Families in the Civil War

Introduction

Emilie Todd Helm lost her Confederate husband in the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863. Though travel between the North and the South was restricted during the American Civil War, Emilie afterwards received a pass to visit her sister in Washington, DC.

Another sister, Martha Todd White also had a husband in the Confederacy. Like Emilie, Martha also received a pass to cross to the Union and visit their sister in the capital.

Their sister, as it turns out, was Mary Todd Lincoln, First Lady of the United States.

The press picked up the news of Martha's visit and falsely printed stories that she had smuggled goods from the North to the Confederacy when she returned home. President Lincoln's political opponents used the incident to attack him, since Lincoln himself had signed the pass allowing her to stay in the capital.

In all, eight of Mary Todd Lincoln's siblings supported the Confederacy, even while their brother-in-law was president of the Union.

The press asked if this compromised Lincoln's leadership. Where did his loyalty lie? With the Nation or with his wife's family?

The Todd family was unique in its proximity to the president. But the division within families was not unique. Families across the Nation faced similar strains due to the war.[1]

Today, we are going to look at the American Civil War and the impact it had on families. The war divided the Nation: North vs South, Union vs Confederacy. But the war also divided fathers and sons, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. The war strained relationships. It broke relationships, and in the extreme cases, relatives faced each other in battle.

Even those with the same allegiances faced the difficulty of separation as the war drug on for years. The bloody conflict killed over 600,000 Americans and left countless others struggling with the death of their loved ones.

For African Americans, the war offered freedom and the opportunity to reunite with family members long separated.

There are a lot of stories to be told.

So, we're going to look at different relationships and different situations to see how the war impacted Americans, not just on the battlefield, but in the home.

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[1] Amy Murrell Taylor, *The Divided Family in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 98-104; "The White House Years," Mary Todd Lincoln House, accessed July 12, 2022, https://www.mtlhouse.org/the-white-house-years.

Let’s dig in.

-- Intro Music --
[Welcome to American History Remix, the podcast about the overlooked and underexplored parts of American history. We’re glad you’re here!]

Border States

In the winter of 1860-61, the seven states of the Deep South seceded from the Union: South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Leaders from these states then met in Montgomery, Alabama to form the Confederate States of America.[2]

For all the secession fervor shown in the Deep South, the situation in the Upper South was different. What the slave states of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri would do was less clear. It was not until after the first battle of the war, at Fort Sumter in April of 1861, that the Border States were forced to declare their intentions. Lincoln called for troops to put down the rebellion. Would these states answer the call or join the Confederacy?

The decision could have very well determined the outcome of the war. If each of those states remained in the Union, it’s hard to imagine the war would have lasted as long as it did. If each state had joined the Confederacy, who knows if the Union could have won.

As it turns out, the Border States were divided. Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee joined the Confederacy.[3] Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Delaware were all slave states that remained in the Union.[4]

Allegiances within the Border States were also divided. Maryland remained in the Union, but Confederate sympathizers there cut the telegraph lines to Washington DC, temporarily halting outside communication with the capital.[5] Union supporters in Tennessee smuggled arms from the North and destroyed Southern railroads. The western part of Virginia came under Union control early in the war and then formed a new state government, and West Virginia entered the Union in 1863.[6]

This region was especially divided. So too did its families have conflicting national loyalties.

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[2] James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 234-35, 254-55.
[3] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 280-82.
[4] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 284.
[5] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 285.
[6] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 303-5.

Fathers and Sons

Among fathers and sons in the Border States, an interesting pattern emerged. Fathers, by and large, supported the Union, while their sons supported the Confederacy.

The *Louisville Daily Journal* feared an "epidemic" of sons who refused to enlist in the Union Army in favor of the Confederacy, and the paper encouraged fathers to shame their sons for their dissension.[7]

But why? Why was there this generational difference?

