

### Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front

Nicole Etcheson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Etcheson, Nicole (2010) "Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss1/8>

## Review

Etcheson, Nicole

Winter 2010

**Giesberg, Judith** *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780807833070

### Northern Women Endure the Civil War

Wars bring women not only hardship and loss, but the opportunity to enhance their status. Such at least had been the focus of scholarship on northern women during the Civil War. Elizabeth D. Leonard in *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (1994) profiled three northern women who found an opportunity during the war to widen women's sphere. Recently Nina Silber, in *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (2005) has questioned the degree to which northern women found the war liberating. Judith Giesberg seeks to remedy the concentration of these works on white, middle-class women by paying more attention to working-class and African-American women.

*Army at Home* begins with the familiar tale of Lydia Bixby, the Massachusetts widow who lost several (although perhaps not as many as the legendary five) sons in the war and whose sacrifice prompted a beautiful condolence letter written by Abraham Lincoln (or maybe by his secretary John Hay). Lydia Bixby was a poor widow and eventually buried with a tombstone marked only with a number. She destroyed the famous letter, earning the scorn of later historians. But she had already suffered the contempt of upper-class women who felt her unworthy of the aid her celebrity status momentarily gained her. Her willingness to proclaim publicly her grief and to actively seek aid from state authorities failed to make her a "true woman" who clung to her sphere and suffered in private. But Lydia Bixby sought aid for a practical reason: she had other children to support and her sons, either because they were dead or because they were not sending their pay home to their mother, failed to help her. Giesberg returns to the plight of widows late in her book. Widows and grieving mothers insisted that the state's obligation did not stop with their husbands' and

sons' deaths. They argued that the government owed them the return of the soldiers' remains and a decent burial. This was a new interpretation that some public officials were reluctant to accept initially.

Giesberg's accounts of rural and urban northern women during the war challenge the image of the homefront as a place insulated from the hardships of the war. On the farm, male relatives might help temporarily, but many women found themselves on their own resources struggling to do back-breaking chores and make enough money to provide for themselves and their children and not lose their property. Women often lost this struggle, appealing for aid to the state or to soldiers' aid societies. This, in turn, brought them under the scrutiny reserved for the poor in a society which distinguished between deserving and undeserving charity cases. To prove their worthiness for aid, women emphasized the patriotism of their work at home. They had sent their men to fight and considered their work part of the war effort in return.

When women failed in their efforts to remain self-supporting, they turned to public institutions such as poor houses and asylums. In addition to taking up residence in jails and homes for paupers, women followed their men to army camps. Giesberg depicts local officials as seeking to turn back women's claims by denying that their relationship to a soldier entitled them to state aid. Giesberg might also consider to what degree the growing number of soldiers' families needing aid strained resources and disinclined officials to be generous. And some women, as Giesberg relates, sought aid with trumped-up stories. Louisa Brunt claimed to be a soldier's widow when she was in fact "a bad girl."

The war did offer expanded work opportunities and here Giesberg concentrates on the dangerous work in government arsenals. On September 17, 1862, known as the bloodiest day in United States history for the carnage at the battle of Antietam, explosions at the Allegheny, Pennsylvania arsenal killed seventy-eight women and girls. While exploiting female labor, male officials and society preferred to understand it as consistent with women's sphere. A *Harper's Weekly* drawing depicted women and men working separately with only a lone male supervisor in the women's portion of the factory. The women are bent over their work, almost as if sewing. As Giesberg notes, it is a distinctly un-military scene. But women arsenal workers, in protesting unpopular supervisors and unsafe conditions, not only moved into the public sphere of political protest but asserted the importance of their labor to the war effort. "Arsenal work was dangerous, but so was soldiering" (82). Later, Giesberg discusses Philadelphia

seamstresses who exerted political pressure on the administration during the 1864 election. In this case, the women were threatened with the firing of those who belonged to disloyal families. The threat to the seamstresses' jobs arose because not all women supported the war. Giesberg points to the role women played in the New York City draft riots and in other anti-war violence. Although the numbers of women were small, their presence was symbolic of working-class communities' resistance.

Giesberg comments that Lydia Bixby's plight forced her out of private space and into public space. This is a trope that she repeats throughout the book. It is most fully developed in the chapter on African-American women's struggle to desegregate streetcars. Although some critics in the black community worried that the women were creating unnecessary conflict with whites, black women used the war as an opportunity to press against discrimination on the cars. African-American women rode the street cars to hospitals and churches where they cared for black troops and did war work. They made a point of asserting so in their suits against the street car companies.

Giesberg offers a new perspective on women in the Civil War North. She shifts our focus away from the nurses and white middle-class women who have frequently dominated it. She has many interesting stories to tell, but she sometimes presses her argument too far. She periodically asserts the importance of rumor. Although it seems likely that women learned of aid possibilities through word of mouth, Giesberg has no concrete instances. Her insistence on the importance of rumor to women's movements seems speculative. Her assertion of the efforts of authorities to "control rumor" also lacks support. Giesberg perhaps overstates when she says, "The Civil War changed the way people on the home front saw space and moved through it." (164) Even given the rhetoric of separate domestic and public spheres, women had traveled to do charity, changed residence, worked outside the home, and run farms before the Civil War. The clearest evidence of change is in street car desegregation. It may be the case that the war increased mobility as women sought philanthropy or jobs to support families for whom the soldier's pay proved insufficient, but it is less clear that how Northerners "saw space and moved through it" changed. Giesberg frequently plays with free labor ideology in her discussion of women's economic roles but this is invoked rather than developed. Although Giesberg makes occasional references to the Midwest, her North is primarily the Northeast and California. Her account is at its best when it asserts that the northern homefront was not hermetically sealed from the battlefield, that women were an

“army at home,” influencing the war itself.

*Nicole Etcheson is the Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University. She is at work on “Unionists, Copperheads, and Exodusters: A Northern Community during the Civil War Era,” to be published by the University Press of Kansas.*