The vast majority of working women had neither the luxury of an education nor a breadwinner who could support them. By 1860 only about 15 percent of all American women worked for wages, and most of them were among the poorer classes—free black and immigrant women, widows, and rural migrants to the growing cities. But the guns of war would soon change the kind of jobs available to women. From the terrible tragedy of Civil War would come new and different wage-earning opportunities for all women.

Women at War
Like a fire bell in the night—to which Thomas Jefferson, many years before, had likened his terrifying thoughts on the unsolved issue of slavery—photographs pierced the dawn silence in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 12, 1861. Confederate troops had fired on a U.S. garrison at Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor. Although no one was killed in the ensuing skirmish, those early-morning shots ignited the bloodiest war in the nation's history.

After thirty-three hours of constant bombardment, Major Robert Anderson, commander of the U.S. garrison at the fort, surrendered. On April 14, the Stars and Stripes was lowered and the Confederate stars and bars triumphantly raised over Fort Sumter. The Civil War had begun, and both sides—Union and Confederacy—erupted in celebration, as if a giant party had commenced. In Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, everyone "seemed to be perfectly frantic with delight," an observer wrote. "I never in all my life witnessed such excitement." Troops drilled and marched through the city to the fervent cheers of thousands of bystanders.

"The town is crowded with soldiers," Mary Boykin Chesnut reported in her diary. "These new ones are running in... They fear the war will be over before they get a sight of the fun."

The news of Sumter's capture electrified Northerners as well, and a wave of patriotic fervor swept through the North. In New York City, a quarter of a million people flocked to a giant rally for the Union. Across the North, people swarmed into the streets waving Union flags. "The people have gone stark mad," exclaimed a woman in the Midwest.

Both the North and the South were jubilant about going to war. Northerners believed that they were fighting to preserve the country, while Southerners believed that they were putting their lives on the line to preserve not only slavery but a whole way of life. Each side believed that the war would be over in a matter of weeks and that its soldiers would win, resolving once and for all the long years of debate and painful compromise over slavery. Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency had brought this agonizing drama to its climax. Southerners portrayed him as a "Black Republican" who would overthrow slavery and give all African Americans as much, if not more, political power than whites. "Do you love your mother, your wife, your sister, your daughter?" a Georgia official demanded of nonslaveholders after Lincoln's election, if Georgia remained in a Union "ruled by Lincoln and his crew... in TEN years or less our CHILDREN will be the slaves of negroes."

Events moved rapidly toward disunion after Lincoln's election. On February 9, 1861, Jefferson Davis, a senator and former secretary of war, was elected president of the Confederate States of America (CSA). The CSA consisted of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Virginia joined the Confederacy three days after Fort Sumter was captured, and North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas did the same over the next three months. The rest of the slaveholding states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—remained in the Union, but their loyalties lay partly with the Confederacy. Ironically, although Lincoln opposed slavery, he had no intention of interfering with it in the states where it already existed. He even believed that the Constitution protected slavery in those states, though he hoped that slavery would eventually die out on its own.

Southern women zealously supported the southern cause of independence. A Georgia woman wrote her local newspaper, "I feel a new life within me, and my ambition aims at nothing higher than to become an ingenious, economical, industrious housekeeper, and an independent Southern woman." Throughout the South, women urged their menfolk to enlist in the Confederate military. A-Selma, Alabama, woman even broke off her engagement when her fiancé failed to enlist. She sent him a skirt and pantaloons with a note attached: "Wear these or volunteer."

Up North, women also showed passionate support—for the Union. Shortly after the war began, Louisa May Alcott, who later wrote the novel Little Women, confided in her diary, "I long to be a man; but as I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can." Harriet Beecher Stowe called the Union effort a "cause to die for," and a woman in New York declared, "It seems as if we never were alive till now; never had a country till now."

As their husbands and sons drilled and marched and prepared for battle in opposing armies, women of the North and South swung into action. Throughout the North, women-organized soldiers' aid societies to sew uniforms, assemble medical supplies, and knit scarves, socks, mittens, and other items for Union soldiers. In Troy, New York, educator Emma Willard became president of her newly organized society. Her group immediately applied for a government contract to sew soldiers' uniforms and give soldiers' wives paid employment. In New York City, about sixty women met at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, the hospital founded by physicians Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, to organize the relief efforts of New York City's women. Within a few days, the Woman's Central Association of Relief (WCAR) was formed with an initial membership of 2,000 to 3,000 women. Beating a city the size of New York, the WCAR became the largest women's organization to carry out soldiers' relief work.

