

# **“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”**

*The history and importance of Michigan’s Civil War Battle Flags*

## **The Civil War’s Impact on Women and Minorities**

The Civil War had a profound impact upon all sections of American society. The *conflict* between the states caused a number of significant changes in the lives of women, African-Americans, and Native Americans.

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### **Women in the Civil War**

Through their work as nurses, relief workers, and spies, women on both sides made invaluable contributions to the war effort. In the course of the war, almost 3,200 women nurses served on the battlefields of the north and south.<sup>1</sup> Dorothea Dix, appointed Superintendent of Women Nurses by President Abraham Lincoln in 1861, directed the training of hundreds of nurses for work in Union field hospitals. Many of these northern nurses became outspoken advocates for improving the medical care for wounded soldiers. Mary Ann Bickerdyke was one such nurse. Unafraid to argue with even the highest-ranking general, “Mother” Bickerdyke worked at nineteen different field hospitals between 1861 and 1865.<sup>2</sup> The poor conditions in Union field hospitals so outraged Clara Barton that after the war she led the campaign for the establishment of the American Red Cross in the early 1880’s. In addition to working as nurses, a small number of women on each side served as doctors. Very few women in the pre-war years were able to receive proper medical training, but the few who did performed admirably. As respect for women doctors grew, the number of institutions dedicated to the training of women in the medical profession grew. Both the Chicago Hospital for Women and Children and the New York Medical College for Women opened their doors in 1863.<sup>3</sup>

Women played pivotal roles in the many private relief societies established for the care of the soldiers at the front. These organizations established themselves quickly after the beginning of the war. By the end of 1861, a total of nearly 20,000 women’s groups were sending goods to their respective armies.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of one month in 1863, a group in Alabama sent to Confederate soldiers in the field the following:

- 422 shirts
- 551 pairs of underwear
- 80 pairs of socks
- 3 pairs of gloves
- 6 boxes and 1 bale of hospital goods
- 128 lbs. of tapioca
- \$18.00 for hospital use<sup>5</sup>

Similar organizations existed in nearly every state. In addition to sending supplies to the front, these aid societies often ran local soldiers’ homes and organized ceremonies welcoming home returning veterans.

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Women also contributed to the war effort as spies, scouts, or even soldiers for the waning armies. Michigan's own Sarah Emma Edmonds disguised herself as a man and fought in the Union army for nearly two years. She was one of approximately 400 women to do so during the war.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Van Lew of Richmond worked to smuggle Union POWs out of the Confederate capitol city. Rose Greenhow of Washington DC relayed information to Confederate leaders that proved instrumental in the southern victory at the first Battle of Bull Run. Harriet Tubman, famous heroine of the Underground Railroad, also worked as a scout for the Union army, despite the fact that the southern government offered a substantial reward for her capture.<sup>8</sup>

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### **African-Americans in the Civil War**

Upon finally receiving the opportunity to fight for their country, African-American soldiers demonstrated courage and bravery under fire. This fact was most evident during the attack upon Fort Wagner, Charleston, South Carolina, in July 1863. The assault was carried out by the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry, the first black regiment in American history.<sup>9</sup> The 54<sup>th</sup>, along with several white regiments, charged the fortress on 18 July 1863. It was a suicide mission. Under point-blank artillery fire, the Union attackers suffered 1,515 casualties; the southern defenders only 174. Nevertheless, the courage of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts exploded the prejudicial theory that African-Americans were unfit soldiers. By war's end, nearly 200,000 black recruits had entered the Union armed forces. They would fight in 449 engagements and prove beyond any doubt, their commitment to the Union cause.

