

The Nurse, The Soldier, The Spy: Three Women of the American Civil War and the Primary Sources They Left Behind

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A portrait shows a sturdy-framed soldier with a dark Union jacket and turned-out toes in large boots holding a gun. Completing the uniform are baggy pants indicating shortness and lack of proper tailoring. A flat-topped hat typical of a Civil War soldier rests over slightly protruding ears. Small eyes below the hat's brim are light, flanking a distinctive Roman nose. The mouth is down-turned, crooked, and hugged by the shading of handsome cheek bones. A glance at this photo would not reveal anything out of the ordinary. But with further examination this soldier, Private Lyons Wakeman, in personal letters to family members, is revealed to be a woman.

A closer look reveals a feminine shape - a large bosom held tightly by gold buttons, but the waist of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman is still visible. The cheek bones become feminine, the eyes softer. Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, along with thousands of other young Americans, lost her life during the Civil War. The only difference was her gender.

Women in the Civil War fought alongside their husbands, brothers, and betrothed. They tended the wounds of strangers and friends and spied on the enemy with unprecedented secrecy. Their role in the Civil War was defined and strong. Many Americans are oblivious to the fact that women were active participants in the Civil War, in secrecy as well as in visible action in the roles of soldiers, nurses, and spies. The fact that most of them did their duties in secret makes them endearing patriots in our country, regardless of which side they fought. Sarah Rosetta Wakeman fought as Pvt. Lyons Wakeman for the Union army. Belle Boyd was a self-made spy for the Confederates. Cornelia Hancock nursed the brutal wounds of battle. These three women represent a fraction of the women involved in the Civil War, but their personally documented accounts are what makes them unique. These three women were chosen for this paper because they each provided detailed primary information about their lives during the war itself, be it through letters as with Hancock and

Wakeman, or a memoir in Boyd's case. Wakeman's letters are the only known in existence to highlight a woman soldier's time while enlisted.

Life for these women was often short or scarred. But their patriotism and dedication should not be forgotten in the history of this war. It is important to remember who they were and what they did. This is made easier by Wakeman, who sent letters about her time as a soldier to her family. These letters were preserved in her relative's attic for over a century. During the Civil War, the government did not censor letters and this enabled Wakeman and others to write about their experiences with no hesitation. Cornelia Hancock wrote letters as well, but ordered a bundle of them to be burned on her return from war. Hancock's letters are strikingly different from those of Wakeman's, whose lack of education is quite clear in her erratic spellings, lack of punctuation, and confusing sentence structures. It is charming as well as enlightening to note the differences. Wakeman's letters are no less valuable because of their grammatical errors. In fact, they add to her character and give a contextual background to the kind of education available to women in the nineteenth century.¹

While letters served as important documents, one woman involved with the war wrote a memoir, proving equally as valuable. Belle Boyd wrote her memoirs shortly after the war ended. It was printed in 1865 in New York and was followed by a tour around the country in which Boyd spoke to veterans and interested groups. She billed herself as "Cleopatra of the Secession" and sizable crowds attended her events. She was brave enough to speak of her multiple arrests and her time in prison as well.²

¹ Cornelia Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse: Cornelia Hancock, 1863-1865*. Edited by Henrietta Stratton Jaquette. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), xx; Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers*. Edited by Lauren Cook Burgess. (Pasadena, Maryland: The Minerva Center, 1994), xi.

² Larry Eggleston, *Women in the Civil War: Extraordinary Stories of Soldiers, Spies,*

It is important to understand why these women were unique to their time. Women in the nineteenth century were considered the lesser sex. Strangely, it was seen as shameful for a woman to don men's clothing and do men's work. It was not socially acceptable for a woman to do hard labor, even though they maintained their own households and helped with agricultural endeavors. Women were expected to be dignified creatures, dependent on men to live their every day lives.

Union records show around 5,600 women called themselves nurses during the Civil War. Although history will never know the exact number of women who fought as soldiers, it is estimated that four to seven hundred put on a man's uniform for both sides of the conflict. It is also unknown how many female spies were active in the war, but a few dozen are estimated. The impact of the actions of women as a whole on the war may never be known, but it is clear that they were not idle citizens. However, women of the nineteenth century were not intended for these roles.³

The typical woman of the Civil War era was in charge of running her household, if she was lucky enough to be married. Poor women worked as laundresses, seamstresses, or in the fields of their fathers, as did Wakeman before she joined the army. Middle class women were nurses, like Hancock, or midwives and mill workers. The upper class, particularly in the South, like Belle Boyd, had plantations to help run. They controlled the workings of the household and took care of slaves and children.

The three women in which this paper focuses are different for several reasons. First, they were literate. Secondly, they were active in an event full of political and other "manly" endeavors - something not encouraged for women of their time. War was not seen as a place

Nurses, Doctors, Crusaders and Others. (McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers: Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 2003), 92-96.