Unlike earlier volunteer groups, these soldiers' relief societies introduced a new concept to volunteer work: efficiency. During the antebellum years, women who did volunteer work were inspired by religious and moral ideals, and were infused with moral and spiritual zeal. Now, as the huge task of supplying the food, clothing, and medical needs of northern soldiers got underway, volunteers were inspired by the precepts of business rather than religion. They felt an abiding, even
motherly concern for the soldiers' welfare, but discipline and efficiency, cooperation and coordination, became the watchwords on their lips.

Free African-American women of the North also did relief work, primarily for former slaves who had escaped North or who were liberated by Union troops as they advanced into Confederate states. In Lawrence, Kansas, for example, the Ladies' Refugee Aid Society helped former slaves find housing in Kansas. Elsewhere, free-black women raised money to assist ex-slaves.

Harriet Jacobs, a former slave herself, assisted freedpeople who were flocking to Washington, D.C., in search of shelter and employment. At Freedmen's Village, a temporary community where more than one thousand former slaves were raising food for the Union army, she distributed clothing to the needy, nursed sick refugees, helped other refugees find work, and organized sewing circles and schools. Jacobs derived great satisfaction from her work. "The good God has spared me for this work," she wrote a correspondent. "The last six months have been the happiest of all my life."

Sojourner Truth, the former slave who mesmerized audiences with her eloquence, also worked as a counselor at Freedmen's Village. There, she instructed former slaves "in the habits of industry and economy," as she wrote a friend. "Many of them are entirely ignorant of housekeeping [but] they all want to learn the way we live in the North," she explained. Truth also taught home economics and personal hygiene to freedwomen. Like Jacobs, she felt truly fulfilled by this work. "I think I am doing good," she wrote. "I am needed here."

In the South, white Confederate women were immersed in soldiers' relief efforts as well. Indeed, in Charleston, South Carolina, women had started rolling bandages in January 1861, three months before the war had even begun. Shortly after the war started, women throughout the Confederacy organized hundreds of local soldiers' relief societies. In South Carolina alone, more than 150 such societies sprang up in the first two months of war. Women in Petersburg, Virginia, met every day, including Sundays, to sew uniforms and knit socks and blankets for Confederate soldiers. Many of these soldiers' relief groups had once been benevolent reformed and missionary societies. Now they turned from raising money for their churches or charitable activities to outfitting their soldiers. Knitting needles flew like whirligigs and sewing machines whirled nonstop as women dashed off one uniform after another.

But Southern women did more than knit socks—they also filled cartridge boxes and made sandbags for fortification. Because the South had fewer factories than the North for making weapons and other war supplies, those back home—mostly women—were pressed into volunteer service to make vital war materiel. Some women were paid for their efforts, especially when they worked in the few factories that did exist, but most women volunteered their services.

Through their soldiers' relief work, both northern and southern women, African-American as well as white, developed valuable administrative skills. They learned how to coordinate the flow of money and supplies from their groups to other agencies, or to the soldiers themselves. They also learned how to keep records, act as leaders of their own groups, and make important decisions regarding the way they used their time, energies, and money. Like their sisters in the women's rights movement and in earlier volunteer groups, they were learning how to be leaders and policymakers.

During the war, women's rights activists continued to draft petitions and collect signatures—but on behalf of African-American slaves instead of for themselves. In 1863 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony organized the Women's Loyal National League to work for the abolition of slavery in all states, including slaveholding states that supported the Union. Both abolitionists and women's rights activists joined the league, and its membership quickly rose to four thousand. In less than a year, the league collected almost 400,000 signatures on petitions urging Congress to pass a 13th constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. Like soldiers' relief societies, the league drew on the efforts of thousands of women in towns and villages throughout the North.

Women also took over the work of men who had gone off to fight. Across the North and South, women took charge of family farms and plantations as their men battled in Antietam or Chancellorsville or Gettysburg—or lay languishing in makeshift army hospitals or military prisons. Some women despised at the enormous responsibilities of planting, plowing, and running a farm, but other women met the challenge head on—and discovered new strengths and abilities in the process. Sarah Morgan of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, marveled at how much she accomplished in one day—"empty a dirty hearth, dust, move heavy weights, make myself generally useful and dirty, and all this thanks to the Yankees."

Throughout the North, scores of women worked in government offices for the first time to replace male clerks who had enlisted in the Union army. They worked as clerks and copyists, copying speeches and documents for government records. They also became postal employees and worked in the Treasury Department cutting apart long sheets of paper money and counting currency. Salaries ranged from five hundred to nine hundred dollars a year by 1865. Although this was more than what most other female employees made at the time, women still earned half of what men had earned for the same work.

