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Women of the War: Female Espionage Agents for the Confederacy

Sarah Stellhorn

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Introduction

Emma Leconte was born in Georgia in 1847 to a college professor and his wife. When her father accepted a job at South Carolina College, her family moved to Columbia, South Carolina. Leconte was living in a house on the college campus when General Sherman invaded. Although her house was spared from the invasion, Leconte watched as the town around her burned, including homes, prisons, and even a hospital with wounded inside. Despite the destruction surrounding her, Leconte wrote in her diary, “Let us suffer still more, give up yet more—anything, anything that will help the Cause, anything that will give us freedom and not force us to live with such people—to be ruled by such horrible and contemptible creatures—to submit to them when we hate them so bitterly.”¹

The Civil War is one of the most studied eras of American history. Southern women not only faced unbelievable hardships throughout the duration of the war but also fought through those hardships to contribute to the war effort. Stories of heroic southern women resonate still: women who took on male personas to be soldiers and officers, women who led troops, women who smuggled vital intelligence over borders, and women who gave up everything to become spies for the Confederacy. Without female support and efforts for the Confederate cause, the Confederate war effort would have died a much harsher and faster death. Throughout the years of the Confederacy, women of the South put their own lives at risk in order to play a vital role in home-front support and espionage purposes. They smuggled paperwork and goods across enemy lines, collected and passed along battle plan information, and formed extensive networks to support Confederate troops. They provided such an extent of detailed

¹ Emma Leconte, “Lucifer in Starlight” in *The War the Women Lived*, ed. Walter Sullivan (Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1995), 262.

information that the Confederate generals came to rely and depend upon these reports from female espionage agents in the field. These women showed an incredible dedication to the Confederacy, and the intelligence they provided left a direct impact on the war effort itself.

The primary sources available in this research area typically include diaries, memoirs, letters, newspaper and magazine articles, and battle reports. Newspaper and magazine viewpoints often varied depending on whether the source was a northern or southern source. *The Continental Monthly* was a magazine dedicated to literature and national policy published in the North for much of the Civil War.² Throughout many of the articles, as well as editorials, authors took on a northern viewpoint of the war effort, especially in their notations about southern women. One author in particular encouraged northern women to have pity on southern women, who had not had the opportunities that northern women had had, and so were automatically considered to be living in the lesser region by default.³ On the other hand, *The Charleston Mercury*, a southern newspaper, distinctly portrayed battles in a light sympathetic to the Confederacy because these articles were written and produced in the South.⁴ The battle reports, typically written by generals involved in the battle, often mentioned the intelligence gathered beforehand. *The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* were filled with letters to and from generals, and generals also wrote several reports of battles, such as General G.T. Beauregard's report on the Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) or Lieutenant-General Thomas J. Jackson's report on the

² "The Continental Monthly: Devoted to Literature and National Policy," *The Project Gutenberg*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1864): 361-480, accessed February 20, 2018, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23537/23537-h/23537-h.htm#AMERICAN_WOMEN.

³ "The Continental Monthly: Devoted to Literature and National Policy."

⁴ "Battle of Bull's Run," *The Charleston Mercury*, in *The Civil War Extra* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

Battle of Cedar Run or Cedar Mountain.⁵ These proved very helpful in establishing the actions taken by Confederate officers after they received intelligence, much of which was delivered by female spies. When it came to understanding the female spies' points of view, the diaries and memoirs proved most helpful in filling in information. The diary of Loreta Janeta Velazquez goes into great depth discussing the various exploits she experienced as a soldier and spy for the Confederacy. However, scholars have recently begun to debate the validity of her testimony, as some details have been disproven and some stories questioned, as compared to other sources. Other sources, such as Belle Boyd's diary or writings by Rose O'Neal Greenhow, accurately detailed the various activities they engaged in, such as Boyd's support of the Confederate takeover of Front Royal, Virginia and Greenhow's delivery of information to Confederate generals at First Manassas. Some authors and editors, such as Katherine M. Jones, put together anthologies of primary writings detailing the progression of the war from women's eyes. Jones's book *Heroines of Dixie* was one of those anthologies that proved enormously helpful, both in exploring the world of the female spies and in discovering more generalized background information about women in the war from a first-person viewpoint.⁶ All of these primary sources are vital to the exploration of female espionage agents in the South.

A variety of secondary sources also expound on the subject and help to fill in the gaps of research left behind by the primary sources. Author Stephanie McCurry's book *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* explores the role of women in the war in a new light.⁷ Not only does she

⁵ *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1, vol. 13, ed. United States War Department, accessed March 1, 2018, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu>.

⁶ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1955).

⁷ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

delve into the emotional and mental side of women's support, including through espionage, but she also explores how women ultimately affected the end of the war. Other secondary authors, including Louis A. Sigaud, author of *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy*, and Ross Ishbel, author of *Rebel Rose: Life of Rose O'Neal Greenhow, Confederate Spy*, explored individual espionage agents.⁸ These books were very useful in comparison with the primary sources written by the spies themselves. Additionally, Harnett T. Kane's *Spies for the Blue and Gray* was very helpful in giving an overview of the espionage situation for both the Union and the Confederacy.⁹ Kane's writing also addressed the larger trends of the Civil War activism by women and put in a larger light the contributions of various espionage agents.

When reading secondary sources, it was very difficult to separate the truth from the exaggerated. Many of these spies were surrounded by hushed gossip and whispered legends, and the rumors that begin with the spies themselves have still carried over into modern-day writings on the subject. Some sources, such as *The Women of the South in War Times*, by Matthew Page Andrews, were more difficult than others to decipher what was true and what was exaggerated.¹⁰ Although Andrews offered detailed explorations of a variety of women involved in the espionage and smuggling rings, at some points in the book, these stories and language use seemed exaggerated, with little proof or evidence to back them up. While these secondary sources were very helpful in filling in research gaps created by the secondary sources, it was sometimes difficult to judge the motivations and truth behind the many stories. Because of the new opinions taken

⁸ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy* (Richmond: The Ditz Press, Incorporated, 1945); Ishbel Ross, *Rebel Rose: Life of Rose O'Neal Greenhow, Confederate Spy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

⁹ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray* (Garden City: County Life Press, 1954).

¹⁰ Matthew Page Andrews, *The Women of the South in War Times* (Baltimore: The Norman, Remington Co., 1920).

on during and after the Civil War, a thin veil of untruth, exaggeration, and legend seems to tinge much of the research done, especially concerning women in the war. The “Lost Cause” mentality embraced an idealistic and selective view of the Old South, recognizing only the good traditions and memories of the old days while pointedly ignoring the harmful institutions such as slavery. This ideology was romanticized and idolized as a tranquil past long gone, and many of these southerners, especially women, came to be celebrated as old-time heroes and heroines who sought only to maintain their way of life in the face of strife. Because this mentality was prominent for years after the end of the war, it is difficult to separate reality from the exaggerated stories that skyrocketed in popularity after the war. Secondary sources, as well as primary, must be carefully examined to determine the value each hold in the face of untruth, as compared and verified against other sources.

Women Going into the War as Spies

Patriotism & Gender Standards

From the very beginning of the war, women firmly supported the war effort. Morale was high, and they not only encouraged their menfolk to join up, but they also scorned young, able-bodied men who did not immediately sign up to defend the Confederacy. As they waved Confederate flags and sang patriotic southern songs, these women also stepped in to help the war effort physically as well as emotionally. They took on traditionally female roles, such as nursing soldiers, sewing clothing, and sending supplies to the lines from home, but they also stepped into positions such as managing the homes and plantations while the men were away, as well as taking on personas of male soldiers, smuggling goods across lines, and, of course, spying.

Women on the southern home front faced a variety of difficulties. They were often left at home with only the children, servants, or slaves while the able-bodied men were off fighting. Left to run the home by themselves, they had to scrounge up what resources they could while protecting their homes and families. One such woman, Cornelia Peake McDonald, wrote about the hardships and poverty she faced during the war. In her diary, she notes that the war's extreme loss of life did not just result from men dying on the battlefields—hundreds of women, children, and older men died on the home front as well due to the lack of resources such as food, water, and sometimes even shelter.¹¹ Especially near the end of the war, the invading Union army made matters markedly worse for those on the home front. Already suffering from starvation, disease, and the everyday struggle of maintaining their household alone, the women at home also had to live with the fear of invading Federal soldiers, whom the grape vine had given a reputation of brutality.