³ Mary Gardner Holland, *Our Army Nurses: Stories from Women in the Civil War.* (Edinburgh Press: Roseville, Minnesota, 1998), ii; Eggleston, *Women in the Civil War*, 2.

for women. They were supposed to be in their homes, in the fields, in the factories, and out of sight. These women were different from their archetypes because they became active in the political and war activities of the time. The 1848 Seneca Falls convention that produced "The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" showed how women were treated before the war:

"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice. He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men--both natives and foreigners. He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead. He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns."⁴

This is just a fraction of the charges the early feminist movement came up with. The full text reveals a harrowing reality: that women in the nineteenth century had few rights and fewer opportunities to help their country, even though help was desperately needed. With primary sources scarce, it is remarkable to find three women who have such detail in their stories. Wakeman, Hancock, and Boyd tell the story of women no longer under a man's thumb.

These three women, though their stories are different, served an important role in the Civil War. They reminded Americans that women were not just wives waiting for their husbands to return. They were active citizens with interests in the war and its outcomes, something women were not traditionally expected to do. While the major players were the men involved, without the involvement of women, the impact of the war on the nation might have been very different. It is key to understand why each of these women did what they did. Their bravery was incomparable, their patriotism blatant, and their lives extraordinary.

⁴ Wayne Franklin, ed., *American Voices, American Lives: A Documentary Reader*. (W.W. Norton & Co.: New York: 1997), 417-430.

Cornelia Hancock: The Nurse. Nurses before the Civil War were mostly men. When the war called for men to enlist it was as soldiers and not as nurses. The role of nursing changed to include women, and it was at that time that the duties of the female nurse changed. Nurses in the nineteenth century were often thought of as surrogate mothers: men relied on them for every-day care, company, and a woman's touch. The use of nurses as medically trained individuals is often overlooked. Usually it was the doctors who performed everything medically related. Most often nurses were used as entertainment for the wounded: they read to soldiers in their sick beds and comforted them but provided no real care. The soldiers dictated letters for them to write, the nurses sang to the soldiers, changed their bedding, and developed maternal relationships with them to make them feel at home. During the Civil War, however, the nurse's role changed because of the huge numbers of wounded and sick. As the number of injured grew, war nurses grew more important. They typically had three duties: to feed the men a proper diet, care for their physical needs, and help the soldier mentally and spiritually. Along with this, they were faced with brutal and disturbing daily responsibilities and charged with providing medical care they knew little about.⁵

Once it was clear that these women could actually provide care the soldiers desperately needed, their roles changed drastically. Cornelia Hancock, who was originally told at the age of twenty-three that she was too young to be a nurse, wrote letters to her family describing her time as a Civil War nurse. Hancock was an army nurse for the Second Corps Hospital at Gettysburg. She described her decision to go to war: "After my only brother and every male relative and friend...had gone to the War, I...came to the conclusion that I, too, would go and serve my country." Hancock's desire to serve was helped by her brother-in-law, Dr. Henry T. Child, who was a doctor in Philadelphia. He summoned her on July 5, 1863, just days after the Battle of Gettysburg. Dr. Child wanted Hancock to accompany him to the makeshift hospital.⁶

⁵ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, viii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-6.

First, however, Hancock had to be inspected by Dorothea Dix, who was appointed Superintendent of Women Nurses in June 1861 and became one of the most famous nurses in the Civil War. Dix looked over the volunteers and had a specific requirement: "No young ladies should be sent at all." Therefore Hancock was denied on the spot. Dix thought it "indecorous for angels of mercy to appear otherwise than gray-haired and spectacled." Hancock was determined, however, and got on the train without permission, ignoring threats to be forcibly removed. When the car full of nurses arrived at Gettysburg, it was obvious she was needed. There were too many injured and not enough nurses. Her age was no longer an issue.⁷

Gettysburg was not an easy place to begin nursing. Every building in the small town had been converted into a makeshift hospital because of the huge number of wounded. Hancock got her first glimpse of war in a church where hundreds of injured men lay on boards covered in straw, the boards stretched over the high back of the pews so that they were almost eye-level with their caretakers. Most of their wounds had not been tended to. They were dying rapidly. Hancock's first task was to go from soldier to soldier with a pencil, paper, and stamps to write letters from the soldiers to their friends and families. Though she did not enjoy it, Hancock "penned the last messages of those who were soon to become the 'beloved dead.'"⁸

Hancock seemed to manage this depressing task well, but the morning sun brought a new horror: the stench of unburied dead. "At every step," she wrote in a letter home, "the air grew heavier and fouler, until it seemed to possess a palpable horrible density that could be seen and felt and cut with a knife." Hancock saw dead

⁷ Alden Whitman, ed., *American Reformers*. (H.W. Wilson Company: New York, 1985), 243; Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 3-4.

