

### Women Making War: Female Confederate Prisoners and Union Military Justice

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#### Recommended Citation

Phipps, Sheila R. (2021) "Women Making War: Female Confederate Prisoners and Union Military Justice," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.1.16

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss1/16>

## Review

**Phipps, Sheila R.**

**Winter 2021**

**Curran, Thomas F.** *Women Making War: Female Confederate Prisoners and Union Military Justice*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$26.50 ISBN 9780809338030 pp.259

The American Civil War is considered the first American total war, a war that included participation of civilians as well as soldiers in the struggle. Women had been enlisted through sectionalism rhetoric leading to war and many had answered the call. Politicized women looked for ways to vent their patriotism and aid the war effort without donning a uniform, though many did that, as well. Thomas F. Curran focuses on these historic women for the St. Louis, Missouri region and finds that, not only did women participate, but many—possibly as many as 200—were arrested and imprisoned for their efforts. *Women Making War: Female Confederate Prisoners and Union Military Justice* is a detailed and well-written study of southern women who risked their freedom to help the Confederacy.

Women who gave shelter or aid to Confederate soldiers, guerrilla fighters, and bushwhackers were considered disloyal women by Union officials. As the war went on, the Union military made it clear that women who worked against the United States government or military in the conflict would be considered vulnerable to punishment for their behavior, especially when General Orders No. 100 formalized the issue. Although some women were considered suspect simply because they were related to Confederate soldiers, others actively committed treasonous acts, such as spying, carrying mail, smuggling medicine, funding the Confederacy, recruiting for the southern army, or helping prisoners escape. The fact that many of these women, upon their release, repeated the same offenses means that they were aware of the risks but were willing to face them again. They had been politicized into the conflict and were determined to do their part to help the South win the war.

St. Louis experienced few major battles but was a supply and training center for the Union. When military officials quit thinking of women as noncombatants and began arresting

them, their main concern was where to confine them. Some were imprisoned in private homes, but they also made use of barracks, the former Gratiot Medical College, and finally across the Mississippi River at Alton, a former state penitentiary in Illinois. Curran discovered that women lived in the same poor conditions at the prison as male inmates: overcrowding, lice, bad water, and corruption of prison officials. On the other hand, his study reveals that romantic relationships formed and some of the inmates even enjoyed hosting Victorian style events while confined. Some women died of disease while isolated and at least one woman gave birth before her release.

Curran argues that all women were arrested only after exhaustive investigation and their economic circumstances were taken into account before exacting punishment. Women from all ranks of society faced arrest, but elite women were more likely to be banished and pay expensive bonds before being released. Poor women could be confined for a time and released with only the duty of giving an oath of allegiance to the United States of America.

Curran researched newspaper accounts, Union Provost Marshal records, military correspondence, prison records, along with first-hand accounts of the people involved to uncover these little-known proponents of the southern cause and the way the Union military handled their transgressions. He organized his findings chronologically since imprisoning women became more common through time. Readers might wish that Curran had provided more background to Missouri's place in the sectionalism fight, their residents' contributions to the turmoil in Kansas and how that affected the public stance of some of their female citizens. He might also have done more to explain how women became politicized as the war began. All in all, however, *Women Making War* is a well-written and enlightening look at this aspect of the war and how it affected women in St. Louis.

Thomas F. Curran teaches social studies at Cor Jesu Academy in St. Louis and is also the author of *Soldiers of Peace: Civil War Pacifism and the Postwar Radical Peace Movement*.

**Sheila R. Phipps** is Professor Emeritus of History at Appalachian State University. She is author of *Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee*. Professor Phipps is currently working on "Appreciate All the Little Curses": Crossing the Boundaries of Gendered Labor.