

Women's Contribution to the Cause

By Dan Brennan*

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A young woman named Lucy Wood confided to a friend that she had “nearly broken down” from exhaustion after devoting the previous month of May 1861 to making uniforms for the young men of her town who had volunteered to go off and fight a war of independence against the government of the United States. Lucy was not alone in her work. As thousands of men took up arms in the Confederate army, thousands of women supported the cause by forming volunteer ladies’ aid societies. These societies made uniforms, tents, leather goods (such as belts and cartridge boxes), socks, and many other items that the men in the army needed.

At the beginning of the war, many women produced company flags for their hometown men. These flags were unique, sometimes made from expensive silk shawls or dresses, and no two looked exactly alike. When a new company went into service, the local ladies carried out an elaborate presentation ceremony, officially giving the flag to the men. Many of these company flags were based on the Confederate First National flag pattern, commonly known as the Stars and Bars. Eventually, flags became standardized and were produced by the government rather than by women at home.

Another way that women supported the war effort was to work on government contracts. They got paid for each piece of clothing that they produced. An additional workforce came from the slave population. Catherine Edmondston, the wife of an army captain, organized some of her female slaves to sew tents, while she and her friends worked on uniforms.

Unfortunately, the Civil War lasted longer than just a few months. As the months turned into years, the ladies’ aid societies continued to produce items for the soldiers. But, at the same time, women had to cope with severe shortages of everyday items such as candles, cloth, cooking utensils, and sewing needles. Women had to relearn the age-old practices of spinning and weaving cloth to make up for the lack of mill-produced fabric.

Some women did not want to make homespun clothes for fear of affecting their high social standing. These women hated the idea that they had to make and wear homemade dresses. Even the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, became annoyed with this class awareness. He publicly announced to the upper-class women of the Confederacy that they needed to put their social status aside and behave like patriotic Southerners.

When the men went off to war, many women were left with the huge task of running the family farm or plantation. Most families in North Carolina did not own slaves. But those families that did faced great difficulty in running their businesses. At first, the Confederate Congress exempted, or excused from military service, overseers and owners. It passed a law known as the

Twenty Negro Law in October 1862. This law allowed one man to stay at home as long as he supervised at least twenty slaves. Some people became angry about this law and said the conflict had become a “rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight.” Eventually, exemption laws were changed, and all able-bodied men were called into the army for the rest of the war.

By the time the war ended, Southern women found themselves living entirely different lives than they had only a few short years before. War and deprivation had made them tough and bitter, yet self-reliant. Women had developed the ability to make their own decisions.

Farms were ruined, crops were destroyed, and the male population was severely depleted from battlefield losses and disease. Postwar life presented a grim prospect for all North Carolinians. And women faced the task of redirecting their energy from surviving four years of war to rebuilding their lives and their state.

**At the time of this article’s publication, Dan Brennan worked for the North Carolina Museum of History as an administrative assistant. He specialized in the history of the Civil War.*