Northern women also worked in factories sewing uniforms. Despite the increased demand for their talents, there were always more seamstresses plying their trade than there was work available for them. Soldiers' wives and widows all sought paid work, and sewing was often the only skill they had. Even when they did work, seamstresses seldom made enough to support themselves. The amount of work available to sewing women—and the wages they were paid—actually declined during the war. Working fourteen to sixteen hours, many seamstresses earned only seventeen to twenty-four cents a day. From that, they had to pay for the thread they used and any damaged goods.
Women found a special kind of power—an inner power of pride and accomplishment—through serving as military nurses. Shortly after the war began, Union military officials established the Department of Female Nurses. Dorothea Dix, who had earlier dedicated herself to improving conditions in the nation’s insane asylums, became superintendent of this new department. She took on the formidable task of recruiting and training nurses for the Union army. Dix, who was gravely solemn in appearance and manner, recruited only women who were at least thirty and "plain in appearance," rejecting applicants who were too fashionably dressed or adorned in jewelry. Dix wanted to make sure that her nurses were above reproach in appearance and manner, and that they dedicated themselves to their work. Under Dix’s supervision, more than three thousand female nurses joined the Union effort. They earned a monthly salary of twelve dollars.

But one of the most distinguished Union nurses during the war was not affiliated with Dix’s Department of Female Nurses. Instead, Clara Barton called forth on her own, working in Union battlefield hospitals and sometimes on the battlefield itself. Barton was a slender, petite woman with a round, open face and a gentle, caring countenance. But this mild exterior concealed an iron will and an abundance of energy. When the war broke out, she collected supplies from soldiers’ relief organizations throughout New England and distributed them herself to Union army camps.

Soon she was nursing wounded and dying men as they were brought in from the battlefield. On her own, she learned how to dress wounds, tie a tourniquet around bloodied limbs to stem the bleeding, and cut a bullet out of human flesh when no doctor was available. Barton called the soldiers “my boys” and ministered to them with a mother’s love. She bathed their perspiring faces with wet rags, stroked their hair and read to them, and gave them small dosages of whiskey to ease the pain. Barton herself was never far from the dangers of battle. One day as she held a wounded soldier in her arms, a bullet whizzed through the sleeve of her dress and killed him.

Sometimes it took all the inner strength that women could muster to perform their nursing tasks. They coped with the tormented screams of men enduring an amputation without the benefit of anesthesia, the ravings of other soldiers delirious from fever and infection, the quiet stoicism of those soldiers who knew they were dying, and the grim reality of death and disease. But nurses and doctors also became accustomed to such overwhelming suffering. Kate Cumming, a Confederate nurse at the Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee, reported in her diary, “The foul air from this mass of human beings at first made me giddy and sick, but I soon got over it. We have to walk, and when we give the men anything to drink, in blood and water, we think nothing of it all.” After the fierce battle of Gettysburg, in which 51,000 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded over three days of fierce fighting, Cornelia Hancock, a volunteer nurse from New Jersey, wrote to her sister, “I feel I shall never feel anything that may happen to me hereafter... I could stand by and see a man’s head torn off, believe you get so used to it here.”

Nurses in the Civil War seldom questioned whether they had stepped beyond women’s sphere in performing such “indelicate” work. Whether they hailed from the Union or the Confederacy, their patriotic commitment and also their hearts told them they were in the right place during the war. If some women found their calling as nurses, other women discovered adventure and fulfillment teaching the former slaves. As the Union armies advanced deeper into the South, capturing Confederate territory and liberating slaves in the process, hundreds of black and white women, mostly in their twenties, followed closely behind to teach the former slaves, many of whom were illiterate. Women risked danger and hardship—and sometimes their families’ disapproval—to venture South. They went under the auspices of the American Missionary Society, the Pennsylvania Freedmen’s Relief Association, and other agencies that recruited teachers and paid their monthly wages of ten to twelve dollars.

Teachers admired their students’ eagerness to learn. “It is a great happiness to teach them,” wrote Charlotte Forten to a friend in November 1862. Forten, an African-American woman, taught in the Sea Islands off of South Carolina. “I
wish some of those persons at the North who say the race is hopelessly and naturally inferior, could see the readiness with which these children, so long oppressed and deprived of every privilege, learn and understand." Adult ex-slaves, too, were willing students. Of one of her grown-up students, Forten remarked, "I never saw anyone so determined to learn."