Fathers in the Border States tended to be small farmers, not large plantation owners like in the Deep South. If they owned enslaved persons, they usually held twenty or fewer. Their generation had lived through political tensions over slavery before – the Missouri Compromise of 1820, for example. These men tended to believe that slave and free states could still coexist within the Union.[8]

The Confederate sons of Unionist fathers were almost universally 16 to 25 years old. They did not come of age in an era of compromise. They were raised in a time of increasing division and sectional violence, and they were more willing to accept disunion over cooperation. Usually, these men were also unmarried and not yet settled in their careers. For their generation, owning slaves was the path to wealth and financial independence. They didn't have the same faith in the Union as their fathers and worried what their lives would be if they could not someday own slaves.[9]

Prior to the war, generational disagreement over politics was common enough, and fathers were generally open to debates with their sons. However, once the war began, the letters exchanged between fathers and sons took on a different tone. The stakes were higher. In a time of war, a difference of opinion could be indicative of treason.

Aware of their son's beliefs, many fathers pressured them not to join the Confederacy. But in 1862 and '63, both the Union and Confederacy began conscripting soldiers, requiring that men serve in the military. Rather than serve what they saw as the "enemy," many sons in the Border States ran south and joined the Confederacy.[10]

Henry Lane Stone, a nineteen-year-old whose family lived in Kentucky and later Indiana, snuck away in August of 1862. He disguised himself as a poor farmer to get past Union forces and reach the Confederate Calvary. He wrote his father a letter a month later. He left, he said, because the North would have forced him into Union service. So, he *chose* to serve in the Confederacy. "Every day convinces me I did right," he said, and he signed the letter "your rebelling son, Henry."[11]

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[7] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 17, 40.
[8] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 15-16, 25.
[9] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 15-16, 20.
[10] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 16-17.
[11] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 13, 18.

Ezekiel Clay of Kentucky promised his father that he would remain home during the war. But in September of 1861, he told his stepmother he was going hunting, then he rode south to join the Confederate cause. Unlike Stone, Clay left a note in his room. "I leave for the army tonight. I do it for I believe I am doing right. I go of my own free will. If it turns out I do wrong, I beg forgiveness."[12]

Clay's father was furious.

The young men generally didn't see their loyalty to the Confederacy as a personal affront to their fathers. They acted out of their own political consciences – they were Americans after all – and they did not intend to cause public shame or to defy their fathers' paternal authority.[13]

But that's not how their fathers felt. It was not simply a disagreement in ideas – it was defiance. American culture at the time believed in a hard line between public and private, between the broad world of politics and the home. Fathers were well equipped to deal with private disagreement. But the war forced the differences out into the open. When their sons physically joined the opposing side, fathers felt that their paternal authority was publicly challenged, and they were ashamed.[14]

For example, John J. Crittenden of Kentucky had one son join the Union while another one joined the Confederacy. The *Louisville Daily Journal* wrote that Crittenden's rebel son brought shame upon the whole family. What made the situation even more scandalous was that Crittenden was a member of the US House of Representatives. Another Union newspaper suggested that his son may compromise Crittenden's patriotism and loyalty to the Union.[15]

Fathers were in a tough spot. They often spoke of their sons being led astray, poisoned or seduced by some third party. The *Louisville Daily Journal* wrote that one Confederate son would have stayed loyal to his father "had not poisonous sophistries been poured into his ears by older men who had a design to corrupt his mind and seduce him into the paths of treachery."[16] Whether or not this was true, the thought that their sons were not truly defiant but rather led astray by conmen or politicians helped some fathers cope. It gave them someone to blame.

Still, fathers usually punished their sons for joining the Confederacy by refusing to send aid, refusing to correspond through letters, allowing their sons to visit home, or, in extreme circumstances, denying their inheritance.[17]

Warner Thompson, a soldier in a Tennessee Regiment was met with silence from his father, who refused to reply to his letters – a serious offense in the nineteenth century. "Pa has ceased to think of me as his son," he wrote in a letter to his stepmother. But behind the scenes, his father was conflicted. He turned to his journal to reflect, writing, "my natural affection for my son and

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[12] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 18-19.
[13] Jane Turner Censer, "Finding the Southern Family in the Civil War," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 225-226. Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 25-26.
[14] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 16, 19, 28-29.
[15] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 28-29.
[16] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 21-22.
[17] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 19, 21, 23, 25-26.

my love of country, cause a struggle within my mind – it is a painful one." Although he could not bring himself to write his son directly, he regularly asked other family members for updates on Warner's wellbeing.[18]

William Breckinridge was similarly cut off by his Unionist father. He received only silence. But then, while in the Confederate Army, he wrote to his father, asking that if he should die in combat, would his father look after his wife and young daughter? His father broke the silence to reply and say, "yes." Despite his son's service in the Confederacy, his father would still do all he could for his son's family.[19]

Brothers

The relationship between brothers offers another view into how the war affected families.