Céline Frémaux wrote about perseverance through these times in her diary. When these northerners invaded their homes, sometimes even using the yard or house itself as an encampment, they often robbed the house of its resources and valuables. Frémaux quickly learned that although women's large hoop skirts would usually be searched for hidden valuables, the soldiers typically left small children alone. Frémaux and other women throughout the South learned to hide silver, jewelry, and other valuables they wanted to protect under the children's clothing.¹² These women constantly lived under the fear of the invading armies, yet they persevered to defend the Confederate cause at all costs. Dolly Sumner Lunt Burge, in a similar situation as Frémaux, had nearly all of her food and resources stolen by Federal troops, including her animals and slaves, whom

¹¹ Cornelia Peake McDonald, "The Pain of Remembering" in *The War the Women Lived*, 77.

¹² Céline Frémaux, "A Cap for Mrs. Worthy" in *The War the Women Lived*, 192.

she called her family, to be used for the Union war effort.¹³ Although this particular group of soldiers did not burn her house, they burned her outbuildings and left the rest of her property destroyed in their wake. In her diary, Burge wrote that that terrible day “ended the passing of Sherman’s army by [her] place, leaving [her] much poorer by thirty thousand dollars than [she] was yesterday morning. And a much stronger Rebel!”¹⁴ Mary Mallard, who lived on her plantation with her mother and a friend during the war, gave birth during the invasion of Sherman’s army. In response to Mallard’s mother’s protests of having to feed the family, the Yankees told them that they had “no right to have even wood or water.”¹⁵ Mallard wrote in her diary, “It was vain to utter a word, for we were completely paralyzed by the fury of these ruffians.”¹⁶ However, despite hardships like invading armies and lack of resources, women still found ways to contribute to the Confederate cause from home.

As much as the southern men believed in the Confederate cause, the women at home held to their hope all the more. Born in England in 1832, Catherine Cooper Hopley eventually moved to Virginia to be a governess. During the war, Hopley noted key observations about women in the South. She wrote that they assembled “themselves in societies, to prepare clothing for the soldiers, and make lint, bandages, and whatever might be needed for the wounded.”¹⁷ Some women even made cartridges, bullets, and gun cases, while others sewed Confederate flags. These women would also send care packages to their soldiers on the battlefields. Yet perhaps even more important than the physical necessities

¹³ Dolly Sumner Lunt Burge, “Thirty Thousand Dollars Poorer” in *The War the Women Lived*, 229.

¹⁴ Dolly Sumner Lunt Burge, “Thirty Thousand Dollars Poorer” in *The War the Women Lived*, 232.

¹⁵ Mary Mallard, “A Birth in the Ruins” in *The War the Women Lived*, 238.

¹⁶ Mary Mallard in *The War the Women Lived*, 234.

¹⁷ Catherine Cooper Hopley in *The War the Women Lived*, 29.

were the moral support these women also provided through letters that went with the packages. By 1864, even “Union military commanders fully appreciated Confederate women’s importance in sustaining the Confederate war effort...with physical and emotional support.”¹⁸ Without the support of their women, the Confederate soldiers would not have had either the supplies or the morale to fight the long, bloody war.

The World of Espionage

Female contributions to the war drastically changed the way the war was fought, and because of their direct involvement, the Civil War is often considered one of the first women’s wars in history. Before, women had been seen as “victims of war, often booty in it, but not perpetrators of it.”¹⁹ Women’s enthusiastic willingness to contribute to the war effort changed the perception of women’s involvement in the war. Women went beyond the traditional spheres of nursing or home front preparations to become smugglers and spies for the Confederacy, and their work made an incredible difference for many Confederate lives.

The Civil War involved more espionage work than any prior U.S. war in history, and the intelligence collected by female spies was crucial to the military tactics of the Confederacy. Although “neither the United States nor the Confederate States of America had formal intelligence agencies” before the Civil War, both sides began to employ spies soon after the outbreak of war.²⁰ The

¹⁸ Kristen L. Streater, “‘She-Rebels’ on the Supply Line: Gender Conventions in Civil War Kentucky,” in *Occupied Women: Gender Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Aleica P. Long (Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 88.

¹⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 86.

²⁰ Rachel Edmonston, “Confederate Female Spies” last modified February 15, 2018. <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/20505>, 4.

Confederate generals relied on female agents for information about Union troops' movements, strategies, and numbers. This intelligence allowed the Confederates to connect not only a network of support across the country as well as a system of knowledge that proved vital to understanding and fighting against the Union's strategies. In fact, these agents proved so vital that by 1861, there were several top female spies on the payroll for the Confederacy.²¹ What had begun as volunteer work quickly morphed into a job the Confederacy depended upon. Although none of these women were formally trained as spies, they "improvised" and "experimented, and what they lacked in finesse they made up in energy and determination."²² These southern women who joined the business of spying were typically white, young and unmarried, fairly attractive, intelligent, independent-minded, and considered to be middle or upper class. Not only did espionage provide these women with a direct way to support the Confederacy, but it also gave them "an outlet for their energy, free spirits, and daring abilities," while also allowing them "to enjoy an element of risk" and a sense of adventure.²³ Before the war, education, economic opportunities, and independence were extremely limited for women, but all that changed with the start of the war. For the first time, it was acceptable for women to break out of their gender roles to step into what had formerly been considered a man's role. They were able to be the heroes rather than simply the victim being saved. Rather than working around the difficulty of being a nineteenth-century woman, these ladies used their gender to their advantage. Society was naïve to the true potential of female agents, and this allowed them to accomplish that much more before the enemy caught on. Additionally, because of the stigmas existing around the treatment of women as

²¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 86.

²² Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray*, 12.

²³ Heidi Konkel, "Female Spies and Soldiers of the Civil War: Being a Woman had its Advantages," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global* (2005): accessed March 3, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/>.

criminals, these women were, especially at the beginning of the war, often the last people to be suspected and the last to be caught or punished for their deeds. With a little acting or flirtatious behavior, these women typically “received sympathetic and chivalrous treatment” when they came into contact with the enemy.²⁴ Because of these factors, women were often able to talk their way out of arrest or punishment when they were caught at the beginning of the war. Throughout the war, the role of female spies continued to evolve, and while the Confederate generals grew to depend upon intelligence from these agents, more and more of these women were being arrested as the war went on.

Some of the best smugglers for the Confederacy were also women. Thanks to their voluptuous skirts, they were often able to hide papers and other items in their pockets and linings, often wearing multiple skirts at a time so as to have more room for the smuggled items. These women smuggled a variety of items, including medicine, weaponry, ammunition, food, clothing, letters, and dispatches. If they were caught at the lines, their goods were typically confiscated and the women would be sent back home. They sometimes faced arrest, imprisonment, or banishment if they had been caught multiple times or if the goods they were smuggling were of a more sensitive nature. One letter intercepted in March of 1863 was headed to Confederate General Sterling Price, “assessing the military condition of St. Louis and the state in general and the probable support for an invasion of the state by Confederate forces.”²⁵ Many of these letters contained intelligence collected by female espionage networks and were being sent south to Confederate generals. Union officials were often at a loss of how to handle this unladylike behavior of these genteel women, similar to the way they

²⁴ James H. Whyte, “Divided Loyalties in Washington During the Civil War,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* (1960): 103-122, accessed February 1, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/stable/40067221>.

²⁵ LeeAnn Whites, “Corresponding with the Enemy: Mobilizing the Relational Field of Battle in St. Louis,” in *Occupied Women*, 112.

were unsure about punishing female spies. Women, especially in the areas of the border states and around the Union lines, formed systematic networks to transfer necessary goods south, and “these women had the resources and connections to make such a supply system thrive.”²⁶ Throughout the war, women smuggled a variety of necessary goods through the lines to soldiers and civilians in the southern states.

The Roles of Female Spies

Rose O’Neal Greenhow

Rose O’Neal Greenhow is one of the most famous Confederate spies and the only one to die while in the service of the Confederacy. Living in Washington D.C., she had access to a number of high-ranking officials and managed to run a very successful spy ring. She is most well-known for sending information concerning Union troop movements to General Beauregard before the Battle of Bull Run, most likely tipping the scales towards a Confederate victory in the battle.

