Title: Women’s Role in the War Effort

Grade Level: Elementary/Middle School

Objectives: Understand the role women played in the Civil War. Appreciate the ways in which museums use objects to study how people in the past did their jobs.

National History Standards:
Standard 2: Student comprehends historical sources; Standard 3: Student engages in historical analysis and interpretation; Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877); Standard 2B: Compare women’s home-front and battlefront roles in the Union and Confederacy.

Time: 45 minutes

Background:

Nurses, including men and several thousand women, worked in Union and Confederate military hospitals, caring for and comforting the wounded. Some were commissioned, many volunteered. Others were relatives of the wounded or members of private aid societies. They worked far behind the lines, struggling to keep patients washed and fed—with lemon juice, beef-tea, and milk porridge. They changed dressings and packed deep wounds with cotton lint. Often they could do little more than comfort the dying.

Confederate spies were often passionate amateurs. Many were women. Most had little trouble slipping in and out of Northern cities and Union strongholds. Sometimes they beguiled government or military officials to obtain information; other times they simply listened in on conversations in hotel lobbies—or bought the latest edition of the newspaper. Some were notorious, but most were never detected. Even those revealed to be spies were simply sent on their way; few were imprisoned.

Vivandières (pronounced vee-vahn-DYAIRS) were women—often officers’ daughters or wives—who accompanied and provided support to Union and Confederate regiments. They sold the troops tobacco, coffee, identification tags, oil lamps, hams—and whiskey. Vivandières did laundry and sewing, as well as cooking. They were quasi-military, often wearing skirted uniforms and sometimes drawing a salary from the regimental paymaster. The name and role of the vivandière originated with the French Army during the Napoleonic Wars; one woman was assigned to each regiment in order to reduce the numbers of women following the army.

Dresses and uniform National Museum of American History
Women’s Role

Printed cotton dress, heavily mended, about 1860

Brocaded silk dress, made in Paris about 1860

Vivandière uniform of jacket, skirt, and pants
Women's Role

Confederate spies were often passionate amateurs. Many were women. Most had little trouble slipping in and out of Northern cities and Union strongholds. They changed dressings and packed wounds with cotton, lint, cheese, beer- tea, and milk porridge. They washed and fed the wounded, and sometimes dressed wounds. They worked far behind the lines, struggling to keep up with the demands of the war. Many volunteered. Others were conscripted. Some were commissioned. The nurses, including men and several thousand women, worked in Union and Confederate military hospitals. They comforted the wounded and provided support to Union and Confederate regiments. They did the laundry and sewing, as well as cooking. They were quartermasters, the French Army during the Napoleonic Wars, one woman was assigned to each regiment in order to reduce the numbers of women accompanying her. She was named the regimental paymaster. The name Vivandières (pronounced veen-yair-ay) was given to the women. They were often officers' daughters or wives. Vivandières provided support to the army, keeping them supplied with food and ammunition. Women were often on the front lines, helping to care for the wounded and injured. Their work was often dangerous, and many lost their lives in the service of their country.

Women's Role

Nurses

The dying

They could do little more than comfort

They changed dressings and packed

Wounds with cotton, lint, cheese,

And fed the wounded as well. They

Worked far behind the lines, struggling
to keep up with the demands of the war. Many volunteered. Others were

Conscripted. Some were commissioned.

Nurses, including men and several

thousand women, worked in Union

and Confederate hospitals. They

comforted the wounded and provided support to Union

and Confederate regiments. They did the

laundry and sewing, as well as cooking. They were

quartermasters, the French Army during the

Napoleonic Wars, one woman was

assigned to each regiment in order to

reduce the numbers of women accompanying

the army. She was named the

regimental paymaster. The name

Vivandières (pronounced veen-yair-ay)

was given to the women. They were often officers' daughters or

wives. Vivandières provided support to the army, keeping them

supplied with food and ammunition. Women were often on the

front lines, helping to care for the wounded and injured. Their work

was often dangerous, and many lost their lives in the service of their

country.
“I was there to work, not to wonder or weep; so I corked up my feelings, and returned to the path of duty...”

—Louisa May Alcott, army nurse

Materials:
- Six copies of the object cards; two copies of each type of card
- Online Video—Eugenia Phillips, spy for the South in Washington, D.C. [link]
- Samples of the types of fabric dresses are made from (brocaded silk, cotton, wool which can be purchased at a local fabric store)

Lesson:
Warm-up:
Have the students list the ways they believe women were involved in the Civil War. List these on the board. Have a class discussion: Are each of the roles listed on the board accurate? Why? Why not? Introduce the three types of women you will examine in the lesson. Play Eugenia Phillips’s first-person account on the video and ask the class which category she falls into (nurse, spy, vivandière). Have the students present evidence from her story to support their conclusions.

Activity:
Divide the class into six groups. Assign each of the groups a “character”: nurses in two groups, spies in two, viandières in two. Distribute to the class the artifact cards with descriptions on the back, as well as the fabric samples. Have students “get to know” their character and carefully examine the clothes that each used to do her job. Have them make a list of the qualities of the clothing, why it’s important to their person’s role, and why it is important that the Museum collected them. Then have the groups that have the same kind of person compare notes and come up with a final list of characteristics and reasons. Then each of the now three groups should elect a group leader to make a report to the rest of the class on their person’s role, the clothing she wore to perform her job, and why it was important for the Museum to collect and display these clothes.
Bibliography

General

Section I: War of Independence

Section II: Wars of Expansion

Section III: Civil War

Section IV: World War II

Section V: Cold War/Vietnam

Section VI: September 11 and Its Aftermath
Americans at War, produced by The History Channel

An introduction to the themes of the exhibition

War of Independence
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- Lydia Minturn Post, Long Island housewife, 1776
- James Collins, teenage soldier, no date
- Doonyontat, Wyandot chief, 1779
- Elijah Churchill, recipient of the first Purple Heart, 1783

Mexican War
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- José María Tornel y Mendívil, Mexican secretary of war, 1837
- George Ballentine, English volunteer for the United States, 1853
- Juan Bautista Vigil y Alarid, acting governor of New Mexico, 1846
- Ulysses S. Grant, American soldier, 1885

Civil War
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- Louis Myers, Third West Virginia Infantry, 1862
- William G. Christie, Minnesota soldier, 1863
- Eugenia Phillips, spy for the South in Washington D.C., 1861
- Spottwood Rice, African American Union soldier, 1864

World War I
World War I Overview, produced by The History Channel

World War II
World War II Cartoons, produced by The History Channel
World War II Overviews in the Newsreel format, produced by The History Channel
- From World War I to World War II
- The North Atlantic and North African Theater
- The European Theater
- The Pacific Theater
The USO in World War II, produced by The History Channel
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- George Hynes, U.S. Army, a last letter home, 1942
- Robert Morris, U.S. Coast Guard, fighting in Italy, 1943
- Robert Sherrod, journalist, the beach at Tarawa, 1943
- Ann Darr, Women Airforce Service Pilots, 1997
- Daniel Inouye, Medal of Honor recipient, 2000

Vietnam
Excerpt from Huey Helicopter—Air Armada, The History Channel documentary, 2002
First-Person Accounts, produced by Arrowhead Film & Video:
- Hal Moore, commander of a Seventh Cavalry Regiment battalion, 2003
- Fred Castleberry, veteran of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division, 2002
- Clarence Sasser, recipient of the Medal of Honor, 2004,
  (produced by Pyramid Studios)