

## Civilian Committee

The civilians of the 7th Michigan include men, women and children portraying non-military Civil War impressions. The role and activities of civilians are topics that tend not to be that well known among Civil War re-enactors. Therefore, it is necessary to continually research these topics in an effort to improve and correctly portray your Civil War impressions. Nothing can take the place of your own research and it is strongly urged that you do this. More and more references are made available all the time. Libraries, museums, personal collections and the internet provide invaluable resources for new and current members.

During the 29 years prior to 1860, women in the east had been lobbying for, or at least were aware of, not only rights for the black man and abolition of slavery, but also of their own rights. Through such means as the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which formally launched the women's suffrage movement under the leadership of Elizabeth Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, women began to demand a greater role in their destiny. These women were primarily interested in suffrage, control of their own property, and the right to obtain a divorce. Though their group was small in number, they were vocal. In addition, the years 1854 to 1856 brought about another area of influence for women - the Crimean War with Florence Nightingale. Miss Nightingale and her assistants were the first trained nurses ever to serve in a field hospital in time of war. Moreover, they were the first women to provide any such service in hospitals anywhere. These women proved to the world that women were in fact capable of enduring the hardships of a battlefield and of providing excellent care to the wounded and the ill. Their success was noted on a world-wide basis, and the field of nursing soon became a goal to which many young and educated women aspired.

With the surrender of Fort Sumter on April of 1861, the call went out not only for men, but also for women to serve as nurses in the general field hospitals around Washington. The Nursing Corps was under the direction and supervision of Dorothea Dix. Miss Dix required that all women in her unit be plain of face, widowed and at least 35 years of age. In addition, Miss Dix made certain that none of her nurses would ever serve at the front. Such restrictions did not sit well with the majority of the female population - many under 35 and single or married who had husbands, sons, brothers or loved ones at the front. It was shortly thereafter that the sanitary commissions came into existence. Their purpose was to see that the men at the front received their supplies from home, that they were well cared for if sick or injured, and that they were assisted in their whereabouts, etc. It is this group under the guidance of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell who provided the training in New York, and Clara Barton in the field that a large number of women were able to go to the front as nurses, and serve the war effort in this manner. The latter group was the forerunner of the Red Cross as we know it today.

In addition to the women who went to war as part of the sanitary commissions' efforts, there were a substantial number who simply went in order to be near their husbands, etc. While they had no official purpose, they did most often find themselves serving as cooks, laundresses and as nurses in the field hospitals. Since disease was rampant in

the camps, an extra pair of hands to help with the sick as well as the wounded was always welcome. Keep in mind that until the Civil War, soldiers whether sick or injured in battle could expect little assistance from the military beyond their initial surgery. There had not been field hospitals per se before the Crimean War in Europe or the Civil War here. The wounded were cared for in the homes of civilians or sent back home on their own. If a man needed care, a family member either had to send money to get him the care or come and personally see to his care. That was one of the primary reasons so many women followed their loved ones to the battlefield.

Michigan women played a variety of roles similar to those discussed above. In 1860, Michigan was still a frontier state; except for its lower tier of counties, it was still wilderness. The majority of the population could be considered to be living at a subsistence level. There were, of course, exceptions. Detroit had some semblance of an upper class at that time, as did Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo. The frontier nature of the state afforded women some privileges and rights not available to their eastern sisters. Michigan women, for example, could own property - many eastern states outlawed such practices. Moreover, educational opportunities were greater in Michigan than in the east - Hillsdale College, the State Normal School in Ypsilanti (EMU today), as well as Adrian and Kalamazoo Colleges all admitted women in the more populated areas of the state and were more liberal minded and more independent in their thought. Most women had worked alongside their husbands to run the farm and had their duties as wife, mother, and child-bearer. They also participated in the other operations and the decision-making of the farm. In short, they were used to working with their husbands - not taking from them. The frontier ladies' guidelines for proper behavior weren't as strict as those of ladies in the East; therefore they were better prepared to work harder at the war front. These were sturdy women who were used to doing whatever was necessary to get the job done, whether it was men's work or women's work.

