

Sewing for the Confederacy

By R. Jackson Marshall III *

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 27:2 (spring 1988).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

In May 1861 North Carolina left the Union and joined the Confederate states. The men got together and drilled and marched and made patriotic speeches. The women got together and went to work to help the men prepare for war. Across the state, spinning wheels and looms were made ready for use in making thread and cloth. Raleigh women gathered in the basement of a Baptist church and made 1,500 mattresses, 600 towels, 400 shirts, 300 uniform jackets, 200 pairs of pants, and 200 haversacks for North Carolina's soldiers. In every community, the women prepared to do their part to win the war.

After the war began, the Confederate government could not make enough clothing for the soldiers in the army. The North Carolina legislature passed a law allowing the governor to create a quartermaster's department to supply clothing to North Carolina soldiers. The quartermaster made contracts with textile mills to make thread, yarn, and cloth. Then he made contracts with women in the state to make uniforms from the cloth made in the mills.

Sometimes North Carolina women organized "Soldiers Aid Societies." They gathered in homes and churches to sew uniforms and knit socks. They earned about \$3.00 for making an overcoat, \$2.00 for a jacket, \$1.00 for a pair of pants, 50 cents for each shirt or pair of sock, and 15 cents for a pair of underwear for the soldiers. With most of the men at war, these contracts soon became the only source of income for many families.

Women in the state worked hard making clothes for the troops. But the supply of clothing did not keep up with the thousands of North Carolinians going into the army. Governor Zebulon Vance worried that the North Carolina soldiers were going to suffer during the winter without enough clothing and blankets. In 1862 he asked the people of the state to help the troops. He wrote, "[T]he articles most needed . . . are shoes, socks, and blankets, though drawers, shirts, and pants would be gladly received. [I]f every mother in North Carolina would knit one strong pair of either heavy cotton or woolen socks for the army they would be abundantly supplied." Then he said, "[I]f you have anything to spare for the soldier, in his name I appeal to you for it. Remember when you sit down by the bright and glowing fire that the soldier is sitting upon the cold earth [and] shivering in darkness on the dangerous outpost." The women in the state did what the governor asked. They gathered extra clothing, and they cut up their carpets to make blankets. In the following months, the governor received hundreds of boxes of clothing from women across the state.

As the war continued, it became more difficult to make clothing for the army. By 1863 the machinery in the textile mills began to wear out. There was a severe shortage of cotton cards. Cotton cards were tools used to get cotton ready for spinning into thread. Because there was no

thread, there was little sewing. Without yarn, knitting was impossible. Uniforms were left unfinished because there were no buttons. The soldiers had to wait months before they received the clothing they needed. The governor received dozens of letters from women asking for supplies to make clothing.

Sacrifices were made again and again to provide clothing for the soldiers. The South ran out of men, food, and supplies. Finally, in April 1865, the Confederate states surrendered. The men put down their rifles and stopped fighting. The women put down their needles and quit sewing for the Confederacy.

*At the time of this article's publication, R. Jackson Marshall III served as research historian at the North Carolina Museum of History.