

# Union Army Laundresses

*In honor of sesquicentennial of the American Civil War and its aftermath, this is the nineteenth in a series of articles about records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., that are useful in researching the war and its participants.*

**W**hen the men marched off to fight the American Civil War, women were not far behind. Several hundred women disguised themselves as men, and enlisted, fought, and died as soldiers.<sup>1</sup> In addition, more than 21,000 Northern women were employed as nurses, cooks, matrons, laundresses, seamstresses, waitresses, and chambermaids. Typically, literate middle-class women were employed as nurses; working class and illiterate women were given the other jobs.<sup>2</sup>

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

2. Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). This publication provides an in-depth discussion of women in Civil War hospitals. She also has an online article, "Ten Common Myths About Women in the Civil War and How to Dispel Them," at <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2008/07/ten-common-myths-about-women-civil-war-and-how-dispel-them>.

Women washed clothes and bedding at hospitals, forts and posts, and in the ever-moving camps of the Army. Women joined their husbands' regiments as laundresses and brought their children along.

This article will examine records that document the civilian service of women as laundresses, also occasionally called washerwomen, for the Union Army. Unfortunately, extant records are limited.



*Women and children in camp, 31st Pennsylvania Infantry at Queen's farm, vicinity of Fort Slocum, near Washington, DC. Library of Congress Call Number LC-B811-2405A. Online at <https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003004782/PP/>.*

## U.S. Army Regulations

U.S. Army Regulations 128 and 1200 allowed four laundresses to each company, who each would receive one ration per day. A ration was “the established daily allowance of food for one person” as described in Regulation 1190. Regulations 129 and 196 ordered that prices for washing soldiers’ clothing “by the month, or by the piece,” be set by the Council of Administration, which was the commanding officer plus the next three ranking officers. Soldiers normally paid the laundress directly, but Regulation 130 stipulated that debts owed to laundresses could be paid “at the pay-table”

(when soldiers were paid) under the direction of the company’s captain. Likewise, Regulations 148, 218, 947, 1360, and 1363 specified that debts owed to laundresses from recruits assigned to their initial unit, soldiers transferred to other units, or soldiers who died, deserted, or were discharged without pay, were to “be entered on a roll made for the purposes” and would “be paid by the paymaster on his next visit at the post” so long as the soldier didn’t owe the government more than he was due in pay. Laundresses “permitted to follow the army” were furnished a certificate, pursuant to Regulation 783, that would enable them to prove their official relationship with the army to anyone who might question it. Regulation 783 also admonished that “no woman of bad character” would be allowed to follow the army. Regulation 1295 required the army’s doctors to meet the medical needs of laundresses and other civilians traveling with the army. Laundresses and officers’ servants were issued a “small common tent” of the “old pattern” for their housing.<sup>3</sup>

Baltimore, Md.

<p><u>Camden St. Co. H.</u></p> <p>Alexander, Sarah</p> <p><u>Nicks Co. H.</u></p> <p>Brown, Susan</p> <p>Davis, Mary L.</p> <p>Evans, Martha</p> <p>Ephardt, Lenia</p> <p>Gridley, Johanna E.</p> <p>Jenkins, Maria</p> <p>Kane, Mary A.</p> <p>Mulligan, Ellen</p> <p>McLean, Sarah E.</p> <p>Norfolk, Mary Ann</p> <p>Pawley, Ophelia</p> <p>Perry, Harriet C. (Henrietta)</p> <p>Taylor, Anne</p> <p>Todd, Roscy</p> <p><u>Jarris Co. H.</u></p> <p>Bailey, Mary H.</p> <p>Bailey, Rose A.</p> <p>Banks, Jane</p> <p>Bee, Eliza A.</p> <p>Bee, Mary J.</p> <p>Beede, Eliza</p> <p>Bell, Lucinda</p> <p>Bodely, Margaret</p> <p>Bodely, Mary</p> <p>Boston, Eliza</p> <p>Bowley, Prescilla</p> <p>Brooks, Henrietta</p> <p>Brown, Ann M.</p> <p>Brown, Martha</p> <p>Brown, Rebecca</p> <p>Brown, Sarah E.</p>	<p>Burr, Lydia</p> <p>Butler, Valinda</p> <p>Campbell, Elsie A.</p> <p>Campbell, Mary C.</p> <p>Candy, Ellen</p> <p>Castus, Susan</p> <p>Chester, Mary A.</p> <p>Clarkson, Mary</p> <p>Deets, Mary</p> <p>Demby, Eliza</p> <p>Dent, Priscilla</p> <p>Dever, Martha</p> <p>Drake, Maria</p> <p>Elizur, Anna</p> <p>Eves, Martha</p> <p>Ferguson, Rachel</p> <p>Franklin, Margaret</p> <p>Gaines, Louisa</p> <p>Garrett, Eliza</p> <p>Garrett, Lydia</p> <p>Garry, Rebecca</p> <p>Gibbons, Sarah</p> <p>Green, Jane</p> <p>Gross, Frances</p> <p>Gross, Mary</p> <p>Hall, Anna</p> <p>Hall, Ellen</p> <p>Hall, Lizzie</p> <p>Harred, Sarah</p> <p>Harris, Sarah</p> <p>Hawkins, Lucretia</p> <p>Hawsey, Eliza</p> <p>Hazard, Louisa</p> <p>Hebren, Henrietta</p> <p>Hitch, Susan</p> <p>Hollinsworth, Sidney</p>
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Page 3 of “List of Female Nurses, Cooks, and Laundresses Employed in Army Hospitals During the Civil War, ca. 1861–ca. 1865” (NAID 2561154).