⁸ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 5.

bodies in piles after one of the worst battles in American history. She and her fellow nurses were reassigned to the field hospital outside the town, closest to where the battle was fought. As the women made their way to lend what little help they could, Hancock noticed bodies strewn in their path. Men who were still alive yet shot in the head and considered a waste of hospital space were left to die in the fields in piles according to the severity of their wounds. The piles were created by the surgeons, whose job it was to determine who was worth saving. Even those who were deemed worthy of medical attention were thrown in a pile to wait. The beds were full, the surgeons backed up, and the wounded were sorted like dirty laundry.⁹

The surgeons were too busy to teach Hancock anything about nursing. Her lack of expertise was frustrating to her, and as she watched the surgeons she felt "helpless." No one paid attention to the women in her task force who were scattered among different groups of dying soldiers. They barely had time to talk amongst themselves. No one gave them orders or answered questions. Hancock took it upon herself to serve the men bits of bread with jelly she had found and "milk punches" after locating a truck filled with condensed milk and alcohol. Seeing the men eat brought her happiness: "I had the joy of seeing every morsel swallowed greedily by those whom I had prayed day and night...to serve."¹⁰

Gettysburg was just the beginning for Hancock. In a letter to her cousin she described her circumstances. She was a woman in a man's world - the surgeons, the soldiers, the dead, the volunteers all were men. She wrote of the daunting task of finding hard-tack from the Sanitary Commission and Christian charities. Her bravery was evident. She was soon the only woman within a half-mile radius and after two days on the field she was finally introduced to the head surgeon of the post, but did not spend much time with him. Hancock observed that of the four surgeons at the camp, none were idle for more than fifteen minutes at a time. They were constantly performing amputations, and afterward Hancock fed the soldiers. She did not mind the blood, but when they asked her to write letters to their wives,

⁹ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

“that I cannot do without crying.” Constantly searching for ways to make the men more comfortable, she asked her cousin to send a newspaper for the bedridden men. And while anxious for news, they were not all anxious for treatment. Hancock reported that many men said, “Help my neighbor first he is worse,” as a show of “Christian fortitude.” Their prayers echoed through the stinking camp, in hopes for “God to take them from this world of suffering.”¹¹

In the camp, Hancock’s living quarters were practical. She had a bunk and a tent, a bed of four sticks and pine boughs with blankets. The government bought her a uniform to wear, but she did not have anywhere to bathe, describing herself as “black as an Indian and dirty as a pig.” When Hancock grew ill, she was “treated as a princess” in a hospital tent and her care was so good she was back to work the next day. She described a lack of sheets and certain foods like butter and rusk, yet the charities sent too many bandages. These observations might not have seemed important to her while she wrote them, but now this data reveals a side of the war that we may never have known. Hancock’s simple letters describing what she did every day and the types of things the camps needed provided much more than a typical war report. She was describing the people, the places, the things: the human side of war, and the aftermath of battle. Her letters home are now a treasure.¹²

In a few months, Hancock was installed at the General Hospital instead of the Corps Hospital, a change she appreciated. Her pay was twelve dollars a month which she generally used for washing her clothing and bedding. Working only during the day, Hancock described long hours and blisters on her toes. Her patients called her “Lady-nurse” and took kindly to her, especially when she had looked after their friends before. Hancock even won inspection prizes, though she does not describe the competition, she adds that “sheets were

¹¹ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 8-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10, 12.

most valuable," and that she kept her soldier's bedding clean.¹³

Hancock stayed with the men she first encountered at Gettysburg until they were well. The men in her care had not yet left their beds in the middle of August and the battle was fought in early July. She had a few favorite men who she described lovingly but never romantically. She did not seem to have romantic encounters with any of them, staying professional the entire time. Most nurses reported the same, that the men did not approach them with any advances. But it is true that some, like Hannah Moir, found love in the hospitals. As was common, Hancock wished to care for her original patients from Gettysburg until they were "on their way to heaven or home." Hancock helped with physical therapy, taught the men to use crutches and commented on their unusual patience, "they are jolly even, for the most part."¹⁴

Hancock's experience at Gettysburg revealed an endearing part of American history: through the brutality of war and one of the bloodiest battles in recorded history, the soldiers in her care were polite, respectful, and grateful for her help. She did not once mention a negative comment or a sexual remark. Hancock wrote of leaving her tent open at night, letting the wind sweep her hair and cool the hot bed she slept in. Not once did a man try anything with ill-will toward her. Hancock herself seemed surprised by this, and it is evident that she became determined to take care of these men, perhaps because of the great amount of respect they had for her, shown here through a glimpse of modesty. After being complimented by a soldier she responded, "If people take an interest in me because I am a heroine, it is a great mistake for I feel like anything but a heroine." Her tenacity was appreciated by the men under her care.¹⁵

On July 21, 1863, a soldier who was in Hancock's care wrote to her. He addressed her as Miss Hancock and apologized for writing her: "You will please excuse a Soldier for writing a few lines to you to express our thankfulness." The soldier wrote to inform Hancock of his

¹³ Ibid., 18, 21.