African-American soldiers suffered casualties at a rate 35 percent higher than that of white soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Often the reason for this was the refusal of southern commanders to take black prisoners. According to the Confederate government, it was more proper to treat black soldiers as stolen property than as prisoners of war.<sup>11</sup> Therefore African-American soldiers, when captured, were often sold back into slavery, or worse, executed. One of the most brutal incidents of the war occurred at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on 12 April 1864. On that day Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who would later go on to found the Ku Klux Klan, executed almost 100 black soldiers. Similar massacres occurred during the battles at The Crater and Poison Spring.<sup>12</sup>

Civil rights advocate Frederick Douglass was one leader who intervened on behalf of African-American soldiers. In July of 1863 Douglass met with President Lincoln to discuss measures to protect black prisoners of war. Douglass urged the president to institute a policy of retaliation against mistreatment of Union prisoners.<sup>13</sup> The president feared that such a policy could set into motion a deadly cycle of brutality. However, the threat was made on 30 July 1863, and black soldiers did eventually receive recognition as prisoners of war.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this did not prevent massacres like the bloodshed at Fort Pillow.

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While at the White House, Douglass also asked the president to correct the injustices wrought upon African-American soldiers by their own army. At the time, black soldiers did not receive pay equal to that of white soldiers. They also had little chance of promotion. Lincoln pledged that black soldiers would receive equal pay before the end of the war and said that he would promote any soldier recommended by the Secretary of War.<sup>15</sup> By 1865, black troops were receiving pay equal to that of their white comrades and did have some, though not much, chance for promotion.<sup>16</sup>

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### **Native Americans in the Civil War**

Native Americans of the South and West fought the federal forces in an attempt to preserve their way of life. The Five Tribes had, in the thirty years since their forced exodus along the Trail of Tears to the Indian Territory (now the state of Oklahoma) finally succeeded in rebuilding their society. However, the coming of the Civil War brought division, and ultimately ruin, to their nation. From the beginning, agents from both sides lobbied the tribes for their support. Cherokee Chief John Ross advocated neutrality, but the tribes - Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole - decided to align with the Confederacy.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the war, the Five Tribes lost most of their new farms and as much as twenty-five percent of their population.<sup>18</sup> After the war the federal government forced the tribes to sign treaties with “war guilt” clauses, confiscated the western portion of their nation, and forced the tribes to allow railroads to be constructed through the section of Indian Territory that remained.<sup>19</sup>

In 1862, the Santee Sioux in Minnesota took up arms against the Union, but for a different reason. The Santee were a farming tribe whose land holdings shrunk with each passing year as a result of white settlement. As their reservation, and their ability to grow sufficient crops, grew smaller, their dependence upon government annuity payments grew. The tribe was already feeling the effects of hunger when in July 1862 they were informed that their payment would be delayed. The store on their territory was full, but its owner would not distribute his goods without payment.<sup>20</sup> This refusal created a tension that eventually boiled over into one of the bloodiest uprisings in American history and began a series of Indian Wars that would continue, at intervals, until 1890. The Santee, led by Chief Little Crow, rampaged across the state for nearly a month before meeting defeat at the battle of Wood Lake. Hundreds of Santee were taken prisoner and in December 1868, thirty-eight were hanged, the largest mass execution of Native Americans in U.S. history.<sup>21</sup>

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## **Notes**

1. Polly Zane and John Zane, American Women: Four Centuries of Progress. (Berkeley, CA: Proof Press, 1989), 42.
2. Glenda Riley, Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women’s History 1607—1877. (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan—Davidson, 1986), 122.
3. Riley, 124.
4. Riley, 122.
5. Riley, 122.
6. Riley, 124.
7. Riley, 124.
8. Zane and Zane, 43.
9. Robert Leckie, None Died in Vain: The Saga of the American Civil War (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 464.
10. Leckie, 464.
11. Leckie, 616—617.
12. Leckie, 617.
13. Douglas T. Miller, Frederick Douglass and the Fight for Freedom. (New York: Facts on File, 1988), 104.
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17. James Wilson, The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America. (NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), 268—269.
18. Wilson, 269.
19. Wilson, 269.
20. Wilson, 1862
21. Wilson, 272.

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