Civil War Heroines
Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society
Mrs. Alfred Martin

By Dr. Ann Hertzler

During the Civil War, thousands of women on the home front rendered services without pay to support the soldiers who were their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and neighbors. Activities of Soldiers’ Aid Societies throughout the south can be deduced from newspaper reports by the names of families contributing money, materials, and food and from the acknowledgement letters of military leaders. More difficult to fathom are the actual projects for the relief of the sick and wounded and the number of hours spent sewing and cooking by these Civil War heroines. This article describes the Soldiers’ Aid Society in Wilmington, the largest city in North Carolina at the time.

The Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society was announced in the Daily Journal on August 8, 1861, to “provide for the wants of those who may be visited by disease or wounded in battle.” The President, Mrs. A. J. DeRosset, was later labeled the “General” because of her organizational powers and leadership ability. The valuable assistance of her colleagues was recognized, but especially that of Mrs. Alfred Martin, a member of the executive committee, and a vice-president. Her daughter regarded her so highly that she later wrote an account of her mother’s work during the war. Many of these women and their families gave provisions, money and many hours of work to support the Soldier’s Aid Society and community relief activities.

SEWING

The Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society originally met at the City Hall to cut and sew projects. On September 12, 1861, an announcement in the Daily Journal urged the ladies to come to the town hall to make up the “cloth lying useless for want of available hands.” In February 1862, the Daily Journal announced that meetings were reduced to two a week “at which time work could be picked up and received.” Meetings were limited following the yellow fever epidemic of 1862, when many families such the DeRossets left the city for their health and safety. Mrs. Alfred Martin probably remained in Wilmington because her husband, the acting mayor, reportedly had yellow fever at this time.

During the last two years of the war, the sewing projects of the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society were particularly noteworthy when field and hospital supplies were greatly needed. The few Southern factories could not meet the huge demand for clothing or material. Donations by local citizens included the use of a sewing machine along with money and supplies for sewing clothing and bedding articles for soldiers in hospitals and in the field. “With their own hands [they] cut out and made underclothing, quilts, knitted socks, packed many boxes of necessaries, and forwarded them to the soldiers in the field.” Often a young lady would attach her name and address to the socks she knitted…with a request to the soldier receiving them to write her a letter. Most of the clothing for soldiers came from the looms and needles of the wives, mothers and sisters. Colonel Gaston Mears, 3rd Regiment, North Carolina Troops, sent a letter from his unit to the Daily Journal to acknowledge receipt of a box containing clothing and hospital supplies on October 28, 1861. A January 6, 1864, Daily Journal announcement from Colonel Dowd, Chief of Clothing Department for
North Carolina Troops, said that shoes and blankets were especially needed by the quartermaster (supplies, dry goods). The quartermaster at Fort Fisher may have had additional needs.

The ladies covered canteens and made haversacks, as well as cartridge bags for rifles, and powder bags by the hundreds. Canvas bags were made to be filled with sand and used in the fortifications at Fort Fisher. Major William Henry Chase Whiting, commanding North Carolina’s coastal defenses in 1861, wrote his superiors that “I have started all the ladies to making cartridge bags and sand bags, and that keeps their little hearts quiet.”

Bedding was provided in the form of sheets, pillow cases, quilts, blankets, counterpanes, towels, mattress sacks, and camp cots. Mrs. Alfred Martin “herself cut out and superintended the making of over 800 mattress sacks which she delivered to the Brigade Quartermaster.” Early in the war on November 25, 1861, a note was sent to Mrs. Martin from William Lamb, a quartermaster at the time with rank of Major and later Colonel in charge of Fort Fisher. It read:

I regret that you had to wait so late at the Town Hall to deliver bed sacks on Saturday night, but I did not get your message until after all the teamsters and laborers were discharged for the night, and I had no one to send. Please send them to-day by Sergt. Morris and let me know when you want the money to pay the work-women.
DELIcacies

Members of the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society prepared food in their own kitchens to send to troops in the field and to serve those passing through the railroad depot and those stationed at Fort Fisher. The home-prepared food supplemented monotonous army rations of salted meat and hard-tack. It added nourishment to troops existing on half rations and without vegetables. Statistics showed that two soldiers died of disease for every one that fell by the enemies’ weapons. Women’s labors preparing and sending food in both the North and South helped save thousands of military lives. Isaac Perkins wrote to the local association a letter of appreciation printed in the Daily Journal in October 27, 1863, “I have been appointed by the Company to thank you... for [even] the very smallest donation. We have never been in a starving condition but we have suffered and do suffer for wholesome food.”