¹⁴ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 21-22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

happiness in seeing a woman at the camp, and of regret in not being able to pay her for her services. Hancock's kindness is evident from the soldier's first-hand account. He told her she would never be forgotten, and they (presumably friends of his who also received her care) think often of her kind acts. It is without a doubt that Hancock had several admirers, and this particular soldier signed his letter "your sincere friend."¹⁶

It is through these letters that historians are able to understand Hancock's life. As a woman in the Civil War, Hancock was appreciated and important, something that might have been overlooked. Although she does mention stress in the relationships between the male surgeons and herself, her role as a nurse was key to the survival of many and it is clear she was needed. Undoubtedly, the tension between the nurses and surgeons was complicated; they were all under a great deal of pressure and politeness was most likely forgotten in times of great stress. While many nurses wrote letters, Hancock is one of the only women whose letters remain intact. It is easier to document her experiences than many other famous Civil War nurses. The letters make it clear how the men felt about Hancock. A dying soldier's mother visited him before his death. As the soldier's last wish, the grateful woman gave Hancock one hundred dollars. Hancock said: "I shall never forget it...He was a splendid looking officer and died a Christian death." It is through Hancock's emotional letters and stories that the historian can decipher her importance in the war.¹⁷

While it is true that not all nurses had a positive experience and many were deeply disturbed by the terrors of battle, Hancock seemed completely in her element. She even called taking care of the soldiers a "pleasure." She also revealed a side of the injured that is not always evident: that they were emotional, distressed men with death at their door. She described their ability to adapt to poor

¹⁶ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 13-14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

facilities: "I am writing this in the hospt.(sic) it is in a Methodist church, not a spot on the floor but a wounded hero is lying. They complain very little although they lie on the hard boards."¹⁸

Hancock's description of the wounded men is not pleasant, but it is vital to the history of medicine and the war. It is clear she was saddened by much of what she saw, especially as emotional connections with the wounded were made. "I saw one of my best men die yesterday. He wore away to skin and bone, was anxious to recover but prayed he might find it for the best for him to be taken from his suffering. He was the one who said if there a was a heaven I would go to it. I hope he will get there before I do."¹⁹ For so many soldiers, the last human connection they had was with their nurse. Even in their darkest hours, they had people caring for them.

Hancock's letters are an invaluable part of Civil War history. They reveal the personality of the soldier, the endearing passion of a young nurse, and the brutality of war. Without the efforts of nurses, the fate of many who survived the brutal war might have been much different. Hancock was, in every sense of the word, a hero. Although different from the heroes of battle, Hancock proved her worth by taking on the duties that many would have found unbearable. Her powerful letters are a testament to her bravery and confirm that the Civil War was a bloody, Godless thing, and few angels existed in the darkness.

Sarah Rosetta Wakeman: The Soldier. On the battlefields and in the hospitals, women were disguised as soldiers. This dangerous act was not well documented because of the secrecy surrounding it and therefore any primary evidence of female soldiers is rare. Because letters were not censored, Sarah Rosetta Wakeman wrote of her unique experience as a private in the Union army. Though listed on the roster as Pvt. Lyons Wakeman, the five-foot, blue-eyed soldier was a handsome young farm girl from New York

¹⁸ Hancock, *Letters of A Civil War Nurse*, 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

State. She fought, marched, and died in disguise as a male soldier.²⁰

Wakeman was poor. She was the daughter of yeoman farmers in central New York, and her grammar and spelling skills as represented in the letters she wrote are surprisingly good for someone who did not receive a formal education. They accurately portray the literacy skills of a poor woman from the nineteenth century. Wakeman joined the army for unknown reasons. It can be assumed the main reason for her enlistment was money, as soldiers were paid a larger wage than she could have earned as a yeoman farmer. Wakeman was no stranger to pretending, especially for cash. Before joining the military, she cross-dressed as a boatman on the Chenango Canal. She was known there, too, as Lyons Wakeman. Lyons Wakeman's identity started before the war did.²¹

In 1862, when Wakeman joined the Union army, the war had been gruesomely escalating for over a year. The Battle of Shiloh was over, and the number of bodies that went home was alarmingly high. The Union needed more troops. President Abraham Lincoln called on state governors to recruit, asking for 300,000 reinforcements in the form of volunteers. When Wakeman joined, she received \$152 for enlisting. She sent every dime to her family, asking them to "spend it for the family in clothing or something to eat" because she could "get all the money" she wanted.²²

Even in her first letter home, it was obvious Wakeman knew the dangers of war. She questioned whether or not she would return home, and asked her family to keep all of her things for her in case she ever did, particularly to keep the spotted calf she was so fond of. Her letters are peppered with apologies. It seems that before she left

²⁰ Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies*. (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 191.

²¹ DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 37.

²² Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 17-18.

for the Canal, Wakeman had a falling out with her family. She apologized to her father in her first letter home, and to her mother in the second letter saying: "I want you should forgive me of everything that I ever done, and I will forgive you all the same." Wakeman never specified what issues she had with her family, nor wrote of her past life, but the description of the life she had as a soldier is vivid.²³

She described cold weather and frozen ground, but being warm in the tents surrounded by her fellow soldiers. Wakeman was in the front lines, and wrote home about the fear of being the first to face the enemy. She sent to her father: "It would make your hair stand out to be where I have been. How would you like to be in the front rank and have the rear rank load and fire their guns over you (sic) shoulder?" Her fear was evident, and her affection for her family is clear. Wakeman wrote of sending them gifts, money, and a "likeness" (picture) of herself. Her younger siblings received individual letters, written carefully by Wakeman in a simpler prose than the letters to her father and mother.²⁴

Wakeman's letters, much like elements of Hancock's, are sad. Although both women described the war with a certain fear and disgust, Wakeman was often pessimistic about her return home. In February 1864, Wakeman wrote to her father to tell him her regiment's latest orders: travel to Texas. She ended it with this: "I bid you all good-by. Don't never (sic) expect to see you again." She signed the letter with one of her many aliases, Edwin R. Wakeman, perhaps to disconnect herself emotionally from the content. After all, if she could pretend to be someone else, would it not have been just as easy to pretend she was not afraid?²⁵

Wakeman did not write much of the battles, but more of her own health, mentality, and homesickness. When she did write of battle, she revealed a palpable fear. Wakeman was in the front lines during the Battle of Pleasant Hill fought on April 9, 1864. The Battle was part of the failed Red River Campaign led by Major General

²³ Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

Nathaniel Banks in Louisiana. Wakeman survived the battle and was not wounded, but wrote to her family of her experiences, calling them by their titles: "Mother and Father, Brothers and Sisters." She lay on the battlefield all night, listening to the dying soldiers cry. Her friends in her unit were wounded. Some were dead. And yet Wakeman was still hopeful for a return home, and full of prayer: "I feel thankful to God that he spared my life and I pray to him that he will lead me safe through the field of battle and that I may return safe home." God had other plans for Wakeman. This was her last letter.²⁶

After the Battle of Pleasant Hill, it was clear the Red River Campaign would fail. The Confederacy gained ground in the tactical side of the war, and the Union officers in Texas were desperate for supplies and troops. Although Wakeman did not record what happened next, it is known that her unit was ordered to march to Alexandria, Louisiana. The Confederates were closing in on them, attacking the 153rd New York's rear guard. The Confederates followed them the entire seventy mile journey, never allowing a full on attack to materialize, frustrating the Union troops who did not know if or when they would stop marching. The forces became paranoid, morale was low, and the physical toll on the soldiers was slowing them down.²⁷

Louisiana's climate was starting to affect the troops. The few times they stopped to eat, the food only caused illness. The lack of sleep, the mosquitoes, the heat, and the closeness of their quarters made sickness inevitable. Like so many other Civil War soldiers, Wakeman did not die in battle. She was admitted to the 153rd Regimental Hospital on May 3, 1864, with the most deadly disease of the Civil War, chronic diarrhea.²⁸

²⁶ Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 71.

²⁷ Gary Dillard Joiner, *One Damn Blunder from Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2002).

²⁸ Harris S. Beecher, *Record of the 114th Regiment, New York State Volunteers*. (Norwich, New York: J.F. Hubbard, Jr., Publisher, 1866), 336.

Wakeman was transferred to the Marine U.S.A. General Hospital in New Orleans, but the trip, which usually took five days, took fifteen because Confederate troops destroyed the river transportation. Wakeman's situation only worsened on the journey to the hospital, but once she arrived, she lived for a month. It is surprising that her secret was not revealed by the nurses and doctors attending to her. Maybe active bodies were so desperately needed to fight, it no longer mattered to the Army whether they were male or female. Perhaps they had no reason to disclose the truth as it must have been obvious at that point that Wakeman would not last long, or perhaps they understood her sacrifice and let her die as a soldier. After all, she was as much as soldier as any man in her company. Perhaps the doctors realized she deserved a soldier's burial.²⁹

Rosetta Wakeman died in the hospital on June 19, 1864. Her death was not reported to her unit until August, so it can be assumed her family was left wondering what had happened to their daughter as she had not written them in months. She was given a soldier's burial in Chalmette National Cemetery in New Orleans, where her grave still remains to this day. On her headstone, however, is the name Lyons Wakeman. It is most likely that during the process of preparing her body for burial her secret was revealed, but the army accorded her the honor of a military burial. The army would not have known what other name to use, nor what to do with a woman's body. To them, she had always been Lyons.³⁰

To women's history, she represents much more than just a woman in men's clothing. She represents a movement, an urge to gain the same benefits as a man by serving one's country. Wakeman was lucky, in a morbid sense. She was not caught like so many were and discharged, nor was she left to die wounded on a battlefield. The fact that she died in a hospital is both a gift and a curse.

Undoubtedly Wakeman joined for more than one reason (the fight with her family which we will never know details of is a variable), but money was an important factor for her. The ability to send her

²⁹ Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 81-82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

paychecks to her family back home was a source of pride for Wakeman. She often wrote of sending them money, and if she did not send it, she mentioned that she would be sending it soon. This was an uncommon thing for a woman to be able to do: provide for her family, go on a wild adventure, and serve her country. Wakeman's bravery is noted, both by the family she helped and the mark she left on history. Her tombstone in Louisiana marks Wakeman's achievements: serving one's country, sending home money to support a family, and earning the respect of the armed forces.

