After four years of seemingly endless battle between a divided nation, more than 600,000 people were killed. These lives, however, were not given in vain. Had it not been for the American Civil War, abolition may not have been carried out. The nation might have remained divided. Women might have remained confined to their roles as the "homemakers." Although the Civil War was fought in hopes of preserving the nation and ridding it of slavery, another war raged on within the depths of this war--the women's war. Serving as nurses both in the hospital and on the battlefields, women came to know a whole different world; a world outside of the home. When the last gun shot was fired, women were expected to return to their roles as the housewives. Some, however, had tasted the sweetness of being able to hold positions equal to that of their male counterparts and had become addicted. In this way, the American Civil War served as a significant turning point for the transformation of societal views concerning working women—particularly those in the field of nursing.

Prior to the Civil War, it was believed that a woman's place was in the home. Societal views held that women were to be the homemakers, while the occupations in the outside world were to be left to the men. "It was an age when women were preferred as angels rather than amazons, homemakers rather than careerists" (Donald & Randall 19). A woman's legal status was dependent on that of her father or husband, depending on whether she was married or not. As a result, a woman could not make any legal appearances in court or sign any legal papers without her father or husband present. The law also held that once a woman was married, all her property was to be turned over to her husband. Certain laws even made it nearly impossible for women to divorce their husbands. This being the case, most women were completely financially dependent upon men.

In a few cases, however, women began to advance towards equality with men. For example, around the early 1850's, elementary teaching increasingly became a feminine affair. Prior to the Civil War, Kentucky took partial steps to allow women suffrage. In this state, widowed mothers were allowed a limited vote in school elections. As early as the 1840's, modern women's colleges began to replace the older, "female academies" (Donald & Randall 20). For the most part, however, attempts at female advances—which were made in hopes of achieving equal footing with men—were unacceptable. At the World Anti-Slavery Conference in 1840, for example, women were only allowed to listen and observe behind a screen of the gallery in which the conference was held. Women were denied verbal participation because male leaders refused to speak on the same platform as them. To these men, it was a disgrace to speak on the same platform as the "inferior" gender.

Such denials of equal opportunity gave rise to advocates of women's rights. Women's rights activists, such as Abby K. Foster, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Angelina Grimke, were deeply disappointed that they could not have a voice in the World Anti-Slavery Conference. Like most female radicals during this time, these women were also advocates of the abolition movement. These women believed that the abolition and feminist movements went hand in hand together. If racial equality could be achieved, gender equality could also be accomplished. Mott and Stanton argued that women were deserving of the rights to vote and hold public office. Such arguments seemed ridiculous to the general public, as these rights were strictly reserved for white, property-owning males only. "Bennet of the New York Herald insisted that women's votes should be polled only at the tea table" (Donald 7 Randall 20). Most women of this era, particularly Southern women, also disapproved of female activists because they threatened the norms of society.
Not until the American Civil War was launched, did a woman's role in society begin to change in a way that could not have possibly occurred otherwise. The first gun shots were fired at Fort Sumter in 1861 only a month after President Abraham Lincoln's inauguration. Thus began the American Civil War, with the proslavery Confederate South on one side, and the antislavery Unionist North on the other. Almost every man in both the North and the South was called to aid their country in what would turn out to be one of the most vicious and bloody wars in American history. The North alone had called 75,000 state militia into federal service the day after the battle of Fort Sumter.

In spite of the heavy demands of the Civil War, the thought of allowing women to help ease the burdens of war was inconceivable. A number of women who ached to offer their services became frustrated with the notion that they could not assist their country in its time of need, simply because they belonged to the gender group which society labeled inferior. Caroline Kean Davis of Virginia expressed this frustration in her journal:

I have the greatest desire to be active and useful now. I sometimes wish I was a man that I might take my place among the gallant defenders of our rights instead of being contented to work in the sphere in which Providence has placed me. . . (Culpepper 38-39)

Davis was only one of many who wished that they were men, merely because being a man seemed to be the only way by which they could serve their country. Like Davis, Julie LeGrand also longed to assist the men at war. In her journal, she expressed her frustration with the subordinate roles women were compelled to live:

I can't tell you what a life of suppression we lead. I feel it more because I know and feel all that is going on outside. I am like a pent-up volcano. I wish I had a field for my energies. I hate common life, a life of visiting, dressing and tattling, which seems to devolve on women, and now that there is better work to do, real tragedy, real romance and history weaving every day, I suffer, suffer, leading the life I do. (Culpepper 39)

Women such as Davis and LeGrand yearned to contribute their help to the war effort, yet they were practically forbidden to do so purely because they were women.

Ignoring the "inferior" tag that society pinned on them, a number of women took advantage of the breakout of war to prove themselves worthy of holding occupations that were normally reserved for male workers only. Nursing became the number one profession through which women proved themselves valuable. Prior to the Civil War, nursing occupations had been heavily male-dominant, and the thought of allowing women to be nurses was absurd. The example of Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War shifted these views so that nursing gradually came to be seen as an occupation fit for women. It was believed that because women were gentler by nature, they made the best nurses. Many, however, believed otherwise. Those in opposition of female nurses believed that "the rough, masculine, and embarrassingly physical atmosphere of a military hospital was no place for a respectable woman" (McPherson 391).