Once war was declared, these women quickly and eagerly followed their volunteering husbands, sons, lovers, brothers, or other family members to the front. In addition, there were others who determined that they could be of service to the men at the front and so they left family and friends to go off to war. Their status, as far as the military goes, was difficult and sketchy at best. Most of those who followed the troops were not willing to serve as Sarah Emma Edmunds did on the front lines in uniform, but many did find their way to the battlefields as nurses or members of the sanitary commissions. Officially each unit was allowed to have one or two laundresses and one or two matrons. Some had more. The Second Michigan, for instance, went to battle with nineteen women. Most of these preferred to serve in the rear and not at the front. There were others, such as Anne Etheridge, who served at the front bringing bandages and first aid to the wounded. The greater number assisted in the hospital tents set up behind the lines. Elmira Brainard, for instance, served with the 7th Michigan in that capacity. Each unit appears to have had 4 to 6 women assisting in this manner. In addition, many of these women also assisted as cooks. The troops would give the women money or items they could use to barter for fresh supplies from the local farmers. The jobs performed by the women who accompanied the troops to battle can almost best be described as the 'extra pair of hands to do what needed to be done'.

The Michigan Soldier's Aid Society started in Detroit as early as April 15, 1861, although it was not officially established until November under the name 'The Soldier's Aid Society of Detroit for Relief of the Sick and Wounded of the Federal Army'.

Michigan's Society was one of the few run entirely by women. Annual dues were 25 cents. The ladies met three times a week at 164 Jefferson Ave. in Detroit to roll bandages and sew hospital garments. Their intention was to supply Michigan soldiers with mittens, nightcaps, flannel shirts, underclothing, socks, slippers, blankets, bed sacks, Bibles, and foodstuffs.

The Michigan Soldier's Relief Association, on the other hand, was a different group working in Washington. It provided money for stranded soldiers in transit, assisted widows with pension applications and claims for back pay, found lodgings for relatives come to Washington in search of wounded husbands, sons, or brothers, tried to locate Michigan soldiers in hospitals or cemeteries, wrote letters for the dying, sent the effects of the dead to their next of kin, distributed vast quantities of food, clothing, bedding, and sanitary supplies sent from home 'for our Michigan boys'. In practice the Association's business was whatever personal service Michiganders might need in the capital.

The Association traveled to the front and set up beside a road from a battlefield. They served hot soup, 'milk punch', gruel, rice pudding, lemonade and tea to walking wounded and passing ambulances.

Michigan Relief Agents were considered visitors at hospitals and had no authority or recognized status. They read and wrote letters, sat with the dying, brought in food sometimes in defiance of doctor's orders, listened sympathetically to all complaints, and in every conflict of authority or personality invariably took the side of the soldier patient.

(Some of the above is from Michigan Women in the Civil War.)

### **Civilian Clothing Guidelines:**

#### **Ladies:**

A lady, during the Civil War era, would have been covered from head to toe with just her face and hands exposed. Many layers of clothing were worn for warmth, but also, and especially, for modesty. This section will attempt to describe what an average lady would wear, starting from the inside, next to the body.

First are the drawers, or pantalettes. These are baggy, generally white cotton, and usually with a split crotch to facilitate bathroom use. They fasten with a drawstring or a button and end just below the knee. A little lace or tucks could be added for decoration. Cotton, linen or wool flannel is recommended for these. This is a very important article of clothing and should not be overlooked.

Second is the chemise. This is another baggy garment, similar to a nightgown, and was sometimes used as one. This would fall to about knee length or a little longer. The chemise is meant to protect the corset and outer clothing from body odors and sweat. This would also be white, probably cotton or linen, with possible lace, tucks or ribbons. This is also an important article of clothing.

The corset is worn over the chemise. This is the single most important garment to achieve the desired shape. It doesn't have to be cinched up tight and is not uncomfortable if made to fit correctly. Corsets can be made fairly easily, or can be ordered from a sutler. If you choose to omit the corset from your outfit, then no supporting undergarment should be worn. A modern bra gives the wrong shape to an outfit.

Over the corset, a corset cover can be worn. This is believed to have been worn by younger women. It is a simple, front-buttoned camisole that would help hide the bumps from the corset stays. White cotton or linen can be used for this.

Over all this come the petticoats. An under-hoop petticoat is necessary for modesty. It can be trimmed with lace and fall to about knee length. Cotton is fine, or wool flannel. A quilted one, or extra petticoats, can be worn for warmth. Use a button, heavy hook and eye, or drawstring to close.