Belle Boyd: The Spy. In the rebellious South, a young woman had a tumultuous four years with her involvement with the Civil War. She was not a nurse, nor a soldier, nor a waiting wife. She was a spy, and chose to be one of her own accord. This dangerous and surprising occupation might have gone unnoticed, but Boyd's information passing skills proved vital to the war efforts of the South, and her important contributions are noted by many.

In her memoir, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, Boyd writes to an English audience, telling them of her time as a self-made spy. Her bravery was terrifying, her will strong, and her book compelling. Compelling enough to allow Boyd to tour the United States giving talks on her time as a Confederate spy, gathering audiences from both sides who wanted to hear the novelty of a woman spy.

Boyd was described as not beautiful, but attractive. After being interviewed by Nathaniel Paige, a war correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, in 1862, Boyd's appearance was described, "Without being beautiful, she is very attractive." Her charm and the way she carried herself allowed Boyd to take advantage of soldiers from both sides of the conflict. She was particularly known for stealing information to give to Confederate General Stonewall Jackson.³¹

³¹ Belle Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison: A New Edition Prepared from New Materials by Curtis Carroll Davis*. (London: Thomas Yoseloff Ltd, 1968), 67.

Boyd was an avid patriot. Her Southern sympathies were inherited from her parents and never left the woman even after her beloved South lost the war. Her first act of bravery was on the first day of the Federal occupation of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Boyd was acting as a nurse in a makeshift hospital, much like Hancock had done in her first days as a Civil War nurse. When a group of Union soldiers walked up behind her, waving the “Federal flag” over the beds of the sick, Boyd stood up to them.³²

She called the men she was tending to “helpless as babies” and ordered the Union soldiers to leave and stop at once, for they were interrupting their “woman’s mission.” Boyd, using the charm she would one day be famous for, found an officer among the soldiers and told him to stop, and to order his men to stop as well. Surprisingly, the Union soldiers left the hospital without harming a single patient. Their intention had been to “bayonet them,” and Belle Boyd felt “immeasurable” satisfaction when they were left at peace. This satisfaction was undoubtedly the start of a burning desire to stand up for her beloved South. Her passion in rebelling against the Union had begun, and would not stop until the day the war was over.³³

Shortly after the incident at the hospital, Boyd made a bold move. The Union occupied her hometown, and on Independence Day, 1862, looting was rampant. Boyd’s home was broken into while she and her mother were inside. Told that Boyd’s bedroom was decorated with the “rebel flag,” the soldiers demanded possession of it, but Boyd was one step ahead of them. Her “negro maid” was ordered, quietly and with great haste, to run upstairs and dispose of the flag. Before the soldiers could find it, the maid had ripped the flag from the wall and burned it. The soldiers’ next step was to hoist a Federal flag above Boyd’s house. Her mother wouldn’t tolerate it. She said: “Men, every member of my household will die before that flag shall be raised over us.” It is no surprise where Belle got her flickering passion. Her mother was just as full of fire as her soon-to-be famous daughter.³⁴

³² Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 128-129.

³³ *Ibid.*, 128 - 129.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

When Belle's mother was then verbally assaulted by a soldier, Belle drew her pistol and shot him. The seventeen-year-old's shot killed the soldier, and the rest of the troops ran but not before plotting to set the house on fire. The Boyd family, even with Belle's father away fighting in his grays, was not to be crossed. These strong women were loyal to the core, and braver than most. Belle ran to the nearest Union officer and explained to him that her house, with all of its inhabitants, was about to be burned to the ground. She convinced him to pardon her murder, stop the soldiers from starting the fire, and on top of disciplining those involved, set a pair of sentries on the house to guard the Boyd women. There was clearly something about Boyd's character that men could not resist.³⁵

She became friends with Union soldiers, close enough to them to gather valuable information on positions and battle plans. Boyd was cunning in her endeavors but not the smartest in how she delivered her information. She used no code, no crypt, and often signed the letters with her own name. It could be assumed that Boyd was pretentious in doing so, and her pride would not warrant an objection to that assumption. Boyd was bold in everything she did. When summoned to appear before a colonel after one of her letters was discovered (she calls him "some colonel, whose name I have forgotten," in her memoir), Boyd was threatened, reprimanded, and read the "Article of War:" "Whoever shall give food, ammunition, information to, or aid and abet the enemies of the United States Government in any manner whatever, shall suffer death, or whatever penalty the honorable members of the court-martial shall see fit to inflict."³⁶

Boyd was breaking the law by being a source for the Confederate Army, and would eventually be arrested with just cause. She was guilty of passing valuable information and was thrown in jail as she should have been. For now, however, Boyd was lucky to only

³⁵ Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 134.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

receive a warning.