Rose O’Neal Greenhow first made connections in Washington through her marriage to Robert Greenhow, who was involved in politics. Greenhow herself quickly joined in on her husband’s world, working on the campaign of James Buchanan and forming a friendship with Jefferson Davis, both connections that would serve her well after the war began.²⁷ She became known as a socialite, popular in her crowd and flirtatious with men. After the death of her husband, she moved to 398 16th Street in Washington, which would later become the

²⁶ Kristen L. Streater, “‘She-Rebels’ on the Supply Line: Gender Conventions in Civil War Kentucky,” in *Occupied Women*, 99.

²⁷ Ishbel Ross, *Rebel Rose*, 42.

headquarters of her espionage ring.²⁸ Despite the fact that the federal officials kept a close eye on her from the very beginning, Greenhow involved herself in the world of espionage immediately after the war began, with the help of Lieutenant Thomas Jordan, also known as Thomas J. Rayford. She “had committed herself irrevocably and officially to the Confederate cause, and had become a central figure in the espionage system” within the first few weeks.²⁹ Her ring grew and flourished with the help of messengers Lillie Mackall and Betty Duvall. Her house became a flow of information, and yet she kept her work as an agent secret from the Union officials from whom she was picking up information. In fact, her network was so thorough and her espionage skills so sharp, she knew about the imminent probability of her own arrest.³⁰ Despite this knowledge, Greenhow defiantly chose to continue her work, although she was more cautious about whom she trusted and how she transmitted information.

Greenhow stayed true to her loyalties. When confronted about her southern sympathies by officials after her arrest, she proudly responded, “I am a Southern woman, born with Revolutionary blood in my veins. Freedom of Speech and of thought were my birthright, guaranteed, signed and sealed by the blood of our fathers.”³¹ The officials, searching her house after her arrest, found only some of the paperwork she had hidden there, including one “report that chilled the Cabinet with its exactitude.”³² Greenhow was a skilled spy, and she knew what she was doing. She spent a number of months in prison, suffering both physically and emotionally from deprivation and stress.

²⁸ Ishbel Ross, *Rebel Rose*, 48. .

²⁹ Ishbel Ross, *Rebel Rose*, 104.

³⁰ Rose O’Neal Greenhow, “In Prison for my Country” in *The War the Women Lived*, 38.

³¹ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 65.

³² Ishbel Ross, *Rebel Rose*, 152.

After her release from prison, Greenhow's work did not end. In August of 1863, she set sail for Europe as an ambassador for the Confederacy.³³ She spent one year in Europe writing, giving speeches, and advocating the Confederate cause with many leaders of top countries. However, on her return trip home in August of 1864, in the midst of a brewing storm, her ship was spotted by Federal officers. Determined to avoid capture and to deliver the letters, gold, and goods that she had brought, Greenhow, against the captain's wishes, demanded to be rowed ashore. Her small boat capsized in the waves, and Greenhow, weighed down by the items hidden in her dress, drowned. She was buried with full military honors and hailed as a Confederate hero. Her headstone reads, "A bearer of dispatches to the Confederate Government."³⁴ Greenhow, the first female spy to come to light during the war, successfully ran a spy ring unprecedented in America. She worked closely with Confederate generals, inspired other Confederate sympathizers to action, and most likely saved hundreds of Confederate lives in her efforts.

Belle Boyd

Belle Boyd, considered the Confederacy's most sensational spy, came from a small town in Virginia and began spying at the young age of seventeen. She made no secret of her status as a Confederate sympathizer, and her bravery and courage in the face of several dangerous situations inspired many southerners in their fight against the Union. She is most well-known for running information and directing Confederate troops in the takeover of her town Front Royal.

Boyd first began to tamper in espionage by spying on Union soldiers in her hometown, writing down messages, and sending them to various Confederate

³³ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 249.

³⁴ Ishbel Ross, *Rebel Rose*, 272.

generals, usually General J.E.B. Stuart. With little experience in spying, Boyd made no effort to hide her handwriting or put the messages in code. After she began to steal weapons, Federal detectives caught and reprimanded her. She continued her work, however, and eventually spent about a week in prison for her actions.³⁵ However, these acts began to form the basis of her reputation as a Confederate sympathizer and spy, and the relationships she formed with the Union officers would serve her well later.

Boyd's first significant act of espionage came soon after the beginning of the war. A Union war council was being held in the dining room of her aunt's house, and Boyd managed to listen in, picking up information about Union plans and troop movements. "As soon as the council was over she jumped on her horse, galloped fifteen miles to give her information" to Confederate Colonel Turner Ashby, Jr., and returned home before anyone missed her.³⁶ She had been stopped twice on her journey, but luckily had obtained falsified papers ahead of time which gave her credibility to be passing through the lines.³⁷ Although Boyd had previously served as a nurse, this jump-started her career as a spy for the Confederacy.

Throughout her career, newspapers in both the North and South sensationalized Boyd's actions for the Confederacy. With the help of her trustworthy African-American maid, Boyd managed to smuggle messages through lines again and again. Her reputation grew consistently. She made her one mistake by trusting a man who promised to be a Confederate sympathizer, but who turned out to be a spy for the Union. Although an African-American woman tried to warn her that this man was not who he seemed to be, Boyd did not take

³⁵ Belle Boyd, "Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison," vol. I, *Documenting the American South*, (1998), 72-101, accessed April 16, 2018, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/boyd1/boyd1.html>.

³⁶ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 173.

³⁷ Belle Boyd, "Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison," vol. I, *Documenting the American South*, 107.

heed of her warnings and instead entrusted the man with a letter containing valuable information to be sent to General Jackson. The man instead took the letter straight to Federal General Franz Sigel.³⁸ This evidence against Boyd triggered a chain of events that eventually led to her arrest and long-term imprisonment in the North.

After her release, Boyd continued to work for the Confederacy, and during one failed attempt to escape Union pursuers, she met Union navy officer Samuel Hardinge. The man immediately became smitten with her, and although she turned him down at first, Boyd accepted his second proposal of marriage.³⁹ After this latest arrest, Boyd, instead of simply being banished south, was banished to Canada. Threatened with death if she was caught in the United States again, Boyd went to Canada. She writes about her mixed feelings in her autobiography, saying, “Each step towards freedom carried me farther and farther from my native hold; [while], did I turn back a heavy penalty awaited me.”⁴⁰ Boyd’s life depended on her flight to Canada, and yet she knew her work for the Confederacy would be limited outside the United States. Hardinge, who had been arrested on the charge of allowing a Confederate prisoner to escape, quickly followed her. Stalked by Union detectives even in Canada, Boyd and Hardinge eventually set sail for Europe and were married.⁴¹

Boyd’s memoirs were published in England several years later, where she also had her first child. After Hardinge’s death, Boyd went on to have several more marriages, growing her family, and eventually returned to the United States as an actress. Although Boyd’s stories as related in her memoirs seem exaggerated and at times extreme, “her account, when checked exhaustively

³⁸ Belle Boyd, “Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison,” 153-154.

³⁹ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy*, 162.

⁴⁰ Belle Boyd, “Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison,” 97.

⁴¹ Belle Boyd, “Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison,” vol. II, *Documenting the American South*, (1998), 106, 110, accessed April 16, 2018. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/boyd2/menu.html>.

against official records, newspaper items, and other available data, proves to be an unusually accurate recital.”⁴² Belle Boyd was one of the most popularized, extraordinary women who spied for the Confederacy, and her brave exploits proved her loyal character and tremendous courage.

Loreta Janeta Velazquez

The recorded exploits of female soldier and spy Loreta Janeta Velazquez have been some of the most highly-debated among accounts of female spies. In her autobiography, Velazquez made a number of claims that have as of yet been unverifiable. However, other acts that have been confirmed by sources still prove remarkable for a woman during the Civil War. Velazquez, who spent much of her time serving as a soldier in disguise, also turned to spying in some of the later war years.

Velazquez began her career as a soldier, disguised as a male, much to her husband’s displeasure. She describes her first taste of war at the Battle of Bull Run, where she attempted (and succeeded, by her account) to prove herself a valiant and trustworthy soldier, even going on to lead troops in battle. Writing about the difficulty of attempting to keep her true gender a secret in the camps, Velazquez boldly claimed, “I have no hesitation in saying that I wish I had been created a man instead of a woman.”⁴³ Velazquez continued to serve in the army disguised as a male, but her first taste of espionage was her own idea. Resuming typical dress for a woman, she traveled to Washington, where she called upon old friends and past connections to pick up any information she could about the Union army’s plans. While there, she managed to learn about a coming attempt to

⁴² Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy*, 86.

