

Section III: Civil War



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 battlefield 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

Women's Role



Brocaded silk dress, made in Paris
about 1860

Women's Role



Vivandière uniform of jacket, skirt,
and pants

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“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.](http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/video/Lesson7.aspx)
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/video/Lesson7.aspx>
 - 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

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Section III: Civil War

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The Price of Freedom: Americans at War Teacher's Manual DVD Menu

***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 Mendivil, 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
- Spottswood 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)



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