Boyd said she was not frightened, and that her "little rebel heart was on fire" with anger. She was rude to the colonel and the men who read her the Article, and was even more determined to create havoc in her realm. She furiously began spying, actively searching and ready to find some kind of information to pass on to a man she deeply admired, General Stonewall Jackson.³⁷

That opportunity came to Boyd on May 20, 1862. Union General James Shields gathered his troops in the parlor of a hotel in Front Royal, Virginia. The cunning Boyd hid in a closet for hours and spied through a peep hole to learn of the General's plans. She knew that her beloved Confederates could not go without this information. Boyd, bearing falsified documents that allowed her into Confederate camps, was soon on her way to the Confederate soldiers whose camp lay just outside town. She delivered her information to a scout for the Confederates, Col. Turner Ashby. She told him everything she had heard, and surprisingly, she was listened to. Two days later, a crowd of Union soldiers filled the streets outside of Boyd's home. Boyd asked one what was going on -- and was told far too much information. The soldier told her that the Rebels were coming, that the Union troops had not been prepared and that their plan of action was to burn the stores in the town and burn every bridge they crossed as they made their way to the next town. Boyd, being the bold woman she was, did not keep this information to herself.³⁸

She ran through town, avoiding bullets (though she claimed some put holes in her navy blue dress) and the beginning skirmishes of battle. She had a mission and that was to tell General Stonewall Jackson of the Union army's plan. Nothing would stop her. "Hope, fear, the love of life, and the determination to serve my country to the last, conspired to fill my heart with more than feminine courage, and to lend preternatural strength and swiftness to my limbs."³⁹

³⁷ Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison* 134.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150-159.

³⁹ Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 162-163.

Boyd's courage showed in this monumental occasion in her life. Her description of feminine courage is certainly not a common one. Many would consider a woman waiting for a loved one to come back from war as feminine courage. Boyd was an oddity in her time, and a rare breed of woman.

Belle Boyd ran all the way to the rear of the Confederate forces where she met someone she knew, "an old friend and connection," Major Harry Douglas. She told him to ready the cavalry, to send them ahead to secure the bridges the Union had planned to burn. Boyd turned down the offer for an escort home, knowing that the soldier escorting her would be needed in battle. She went back the way she came, knowing she had done her beloved South some good.⁴⁰

Because of Boyd's message, the Confederates won that battle. The bridges were secured, even though a light had already been lit at the first one, it was stopped and regained by the Confederates. They knew the Union's next move and followed them. A spent Boyd returned from the battle field to a hero's welcome. The Confederates cheered her, and although she was "utterly enervated and exhausted," she turned her own home into a hospital and cared for the wounded.⁴¹

The same day, a courier gave to Boyd what she called the item she values "far beyond any thing I possess in the world." A short note, only one sentence, from Gen. Jackson that read:

"Miss Belle Boyd,
I thank you, for myself and for the army,
for the immense service that you have rendered
for your country to-day.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 162 - 163.

⁴¹ Ibid., 165.

Hastily, I am your friend,
T.J. Jackson, C.S.A.”

Belle Boyd was a servant of the South to the core, and with a system she called the “underground railroad” she was able to pass messages to officers in the Confederate army. The “locomotive on this railway” was an elderly black man (some sources claim it was her slave, Eliza, but Boyd herself never stated so) who hid Boyd’s messages in a large silver pocket watch from which all of the workings had been removed. If anyone looked at the watch, it would have told them the wrong time and seemed like an old man’s trinket. But Boyd’s system, seemingly flawless, failed her.⁴²

As night set one “lovely Wednesday,” Boyd saw cavalry men outside. She quickly sent a note via her underground railroad and went to bed. The next morning, she saw the men assembling a carriage near her house. She ignored this, until her servant told her that there were men wishing to speak with her. Boyd was under arrest, from direct orders from the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. Her personal affects were searched. One of her loyal servants managed to burn a bundle of her papers before the men could find them, but they still found plenty of contraband, including a pistol given to Boyd for defending her mother so many months ago.⁴³

Boyd was given thirty minutes and a trunk to pack. She was escorted to prison in Winchester, Virginia by 550 soldiers. Her notoriety had reached its peak, she was an enemy, but her escort made her feel like a celebrity. She described her first night in prison. “My first night in a prison must be painted in dark colors, unrelieved by the radiance that plays upon the features of the sleeping devotee.” Her pride was higher than ever, after all, she was recognized by those she disliked the most as an enemy. Boyd said she dreamt of angels that night, though she slept few hours. She was, above all, frightened.⁴⁴

⁴² Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 172.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁴ Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 197-198; Ruth Scarborough, *Belle Boyd*:

She was severely punished for her crimes, kept in solitary confinement for what is thought to be weeks until the heat of mid summer forced the prison guards to open her cell door. She was allowed thirty minutes of exercise daily. Her conditions were not terrible, for it is certain that she would have complained of them in her book. Boyd had a way of exaggerating, stretching the truth to make herself seem like more of a hero than she actually was. Her intended audience was not an American one, Boyd wrote her book for the English. Sick of her ramblings on about her heroic rise to fame during the Civil War, Boyd was not superbly popular after the battles had stopped.⁴⁵

Boyd was imprisoned a few more times before the end of the war, never seeming to get her fill of disloyalty to the North and utter servanthood to the South. Boyd married three times, became an actress of moderate success both in the United Kingdom and in America, and died June 11, 1900 of a heart attack. Such a spy was lucky to die the way she did. Many would not have succeeded in continually persuading their captors to release them. Boyd's charm, mystique, and cunning made her one of the most successful spies in all of history.⁴⁶

Conclusion. While each woman represents a different aspect of the Civil War, their roles are all important. More importantly, however, are the primary resources they left behind. Without these letters and memoirs, women's history would be lost in the scope of the Civil War. Fortunately, our brave heroines recorded their thoughts, tasks, and emotions in a way that changed the perception toward women in the bloodiest war in American History.