In some cases, brothers enlisted together, in the same regiments, and served side by side.[20] The presence of a brother could be a comfort for men in combat. Brothers Arch and Ed Snow of New York served together. On the occasions that they were separated, Ed would write home to his parents and complain of loneliness. When the brothers were together, however, the letters home were more cheerful.

Serving with a brother did not erase the horrors of war, but it did help ease the loneliness and homesickness that many soldiers felt.[21]

However, brotherly loyalty could also hinder the war effort. Brothers could enlist together, serve together, and, in some cases, desert together.[22] Their loyalty to each other seems to have been paramount.

But, of course, in other cases, brothers found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.

Parental relationships were defined by a sense of duty and respect. Brothers, on the other hand, were more or less equal intellectually and in social standing, and they were much less concerned with offending each other. I know because I have two brothers. So, as they debated the political events of their day, brothers were usually open, direct, and honest.[23]

Throughout the 1850s, the brothers Joseph, Samuel, and Edmund Halsey wrote each other almost weekly. The men were originally from New Jersey, but Joseph moved south, married, and owned a plantation. Samuel and Edmund remained in the North. Their views fell along regional lines. As they debated the political crises, they'd send each other documents to read and critiqued each other's ideas and arguments. Edmund, for example, criticized Joseph for using the word

[18] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 26-27.
[19] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 28.
[20] Jeremy Youngs, "From Home Front to Battle Front," *New York History* 97, No 2 (Spring 2016): 166.
[21] Youngs, "From Home Front to Battle Front," 169-72.
[22] Youngs, "From Home Front to Battle Front," 174-75.
[23] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 64-65.

"fanaticism" too liberally. All the while, the Halsey brothers remained friendly. They made it clear that they were not criticizing each other – they were discussing politics.[24]

Spirited yet friendly disagreement was not so easy to maintain once the war began.

Before the war, John and Jabez Pratt of Maryland spoke kindly of each other, even when they disagreed. But combat raised the stakes of their disagreements, and the language in their letters grew fiercer. John called Jabez a "fool" for supporting the South. Jabez called John "crazy" and told his brother to stop writing until he had come to his senses.[25]

Then, in the course of the war, some brothers came into more serious opposition. At the time, many used the word "fratricide," the killing of a brother, to describe the Nation turning in on itself.[26] For brothers who enlisted in opposing armies, the term was uncomfortably close to reality.

To men of this era, military service was an act of honor, of bravery, and of male *duty*. Faced with the prospect of meeting a brother in combat, the siblings often encouraged the other to resign. "He must not take sides against me," wrote one Confederate soldier of his brother. "I wish to God he would resign," wrote another. But the arguments rarely, if ever, worked. Men on both sides felt it was their duty to serve.[27]

It's difficult to know exactly how many brothers faced each other in battle, but we know it wasn't rare. At the Battle of Manassas, Matthew Page Andrews witnessed the death of *two* brothers. In another instance, a Union soldier led his army across a battlefield when he heard a wounded soldier calling his name, only to find that the dying man was his brother. In one of Tennessee's Union regiments, there were five soldiers with brothers in the Confederate Army.[28]

At the beginning of the war, newspapers actually celebrated the occasions when brothers met in combat. It was the *ultimate* display of national loyalty and courage. But that was at the beginning of the war when no one knew how long and bloody the conflict would be. As the war dragged on and on, and the death count rose higher and higher…they stopped celebrating. Rather than "brave," it became "tragic." The *Louisville Daily Journal*, wrote that there is "no feature of the present war so tragic as when brother is thus found arrayed against brother."[29]

Brothers with divided loyalty knew they may one day face each other in battle. In most cases, as if in anticipation, the men stopped using their brothers' names. As one soldier reflected, "If I should meet any of my relatives on the battlefield, they will there be considered as my enemies and treated as such."[30] The language they chose to use was cold and impersonal. Their family became anonymous enemies, possibly more as a coping mechanism than as a reflection of their true feelings.

