Northern Homefront
Northern Work

Work on the northern home front has been more diffuse and less abundant than this recent outpouring of writing about the Confederacy. In considerable measure, this is because war was less of a presence in northern society: a smaller proportion of men left home to fight; a smaller proportion of the north's resources were expended on the war; enemy troops did not for the most part march across northern soil. As a result, it is more difficult to identify shared wartime experiences or to produce generalizations about war's impact at home.

Unlike most southerners, many northerners were not called upon to confront the economic hardships that characterized the Confederate South. Agriculture, which employed 3,500,000 of the North's 5,000,000 workers in 1860, flourished during the conflict. As Paludan notes, "economically the war brought most farmers the best years of their lives." The departure of men for the army raised wages of agricultural laborers, encouraged more rapid mechanization, such as further spread of the reaper, and increased the responsibilities of northern, like southern, women for the day to day labor of farming. The demands for foodstuffs from the army and from the North's growing urban population generated significant increases in market involvement, and rural families found themselves by war's end much more tied to the commercial economy. The Homestead Act of 1862 opened millions of acres of new farmland to upwardly and westwardly mobile settlers, seemingly affirming the Union's commitment to the independent yeoman and to the ideals of free labor.

The experience of the North's industrial laborers was more bleak. Industrial workers served in the army at a high rate, and although their families received military bounties and wages from absent men, many women and children faced hardships in the context of the war's inflationary economy. Most wartime workers experienced an actual decline in their standard of living, a decrease that was even sharper for women laborers than for men, and more dramatic for unskilled than skilled laborers. Tens of thousands of children were drawn into the workforce as well to help replace manpower lost to the war. Although deprivation was neither as widespread nor as intense as in the Confederate South, many on the northern home front, especially in urban areas, also suffered as a result of the war. By 1865, for example, the city of Philadelphia had meted out $2.6 million in an effort to provide support for needy soldiers' families.

Such pressures contributed to growing labor activism, thousands of strikes and many new unions. But the opportunity to stigmatize resisting workers with charges of disloyalty and hindrance of the war effort enhanced the power of owners who were already benefitting from the consolidation of business and wealth encouraged by the war. Much of the intensification of class conflict that resulted from these transformations would not make its appearance until the labor battles of the 1870s and after, but the North did not escape the wartime fissures that rent southern society.

Northern Women

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Gage hailed the war as transformative. "The social and political condition of women was largely changed by our Civil War," they wrote. "In large measure," they explained, it was because war "created a revolution in woman herself."
One of the areas of women's participation that has gained most attention in this regard was nursing. In the South, most women who entered hospital work during the war were erstwhile volunteers or visitors, rather than long-term salaried hospital workers, and their labors were more likely to prove a temporary extension of the domain of nurturant domesticity than a lasting transgression of conventional gender boundaries. Northern nurses, by contrast, were more likely to use their wartime experiences as a foundation for a new sense of self and vocation. In the North, the war provided a catalyst for women's advancement into both professional nursing and medicine. The lives of Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix exemplify this northern pattern, one which leads historian Elizabeth Leonard to conclude that northern nurses "trespassed en masse into the 'public sphere,'" and became "wielders of a new kind of institutional power previously hoarded by men."

Women's wartime activism in the North grew directly out of prewar traditions of reform and focused on a variety of goals: abolition, first and foremost; Lincoln's reelection, female suffrage, and philanthropic efforts for soldiers and their families. As with studies of white southern women, however, the question remains of how empowering and transformative these undertakings proved. Matthew Gallman's study of Philadelphia shows women engaged in a broadening array of benevolent efforts, but he does not see a concomitant rise in their authority. In larger organizations, women volunteers tended to labor under male directors.

Despite Stanton, Anthony and Gage's triumphant assessment, the legacy of war for northern women seems ultimately to have been mixed. The attention of these nineteenth-century writers was, we should note, in any case directly--almost exclusively--to the meaning of the war in the lives of middle-class women like themselves, and so they took little account of working women pressured by war's economic circumstances. Women regarded work as a burden rather than an opportunity and swelled the ranks of the North's manufacturing labor force during the conflict. Stanton and Anthony may in fact have derived their triumphalism from their own first-hand knowledge of the impact of war's democratic ferment upon the movement for woman suffrage. Although they would be bitterly disappointed when the fifteenth Amendment enfranchised black men but not white women, Stanton and Anthony believed that the foundation for women's ultimate success in achieving the vote was assured by the victory of the ideologies of citizenship and human rights for which the North fought.

**God, Life, and Death**

Yet our understanding of what we call the "home front" remains partial and incomplete. Dozens of topics that would enhance our understanding of the war have been overlooked entirely or are only beginning to be explored. Let me speak of two such neglected dimensions of life central to nineteenth-century Americans--North and South--and central to their experience of Civil War. The first is religion. Both the Union and the Confederacy believed that God was on its side. Religion was at the heart of the soldiers' reasons for fighting and their consolations for dying; it was a foundation of strength for civilians sacrificing their loved ones to the cause; it was a motivation for slaves struggling for the Day of Jubilee. The language of the war was cast in religious metaphor, as both sides worried about God's chastening hand. Yet as three prominent scholars recently observed, "the religious history of the war has yet to be written." A recent collection of essays about religion and the Civil War is designed as an invitation to further
research and inquiry, for this is a topic both military and home front historians need to understand far better. It is also another example of a force linking the civilian with the military experience and reaching across any division between home and battlefront.