With Celia Hancock's delicately written letters, we are

Siren of the South. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983), 66.

⁴⁵ Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 201.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

informed of the tragedy she experienced being a nurse. While her role as a nurse was undoubtedly the most feminine of the three women highlighted, it is important to know that the men in her care treated her with utmost respect. Some may have perceived Hancock as an object of sexual desire or disrespected her because she was a woman. Neither of these things ever happened according to her letters, and Hancock's story in its entirety gives an insight to the aftermath of battle.

The descriptions of medical practices, the way Hancock wrote letters from dying men to their wives, and how she asked her friends and family for supplies enables the reader to understand the war was not a singular thing. The war's repercussions were evident and the effect of the sick and wounded rippled through lives and communities. Whether every building was turned into a makeshift hospital or people stripped their own beds at home to send sheets to wounded soldiers, the people in Hancock's life who were not directly connected to the war felt an obligation to help. The American people helped their soldiers, just like they do today.

In the throes of battle, Rosetta Wakeman dedicated her entire life to a secret. Despite being female, Wakeman's impact on the war was no different than any other soldier. She took orders like her male counterparts, marched, ate, slept, fought, and died with them. If we treated our female soldiers today (which we do not - segregation in bunks, barracks, and other discriminatory policies are in place to separate the genders based upon social norms) exactly like our males, it would echo Wakeman's life. It must be considered, then, how tough she was. To not have a soul to confide in besides the letters she wrote home to her family must have been trying. Perhaps a few of her comrades knew, perhaps they did not even suspect her secret. Either way, she lived a life that could have ended very badly, and her bravery should not to be forgotten.

Wakeman's letters also provide an insight into the literacy level of the nineteenth century. For a female who received no formal education, her writing skills are average. Her spellings (like much of those in the mid nineteenth century) are erratic and sometimes hard

to follow. Overall, however, it is remarkable that Wakeman conveyed a strong amount of intelligence and emotion in her letters. They were desperately sad in some cases, and in others, charming. Wakeman's ability to clearly state her emotions without too many words makes her story personable.

Boyd's boisterous memoir is possibly fictionalized in parts. We can only hope that the majority of the stories she tells are not exaggerations, but based on her bold mannerisms this is unknown. At least she told her story - many female spies in the Civil War were not brave enough to do so. For example, Mary Elizabeth Bowser was a known spy for the Union, spying on Jefferson Davis in his own home. While literate and perfectly capable of writing her memoirs, Bowser never did. Her life after the war is undocumented, and her role is only known because of some correspondence.

Boyd was brave, that is certain. She used a different kind of feminine charm to woo her men into submission. It is not clear whether or not Boyd was ever sexually involved with any of her many contacts, but her persuasive techniques rarely failed. She was the perfect candidate to spy, powerful yet unassuming. Perhaps it was because she was female that her task was so easy. There is little doubt that men would not have suspected a woman to be a spy. After all, in the nineteenth century, a woman's place was in the home, tending to the family and household duties. A woman as a spy was the perfect disguise - unassuming and unnoticed.

This helped Boyd be successful in a number of ways. While men were not afraid to speak to women, they probably assumed that Boyd would not understand the context of the information they were passing to her. On top of that, the Union forces who unknowingly passed information to her did not know of Boyd's connection with Confederate troops, something they should have considered because of her reputation.

All three women's experiences represent a terrible time in our country. Over six hundred thousand American soldiers lost their lives. It is certain that the women who participated in the Civil War saw a need and filled it, not an uncommon characteristic in feminine history. Fortunately, their stories were documented by letters. Without these valuable tools, we might never have known the extent to which American women participated in the bloodiest war in American history.

After the war came increased opportunities for women. They were able to keep their jobs as nurses and now the majority of nurses in the United States are female. The establishment of the Army and Navy Nurse Corps at the turn of the century allowed women to use their long-standing patriotic loyalty. And spies will always be abundant. Women in the CIA and FBI exist in capacities of which we may never know. Every woman working in these fields has a petticoat-wearing, rebellious, and courageous Civil War hero to thank.

The images of war might look a little different now -- after all, the likeness that Sarah Rosetta Wakeman sent home was not in curls and a dress, but with short cropped hair and a uniform. Her feminine features discarded to help her country, Wakeman stands out above the typical soldiers of the time. She was a rarity - a woman in the place of a man. She proves that the women of our country were, and still are, beyond brave.