A committee of ladies of whom Mrs. Martin was a member organized lunches and bandages for train-loads of sick and wounded soldiers passing through the city twice daily for several months. The June 9, 1864, Daily Journal reported that the railroad depot brought 100 to 360 sick and wounded soldiers into town two times a day on their way home or to their own town hospital; three-fourths being from South Carolina and Georgia. The men were transferred to a large building on the wharf during their two hour layover which allowed time for food and care before transfer to the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad Depot across the river on Eagles Island. Miss Mary Ann Buie, known as “the soldier’s friend” because of her successful work soliciting food and materials, praised the ladies “for the sumptuous fare given daily at the Wilmington Depot to the wounded soldiers,” many dishes which could be found at no other place in the Confederacy. James Sprunt wrote, “Feasts without price were constantly spread at the depot.”

The Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society also planned holiday meals for the railroad depot and for Fort Fisher. A dinner announced for Christmas Eve in 1864 at the depot resulted in many contributions of money and food (turkeys, hams, fowls, potatoes, turnips, and cabbages). The Christmas dinner was redirected to Fort Fisher which had just sustained a terrific bombardment. In addition, a New Year’s dinner was planned by the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society for Fort Fisher for Wednesday, January 3, 1865, to show appreciation to the troops. Members of the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society and citizens along with General Braxton Bragg attended. Later, during the battle of January 13, 14, and 15, the troops existed for three days with only “cornmeal coffee” and uncooked rations.

In preparing food for these various projects, the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society overcame many obstacles including escalating food costs. The May 7, 1864, Daily Journal announced “During the past week five dollar notes of the Confederate States Treasury have depreciated 25%... a great inconvenience has been experienced by housekeepers.” Because provisions were so expensive with the inflated Confederate dollar and many food shortages, food donations to the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society were especially appreciated. Contributions reported in the newspaper were pork, beef/bacon, sardines, fish, poultry, eggs, butter-milk, rice, flour, homemade bread, muffins, corn, beets, potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, dried fruit, pickles, peaches, apples, lemons, limes, and additions such as butter, suet, lard, cream, coffee, tea, spices/essences, mustard, catsup, molasses, wine jellies, tea, sugar and lime. These would have been turned into “delicacies,” a term conjuring up expensive ingredients and fancy cakes and pies, but actually meaning good, well-balanced home cooking.

Mrs. DeRosset was known for her ability to “overcome difficulties in getting all she needed” for the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society members to prepare foods for the soldiers. Most kitchens in well-to-do homes would have been similar to the kitchen of the Zebulon Latimer family located on Third Street. The iron stove would have been used for cooking, water for cooking and cleaning would have come from a well and cistern, but typical “ice box” refrigeration would not have been available because ice shipments from the north ended during the Civil War.

Mrs. Martin’s kitchen at her home on Second and Dock Street would have served her household of 18 (10 family plus 8 slaves and servants). Food for the soldiers would also have been prepared there for the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society. In 1850 and in 1860, Mrs. Martin’s older female slaves probably helped with cooking. The 1850 census enumerates five females (age 40, 25, 23, 21, 4) and 3 males (ages 37, 24, 14). The 1860 census lists six females (ages 25, 22, 18, 16, 14, 8) and 2 males (ages 22 and 12). Although blacks are seldom acknowledged for their cooking contributions, they probably prepared most of the dishes in the family kitchen following the English, French and German recipes from the household mistress and adding their own special touches.
The December 26, 1864, Daily Journal praised the patriotic efforts of the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society for dispensing the many delicacies to the battle-scarred veterans. Mary Ann Buie praised the women because “the soldiers received full benefit of donations.” Colonel Hutchinson of Georgia wrote in the May 20, 1864, Daily Journal that many cities, towns and villages gave no assistance whatever, but in Wilmington “all the attention was given to us that ladies of the South could give.” Emma Maffitt, Mrs. Martin’s daughter, emphasized the dedication of these modest, unassuming women, who gave no thought of the value the world or coming generations would place upon their lives.