## Hospital Laundresses

Women employed as hospital laundresses were paid by the federal government. Better documentation exists for them than for other laundresses, although extant records are still meager.

First, there are the “Duty Station Records of Hospital Attendants, Matrons, and Nurses, 1861-1865” (National Archives Identifier [NAID] 655661), in Record Group (RG) 94, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office. This series also includes laundresses and cooks,

3. *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861, with an Appendix Containing the Changes and Laws Affecting Army Regulations and Articles of War to June 25, 1863* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863). The 1861 regulations were issued 10 August 1861 and superseded the similar *Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1857* (New York: Harper & Brothers, [1857]) that were in effect at the beginning of the war.

although mention of those two occupations is much less frequent than matrons and nurses. These cards provide a little bit of information and identify the original source. For example, the card for “Catharine Duffy,” Laundress, Newton University General Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland, refers to Reg[ister] 99 – Dec. 18/[18]62 to June 19/[18]63” and “M[uster] Roll Feb. to Apl. [18]63.” There is also a card for “Catharine Duffy,” Matron, Camden Street General Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland, that refers to “M[uster] Roll Apr. to Aug. [18]62 and Reg[ister] 55.” It is possible that Catharine Duffy, laundress, and Catharine Duffy, matron, was the same person, just employed in different roles at different times. The information from the original muster rolls and registers referred to in these “Duty Station” cards were more fully transcribed in the “Carded Service Records” discussed next.

Second, there are the “Carded Service Records of Female Hospital Attendants, Matrons, and Nurses, 1861-1865” (NAID 655658), also in RG 94. As with the previous series, this series also includes laundresses and cooks. The information on these record cards was copied from original muster rolls and registers in the mid-1890s. Here, for example, are three record cards that indicate Catherine (or Cathrine) Duffy (Duffey or Duff) was employed as a laundress at Newton University U. S. A. (U.S. Army) General Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, from 18 December 1862 to April 1863. There are also four cards for a Catherine Duffy who was employed as a matron at Camden Street U.S.A.. General Hospital from 1 April to 30 September 1862, when she was “relieved from duty.” Unfortunately, these records do not provide identifying information, such as age, birthplace, or residence that would either allow more specific identification or to positively say that the matron and laundress was the same woman. As seen in this example, the spelling of names on the “Carded Service Records” may not precisely match those given in the “Duty Station Records.”

Third, there is the “List of Female Nurses, Cooks, and Laundresses Employed in Army

Hospitals During the Civil War, ca. 1861-ca. 1865” (NAID 2561154) in Record Group (RG) 112, Records of the Office of the Surgeon General (Army). This single volume is not comprehensive: it only includes selected hospitals and employees, and there are no dates of employment, positions held, or identifying information. However, it is easy to use and it has been completely digitized and placed online at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2561154>. The information is arranged by locality, then by name of hospital, and then alphabetically by name. For example, there are three pages for Baltimore, Maryland, containing names of ladies who worked at the Camden Street, Hicks, Jarvis, McKim’s Mansion, Marine, Newton University, and Patterson Park hospitals. Our Catharine Duffy is not found in this volume.

Fourth, there are “Records of Disallowed Claims of Laundresses, 1861-1920” (NAID 2591963) in RG 217, Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury. This series primarily includes women who worked at U.S. military posts in the 1870s and 1880s, but there are a number of claims based on unpaid work during the Civil War. Our Catharine Duffy is not included in these records. However, two examples are Mary J. Reed, who claimed she had not been paid for hospital laundress work in Kentucky for the 9th Michigan Infantry during 1861-63, or Louiser Wilcurson, who said she worked at a hospital in Yorktown, Virginia, for the 4th U.S. Colored Troops Infantry in 1863-65.