With such an enormous rate of death in the army, nearly all Americans were touched by the war's impact. Indeed, death may have been the most powerful Civil War reality for many Americans. Obviously it was so for those who actually died, but for survivors as well, the deaths of loved ones, comrades, neighbors may have proved the most powerfully felt of all the Civil War's experiences. I think we need to know far more about the meaning of this slaughter for the generation that lived through it. And as I have already suggested, it seems to me highly probable that we have seriously underestimated the number of civilian deaths that resulted from the war. Contagious diseases brought to cities and towns by encamped troops killed more than just soldiers; the disruptions of slavery brought the kinds of violence and retribution I have already described; the irregular warfare of the conflict may well have been, as Daniel Sutherland is beginning to show, far more extensive than we have heretofore imagined.

The Copperheads
By: Anonymous

Who are the men that clamor most
Against the war, its cause and cost,
And who Jeff Davis sometimes toast?
   The Copperheads.

Who, when by wretched whiskey tight,
Hiss out in rage their venomed spite,
Who crawl and sting, but never fight?
   The Copperheads.

Who hold peace meetings, where they pass
Lengthy resolves of wind and gas,
Much like the bray of Balaam's ass?
   The Copperheads.

Who, when false faction is forgot,
When patriots keep a common thought,
Have discord and dissension taught?
   The Copperheads.

Who swear by bondage, and would see
Rather their country lost than free,
Who dread the name of Liberty?
   The Copperheads.

Who hate a freedom-loving press,
The truth, and all who it profess,
Who don't believe in our success?
   The Copperheads.
And who, when Right has won the day,
Will take their slimy selves away,
And in their dirty holes will stay?
The Copperheads.

And who will be the hiss and scorn
Of generations yet unborn,
Hated, despised, disgraced, forlorn?
The Copperheads.

While God He Leaves me Reason, God He will Leave me Jim
Mary C. Booth

"Soldier, say, did you meet my Jimmy in the fight?
You'd know him by his manliness, and by his eye's sweet light."
"I fought beside your gallant son - a brave, good fellow he;
Alas! he fell beneath the shot that should have taken me."

"And think you that my Jimmy cared about a little fall?
Why make a great ado of what he would not mind at all?
When Jimmy was a little boy, and played with Bobby Brown,
He always played the enemy, and Bob he shot him down.

"I've seen him fall a hundred times, the cunning little sprite;
He can't forget his boyish tricks though in an earnest fight.
But never mind about the fall; I want to hear of him;
Perhaps you've heard the Captain speak of what he thinks of Jim."

"I've often heard the Captain say Jim was a splendid lad,
The bravest and the handsomest of all the boys he had.
And here's a lock of Jimmy's hair, and here's a golden ring;
I found it tied around his neck upon a silken string."

The mother took the matted tress, she took the ring of gold,
But shook her head, and laughed aloud at what the soldier told.
"Soldier," said she, "Where is my boy? Where is my brave boy Jim?
I gave the others all to God, but God he left me him.

"Hush, there is Uncle Abraham a-knocking at the door;
He calls for other mother's sons, 'Three hundred thousand more!'
Be still, Old Uncle Abraham; 'twill do no good to call:
You think my house is full of boys; ah, Jimmy was my all."
COME UP FROM THE FIELDS, FATHER
By Walt Whitman

Come up from the fields, father, here's a letter from our Pete,
And come to the front door, mother, here's
a letter from thy dear son.

Lo, 'tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yello\-\-\-\-er and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio's village with leaves
fluttering in the moderate wind,
Where apples ripe in the orchard hang and
grapes on the trellised vines,
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?)
Above all, lo, the sky so calm, so transparent
after the rain, and with wondrous clouds,
Below, too, all calm, all vital and beautiful,
and the farm prospers well.

Down in the fields all prospers well,
But now from the fields come, father, come
at the daughter's call,
And come to the entry, mother, to the front
door come right away.
Fast as she can she hurries, something ominous,
her steps trembling,
She does not tarry to smooth her hair nor
adjust her cap.

Open the envelope quickly,
O this is not our son's writing, yet his name
is sign'd,
O a strange hand writes for our dear son,
O stricken mother's soul!
All swims before her eyes, flashes with black,
she catches the main words only,
Sentences broken, gunshot wound in the breast,
cavalry skirmish, taken to a hospital,
At present low, but will soon be better.

Ah, now the single figure to me,
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all
its cities and farms,
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head,
very faint,
By the jamb of a door leans.

Grieve not so, dear mother (the just-grown
daughter speaks through her sobs,
The little sisters huddle around speechless and
dismay'd),
See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will
soon be better.
Alas, poor boy, he will never be better (nor maybe needs to be better, that brave and simple soul),
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,
The only son is dead.

But the mother needs to be better,
She with thin form presently drest in black,
By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully sleeping, often waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing,
O that she might withdraw, unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.