Northern women were able to overcome these prejudices with the help of Surgeon General Hammond. In July of 1862, General Hammond ordered that at least one-third of the nurses in general hospitals had to be women. About 3,200 women thus served as nurses in the North during the war—one-quarter of the total number of nurses (McPherson 391). The Sanitary Commission became the primary agency through which Northern women aided the war effort. Although most of the paid help were men, majority of the volunteer workers who ran its 7,000 local auxiliaries, raised money to fund it, collected supplies, and worked as nurses were women. Women were willing to devote their services to the war effort, even if it meant not getting paid for doing the same work as that of male workers who did get paid.

Southern women, on the other hand, were not as successful in overcoming discrimination towards female workers. Both Southern men and women alike, deemed nursing a "man's job," which women had no business with. Theirs was a belief that the hospital was "no place for a refined, modest young lady" (Sullivan 151). As a result, Southern women who worked as nurses were often ridiculed. Women themselves accused female nurses
of lowering their modesty and dignity by entering a field which only men should be allowed in-the hospital. Kate Cummings was amongst those devout Confederate female nurses who were compelled to endure such ridicule. In response to the criticisms of other women, Cummings stated:

I have perhaps made a mistake as regards the meaning of the word modesty. As far as my judgment goes, a lady who feels that her modesty would be compromised by going into a hospital, and ministering to the wants of her suffering countrymen, who have braved all in her defense, would not rightly lay claim to a very large share of that excellent virtue-modesty. . . There is scarcely a day passes that I do not hear some derogatory remarks about the ladies who are in the hospitals, until I think, if there is any credit due them at all, it is for the moral courage they have in braving public opinion. (Sullivan 151)

Some women nurses were even begged by their families to return to their homes, as that was where they "belonged." Despite the heavy disapproval of society, Kate Cummings and other southern women such as Ella Newsom and Georgeanna M. Woolsey committed themselves to caring for and nursing the injured soldiers. After the Civil War, Woolsey described the burdens that women carried as a result of working as nurses:

No one knows, who did not watch the thing from the beginning, how much unfeeling want of thought, these women nurses endured. Hardly a surgeon of whom I can think, received or treated them with even common Courtesy. . . the army surgeons determined to make their lives So unbearable that they should be forced in self-defence to leave. It seemed a matter of cool calculation just how much ill-mannered opposition would be requisite to break up the system. (Culpepper 324-325)

The brevity of these women and their willingness to work in the face of mockery and opposition helped to save many wounded soldiers. Even more, their willingness to "[brave] public opinion" and carry on with their work of aiding the wounded and the dying, served as a tremendous example to those women who sat on the sidelines, believing those who said that they were worthless outside of the home (Sullivan 151).

Such opposition, no matter how cruel, did very little to hinder these female nurses' determination to prove their value outside of the home. Some women even went beyond the boundaries of the hospitals, following their men to the battlefield. Clara Barton, nicknamed the "Angel of the Battlefield," was amongst those who followed the men to their battles. Barton courageously stood by to provide immediate medical relief to the soldiers. In her diary, Barton defined her role in the war, stating, "My business is stanching blood and feeding fainting men; my post the open field between the bullet and the hospital" (Wright 209).

Mary Ann Bickerdyke was another whose assistance at the battlefields earned her a nickname. To the men she assisted, she was affectionately referred to as "Mother Bickerdyke" (McPherson 392). With help from Generals Grant and Sherman, Bickerdyke was able to overcome the gender discriminations of surgeons and high-ranking officers. She was one of the few civilians who were allowed to travel with General Sherman and his army. Moreover, she was one of the few who managed to earn the respect of General Sherman and the men which he led to war.

Cummings, Newsom, Woolsey, Barton, and Bickerdyke were only five of the over 3,000 women who served as nurses during the Civil War. "Thanks to their dedication and courage, the hospital experiences of thousands of soldiers were made more bearable. Thanks to these pioneers, nursing was opened as a career for women in America. . . " (Culpepper 315). Had it not been for these "pioneers," society might never have come to the realization that women were worthy of the same respect as men; that women were capable of many of the things that men were capable of; and that women were deserving of equal opportunity. Previous to the Civil War, the general American public--including both men and women--strongly felt that a woman's role was in the home. However, by the end of the Civil War, the views of many had been altered, particularly women. Women themselves finally came to see that they were capable of holding jobs outside of the home, and that they were not inferior to men. The Civil War provided a means for women to make this discovery and gave them the confidence to step up against gender discriminations. Although it would be over half a century before women
finally achieved suffrage and many other rights and privileges, the Civil War nonetheless sparked a fire in the hearts of many American women—a fire that would later lead them to fight for equal opportunity.

Works Cited


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