⁴³ Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle: A Narrative of the Exploits, Adventures, and Travels of Madame Loreta Janeta Velazquez*, ed. C. J. Worthington (Arno Press Inc., 1972), 130.

control the mouth of the Mississippi, a possible future attack on New Orleans and/or Mobile, and the depth to which spies in Washington, such as Greenhow, were being hunted down.⁴⁴ It is unknown whether Velazquez shared any of this information with her commanding officers, but according to her memoirs, she returned to her unit and continued to fight.⁴⁵ However, in the next months, Velazquez grew more careless about concealing her gender, and she suffered her first arrest, including a fine and a ten-day imprisonment.

The information that Velazquez had picked up in Washington proved true, and New Orleans was captured in the early months of 1862. During the occupation, Velazquez offered her services as a smuggler, running the lines with false passes and pretending to befriend Union officers in an attempt to get more information.⁴⁶ Velazquez made no secret of the fact that she was proud of her work, and she considered her smuggling and spying no less important than her role as a soldier had been. After she escaped New Orleans under the threat of arrest, Velazquez variously dressed as female and male as she continued to spy, going by the name of Lieutenant Harry T. Buford when she was in disguise.⁴⁷ Although she sometimes worked for various Confederate generals, most of her espionage work was done on her own. Although some of her tales may be exaggerated beyond the scope of the truth, Velazquez did perform some remarkable services for the Confederacy. “One of her more dangerous reported exploits,” writes author Richard H. Hall, “was penetrating the Federal detective corps headed by Lafayette C. Baker and acting as a double agent, pretending to work for him while actually carrying out Confederate operations.”⁴⁸ She claims to

⁴⁴ Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle*, 139.

⁴⁵ Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle*, 143.

⁴⁶ Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle*, 251.

⁴⁷ Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle*, 272.

⁴⁸ Richard H. Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 101.

have done all of these deeds for the sake of the Confederate cause, but in the midst of her work, she deeply desired to be labeled a hero, and she continuously claimed glory for herself. Her memoirs must be read and studied with a careful eye for her truth and motivations.

In recent years, scholars have begun to heatedly debate the truthfulness of Velazquez' memoirs. Although some of her claims have been verified against outside accounts, many more are unable to be examined because of the secret nature of the work while she was in disguise and spying. Historian William C. Davis casts doubt on her claims of childhood, education, and early adulthood, instead drawing connections and arguing that her true identity was Ann Williams, a woman who had worked as a prostitute in New Orleans.⁴⁹ Velazquez, Davis argues, saw the chance for a new life, a new story, and a new identity with the beginning of the Civil War, and she seized it. Velazquez had numerous aliases during the war, and Davis also brings up one controversial story in particular that Velazquez personally told to newspaper editor Robert. H. Purdom.⁵⁰ Davis refutes a number of stories that Velazquez told in her memoirs, including one about Ball's Bluff, where she claims to have fought with the fifth Texas regiment. This, Davis says, "is rendered suspect by the fact that no Texas units were in that fight."⁵¹ Davis claims that Velazquez was none other than an intelligent, sneaky con artist. However, other writers, such as Heidi Konkel, claim that although Velazquez' story is controversial, "her autobiography does merit some validity as some of the information has matched official documents."⁵² There will most likely never be a way to fully discover the truthfulness of her story. Despite the

⁴⁹ William C. Davis, "Confederate Con Artist," *Civil War Times* 56, no. 3 (2017): 52-59, accessed February 14, 2018, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/ehost/detail/detail>.

⁵⁰ William C. Davis, "Confederate Con Artist."

⁵¹ William C. Davis, "Confederate Con Artist."

⁵² Heidi Konkel, "Female Spies and Soldiers of the Civil War."

controversy surrounding Velazquez' stories, many of her espionage antics that have been proven true contributed significantly to the Confederate cause.

Antonia Ford

Antonia Ford, who assisted the Confederate army in numerous ways, grew up in Fairfax Courthouse, Virginia. Scholars have compared her to some of the most famous Confederate spies, saying she was “a twenty-four-year-old who played Belle Boyd in a more placid, yet quite lethal way.”⁵³ Although she did not have the flair or the loud pride that Boyd did, she was quite as effective at espionage, making use of her intelligence as well as her feminine charms. Ford was considered pretty and well-liked, and she made no public professions of her Confederate leanings. Rather, she chose to keep her beliefs quiet, making it easier for Union officers to trust her with valuable information. Ford's father, also a Confederate sympathizer, was a merchant who delivered various messages to southern agents. Her family also commonly took in Union soldiers as boarders, so she had access to many officers whom she got to know fairly well and who grew to trust her.⁵⁴ Ford took careful precautions to keep her work secret. Once, when her house was searched by Union agents, she quickly hid all of the incriminating papers under her skirts. She is most well-known for assisting Confederate Commander John S. Mosby and his Rangers in the capture of Union General Edwin H. Stoughton in their raid on Fairfax Courthouse in 1863. Ford was commissioned as an honorary aide-de-camp by Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart for her assistance.⁵⁵ She was later discovered and arrested because she bragged

⁵³ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray*, 169.

⁵⁴ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray*, 169.

⁵⁵ Willard Family, *Willard Family Papers*, revised Margaret McAleer and Amanda Loeb, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (2017).

about her work to another woman, whom she thought to be a Confederate officer as well, but who actually turned out to be a Union agent in disguise. Although Ford spent time in the Old Capitol Prison, she eventually went on to marry the man who had arrested her, Union officer Joseph C. Willard.⁵⁶ Antonia Ford's sly work for the Confederacy assisted several southern generals in carrying out their plans.

Belle Edmondson

Belle Edmondson had quite a different beginning than many of the other female spies who made significant contributions to the Confederacy. At age eighteen, she signed on with the army to be an official smuggler for the Confederacy. By sewing everything into her clothing, she managed to smuggle various pieces of contraband over the lines, including dispatches, equipment, and medical supplies.⁵⁷ Edmondson wrote several times in her diary about having trouble walking normally because she was so weighed down by the goods hid within her petticoats. Typically, these goods and any information she picked up were transmitted to Captain Thomas H. Henderson, a Confederate scout.⁵⁸ She quickly learned the art of smuggling and picked up various tips to help her get across the lines, such as the necessity of having passes and the fact that African-American men on the picket lines tended to be more lenient than white men. Edmondson conscientiously wrote in her diary about each day's adventures. On Wednesday, March 23, 1864, she wrote that she had an extra successful day, especially in comparison to the next week, when she managed to smuggle through

⁵⁶ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray*, 175.

⁵⁷ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 270.

⁵⁸ Richard H. Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 104.

only a few letters.⁵⁹ On some days, the lines would unexpectedly close, and Edmondson would be unable to get through at all. If caught, she was typically only sent back behind southern lines with a guard rather than being arrested.⁶⁰ Over the course of her smuggling, Edmondson managed to make these trips frequently, sneaking over vital goods and letters for both soldiers and civilians.

Emeline Pigott

Emeline Pigott completed most of her work for the Confederacy from her home, a farm along Calico Creek in North Carolina, next to a Confederate camp. Pigott collected supplies, including medicine and food, and left them in designated hollow trees for Confederate soldiers or officers to pick up. As well as collecting and delivering these supplies, Pigott distracted Union soldiers in her home while her brother-in-law snuck food to Confederate troops hiding in the woods.⁶¹ Pigott was caught and arrested when Union officials set a trap for her with planted information. She spent one month in prison, and although she was taken to court, she was never actually put on trial. Pigott was set free only because she threatened the two men who had planted the false information, who then had her released. Although Pigott was watched closely and her home repeatedly searched, she was never arrested again.⁶² She continued to serve the Confederacy throughout the rest of the Civil War.

⁵⁹ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 272.

⁶⁰ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 273.

⁶¹ Ruth Royal Barnes, "Pigott, Emeline Jamison," last modified 1994, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/pigott-emeline-jamison>.

⁶² Ruth Royal Barnes, "Pigott, Emeline Jamison."