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[24] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 65-66.
[25] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 68-70.
[26] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 71-72.
[27] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 71-72.
[28] It was Company F of the 24th Union Regiment in Tennessee. Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 74-75.
[29] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 75-76.
[30] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 74.

However, there is more to the story. Another pattern emerged *after* a battle. If a brother was captured or wounded, his sibling might send aid, make sure they got medical attention, or vouch for their parole. In one case in Missouri in 1862, a Unionist halted the execution of his Confederate brother. But these men usually took action from a distance. They would send *others* to check on a brothers' welfare, avoiding direct contact.[31]

They usually explained their actions, not as signs of affection for their brothers, but for their *mothers*. When a Union soldier came across his wounded brother in a Kentucky battlefield, he dragged him to safety saying, "What will mother say when she hears of this?" When another soldier found his wounded sibling after a battle, he stopped for a moment "dropped a tear for mother's sake," then left his brother there.[32]

It's hard to speak with certainty on the matter, but it seems that some of these men were not able to fully disconnect from their families.

Brothers and Sisters

The experience of women in the war was similar but distinct from that of men.

Gender roles in the nineteenth century were, generally, pretty strict. Even when women were unable or unwilling to fulfill their *proper* roles, everyone knew what was expected. Americans celebrated specific virtues of women – domesticity, piety, purity, and submissiveness. At the same time, Americans separated the world into public and private realms. A woman's place, they believed, was at home. Public life was for men.[33]

Despite the separation of public and private, women were well aware of current events. In fact, many women enjoyed talking politics with their family members and friends. They formed their own political opinions that sometimes differed from their fathers, husbands, or other male loved ones. They were just encouraged to keep any dissenting political opinions private and out of the public sphere. Women were, therefore, selective in how and with whom they shared their views on the war.[34]

Women, generally, could be more open and honest about their opinions with brothers or male cousins than with their fathers or husbands, where there was an assumed hierarchy and women were supposed to be submissive.[35]

With comfortable frankness, Ellen Coolidge, the granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson, wrote to her brother, who still lived in their native Virginia, "The idea of Civil War makes all the blood in my body run cold." She wrote openly about how "unhappy" the conflict made her.[36]

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[31] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 78-79.
[32] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 78-79.
[33] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152.
[34] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 43, 61, 82-84.
[35] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 86.
[36] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 85-86.

But the dynamics between siblings also made it easier for relationships to sour, and the war ruined many intimate ones. Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and his sister Laura Jackson Arnold were very close before the war. As children, they were orphaned together. They exchanged letters with each other for decades. Laura was one of Stonewall’s closest confidants. But when he sided with the Confederacy, Laura cut off their communication and apparently would not allow others to speak his name in her presence. It seems that their once close relationship only made their division more painful.[37]

Maria Knott was a Kentucky Unionist. When her two brothers supported the Confederacy, she wanted to disown them. “I am sorry to own such brothers,” she wrote in a letter to her son. But here’s the thing: her son and his wife *also* supported the Confederacy. And she didn’t speak of cutting them off. It was easier, it would seem, to disown a sibling than to disown a son.[38]

Women also found it to be easier to be forthright in their relationships with other women – sisters, cousins, female friends. However, navigating relationships with differing political allegiances could be challenging, even between women. Sometimes women tried to avoid the subject and not let the outside world intrude on their relationships – they believed they were separate spheres, after all. This could sometimes work. Harriet Williams of Maryland wrote of her Southern friends, “Until they say or do something to offend, I consider it my duty to treat them as I have always done.”[39]

But silence on the subject could harm relationships built on honest and intimate feelings. Josie Underwood of Kentucky wrote of her friend, “I am sure she still loves me, but there is restraint in our intercourse now.” (Intercourse meant conversation.) Not allowing the world to intrude on their relationships meant no longer being open with each other. Or, at least, being less open. “We can’t talk of indifferent things when the war is the all-absorbing subject of our thoughts,” wrote Underwood.[40]

Many women, thus, complained that friendships were broken by the war. Sometimes it was subtle. Sometimes it was explicit. Josie Underwood’s book club just decided to stop meeting until the war was over, rather than deal with the tangled mess of allegiances. In their journals, women confided they hoped the relationships would return to normal after the war was over.[41]

Husbands and Wives

Married couples tended to keep their political discussions private and within the home, again acting out of the belief that they were separate and distinct realms. Political disagreements, so long as they were kept private, were common enough and not too troublesome. But again, as we’ve seen, the war made disagreements a more serious matter.[42]

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[37] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 87.
[38] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 64, 86-87.
[39] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 83.
[40] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 82, 84.
[41] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 85.
[42] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 39.