The hoop petticoat is next. There are a few different types; some are easily made and some would be better to purchase. Most typical for re-enactors is the covered crinoline, most likely made of cotton with several metal hoops threaded through casings. The cage crinoline is gaining in popularity, but is more difficult to make. It consists of numerous hoops attached to tapes hanging from a waistband. A simpler hoop petticoat is the corded petticoat which has several cords sewn into the cotton cover instead of metal hoops. It is more suited for work outfits. In general, smaller hoops are worn with day dresses and work attire, and larger hoops are saved for more formal wear.

Over-the-hoop petticoats should be of slightly heavier cotton (or silk taffeta, for a 'rustling' affect). It covers the hoops so they don't show through outer clothing. This doesn't have to be white and can be dressed up with tucks and other decorations.

Now on to the dresses.... Fabric types for dresses include cotton, linen, wool or silk. Although polyester and rayon were non-existent at this time, they can be used if the 'feel' of the fabric is right. Just keep in mind that the man-made fibers don't 'breathe' like the natural fibers. This is very important on those hot summer days. Currently there are many reproduction fabrics available that would be suitable for Civil War re-enactor dresses. It is helpful to know what colors were in existence during our period, however, as the repro. fabrics are also printed in modern colors. Plaids and stripes were popular during the 1860's also. Most bodices are lined and boned on darts and seams. Skirts can be lined part way up. Piping is sewn into seams that are stressed during wear. White cotton collars and cuffs are basted into dresses to help keep the dresses cleaner. For fasteners, use heavy, skirt hooks; wood, metal, pearl, or covered

buttons; and lacings. No snaps or zippers are used. You will also find it handy to have several safety pins readily available for quick-fix situations! And, yes, they are very authentic!

A work outfit is usually a one-piece dress. It generally is plainer than a better dress and probably a dark color with long sleeves and buttons up the front. The skirt wouldn't be too full, either gathered or pleated to the bodice or waistband.

A day dress is a little dressier, worn with a hoop. It can be trimmed with ribbon ruching, braids or piping. It can also be one or two pieces, probably fastened up the front. Fuller, shorter sleeves can be worn with undersleeves added to cover lower arms. Matrons (a woman with children old enough to be married) would wear darker, more subdued outfits. Unmarried and younger women can wear brights and pastels with fancier trims.

A ball gown is very special and should be given lots of thought before pursuing its construction. It would generally be cut lower in the neckline with short sleeves. A fuller hoop is sometimes worn. Since a lot of work and expense goes into making a ball gown, it is suggested that new re-enactors study lots of pictures from the Civil War era and also the gowns of other re-enactors before undertaking. This would help avoid disappointment and wasted time and money. Modern day prom dresses and bridesmaid dresses do not convert well to Civil War era ball gowns.

For your feet, either black or brown leather boots are preferred, with a low heel. Look for square toes and plain leather soles. Ballet-type slippers can be worn for the balls. Cotton or wool stockings in black or other colors are held up with garters.

Hair is generally parted down the middle and can be rolled or braided and pinned in the back. Although snoods were a new fashion item at the time and generally worn by the younger women, they're an easy way to hide a shorter hairstyle for a lady. Hairpieces are also available to add to a shorter style and this was done in the 1860's as well. Bangs are not worn. Try to restrict them somehow because this is a modern hairstyle. Bangs were not worn until 15 to 20 years after the war.

The head is also covered most of the time-- to keep the hair cleaner. A day cap is very popular when indoors, or 'at home'. This can be plain or fancy with ribbons and lace. Bonnets and hats are another whole area of study. Shapes and colors and materials all need to be coordinated for an authentic look. This would be another area to hold off for a while until some individual research is done.

Jewelry is worn quite frequently. French hook earrings are the preferred type. Crosses and brooches are popular-- the cameos are extra popular. Pocket and pendant watches are acceptable, but wristwatches and watch pins were not in use at this time.

Makeup is not worn by proper ladies. But, if you must, strive for the 'natural' look. No nail polish should be used.

Other items worth considering: parasols, capes for cold mornings and evenings, mitts and gloves, shawls, reticules (handbags), baskets for marketing, fans, aprons for cooking or serving, lace collars to dress up an outfit.