Consequences and Punishments

Banishment & Imprisonment

Even from the beginning of the war, Federal detectives, police forces, and judges were relatively uncertain about what to do with female traitors. Male spies and smugglers suffered harsh fates, including execution. Yet because of the stereotype about women that existed in the time before the Civil War, it seemed harsh, unnecessary, and cruel to exact this same punishment on women. Officials were unprepared to deal with these women, and they were forced to “confront the dangerous evidence of women’s political activity and to find ways to hold them accountable.”⁶³ The women needed to be contained somehow, especially as Union army generals recognized the increasing importance of the information these female spies were delivering, but they were at a loss when it came to how to stop the problem.

Although there are many records of women being threatened, interrogated, jailed, and banished south, there are no accessible records of women being executed for the crime of espionage. While male spies frequently faced execution, it was simply out of the question, too horrendous for the northern justice system, to allow this punishment for women, no matter how badly they needed to end the leaking of information. The stereotype of women at the time, especially southern women, was an “ideal of ‘true womanhood’... [that] portrayed females as frail and dependent, unequipped to survive in the rough-and-tumble world without a male protector” and certainly unable to take the initiative of independence for themselves.⁶⁴ Although the women spying for the Confederacy clearly defied this

⁶³ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 104.

⁶⁴ Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 197.

stereotype, they were still not subjected to the same punishments as men. “Despite the condemnation of these women by Northerners, veiled sympathy seemed to spare these women from the punishment that would normally fit their crime,” and many women were saved by this quiet adherence to the original stereotypical view of women as the softer, more dependent gender.⁶⁵ Eventually, in their desperation to stop intelligence from being leaked and in their hesitation to punish women with death, some occupied areas even began to treat and punish these women as they would prostitutes, as General Butler did in his infamous New Orleans order.

Instead of facing execution, many female spies who were caught faced banishment to the South, especially if they were living and working in the North. Union Lieutenant Colonel Franklin A. Dick, who was stationed in the border state of Missouri, faced a tricky situation with many Confederate sympathizers. In one letter to a higher-up, he encouraged the allowance of southern sympathizers to go south, where they could do less harm, and noted that “there are many female spies in good society who ought to be sent. They are efficient aiders of the rebellion.”⁶⁶ The Union officers and generals who had to deal with these women saw banishment as a positive way to remove them from the situation and halt the gathering of sensitive information.

In addition to banishment, a commonly-used punishment for female spies and smugglers was imprisonment in various northern prisons. Oftentimes, these imprisoned women would be offered their freedom in exchange for an oath of loyalty to the United States of America. Although some women did agree to this offer, many of the most famous spies and smugglers, such as Rose O’Neal

⁶⁵ Rachel Edmonston, “Confederate Female Spies,” 7.

⁶⁶ Franklin A. Dick to Abraham Lincoln, *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 2, vol. 5, ed. United States War Department, accessed March 1, 2018, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu>.

Greenhow and Belle Boyd, repeatedly refused, and so endured longer terms of imprisonment. Rose O'Neal Greenhow, when first arrested on August 23, 1861 by Detective Allan Pinkerton, was put on house arrest in her own home for several weeks while detectives ransacked her house looking for evidence.⁶⁷ Greenhow's house was converted into a prison, and although detectives and police officers searched frantically through her personal items for incriminating evidence, Greenhow managed to eradicate the most damning papers by destroying them or sending them out of the house with a friend.⁶⁸ Trapped in her own home with her youngest child, Greenhow was never left alone, and so she could do little to continue her spying purposes. After the detectives finished searching through her house, Greenhow was transferred to a more secure prison.

Unlike Greenhow, who was arrested only once and held for a long amount of time, Belle Boyd was arrested multiple times over the course of her work for the Confederacy. Boyd was caught and reprimanded the first time, but continued picking up, writing down, and sending messages containing sensitive information. The second time she was caught, she was arrested and held prisoner in the Eutaw House, a hotel in Baltimore, before being released.⁶⁹ Boyd, who determinedly continued her work, was arrested numerous times after this incident, typically being held on house arrest following her captures. She did spend time in the Old Capitol prison, the same prison where Greenhow was held. During her last stretch of time in prison, near the end of the war and before her escape to Europe, Boyd managed to continue to send and receive messages from within the prison via a small rubber ball with messages sewn inside that was thrown in and out of Boyd's window in her cell.⁷⁰ Although Boyd remained useful during her time in prison,

⁶⁷ Rose O'Neal Greenhow, "Rose O'Neal Greenhow," in *The War the Women Lived*, ed. Walter Sullivan (Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1995), 38.

⁶⁸ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 64-65.

⁶⁹ Belle Boyd, "Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison," 101.

⁷⁰ Belle Boyd, "Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison," vol. I, 273.

both by sending messages and by helping coordinate the escape of a fellow prisoner, she suffered greatly, becoming very ill during this last imprisonment.

Some women made mistakes that landed them in prison, such as Antonia Ford, from Fairfax Court House, Virginia. Sly and subtle, Ford picked up information from Union officers who were boarding in her family's home. Ford was eventually caught because she bragged about her work to another woman she believed to be another spy for the Confederacy, but who was actually a double agent for the North.⁷¹ Emeline Jamison Pigott, a smuggler who snuck a variety of supplies to nearby Confederate troops, also walked into a trap set by Federal officials who purposely planted information to catch her in the act. Pigott was able to tear the message she was carrying to bits before they could read it, but she spent one month in prison for her lack of conscientiousness. This was Pigott's one and only arrest and "although she was watched closely and her home was searched repeatedly...[she] continued to help the Confederate cause in every way she could."⁷² Assisting the Confederacy when surrounded by Unionists was a dangerous business, and both of these women were captured and punished for their services.

Other women miraculously managed to avoid capture again and again. In 1864, Belle Edmondson writes about being threatened with arrest and having to sneak out under a thick veil to keep her identity a secret.⁷³ Edmondson had to lay low for a while during this time, and although she did not cease her work for the Confederacy, she was more limited in what she could do. Although spy and soldier Loreta Janeta Velazquez suffered capture and arrest a few times, leading

⁷¹ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray*, 175.

⁷² Ruth Royal Barnes, "Pigott, Emeline Jamison" last modified 1994, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/pigott-emeline-jamison>.

⁷³ Belle Edmondson, "Diary of Belle Edmondson: January – November 1864," *Documenting the American South*, (1998) 46, accessed April 16, 2018, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/edmondson/edmondson.html>.

to fines and short-term imprisonment, she managed to avoid arrest when her life, or at least a long imprisonment, may have been at stake. Under disguise, Velazquez was delivering a number of letters, packages, and money to Canada when she came face-to-face with the very detective who was looking for her. He did not recognize her, thanks to her disguise, and she was able to continue on her way unhindered.⁷⁴

Women, especially upper-class women, were not used to the harsh conditions they experienced in prison. Although there are no accessible records of women being directly executed for treacherous acts, many women suffered and some even died due to the extreme conditions they experienced while imprisoned. Mrs. William Kirby, whose husband and son both fought for the Confederacy, became a blockade runner to sneak quinine across the lines for Confederate hospitals. Despite the numerous pickets and scouts, she eventually began sneaking out weapons and ammunition, typically traveling short distances through woods and hills to drop the smuggled goods off with local loyal farmers. Kirby was finally caught and arrested when trying to sneak out two rifles hidden under her dress. She was imprisoned on Ship Island, where she stayed until her death near the end of the war.⁷⁵ Kirby is just one example of the price women paid for their loyalty to the Confederacy.

The Old Capitol & Carroll Prisons

Although many women who were arrested were held in makeshift prisons such as homes, hotels, offices, or boarding houses, there were several specific prisons in the North dedicated to holding Confederate sympathizers. Two of these prisons, The Old Capitol Prison and Carroll Prison, had numerous cells occupied

⁷⁴ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 295-297.

⁷⁵ Matthew Page Andrews, *The Women of the South in War Times*, 17-19.

by women for much of the war. These two prisons were connected as adjoining houses. Two of their most famous occupants included Belle Boyd and Rose O'Neal Greenhow, the latter of whom the Old Capitol Prison's record books listed as "'a dangerous, skillful spy.'"⁷⁶ Many other women, including Antonia Ford, also spent time in the prison on the charge of espionage.