Just as Unionist fathers tended to blame others when their sons supported the Confederacy, husbands tended to blame a third party when their wives had differing political sentiments. Again, placing the blame on someone else made it easier to deal with a dissenting wife. And, most commonly, a man would place the blame on his wife's father.[43]

And there was some truth in that blame. In a patriarchal society, women were raised under the authority of their fathers and then came under the authority of their husbands. If the father and husband disagreed, the two men could blame the other for leading the woman astray. And she would often be caught in the middle. Never mind that she might have opinions of her own.

When his wife Catherine supported the Union, Henry Hopkins believed she was being swayed by her father. "My influence was entirely superseded," he wrote, because his wife chose to listen to her father rather than to him.[44]

Though, in some cases, the husband's authority was seemingly reaffirmed. Brutus Clay was furious when his daughter Martha, who had supported the Union like her father, changed her view and sided with her husband in support of the Confederacy. It was Brutus' brother that reassured him. "I beg you to overlook her secessionism because it is the virtue of a woman to go with her husband in all things."[45]

The war, it seems, caused a conflict in the patriarchy. Which man was in charge here?

Even when the war did not divide a family's loyalties, the conflict nevertheless separated loved ones.

Husbands and wives could spend months or years apart while he served in the military, and she remained at home.[46] The letters exchanged between husbands and wives at the time reveal the emotional and relational cost of the war.

Men opened up to their wives about their loneliness in battle and their fears for their homes. Would the family be secure without his financial support? Would their children's education be inadequate without a father in the home? Who would protect the family if something were to happen while he was gone? These were the private fears they held, meant only to be shared with the ones they trusted.[47]

And so, to ease their anxieties, husbands often sent detailed instructions to their wives on how to handle the household affairs. They sent orders to the children to study hard, say their prayers, and for God's sake listen to their mothers. They also asked their wives to let their children read and reply to their letters. The men were trying to stay close, to maintain their roles as fathers and husbands, despite their absence.[48]

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[43] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 36-43.
[44] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 38.
[45] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 41.
[46]John Patrick Riley, '"I love Country but I love my Family and Self Much Better': The Emotional World of Civil War Family Men," *Civil War History* 67, no 4 (Dec., 2021): 274.
[47] Riley, "The Emotional World of Civil War Men," 259-60.
[48] Riley, "The Emotional World of Civil War Men," 256-7, 262-4, 270-1, 273.

Sometimes the strain was so much it caused men to question their loyalties to both the Union and Confederacy. Conflicting allegiances between nation and family was keenly felt when a soldier's wages were delayed. Payments were often irregular, so husbands wrote home to ensure their family received the money. The soldier Charles Reid wrote his wife, "If you do not get anything, I will not remain in the army."[49] According to one study, men with wives at home were 30% more likely to desert than single men. Men with children at home were 80% more likely to desert than single men.[50] These men missed their families.

Their letters also reveal the intimacy between husbands and wives. Sexuality was less public than it is in the present, but in the private realm, couples could talk openly. Confederate soldier John Boatwright wrote to his wife about the cold, lonely nights without her and how he longed to share a bed again so they could keep each other warm…if ya know what I mean.[51]

Couples could also tease each other. In one letter, the wife of Union officer James Bowler playfully blamed him for her pregnancy. To which he replied "You are very sly, indeed! I guess you have forgotten how you used to keep me awake when I wanted to go to sleep."[52] Good for them.

African American Families

Long before combat, slavery – the cause of the Civil War – tore apart many African American families.

