

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR



Above: Katharine Prescott Wormeley of Newport cared for sick and wounded soldiers and became 'Lady Superintendent' of Portsmouth Grove Hospital.

Left: Kady Brownell of Providence wears her self-made uniform.

Women and the war

At a time when female roles were limited, a few took active part in conflict

While most women were content to remain at home and to focus on the home and their families when their husbands went off to war, others took more active roles, some even hiding their gender to accompany their husbands to battle.



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There were women who became notable for the roles they or their husbands played in the Civil War. Mary Todd, the daughter of a prosperous merchant and banker in Lexington, Ky., met and married Abraham Lincoln in 1842. Mary's sister, Elizabeth, stated that Lincoln "was charmed with Mary's wit and fascinated with her sagacity — her will — her nature — and culture." The Lincolns had four children, all boys. Robert Todd Lincoln was the only son who reached full maturity. In 1861, they moved to the White House and lived there until the president's death on April 14, 1865.

Julia Grant, the wife of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, accompanied her husband at numerous times during the war. She was taken into custody by Confederate troops in Mississippi in 1862, probably the only wife of a major general ever to be. When Confederate Brig. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest became aware of her identity, he reportedly said, "Pass that woman through the lines, and waste no time." When Grant was at City Point, Va., for the long siege of Petersburg near the end of the war, she traveled there and made sure he frequently had "good home-cooked food."

Julia Ward Howe, a talented, independent-minded woman — poet, writer, playwright, preacher, lecturer and reform leader — spent much of her life at her Oak Glen country home in Portsmouth. She is best remembered for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in 1861. She traveled to Washington, D.C., met President Lincoln and visited military camps in the area. During these visits she heard a tune popular at the time, "John Brown's Body," celebrating his martyrdom for the anti-slavery cause. As she lay in her hotel bed early one morning, the words came to her:



Clara Barton tended to wounded soldiers on the front lines and later founded the American Red Cross.

The poem was first published in February 1862, was quickly put to the tune of "John Brown's Body" and became an unofficial anthem of the Union.

Clara Barton of Massachusetts became convinced it was her Christian duty to help comfort and care for Union soldiers. In August 1862, she obtained permission to administer to soldiers on the front lines. She performed her mission at several battles, including Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, Antietam and Fredericksburg. She became known as the "Angel of the Battlefield," and after the war founded the American Red Cross.

A good many other women played less prominent roles. Some accompanied their husbands to war and served to meet their needs as well as the others around them, often acting as unofficial nurses. Harriet W.F. Hawley managed to stay with her husband when he took command of the 7th Connecticut Regiment. When Pastor Stephen Barker joined the 13th Massachusetts Regiment, his wife became a nurse for the unit. Mrs. John A. Logan, the wife of an Illinois colonel, was able to find her wounded husband aboard the steamer New Uncle Sam and tended to him and other wounded men.

Mrs. John B. Turchin, wife of a

colonel in the 19th Illinois Regiment, accompanied her husband to war and served as a nurse. In a campaign in Tennessee, her husband became very ill. Veterans of the unit stated that she essentially took command of the unit for 10 days and briefly led it in combat.

The men of the 26th North Carolina Regiment noticed that Sam and Keith Blalock had a very close relationship. Keith explained that they had grown up in the same town and were distant relatives. The officers of the unit eventually discovered that Sam's real name was Malinda; she was Keith's wife.

Robert Brownell and his wife, Kady, lived in Providence at the outset of the war. When Robert enlisted in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment and the unit left for the nation's capital, Kady made her way there. Both took part in the First Battle of Bull Run, Kady serving as temporary color bearer. She also accompanied her husband later in the war with the 5th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery when the unit saw action in North Carolina. Kady served as nurse and standard bearer.

Newport's own Katharine Prescott Wormeley was one of the first women during the war to assist the Medical Bureau and Sanitary Commission in caring for sick and wounded soldiers. She was eventually named "Lady Superintendent" of Portsmouth Grove Hospital in Portsmouth. She accepted the position in August 1862, and was responsible for its "domestic management." The hospital came to be quite sizable, with 28 ward buildings and 60 patients per ward.

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