During the Civil War years, women appeared in new places and new roles where they traditionally would not have been. They did all of this “while they sustained their families and kept active in their communities with church work and teaching.” A letter from Colonel Lamb suggests that some women earned money sewing to augment their limited resources. On May 14, 1862, Henry Lowe & Co. advertised in the Daily Journal for 100 women and girls to finish up socks. A number of widowed women filled in professions left vacant in schools, factories, and offices in government bureaus. Eliza Hall Nutt Parsley, whose husband died in the war, entered teaching and in December 1894, she organized the Cape Fear Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. These activities led to continued acceptable charitable community food based projects for women.

Mrs. Alfred Martin

Christian Caroline Dudley was born in 1809, the daughter of Mr. Christopher Dudley, Wilmington - Postmaster. Her mother was Leah Spicer Dudley.

In 1837, she married Alfred Martin who clerked for her father, was later a book-keeper, and, subsequently, a naval stores and commission merchant. His community activities included: President of the Chamber of Commerce, Director of various Banks of Wilmington; City Alderman, officer in St. John’s Masonic Lodge and the Grand Lodge of North Carolina; membership in the Thalian Association; the Sanitation Committee; and the Relief Association.

The 1850 Census listed five children in the Martin family: Eugene, 10; Emma H., 8; Clarence D., 6; Catherine, 4; and William A., 2. All three boys attended a boy’s school at 3rd and Ann Streets and participated in an 1852 declamation contest. Clarence died in the Civil War. Eugene became a Captain in Wilmington Rifle Guards; served at Fort Anderson during the 1865 bombardment; and became a well known lawyer and U.S. Circuit Judge. The Martin’s daughter, Emma, married Captain John Newland Maffitt in 1870 and in 1906 she wrote his biography and the newspaper recognition of her mother. Their son Eugene “made a happy home for his parents in their old age at 520 Dock Street.”

Mrs. Martin died in 1895 at age 86. Her obituary read “She was a woman of admirable Christian character and illustrated the refined and cultured womanhood of an era that passed away with the beginning of our Civil War, funeral from St. James Episcopal church thence to Oakdale cemetery.” Alfred Martin died in 1898.

Often the contributions of women to the family and community are unrecorded. Christian Caroline Dudley Martin survived the devastations of war, the yellow fever epidemic, the loss of a son, and poor health in her advancing years. Although pictures of Mr. Alfred Martin (husband) and Mr. Eugene Martin (prominent son) could be located in historic files, no picture of Mrs. Alfred Martin could be found. At the end of the war, her family and community history is lost to us and she is known to us by her husband’s name on her card.

Mrs. Martin’s calling card circa 1890s. Courtesy of the Cape Fear Museum.

About the Author

Since retiring to Wilmington from teaching at Virginia Tech, Dr. Ann Hertzler has written a number of articles for publication. These include two Civil War papers for a nutritional journal Nutrition Today “Florence Nightingale’s Influence on Civil War Nutrition” (2004) and “Scurvy - American Civil War” (2006). She was also the co-editor, with Merle Chamberlain of the LCFHS publication Modern Recipes from Historic Wilmington, which is now in its 5th printing. This collaborative team also wrote the April 2005 Bulletin article “Sara Stark Robinson - her household book.” When not writing, collecting recipes or doing oral histories Ann serves as a docent at the Latimer House, works with the Victorian Children’s Program and supports the summer camp. She also provides warming kitchen decor for the Flavor of the Past and Candlelight Tour events.
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The March 1998 Bulletin noted, “No one’s star shines brighter than that of Merle Chamberlain.” On August 26, 2006 her star dimmed as she passed away but her contributions to the work of the the LCFHS will long be remembered. Merle earned her library of science degree from Drexel University and worked as a professional archivist at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for many years. Arriving in Wilmington in 1984 from Philadelphia, Merle put her life experiences to work in the archives here. For twenty years she tirelessly compiled subject index cards, produced bibliographies, wrote pamphlets, researched articles and generally kept the organization of the paper ‘jewels’ of the Society in an accessible classification system. Combine these efforts with her expert assistance to other researchers, volunteer service at the New Hanover County Public Library, St. John’s Art Gallery (now Cameron Museum) and the Historic Wilmington Foundation to get a glimpse at the impact she had on local documentation. She was particularly interested in ephemera collections which Merle described as, “pieces of the past that are too valuable to junk but will get lost unless they’re catalogued.” Several of her personal projects involved genealogy including the Latimer, Savage and Nixon families. As a private woman of humility she was never one to present all of her achievements in the public light but they are on record as being significant and far reaching. Her name will live on through the Chamberlain Cup, the award presented to the winner of the annual 8th grade History Bowl competition. But her memory will carry on in each of our hearts.