sometimes, "war is God's missionary."⁴⁴ Experiencing the cruelty that was placed upon slaves directed Livermore to volunteer to help aid in the USSC. Stating she was against slavery made her act upon her beliefs by joining the USSC so that she could fight against the horror and pain that the slaves endured. She devoted herself on the Union side to fight against and try to rid the south of enslavement. Livermore felt so strongly about fighting against bondage that she claimed joining the USSC was all a part of God's plan. It was her mission from God, which made her such a patriot.

Experiencing all that she experienced in this time is what prompted Livermore to be a patriot and join in the USSC.

There were also a wide variety of other women who fought in order to express their patriotism to their country. Mrs. Black of Boston was placed on the draft by accident, but still showed up.⁴⁵ She showed patriotism because she wished to take position and fight in the war even though she was mistakenly enlisted. Mary Siezgle joined the war because she felt like she had to do “her share of fighting.”⁴⁶ She felt as if she owed it to her country. A nineteen year old girl from Brooklyn by the name of Emily wished to enlist in the war because she believed that she was destined to be the next Joan of Arc.⁴⁷ Emily thought that she could be the heroine of her country if she played a part in fighting in the war. Mary Brown volunteered to join the war because she had very strong views against slavery.⁴⁸ The strong views of Brown gave her willpower to fight against slavery, which was a means of being patriotic for the sake of the Union. Lou Morris enlisted and said her main reason for wanting to fight was because she was a nationalist; she later claimed that she would take part in another war if she given the chance.⁴⁹ Morris stated she would continue to fight because she showed a strong patriotic sentiment. A girl enlisted by the name of Charles Norton signed up for the war because she had a fascination for the war and aspired to fight in it.⁵⁰ She had ambitions toward achieving something for the Union. Mary Smith served in the war because she admitted she was “full of patriotism.” She also proclaimed she entered the military as a spy in order to, “serve my country perhaps importantly.”⁵¹ Smith yearned to enlist because she had such adoration for her country. There were a multitude of reasons why women decided to fight in the war, but the majority of women claimed that their main motive for enlisting was because they pledged loyalty to their nation and all that it stood for.⁵²

Northern women joined the Civil War because they wanted to break free from society's strict social norms and because they wanted to show their patriotism. There was no secret that life in the nineteenth century for women was far different than that of men. It was ideal for women to present themselves as obedient, modest, and have their center of attention be on family and the home. Women had very limited opportunities when it came to labor. Society encouraged women to participate in domestic activities such as taking care of the children and cleaning the house, but if they did engage in work outside of the house they were not paid as well as their male counterparts. Many women weren't happy with the social, legal, and economic restrictions placed on them in Victorian era America. Their main and easiest way to reject these ideals was to join the Civil War. Women also enrolled in the war because of their strong patriotism. Women displayed patriotism even if they did not sign up to fight in the battlefield. Real patriots of the war were women who actually volunteered to fight because it wasn't required of them by society, but they felt like it was their duty. The quote I presented at the beginning on this paper is from Mary Livermore's memoir published in the postwar years. Although Livermore failed to mention the specific cause's women had for joining the war, it's evident that women joined mainly because they wanted to break free from the roles society placed on them and or wanted to exhibit patriotism for their nation.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War* (Hartford: A.D. Worthington, 1888), 199-20.
 - ² Louis P. Masur, *The Civil War: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ix.
 - ³ DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 7.
 - ⁴ Mabel Collins Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 9.
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.
 - ⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.
 - ⁷ Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 200.
 - ⁸ Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman*, 3.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.
 - ¹² *Ibid.*, 2.
 - ¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.
 - ¹⁵ Sylvia Dannett, *She Rode With The Generals: The True and Incredible Story of Sarah Emma Seelye, Alias Franklin Thompson* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), 16.
 - ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.
 - ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.
 - ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.
 - ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.
 - ²⁰ Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 5.
 - ²¹ The Fort Scott *Tribune Monitor*, January 27, 1884; the Lansing *State Republican*, June 1900; the *Detroit Post and Tribune*, May, 1883.
 - ²² Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Application for Pension* (Civil War Trust, 1891), 1.
 - ²³ Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 36.
 - ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.
 - ²⁵ Lauren Cook Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18.
 - ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.
 - ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.
 - ²⁸ Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (Irvine: University of California Press, 2004), 11.
 - ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.
 - ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.
 - ³¹ *Ibid.*, 11.
 - ³² Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 37.
 - ³³ *Ibid.*, 39; "Female Soldiers," *Army and Navy Register*, 11 Feb. 1882.
 - ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41; "A Young Lady Eager to be a Soldier," (St. Louis) *Missouri Democrat*, 3 Dec. 1863.
 - ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.
 - ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.
 - ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.
 - ³⁸ Edmonds, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy*, 19.
 - ³⁹ "The Story of a Remarkable Life," *Detroit Post and Tribune*, 26 May 1883
 - ⁴⁰ Burgess, 37.
 - ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22.
 - ⁴² Livermore, vi.

⁴³ Ibid., ix.

⁴⁴ Ibid., v.

⁴⁵ Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 26.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 26. "Many Women Served," *National Tribune*, 17 Jan. 1935.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁵¹ Pauline Cushman, *The Romance of the Great Rebellion: Or, the Mysteries of the Secret Service* (New York: Press of Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1864), 9.

⁵² Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 42.

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