

2021

Women and the Wars: Uncovering Hidden Histories and Untold Stories from the Homefront to the Battlefield

Robert W. Maloy
University of Massachusetts Amherst, rwm@educ.umass.edu

Elizabeth Lownds
University of Massachusetts Amherst, elownds@umass.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/education_faculty_pubs

Recommended Citation

Maloy, Robert W. and Lownds, Elizabeth, "Women and the Wars: Uncovering Hidden Histories and Untold Stories from the Homefront to the Battlefield" (2021). *Massachusetts Council for the Social Studies Newsletter*. 339.

Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/education_faculty_pubs/339

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Women and the Wars

Uncovering Hidden Histories and Untold Stories from the Homefront to the Battlefield

By

Elizabeth Lowndes
Robert W. Maloy
University of Massachusetts Amherst

How do teachers integrate the experiences -- the herstories -- of women into elementary, middle and high school history and social studies curriculum frameworks? Throughout U.S. history, women have struggled to own and control property, to vote, to have the same protections given to men in workplaces, to control their own bodies, and to choose the jobs and careers they want for themselves and their families. Still the stories of women are only marginally present in state curriculum frameworks.

To uncover one area of hidden histories and untold stories from U.S. history, we have been investigating how women's participation in wars from the American Revolution to current conflicts of the 21st Century have transformed women's position in society. During times of war, women moved into roles that they had not had beforehand, but would continue to have afterwards. The image of Rosie the Riveter, for example, shows a woman engaged in industrial manufacturing during World War II, a role women did not play extensively before that war, but would have more opportunities to play after the war was over. Rosie's experience actually happened to millions of women who worked in steel mills, foundries, automobile plants, and shipyards. The war and the work changed the place of women in post-war society.

Rosie the Riveter is not the only example from World War II of women playing new roles that transcended earlier gender barriers and social boundaries. We could have listed the "Fly Girls" (female pilots); "Top-Secret Rosies" (women during mathematical calculations before the

emergence of computers); “Code Girls” (women code-breakers); and African American women soldiers (688th Central Postal Directory Battalion and the 404th Armed Forces Band).

While many more examples could be added to this list for World War II, and for every American war, in each instance, women playing new roles opened new directions and created lasting changes in society.

To organize our research of gendered change during war we looked at the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Cold War/Space Race, the Vietnam War, and the Post 9/11 wars of the 21st century, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With teachers and students in mind, we developed the following categories of women’s roles during wartimes (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Roles Played by Women During Times of War

Soldiers/Other Military Activities	Spies and Espionage	Nurses and Medicine
Workers and Owners	Political Activists	Science and Technology Pathfinders

The categories are flexible to encompass the wide variety of activities performed by women during different times of crisis and conflict. For example, women like Sybil Ludington and Betsy Dowdy who rode to warn the colonists about the arrival of British soldiers during the American Revolution are listed under the “Soldiers and Other Military Activities” category while African American abolitionists like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman who worked to free slaves on the Underground Railroad before and during the Civil War are included in the “Political Activists” category.

Doing our research, we sought to document examples of how wartime roles for women created social and political change; for example.

- During the Civil War when some 3000 women served as military nurses, [Annie Wittenmyer](#) developed a “dietary kitchen system” in which patients were each given a diet tailored to their medical condition, a system still in use in hospitals today.
- The Naval Act of 1916 opened the door to women volunteering as yeomen in the U.S. Navy and serving as radio operators, stenographers, and messengers.
- [Executive Order 9346](#), signed by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1943 to promote fair hiring practices in wartime industries led to more opportunities particularly Black women, many working as human computers who read film from wind tunnel tests, ran calculations, and plotted collected data.
- During the Cold War, Dorothy Vaughan (featured in the movie *Hidden Figures*), Katherine Johnson, Kitty O'Brien Joyner, Mary Jackson, Christa McAuliffe, Sally Ride and Mae Jemison, among other women mathematicians and scientists, played vital roles in the U.S. space program, pioneering new roles for women in STEM fields.
- Sometimes, change is a long time in coming. Deborah Sampson enlisted in the Revolutionary army in 1781 as a crossdressing soldier under the name of Robert Shurtliff. In 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [the Deborah Sampson Act](#) to provide health care services to veteran women soldiers and address disparities of coverage between men and women. It was passed by the Senate and signed into law on January 5, 2021.

Many of the experiences of women remain hidden, untold, forgotten, erased. We have sought to locate these experiences to provide teachers and students with much needed opportunities for integrating gender and women’s studies in K-12 in history and social studies classes.

To provide resources to teachers and students, we are assembling women and the wars pages on the [resourcesforhistoryteachers wiki](#), a free online open content resource edited by

Robert Maloy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. So far, the following pages are available: 1) [Women During the American Revolution](#); 2) [Women of the Abolitionist Movement](#); 3) [World in World War II](#); 4) [Women in World War I](#); and 5) [Women and Space Exploration](#). Our goal is to continue researching and adding pages to the wiki. We welcome ideas and contributions to the project from teachers and students as well as examples of learning plans and instructional activities that expand and extend the histories of women throughout U.S. history.

Elizabeth Lowndes is an undergraduate senior history major at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Robert W. Maloy coordinates the history teacher education program in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He can be reached at rwm@educ.umass.edu