Nursing and teaching were traditional forms of women's work, performed in the rush and excitement of war. But women also did untraditional work during the war. Both black and white women worked as spies, scouts, and smugglers. Mary ElizabethBowser, a former slave, became a servant in the home of Confederate president Jefferson Davis—so that she could relay military information overhead in the Davis household to the Union side. Two other former slaves, a husband and wife, cleverly devised a system in which the wife, who got herself hired as a laundress for the family of a southern officer, sent messages via the clothesline to her husband, who worked on the Union side. Each article of clothing that she hung on the line represented a movement of Confederate troops. As her husband explained, "That gray shirt is [Confederate general James] Longstreet; and when she takes it off, it means he's gone down about Richmond." In general, ex-slaves spied for the North because they wanted to help defeat slavery. About four hundred women disguised themselves as Union or Confederate soldiers and fought in the war. With the proper attire, some could easily pass for men. Women enlisted for a variety of reasons. Some believed in the cause so deeply that they would not let being a woman stop them from fighting as soldiers. Others craved the adventure or could not bear to be apart from husbands or other loved ones who had joined the army. No doubt some women were killed in battle and went to their graves with their true identities concealed. Other women soldiers were forced to reveal their secret when they were wounded. A female Union soldier, wounded in the battle of Chickamauga in Tennessee, was captured by Confederate troops and returned to the Union side with a note: "As the Confederates do not use women in the war, this woman, wounded in battle, is returned to you." When a Union nurse asked her why she had joined the army, she replied, "I thought I'd like camp life, and I did."

For the first two years of the war, Confederate forces won most of the major battles. The Union army, even with its superior resources, floundered from one battle to another under a succession of inept Union generals. Finally, on September 18, 1862, the Army of the Potomac achieved its first significant victory—at Antietam Creek in Sharpsburg, Maryland. The cost of victory was enormous. In one day, nearly six thousand men on both sides were killed and another seventeen thousand were wounded.

But the victory impelled Lincoln to do something that he had been contemplating for a long time: issue an Emancipation Proclamation to free southern slaves. On September 22, 1862, he issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that warned the Confederate states that all slaves held in any state still in rebellion against the Union on January 1, 1863, would be "thenceforward, and forever free." With one stroke of the pen, Lincoln had turned the Civil War into a war to abolish slavery as well as to preserve the Union. By giving the war this added moral purpose, he infused new fighting spirit in Union troops, won the support of other nations that condemned slavery, such as Great Britain, and gave southern slaves renewed hope that the "day of jubilee"—freedom—would soon arrive.

But for most slaves, the outward circumstances of their lives changed little. Most of them stayed on their plantations, some journeyed to refugee camps set up by the Union army, and some went in search of family members who had been sold to other plantations. For all slaves, the war brought new hardships and new challenges. On plantations the work load seemed to double as white men went off to fight and slave men were either forced into service by the Confederate army or recruited by the Union army. Eliza Scantling, who was fifteen in 1865, recalled that in the early months of that year, she "plowed a mule an' a wild un at dat. Sometimes me hands get so cold I jes' cry."

When slave fathers joined the Union army, slave mothers and children suffered the wrath of cruel owners. In 1863 one slave woman wrote to her soldier husband: "I have had nothing but trouble since you left... they abuse me because you went & say they will not take care of our children & do nothing but quarrel with me all the time and beat me scandalously the day before yesterday."

Despite such ill treatment, or the upheaval of living in refugee camps, or the uncertainties that lay ahead, slaves rejoiced at their emancipation because it meant that their families could be together. Hundreds of black couples began to legalize marriage ties. In slavery they had married without benefit of a prescribed civil or religious ritual that was legally binding, and planters were free to break up these marriages. Now, as free people, couples yearned to make their marriages legal and to reunite family members who had been sold among various plantations.

As the war dragged on, African-American and white women on the southern homefront bore the worst hardships, because the war was fought mostly on their soil. Union forces moved farther south, and entire homes, neighborhoods, and towns were destroyed. Almost as difficult to bear were the constant shortages of food and the astronomical price of everyday items. The Union blockade of southern ports deprived Southerners of both the necessities and luxuries they had always taken for granted. Because food was scarce and an unstable Confederate currency continually drove prices higher, basic foodstuffs became unaffordable. People gave up drinking coffee, because the cost of beans had skyrocketed to seventy dollars a pound. Instead, they made do by brewing okra seeds, toasted yams, and roasted corn. In Richmond a barrel of flour cost as much as seventy dollars—beyond the means of most families. By early 1865, bacon and butter in Petersburg, Virginia, cost twenty dollars a pound, and chickens ran as high as fifty dollars apiece.

Worries over how to stretch meager dollars and provisions, and how to protect their homes and possessions from ruin, took a terrible toll on southern women. "I