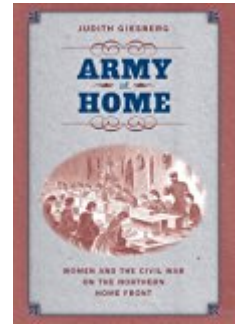


Judith Giesberg. *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 248 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3307-0.

Reviewed by Jennifer Newman Trevino (University of Texas - Pan American)

Published on H-CivWar (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



## Writing the Unwritten Stories: Marginalized Women on the Northern Home Front

During the Civil War, the home front played a vital role not only in the way Americans experienced the war, but also in the outcome of the war itself. Only within the past few decades, however, have historians begun to examine this aspect of the conflict. The Southern home front has received attention from such historians as Drew Gilpin Faust (*Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* [1996]), George Rable (*Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* [1989]), and Victoria Ott (*Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* [2008]), who examine the role of the home front in Confederate defeat. Likewise, Jeanie Attie (*Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the Civil War* [1998]), Elizabeth D. Leonard (*Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* [1994]), and Judith Giesberg (*Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* [2000]) have examined the Northern home front. The historiographical debate surrounding Northern women during the Civil War, however, has centered on the middle class and on what it did or did not gain as a result of the war.

In her book, *Army at Home*, Giesberg points out the shortcoming of this approach—it leaves out working-class, immigrant, and African American women. She believes that the fact “that historians continue to search for evidence that women’s war work propelled them into postwar suffrage activism speaks to our contemporary needs, but it may not help us understand how the war challenged women and men to rethink relations within

rural households” (p. 43). To begin recovering the stories of marginalized Northern women, Giesberg uses models employed by such historians as Catherine Clinton (*Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend* [1995]), Leslie Schwalm (*A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* [1997]), and Laura Edwards (*Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* [2000]) who look at marginalized Southern women. She examines private letters, petitions, and lawsuits, and reads between the lines of what men wrote about women. In this difficult task she succeeds admirably.

Giesberg argues that although most Northern women were removed geographically from the war, they, like Southern women, were actively engaged in political behavior. She debunks the mythical wartime imagery of “women standing still in anticipation of their sons’ and husbands’ return” and explores the ways in which “working-class and marginal rural northern women moved in response to the nation’s call for men—how they picked up the plows in the fields and the tools in the workshop, left home to find work or apply for aid, and traveled to urban hospitals and southern battlefields to retrieve loved ones” (p. 9). Giesberg believes that during the Civil War, as traditional antebellum concepts of separate spaces for men and women collapsed, “women produced spaces where they ceased being the object of war and became its subjects” (p. 13). Women on the Northern home front stepped in to fill the void left by

men who enlisted. As they faced the wartime challenges of “managing their farms, working in munitions, collecting state aid money, adjusting to changes in their sewing work, [and] locating and caring for injured or dead soldiers,” they were forced to alter and reconceptualize their role and position in society (p. 10). Women’s wartime experiences did not automatically translate into postwar activism. Rather than focusing on this topic, Giesburg encourages historians to examine and understand the wartime experiences of Northern women in their own right.

Rather than move chronologically through the war, Giesburg progresses thematically to cover various aspects of the lives of marginalized Northern women. Chapter 1 examines how Northern women took over the management of their farms and families in the absence of their men. Many Northern women, according to Giesburg, experienced the war as a “withdrawal of labor from their farms and their rural communities” (p. 19). With their men gone, women often turned to their families, friends, and neighbors, while others applied to local aid societies for help. Chapter 2 looks at the case studies of over one thousand women who sought shelter in Massachusetts institutions after being displaced by the enlistment of men in the army. Just as Southern women were displaced and forced to move around, so were Northern women. When they were unable to get help in their area, many women traveled to a different community or a larger city to seek aid. When applying for aid women included details that would cast them in a favorable light. Unwed mothers and prostitutes attempting to gain entrance to almshouses portrayed themselves as victims of seduction and betrayal, claiming that such and such a man (the more specific they

were, the more sympathy they could garner) promised to marry them and then enlisted in the army. Chapter 3 explores the further erosion of public and private spheres as women entered the traditionally all-male workplace of munitions plants. When women entered a workplace that was traditionally dominated by men, their bodies were out of place in a society that designated separate spheres for men and women. Chapter 4 focuses on the ways in which African American women used the war as an opportunity to move into spaces that had been traditionally segregated. During the war, black women began to challenge segregation on streetcars. Indeed, according to Giesburg, “streetcars became the platforms on which women of color interpreted the meaning of emancipation on the northern home front” (p. 98). Chapter 5 looks at how white women attempted to protect traditional spaces from change brought about by emancipation, enlistment, and integration. Public protests, such as the New York City draft riots, were demonstrations of how many women in the North sought to protect their communities from the draft, from emancipation, and from integration. Chapter 6 follows women who traveled to the sites of battles to retrieve the bodies of dead loved ones.

Giesburg’s attempt to move research in the direction of examining working-class, immigrant, and African American women will hopefully encourage further work in this area. She focuses mainly on Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, but she also examines women in Washington DC, New York City, and San Francisco, while encouraging scholars to further explore the lives of other Northern women. Her well-written book will be of interest to historians of the Civil War as well as a broader audience and should encourage further research of this nature.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Jennifer Newman Trevino. Review of Giesburg, Judith, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25746>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.