Slave owners sold their slaves to other owners or traders, thereby separating husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters. Owners further disrupted family relationships by sexually exploiting enslaved women, regardless of if she had a family.[53]

Meanwhile, free African American families in the North also experienced racial discrimination. Employment options were limited, and African Americans men found it difficult to earn enough for their families. Often other members had to work and contribute to the family's survival. This broke from the white, middle-class ideal of a male "breadwinner." Additionally, African Americans in the North tended to live with extended families or fictive kin – those not related by blood but considered part of the family – and they would often pool their resources together.[54]

Suffice is to say, African American families had a very different experience in America than white families.

But like all families, African Americans, both enslaved and free, felt the impact of the war.

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[49] Riley, "The Emotional World of Civil War Men," 255-6, 260, 265-7, 284.
[50] Riley, "The Emotional World of Civil War Men," 280-4.
[51] Riley, "The Emotional World of Civil War Men," 261-62.
[52] Riley, "The Emotional World of Civil War Men," 261-2.
[53] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 192.
[54] Holly A. Pinheiro, Jr., *The Families' Civil War: Black Solders and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2022), 6, 14-21.

As the Union Army progressed through the South, many African Americans escaped the plantations to the Union camps. Finally free from slavery, men and women were quick to legalize their marriages, an opportunity they didn't have under slavery, and to seek out lost family members.

In 1865, a Union soldier wrote to his wife after witnessing freed African American families reunited. "I wish you could see this people as they step from slavery into freedom. Men are taking their wives and children, families which had been for a long time broken up are united."[55]

The Union Army did not permit African Americans to serve in combat until 1863. For the remainder of the war, free Blacks from the North and emancipated Black men from the South served in segregated units – what they called the colored infantry.[56]

Before soldiers were sent to the frontlines, they received military training. African American soldiers from Philadelphia, for example, were trained at the nearby Camp William Penn. Women who lived close enough would regularly visit their men in training.

This sort of visitation was common enough among white and Black families, but African American women faced the added judgement of white women who assumed that they were hanging around camps because they were prostitutes. One white woman referred to the Black women as "harlots" and claimed that their behavior was "blasphemous and obscene." In reality, they were wives, mothers, and sisters simply visiting their families.[57]

Black women showed support for their families and for the war itself in much the same way that white women did. Their presence at the camps was a simple yet important public statement: the war was theirs too.[58]

As we've mentioned, wages for military service were often inconsistent. Many African American families, who already faced financial hardship, struggled to find ways to survive while men in the family were away. In 1864, Mary Williamson of Pennsylvania had to send her eight-month-old son to live with his paternal grandparents because her husband Benjamin was serving in the war, and she had no way to support herself and their son.[59] Despite the difficulty, many African Americans and white men alike saw military service as a demonstration of their manhood. African Americans were further motivated to serve because of their desire to end slavery and to prove that they were deserving of full rights as citizens.[60]

In some ways, after the war, their efforts were rewarded. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed citizenship for anyone born within the United States. And the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 protected the voting rights of African Americans.

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[55] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 84.
[56] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 37.
[57] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 74.
[58] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 73-74.
[59] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 1-2.
[60] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War,* 73, 80-83.

However, the war did not end racial discrimination in America. It's why the Nation needed a Civil Rights Movement a century later.

Continued racial discrimination was evident as soon as the war ended. White regiments were discharged, and Confederate prisoners of war released before African American regiments were demobilized. Wives wrote to their husbands, longing for them to return to their families now that the war was over. Lucy Bailey actually wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, asking if her husband John was still alive and, if so, "I wish you please grant him a furlough to come home."[61]

There was also the issue of compensation for a soldiers' family. If a man died in combat, his spouse and children could receive financial help from the US government in the form of a monthly pension. However, due to slavery and racial discrimination prior to the war, African American families found it difficult to prove marriage or parenthood to the state. The families of African American soldiers who died in the war did not always receive their pensions.[62]

At the same time, formerly enslaved men and women continued to formalize and legalize their marriage commitments through the Freedman's Bureau, a new government agency created to assist former slaves. Couples also adopted children of friends and family who had passed away, giving the children homes.[63]

Others began the work of finding family members lost in the slave trade. It was, in fact, among the most important things they could do with their freedom. As one agent of the Freedman's Bureau wrote, "In their eyes, the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited."[64]

They often went on long journeys hundreds of miles and across state lines in search for their lost family.[65] One Northern reporter met a freedman in North Carolina who had walked 600 miles in search of his wife and children.[66]

Siblings Polly and George East were separated from their parents in 1849. After the war, their parents, Ben and Flora, posted advertisements offering $200 to anyone who would help their children, wherever they were, reach Nashville to be reunited with their parents.[67]

Such efforts were not always successful. Some men and women found that their spouses had remarried in the years since their separation. Some were never found at all. Newspaper advertisements seeking lost kin could still be found in the early 1900s.[68] Though decades had passed, they were still looking for their families.