This sums up what we ladies of the 7th Michigan typically wear. However, other styles can also be correct as verified by your own research. Please don't rush into your purchases before doing adequate research. Visit museums and libraries and ask lots of questions. Our members are very willing to share what knowledge they have acquired. Many of us will also lend patterns and books to other members. Just ask at the meetings, or call a board member or new members' chairman for information

NOTE: Just because a sutler is selling an item, don't assume it is correct or authentic to our time period. Do your research. Stay away from plastic and nylon unless you are sure you can hide it. However, keep in mind that an early form of plastic, called celluloid, was available as was an early form of rubber elastic.

VERY IMPORTANT: Have a tin cup or glass for water during hot weather and for ladies' activities. Also, plan on purchasing a period-looking stool or folding chair to use at events. It's also fine to sit on a period-looking quilt.

### **Babies and small children:**

All babies wore dresses and bonnets until they were toilet trained, at about 4 or 5 years. Their drawers showed below the dress. Boys' dresses were plainer than girls'. Use a type of material, probably cotton, that can be bleached or boiled to remove stains. A girl's hair is parted down the middle, while a boy's hair is parted on the side. The most difficult part of dressing the little ones is finding correct looking shoes. Much research has come out in the past few years to help develop an outfit for small children. Members with young children would be happy to share what knowledge they have acquired.

### **Girls:**

As a girl aged, her skirt got longer and her drawers got shorter. A very young girl would wear a dress about knee length with full-length drawers. She generally wouldn't wear a hoop until much later. Her dress would probably be full, one piece, hanging from her shoulders. When she is a teenager, she is ready for a full-length skirt and would dress as a young adult.

Her outfit would consist of: drawers, chemise, petticoat, dress, shoes and stockings (although bare feet are perfectly acceptable!). Put lots of growth tucks in kids' clothing so you don't get caught making a whole new wardrobe each year.

A young girl can wear her hair in curls, unrestrained. As she approaches the long skirt age, she should start pinning up her hair.

## **Boys:**

Boys would wear a loose-fitting shirt, knickers (up to teen years), a sack coat, a straw or felt hat, black or dark brown shoes (like chukka boots), and wool or cotton socks. Clothes were generally ill-fitting and baggy. Knickers would be buttoned to the shirt or suspenders can be worn.

## **Men:**

A man of the Civil War period would dress according to his occupation. Drawers were not always worn in our area of the country, but were a newer item that the soldiers received when they enlisted. If wearing drawers is desired, they would be made of cotton, linen or wool, extend to the ankles with optional ties. They are worn higher than the modern waist and fasten with a few buttons at the fly.

Shirts were considered part of the underwear. They are made of cotton, linen or wool also. They are cut longer than modern shirts and are tucked between the legs, thus acting as a pair of drawers. Most are a pullover style with a few buttons to close at the neck and a button to close each cuff. Sleeves are full cut. Collars are optional.

Vests are typically worn over the shirt. For decency a man would not be seen in public without a vest or coat over his shirt. There are several collar styles for vests. Wool or linen is the preferred fabric.

Trousers are similar to military ones: full cut, riding higher at the waist, with buttons at the fly and no creases in the legs. They would be made of wool or linen also. Suspenders, or 'braces', can be used to hold up the trousers.

A frock coat or sack coat is also worn most of the time. A frock is longer and more fitted whereas a sack is looser and shapeless. Wool or linen is correct for these. Trousers, vest and coat can be matching fabric or contrasting, as desired. Trousers did NOT have creases.

Socks are made of cotton or wool, either hand-knit or by machine. Shoes would follow the guidelines of the military: leather, square toe, pegged sole.

Men wore hats at all times when outdoors. There are several styles of these and it would be best for new members to do research before purchasing. Various styles of slouch hats were popular and worn. It is improper to wear a hat indoors. Some things to consider for men's clothing are: dress clothes are for dress occasions and are not worn everyday. It is more typical to wear working cloths at re-enactments. Your clothing should suit your impression. Do adequate research before purchasing your outfit.

It cannot be emphasized enough that research must be done continuously by new and current members alike. Our motto is: 'Constant improvement forever'. To achieve this we all must do our own research and share it with other members of our unit.



Examples of civilian attire.



Examples of civilian attire.