The Old Capitol Prison, built in 1800, was originally occupied as a tavern and boarding house. After Washington's capitol building was burned in the War of 1812, it also temporarily served as the nation's capital, therefore earning the nickname the "Old Capitol" after the building was vacated in 1825.⁷⁷ Although it served as a school for a while, it had again been abandoned by the time the Civil War started. While its primary occupants were traitors to the Union, there were a few northern criminals locked up in the prison as well. The prison included gallows, where hangings took place. The building has since been torn down, and today the Supreme Court building stands on its site.⁷⁸

Virginia Lomax, who spent time in Carroll Prison for supposedly writing a disloyal letter, described her cell as a damp apartment on the ground floor. In her room, there was a bed with pillows, a straw mattress, sheets, and a dirty blanket, as well as a table with one chair, one cup, and a basin. Lomax also had a roommate.⁷⁹ She and her roommate were often served inedible meals, and the guards often used hanging as a threat to control behavior, although none of the female prisoners were ever executed there. Discussing the rules, Lomax writes, "They were exceedingly strict, but no prisoner was ever told what they were;

⁷⁶ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 61.

⁷⁷ Brenda Hay Smelser, "Old Capitol Civil War Prison" last modified 2008. http://www.censusdiggins.com/prison_oldcapitol.html.

⁷⁸ Brenda Hay Smelser, "Old Capitol Civil War Prison."

⁷⁹ Virginia Lomax, "The Old Capitol and its Inmates: By a Lady who Enjoyed the Hospitality of the Government for a 'Season,'" *Documenting the American South*, (1999), 67, accessed April 16, 2018, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/lomax/lomax.html>.

therefore one was in constant danger of breaking them through ignorance – the first imitation of his transgression being the whiz of a bullet uncomfortably near.”⁸⁰ Some women were released for agreeing to take the oath, but those who refused continued to suffer under the harsh conditions of the prison, some even dying because of them. By the time Lomax’s friends were able to hire a detective to get her released, Lomax herself was suffering from a disease they called “prison fever,” and she described her appearance as “more like a phantom than [her] former self.”⁸¹ Lomax did make a full recovery after her release from the prison.

Rose O’Neal Greenhow’s prison cell was a room located in the back of the building, with a view of the prison yard so she could not see the street. It was roughly ten by twelve feet, and it included a straw bed with a pillow, a wooden table and chairs, and a mirror. Greenhow and her young daughter, who was imprisoned with her and who suffered a degrading illness while there, were fed soldiers’ rations. Greenhow spent nearly six months in this prison, and she writes of both physical and emotional suffering, saying, “My existence is now a positive blank.”⁸² Both Greenhow and her daughter were greatly affected by the harsh conditions they experienced in the Old Capitol Prison.

Belle Boyd, the Old Capitol Prison’s other most famous resident, described her cell as similar to Greenhow’s. She listed a washing stand, a mirror, an iron bedstead, a table, and a few chairs for furniture. Whereas Greenhow’s room looked over the prison yard, Boyd’s looked over Pennsylvania Avenue. However, officials were reluctant to allow Boyd, as well as Greenhow, to ever go outside into the prison yard. They provided her an African-American servant, through whom Boyd communicated with the other prisoners. Boyd also

⁸⁰ Virginia Lomax, “The Old Capitol and its Inmates,” 88-89.

⁸¹ Virginia Lomax, “The Old Capitol and its Inmates,” 216, 222-224.

⁸² *Heroines of Dixie*, 75.

communicated by wrapping small notes around marbles, which she then “rolled deftly from one room to another behind the backs of sentries.”⁸³ Even the thought of defying the Union guards in this small way gave Boyd and the other prisoners a sense of satisfaction and hope. The officers were supposedly rough with the prisoners. Boyd claimed to have sustained several injuries while imprisoned at the Old Capitol, including a cut on her arm and a broken thumb.⁸⁴ When the officials offered her freedom in exchange for her taking the oath of allegiance, Boyd reportedly replied, “I hope that when I commence the oath of allegiance to the United States Government, my tongue may cleave to the roof of my mouth.”⁸⁵ Despite Boyd’s harsh and consistent refusal to take the oath, she eventually gained her freedom through a prisoner exchange. Boyd later spent time in the Carroll Prison as well, but she was able to communicate with the outside this time through the rubber ball trick. She also communicated with prisoners in neighboring cells by passing notes through holes in the walls.

Other female prisoners included Mrs. Simon Bissell and her daughter, who were imprisoned on the charge of smuggling. They had tried to smuggle “nine trunks containing forty dresses, 223 pieces of underclothing and fifty pounds each of coffee and sugar for which they had received no special authorization” to relatives in Virginia, where resources were limited.⁸⁶ The two women spent four weeks in prison before they used their connection to a high-ranking Union officer to be freed and banished south. These women, along with more famous residents such as Boyd and Greenhow, as well as smaller-scaled espionage agents and smugglers such as Antonia Ford, all spent time in these two connected northern

⁸³ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy*, 86.

⁸⁴ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy*, 95.

⁸⁵ Belle Boyd, “Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison,” vol. I, 202.

⁸⁶ James H. Whyte, “Divided Loyalties in Washington During the Civil War.”

prisons, which were by far the two most commonly utilized prisons for treacherous women.

Public Opinion

Not all people were in favor of lessening the punishments for female spies who had been caught. One magazine admitted that although it could be difficult to know without a doubt if someone was guilty of espionage, the punishment should be death for those found guilty without a doubt, even if that person was a woman. The only exceptions should be spies who were to be exchanged as prisoners of war in very specific situations. This same article also suggested that one should be punished according to how useful one was to the enemy; only the smallest, most insignificant spies should be eligible for an exchange. As to the woman question, this author suggested that if females chose to forgo their place in society “as to take up arms, or to incite others to do so, or to assist or encourage them in waging hostilities, they are no longer entitled to the exemption of non-combatants” (women and children).⁸⁷ This author argued that by choosing to spy or smuggle goods, jobs not socially acceptable for women, these women were choosing to give up the protection their gender would normally have given them.

Southern spies were glamorized and romanticized in both the North and South during and following the Civil War years, in a time period that lamented over the “Lost Cause.” After the war, this mentality of reminiscence “eased the region’s passage through a particularly difficult period of social change.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ “Who May Kill in War, and Who May Not,” *The United States Service Magazine* (1864-1866) 4, no. 5 (1865): 1-10, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/americanperiodicalsdocview/>.

⁸⁸ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 6.

Southerners were immensely proud of these women, while northerners, although outwardly hateful towards these genteel ladies, sometimes even seemed to quietly admire these women's bravery and determination. No matter how readers reacted to the stories, they were drawn to them because these female espionage agents for the Confederacy were presented as "dangerous yet appealing."⁸⁹ Sensational stories about these female spies appeared frequently in southern newspapers, usually more exaggerated than truthful. These stories even made their way into northern newspapers when the spies were captured and imprisoned. While some newspapers and magazines accused these women of being scandalous, many still attempted to portray them as virtuous because no one wanted to admit that women were openly ignoring the stereotypes that had previously limited their independence and influence on political and military matters.⁹⁰

Northern newspapers even admired the southern ladies' spirits and lamented the fact that they were dedicated to such a poor use. One magazine wrote, "Nothing could exceed the enthusiasm, the persistency, the heroic endurance, the self-sacrifice they have manifested. Only had it been a good cause!"⁹¹ Northerners admired the dedication, effort, and courage, but were dismayed over the way the women put these traits to use. Often, northern writers, desperate for someone to blame, attributed the southern women's misguided dedication to a poor environment and a lack of education. By acknowledging their potential while also calling them "deluded," these northern writers often triggered pity for the southern women who dedicated their Civil War years to spying and smuggling.⁹² They turned the women's brave antics into another reason for the

⁸⁹ Rachel Edmonston, "Confederate Female Spies," 11.

⁹⁰ Heidi Konkell, "Female Spies and Soldiers of the Civil War."

⁹¹ "The Continental Monthly: Devoted to Literature and National Policy," 428.

⁹² "The Continental Monthly: Devoted to Literature and National Policy," 431.

Union to fight, to give these women a chance to dedicate their passion to a more worthy cause.

After the war, writers from all over the country continued to put these female spies on pedestals, promoting the “Lost Cause” mentality. Some writers put them into main characters in literature, often “presenting a daring and often dangerously enticing Southern woman, who was capable of flirting with Union officers to aide her beloved Confederacy.”⁹³ These fictionalized women were becoming a popular form of entertainment especially for northern women, who perhaps did not truly understand the extremity of these southern women’s positions because they had been so romanticized. The “Lost Cause” had become a cultural phenomenon, not just in the South, but all through the United States, in a desperate attempt to maintain some semblance of the southern identity.⁹⁴ These stories of women so loyal to the Confederate cause depicted the values of the Old South and contributed to that ideal, and, for that reason, these stories were much more popular than stories of women who wanted to reunite the country peacefully.