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[61] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 77-79.
[62] Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 83-87.
[63] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 84; Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 26.
[64] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 144.
[65] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 197.
[66] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 82.
[67] Taylor, *The Divided Family*, 197-98.
[68] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 84.

Death

There is one last subject we need to cover – death away from home. No one expected the war to last as long as it did, and no one expected that so many would perish.[69] No death is easy to bear, let alone that of 600,000 men who went to war and never returned to their families.

Americans in the nineteenth century typically passed away in their homes, with their family around them. The war, of course, made that impossible for many. Though some tried to recreate the home and family when they could. In hospitals, delirious and dying soldiers sometimes mistook nurses for their wives, sisters, or mothers. Nurses sometimes went along, letting the men believe they were with their families as they passed.

The practice was so common it even inspired a popular song called "Be My Mother Till I Die." In the song, a nurse sings:

> *Let me kiss him for his mother,*
> *Or perhaps a sister dear;*
> *…………….*
> *Farewell dear stranger brother,*
> *Our requiem, our tears.*[70]

New photographic technology also allowed soldiers to carry photos of their loved ones. It was common for men, as they lay dying on the battlefield, to take out the photos of their family and spend their last moments looking upon them. One Union solder at the Battle of Gettysburg, Amos Humiston, was found dead and clutching a photo of his three children – Franklin, Alice, and Frederick.[71]

For those away from the battlefield, the death of a loved one could be hard to accept, especially with so many men were buried near where they died, not near their homes. After the Battle of Gettysburg, Jane Mitchel received a letter from a soldier informing her that he had buried a body that had been wrapped in a blanket that bore her son's name. Mitchel, however, could not accept the news. Without seeing the body herself, she held out hope that her son may still be alive. She later reflected, "It was years before I gave up the hope that he would someday appear. I got in my head that he had been taken prisoner and carried off a long distance but that he would make his way back one day – this I knew was very silly of me, but the hope was there nonetheless."[72]

One More Story

We want to conclude with one more story that doesn't fit into any section but somehow captures how unique this war was.

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[69] Drew Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 3.
[70] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 12-13.
[71] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 11.
[72] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 129-30.

After the battle of Antietam, Fanny Scott grew worried that she had not heard from her son Benjamin for several months. So, she wrote a letter to Robert E. Lee – the leader of the Confederate Army – asking for news of her son. Lee forwarded the letter across enemy lines to the Union general Joseph Hooker. He had his staff look into the hospital records and later replied to Scott in a letter, again passed through Robert E. Lee. Hooker informed the poor woman that he had no news of her son.[73]

Think about that… Hooker and Lee were actively trying to kill each other's men., but they together took time to pass letters across the dividing line and try to help a mother looking for her son.

This was an *intimate* war.

Conclusion

The American Civil War, like every war, strained family relationships. Men were separated from their wives. Women were left to raise children on their own, hoping and praying for their husbands' safe return. Sometimes their prayers were answered, sometime not. Heartbreaking as it may be, war is an experience well known in human history.

But a civil war, by nature, is a strange war. It is not two nations pitted against one another, both sides facing an external enemy. In a civil war, the enemy is among you. There was a North and a South, a Union and a Confederacy. But the line between them was sometimes blurred. Sometimes the line ran right through a family. Brothers might serve side by side or against one another. The war strained and sometimes broke relationships between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters.

But, in the end, the war also ended American slavery. And it offered African Americans the opportunity to gain formal recognition of their families and the chance to find lost loved ones.

As it waged war against itself for four long and bloody years, the Nation felt the searing pains and the joyous victories of war. And so did the Nation's families.

Thanks for listening.

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[73] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering,* 127-29.

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