### **Fort and Post Laundresses**

Laundresses at forts and posts were paid directly by the soldiers or officers, so the government was not involved in those transactions. However, civilians are sometimes mentioned by name in post records. These records were described in Elaine Everly, et al., comps., *Preliminary Inventory 172, Preliminary Inventory of the Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Part V*, as well as online in the National Archives Catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/>. Search for the fort or post name to learn what types of records

are available, and for what years. Most fort and post records have not been microfilmed or digitized.

As mentioned in the discussion of U.S. Army regulations, names of laundresses who were owed money by transferred, deceased, deserted, or discharged soldiers were supposed to be named on a roll (list) for subsequent payment out of any money the government still owed the soldier. Laundresses whose claims were disallowed, usually because their names were not placed on such a roll, are in "Records of Disallowed Claims of Laundresses, 1861-1920" (NAID 2591963) mentioned above. For example, ten ladies filed claims for unpaid work performed at Newport Barracks, Kentucky, in 1860-61, for men transferred from the 13th U.S. Infantry to Co. F, 8th U.S. Infantry. They were Katharina Raehl, Mary Swade, Selina W. Holt, Mary Leary, Katharine Grubel, Augusta Hammerle, Fanny Yagier, Margaret Ostermayer, E. M. Boizard, and Priscilla Michaels.

## Camp Laundresses

First, the "Duty Station Records of Hospital Attendants, Matrons, and Nurses, 1861-1865" (NAID 655661), mentioned previously, lists a few laundresses affiliated with regiments. For example, there is a card for Bridget Duffey, laundress, 63rd New York Infantry, that refers to File 1122, dated 4 July 1864. Unfortunately, this reference is a dead end—no such file can be identified from this cryptic notation.

Second, mentions of specific laundresses can be found in published regimental histories. For example, the wife of J. F. W. Shultz of Co. E, 87th Pennsylvania Infantry, "was a faithful and popular laundress" whom "the boys" called "the Mother of the Regiment." She spent several months at their encampment in Winchester, Virginia, and was taken prisoner there.<sup>4</sup> Many older regimental histories can be found online

4. George R. Prowell, *History of the Eighty-Seventh Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers* (York, PA: Press of the York Daily, 1903), 89.

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at *HathiTrust* and the collection called “Civil War Laundress” at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/mb?a=listis;c=1092467312> has quick links to two dozen books mentioning laundresses or containing regulations that governed them.

Third, “Records of Disallowed Claims of Laundresses, 1861-1920” (NAID 2591963) mentioned above, contains claims by several women who claimed they were camp laundresses during the Civil War, including Mary Mullaney and Ann O’Brien, who washed for the men of Co. D, 5th New York Artillery, or Mary Wunder, who was owed money by Malachi D. Moran, drum major of the 31st New York Infantry.

### Post-Civil War Era

Women served as laundresses at western army forts and posts; for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands; and at Indian schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. For more information about these records, search “laundress” in <http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/> and then narrow your search to records created at specific forts, agencies, or schools. An excellent discussion of the lives of women at western forts, including army officers’ wives, laundresses, and cooks, is Anne Bruner Eales, *Army Wives on the American Frontier: Living by the Bugles* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1996).

### Conclusion

Finding records about a specific Union Civil War laundress is challenging without any guarantees of success. I hope you make a clean sweep.<sup>5</sup> However, if you search through all the suggested records, and feel washed up<sup>6</sup> after washing out,<sup>7</sup> at least you won’t be wet behind the ears<sup>8</sup> in archival research.

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5. Decisive or overwhelming success.

6. Unsuccessful; depleted in vigor.

7. Complete failure.

8. Lacking experience.

### For More Information

In addition to the sources cited in the footnotes, two other publications are useful. A detailed look at the occupation was given in Virginia Mescher, “Tubs and Suds: Civil War Laundresses in the Field, Camp and Hospital,” *Champ Chase Gazette* (Aug.-Sept. 2003), online at [http://www.raggedsoldier.com/final\\_laundry\\_vv.pdf](http://www.raggedsoldier.com/final_laundry_vv.pdf).

Records of laundresses employed at Confederate hospitals are discussed in DeAnne Blanton, “Confederate Medical Personnel,” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring 1994): 80-84, online at [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1994/spring/confederate-medical-personnel.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1994/spring/confederate-medical-personnel.html).

### NARA Online Resources

National Archives Catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/> provides access to information about NARA’s vast nationwide holdings of federal records.

“List of Female Nurses, Cooks, and Laundresses Employed in Army Hospitals During the Civil War, ca. 1861-ca. 1865” (National Archives Identifier [NAID] 2561154). This volume has been digitized and is online at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2561154>.

“Records of Disallowed Claims of Laundresses, 1861-1920” (NAID 2591963). Online information for these 180 files includes the name of each laundress and the military units and men who failed to pay them! Go to <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2591963> for information. The list of laundresses (but not their clients) is also online at <https://twelvekey.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/laundressfilelist.pdf>. 🌳

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