Impact

Intelligence

By the ending months of 1863 and certainly by the beginning months of 1864, many of the spy rings that had flourished in the early stages of the war had been put out of commission. Most female agents had been imprisoned, banished south, forced to flee the country, like Belle Boyd, or had lost their lives, like Rose

⁹³ Rachel Edmonston, “Confederate Female Spies,” 2.

⁹⁴ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980), 7.

O'Neal Greenhow. Had these spies been able to continue their work through the ending years of the war, the Civil War perhaps could have even been extended by several months. The Confederate generals relied on information about the enemy from these spies, and when this information was no longer available to them, they struggled to maintain their previous success in battle.

The intelligence provided by these women inspired generals and armies to action, most likely changing the outcome of several battles in particular.

However, because their identities and specifics were kept secret due to the delicate nature of the spying situation, historians may never know the depth to which their information assisted in the war effort. The official battle reports, primary sources written by the Confederate generals themselves, offer some insight into the impact of the intelligence provided by female spies. In his report on the Battle of Cedar Run (Cedar Mountain) on August 9, 1862, Lieutenant General Thomas J. Jackson wrote, "Intelligence having reached the commanding general that Gordonsville was endangered by the approach of the enemy, I was ordered to move in that direction."⁹⁵ Had Jackson's commanding general not received this intelligence, it would have been too little too late for Jackson to move into position by the time they realized where the enemy was moving. This intelligence, provided by agents, inspired the generals to action and triggered preparatory movements.

Even the Union generals had caught wind of the incredible amount of information the female agents were picking up and sending south. In a letter to Union General James G. Blunt, Colonel William A. Phillips wrote that the Confederate generals had "female spies and other means of information" who

⁹⁵ Lieutenant General Thomas J. Jackson, "Battle of Cedar Run or Cedar Mountain," in *The Confederate Soldier in the Civil War* (Paterson: Pageant Books, Inc., 1959), 103.

were passing along the Union army's every move.⁹⁶ Clearly, these women were assisting the Confederate cause by picking up information in the northern and border states and sending it south, and the Union generals knew this information was making a difference in the Confederate strategy.

Women Changing the War

Women's assistance saved lives during the war through providing intelligence as well as displaying bravery in the midst of battles themselves. Rose O'Neal Greenhow provided information that led to the Battle of Bull Run or First Manassas that most likely had a dramatic effect on the outcome of the battle. The Battle of Bull Run was the first major battle of the Civil War, and it took place on July 21, 1861 near Manassas Junction, Virginia, roughly twenty-five miles outside of Washington D.C., where the Union troops were currently stationed. About 35,000 Union troops marched from D.C. to attack 20,000 Confederate troops along the small Bull Run River.⁹⁷

As discussed earlier, Rose O'Neal Greenhow operated a widespread, very successful spy ring in Washington D.C. She discovered information on federal troop movements concerning the time and place that would become the Battle of Bull Run, and "from Washington she sent two messages in code to General Beauregard, and on this information he based his defense at First Manassas."⁹⁸ This information included not only the exact routes the Union army would be taking, but also how many soldiers would be marching on the Confederates as well as specific railroad lines the Union army intended to cut in order to cut off

⁹⁶ William A Phillips to James G. Blunt, *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 13, ed. United States War Department.

⁹⁷ History.com Staff, "First Battle of Bull Run" last modified 2011. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/first-battle-of-bull-run>.

⁹⁸ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 62.

supplies and travel routes in the Confederate states. Greenhow sent the first of several messages with female messenger Betty Duvall, who snuck the coded messages across the lines wrapped up in her thick dark hair, which was pinned up. Duvall rode a total of fourteen miles in one day.⁹⁹ She reached the general in time for him to call in reinforcements and, in fact, her first message inspired him to action. One call went out to General Joseph E. Johnston. General Johnston later wrote in his report that “On the morning of the sixteenth intelligence was received that General Patterson’s army had crossed the Potomac at Williamsport.”¹⁰⁰ The General outmaneuvered Union troops to bring 11,000 men to assist General Beauregard in the battle.¹⁰¹ These extra troops turned the tide of the battle, and the Confederates were able to break the Union lines and push back the Federal troops.

Although they were not able to pursue the Union army, they did hold off and push them back. Even the newspapers acknowledged the importance of Greenhow’s information. The day after the battle, *The Charleston Mercury* printed an article noting, “For more than a week the commanding general of the Confederate forces at Manassas has been anticipating an advance of the enemy, and so arranged his troops as to be prepared at all points.”¹⁰² Greenhow’s timely information allowed these troops the time they needed to get into place and prepare for the coming battle. Greenhow is believed to have later received a thank-you note from General Beauregard’s chief of staff Tom Jordan, reading “Our president and our General direct me to thank you. We rely upon you for further information. The Confederacy owes you a debt.”¹⁰³ This note became one

⁹⁹ William C. Davis, *Battle at Bull Run: A History of the First Major Campaign of the Civil War* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), accessed March 28, 2018, <https://books.google.com/books?id=RGU0zK6dB6IC&pg=PP15&dq=Bettie+Duval&hl>.

¹⁰⁰ General Joseph E. Johnston, “Battle of Manassas (Bull Run),” in *The Confederate Soldier in the Civil War*, 45.

¹⁰¹ History.com Staff, “First Battle of Bull Run.”

¹⁰² “Battle of Bull’s Run,” *The Charleston Mercury*, in *The Civil War Extra*, 37.

¹⁰³ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray*, 36.

of Greenhow's most prized possessions, as it represented the fact that her information had made a difference in the battle.

Before this battle, many northerners had expected this war to be a quick, decisive affair. Many residents of Washington D.C. and the surrounding area had even come out during the battle to picnic in surrounding fields and to watch the battle.¹⁰⁴ They viewed it as a form of entertainment. However, after the battle, they were much less sure about the quick end they had expected, and the Confederate victory "gave rejoicing southerners a false hope that they themselves could pull off a swift victory."¹⁰⁵ This battle, won in part because of Greenhow's timely information, would affect the morale of both sides at the beginning of the war.

Although information such as Greenhow's knowledge about the war greatly turned the tide in specific battles, women also participated in more direct ways. Belle Boyd, one of the more sensational spies in the war, not only managed to collect information but also to deliver it in times of desperation. Boyd was staying in the Union-held town of Front Royal, Virginia, where her aunt ran a boarding house. On May 23, 1862, she obtained information about the Union army's plans to burn bridges, shut down roads, and destroy supplies in order to halt the coming Confederates.¹⁰⁶ The Confederates believed there to be many more Union troops in the town than there actually were, and Boyd knew they could take the town if only they could get there in time. Desperate, she asked several male Confederate sympathizers to deliver the message. They refused, and Boyd decided to deliver it herself. With gunfire already beginning, she ran out of the town through no-man's land towards the Confederate troops. Boyd "scrambled over fences, crawled along the edges of hills and fields, and at last

¹⁰⁴ History.com Staff, "First Battle of Bull Run."

¹⁰⁵ History.com Staff, "First Battle of Bull Run."

¹⁰⁶ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 173.

approached the oncoming southern line.”¹⁰⁷ Although the Union troops fired at her, they did not hit her. She took off her bonnet and waved it high in the air, urging the Confederate troops onwards to the town. Heeding her message, the two front units “without waiting for further orders, swept by her and dashed onward to the town at a rapid pace.”¹⁰⁸ Because of Boyd’s bravery and quick thinking, the Confederate troops were able to save the bridges, rescue some supplies, and take over the town. In her memoirs, she writes, “Acting upon the information I had been spared to convey, the Confederates gained a most complete victory.”¹⁰⁹ Boyd knew her information had paved the way for the Confederates to take back Front Royal, and she was proud of the role she had played in it. The same day as the battle, Boyd, like Greenhow, also received a message of thanks from top generals. T.J. Jackson wrote, “I thank you, for myself and for the Army, for the immense service that you have rendered your country today.”¹¹⁰ Without Boyd, even if the Confederates had been able to infiltrate the town successfully, they most likely would have lost many more men.

Lesser-known women oftentimes made just as big of a direct impact on specific situations as did female spies such as Rose O’Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd. On May 2, 1863, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was in quick pursuit of a group of Union troops attempting to cut off Confederate transportation and communication by slicing railroad ties. General Bedford, needing to sneak up on the Union army, was looking for an alternative route from the main road, where the bridge had been set on fire. Sixteen-year-old Emma Sansom, who lived nearby, jumped on the General’s horse with him to show him

¹⁰⁷ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue & Gray*, 142.

¹⁰⁸ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy* (Richmond: The Ditz Press, Incorporated, 1945), 49.

¹⁰⁹ Belle Boyd, “Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison,” vol. I, 136.

¹¹⁰ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy*, 52.

to a little-known ford where he and his troops could safely cross the stream.¹¹¹ This would allow them to catch the Union troops off guard and to get around the burning bridge. Sansom and the general rode through “thick undergrowth that protected [them] for a while from being seen by the Yankees at the bridge,” but they eventually had to dismount and sneak through the brush to avoid being seen.¹¹² After Sansom showed him the ford, General Bedford delivered her safely back home before taking his troops across the ford and successfully surprising the enemy. Without Emma Sansom’s willingness to put her own life at risk to direct the general and his troops, they most likely would have been trapped by the Union army.

The Ending of the War

Just as women had a major impact on the war as it was being fought, they also greatly influenced the ending of the war. By 1864, fewer and fewer women were able to participate in the war effort by spying or smuggling. Most female smugglers had been caught or were unable to continue their services as the Union army pushed south. Female spy rings had come to an end because the women were caught, banished, or forced to flee. Rose O’Neal Greenhow died on her way home from Europe in August of 1864.¹¹³ By the summer of 1864, Belle Boyd was living safely in England.¹¹⁴ Blockade runner Mrs. William Kirby had been captured and imprisoned.¹¹⁵ Antonia Ford had been caught.¹¹⁶ More and more

¹¹¹ Matthew Page Andrews, *The Women of the South in War Times*, 278.

¹¹² Matthew Page Andrews, *The Women of the South in War Times*, 280.

¹¹³ *Heroines of Dixie*, ed. Katherine M. Jones, 249.

¹¹⁴ Belle Boyd, “Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison, vol. II, *Documenting the American South*, (1998), 110.

¹¹⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 99.

¹¹⁶ Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue & Gray*, 175.

supporters like these women, who had remained dedicated to the Confederate cause, had slowly become unable to render their services to their country. Without key intelligence, Confederate generals were having to rely more and more on instinct, desperation, and rumors rather than certain information as they fought a losing battle.

As the war continued, patriotism and morale began to drop. Women were tired of suffering, tired of fighting for what seemed to be a losing cause. Although women clearly had the power to contribute so much to the Confederate cause, they also had the power to turn the tide of morale and ultimately to bring down the Confederacy. The longer the war dragged on, the more southern women, left at home alone, began to protest the suffering, starvation, and lack of resources caused by the war. Southern “women citizens’ consent for secession and new nationhood was neither solicited nor secured,” and although they at first went along and fully supported the men’s goal to maintain their way of life, as the war went on, they appeared more loyal to their own families’ welfares and less and less to the Confederate cause.¹¹⁷ In the every-day struggle simply to survive, supporting a losing war became the least of their worries. Surviving was becoming more and more difficult, thanks to Yankee raids, limited resources, and continued deaths. In areas of the South that had more openly opposed secession, average women’s loyalty was starting to become an issue as early as 1862.¹¹⁸ They spent less time making clothes for soldiers and more time petitioning the government for assistance, often with limited success. As women’s morale dropped, so did the morale of their husbands, brothers, and fathers on the front lines. “The home front and military conditions were inextricably linked, materially and politically,” and because the home front’s once-strong confidence

¹¹⁷ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 24-25.

¹¹⁸ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 118.

took such a dip in the later years of the war, the Confederacy began to lose ground.¹¹⁹ Men at the front could not focus on the battle when they knew that their families were at home and in danger of starving. In reality, the “failure of the Confederacy to alleviate the suffering of soldiers’ families may have contributed more to Southern defeat than any other single factor.”¹²⁰ The hardships female spies and women at home faced during the final years of the war contributed significantly to the decline in the Confederacy’s abilities to continue fighting the war.

By 1865, the war-torn South was struggling to figure out where to step next. After the war, women faced a choice. They had played a distinct role in the war, which was beginning to be recognized by other Americans as well as people across the world. One British journalist remarked in the 1860s that “Never...had any war seemed so much a woman’s war as the Civil War.”¹²¹ Some women wished to return to the nearest sense of normal they could find, while others cherished the newfound freedom they had obtained during the war. Throughout the war years, there had been a “growing recognition on both sides of women’s political identity and capacity,” and many women were reluctant to give up this newfound recognition.¹²² Gender stereotypes had been distinctly challenged during the war out of necessity, and while some women stepped back into their roles as homemakers, others fought to keep the rights they had gained during the war. Despite the fact that some of these changes, such as females being officially enlisted as spies for the army, were temporary, many more became permanent and paved the way for later changes. During the war, “southern white women made unprecedented claims on the state and in the process turned themselves into a

¹¹⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 205.

¹²⁰ Bell Irvin Wiley, *Confederate Women* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 177.

¹²¹ Nina Silber, “A Woman’s War,” *OAH Magazine of History* 8, no. 1, (1993): 11-13, accessed January 1, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/stable/25162919>.

¹²² Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 87.

powerful voice” in the Confederacy, and this voice did not die with the war.¹²³ The agency women gained during the war became a cultural trademark change for women. These ideas of independence had triggered a confidence in women not seen before. While many were initially hesitant to let go of traditional values, necessity created from the men being gone to war meant that women were forced to take over more responsibilities, and “a good many women discovered that they could handle their new responsibilities as capably as any man.”¹²⁴ The women did not easily give up these newfound responsibilities after the end of the war. Female spies, women smugglers, and the thousands of other women who supported the war effort in various ways changed the female stereotype in the South and triggered the long-lasting, slow shift in how society viewed women.

Conclusion

Proven by a wide variety of carefully-examined primary and secondary sources, the intelligence provided by female espionage agents significantly contributed to the actions taken by generals in battles near the beginning of the war. Driven by loyalty to the Confederacy as well as an intrinsic motivation to succeed, spies such as Rose O’Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd, among others, defied traditional gender standards and risked their lives, freedom, and reputations to contribute to the Confederate cause. Spy rings led by women such as these flourished across the Confederacy as well as the Union during the war, and the intelligence gathered in these rings was smuggled through the lines, also often by females, to Confederate generals in the South. Although female spies were never executed for their crimes, they spent months in prisons with harsh conditions as

¹²³ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 135.

¹²⁴ Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came*, 199.

well as suffering banishment from the very areas in which they were working as a spy, limiting their ability to help the Confederate cause.

Public opinion, both in the years immediately following the war and continuing throughout the next few centuries, drastically changed the image of these women. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, female spies were portrayed in magazines, newspapers, and literature in a way that romanticized and glamorized the heroic work they had done for the Confederacy. This viewpoint carried over into the twentieth century, making it difficult to understand the truth behind their work as spies. However, careful inspection and scrutiny reveals the impact their work had on the early stages of Confederate military strategies. Examples such as the First Manassas information gathered by Rose O'Neal Greenhow and the courage displayed by Belle Boyd at Front Royal point to the dramatic role these women played especially in the beginning years of the Civil War.

After the war, there was a slight split in the commonly-accepted means of female independence. Older women, who had grown up in the antebellum South, clung to past traditions of women as homemakers as well as socialites in the upper classes. Despite the drastic changes that took place during Reconstruction and in the following years, these mature women made little attempt to move forward from the stereotypes that had existed before the war. However, younger women, many of whom had come of age during the war, took a much different viewpoint when it came to female stereotypes after the war. They had grown up with the war and had long since left behind the antebellum traditions of the South. They had known independence, and young women who served as spies, smugglers, or in other stereotype-defying roles clung stubbornly to their newfound agency as women. They made a life for themselves after the war, which looked much different than the lives of their mothers or grandmothers. Led by the women who had served the Confederacy in various capacities, these women set an early

standard of feminism by their participation in the Civil War, and their early legacies of dedication, courage, and intellect continued on for decades, changing the commonly-accepted role of women in future wars.

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