Vicksburg

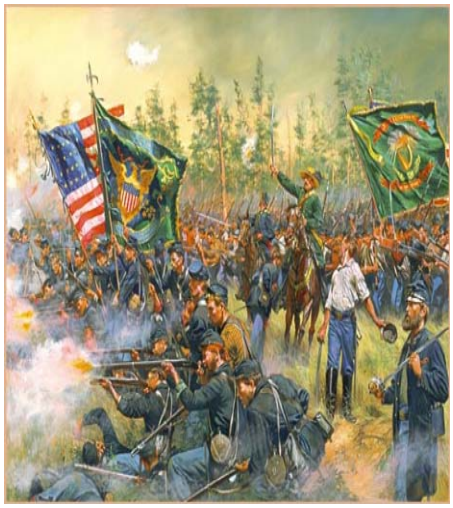
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Vicksburg National Military Park

They Fought Like Men… Irish Women in the Civil War

Contributions of female soldiers during the Civil War were extensive. Many times their courage exceeded that of their male comrades. Prominent among these strong women were those of Irish descent, such as Jenny Hodgers, Martha Lindley, and Brigit Divers.

As social and political issues of the era forced many to emigrate from Ireland, the Irish could be found in armies around the world during the 19th century. In America these volunteers were in the forefront of patriotic endeavors, fighting for both the Confederate and Union armies. Everywhere they fought, they bore the colors of their homeland reflected in their flags, uniforms, and adornments. The women soldiers of Ireland were no exception.



Irish soldiers were ready and willing to fight. Abroad, they were considered mercenaries; in America, they became patriots. They served with Napoleon and his Legions, in the Spanish Army, in revolutionary armies in South America, both sides in the Mexican War, in the Vatican's Papal Guard, and on both sides of the American Civil War.

And even though they showed undying support for each and every war they fought in, the colors and symbols of Ireland were carried with pride.

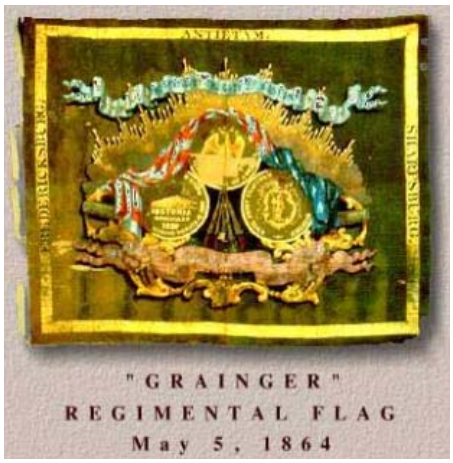
The shamrock, (seamrock), a little three leaved, trifoliate clover, has long been revered as a symbol of the Irish dating back to 1571. Worn as a badge on one's lapel to celebrate the Saint's feast day, it is still "the" symbol of Irish culture. It was chosen as the national emblem of Ireland because of the legend that St. Patrick used the plant to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity.

Unfortunately, Queen Victoria of England did not share in their patriotism and forbade the wearing of the shamrock while fighting for her. Ultimately, there were so many Irish in the English army that Queen Victoria finally allowed them to wear the shamrock on St. Patrick's Day to show her gratitude for their support.

The Eighth Census of 1860 determined that there were 1, 611,304 individuals of Irish birth in the United States; some 1,526,541 of them resided in states that would remain loyal to the Union. These statistics do not reflect the number of persons of Irish descent born in the United States.

The American Civil War was fought for many reasons. The two most popular theories were commerce and control of the Mississippi River, and slavery. Regardless of the reason, soldiers from all over the world fought for the "cause." This cause was one of the bloodiest battles ever fought during American times. The number of soldiers that died in this war surpassed the total number of soldiers that died in all wars up through the middle of the Vietnam War, combined.

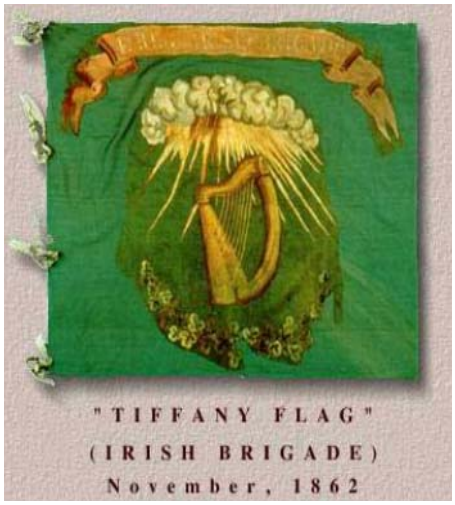
Even during the battle of Vicksburg one could find a healthy surplus of Irish volunteers. At the Great Redoubt for instance, the 7th Missouri and the 21st Louisiana opposed each other in a fierce battle. Union forces planted their flag and fought in earnest until they were driven back by the Confederates. What makes this skirmish most unusual was that both sides were Irish, fighting in their native tongue, Gaelic, leaving American soldiers in a disadvantage on both sides.


"GRAINGER"
REGIMENTAL FLAG
May 5, 1864

The contributions of the Irish soldier during the Civil War were monumental. These hard-working, dedicated soldiers had a "can do" attitude that spirited anything for the cause. Interestingly enough, some of these dedicated soldiers were women. It has been noted by various authorities that near 400 women disguised themselves as men and joined the forces fighting for the war. Women, including those of Irish descent, were just as committed as the men. Commonly asked questions were, "How did they disguise themselves so that no one knew? How did they pass the medical exams?"

Historical accounts note that several of the women who enlisted, and managed to keep their identity a secret, did so at the same time in the same geographic area. The physician conducting the exam did not require men to remove their clothing for a thorough exam; rather, he asked to see their hands, looking for the hard-working soul. Since life was hard, most everyone had weathered hands, even the women. And so, they gained unquestioned access to the battlefield.

Brigit Divers – Union Nurse


"TIFFANY FLAG"
(IRISH BRIGADE)
November, 1862

Brigit Divers' husband was a private in the 1st Michigan Cavalry. Traveling with him, she had the opportunity to serve in many capacities during the war. If a soldier fell in action, she would take his place and fight as bravely as the best. She rode with the troops day and night, wearing out horses until they dropped from exhaustion, or were shot from underneath her while in battle. Brigit was a hearty soul who worked with stamina and conviction. She rode on Rebel soil to retrieve her dead captain's body, strapped him on her horse, and rode for 15 miles to where he could be shipped to his family in Michigan.

Immediately after delivering her captain's body, she was sent back into the battlefield to retrieve the wounded with ambulances. She was an unofficial oral historian for the U.S. Christian Commission, providing information about the 1st Michigan. She worked with Union forces as a nurse. When her husband enlisted in the 1st Michigan Cavalry she followed him to war and served as *Viviandiere*, an agent of the Sanitary Commission for the entire brigade.

During her tenure with them, she went through near ten horses, as several were shot right from under her as she rallied the regiment on numerous occasions.

At Fair Oaks she looked up while caring for her wounded husband and yelled "Arragh, go in, b'ys! Bate and bloody spaleens and revenge me husband and God be wid yez!" This spirit infused the soldiers and propelled the men back into a charge.

Brigit was known by several names such as, Irish Brigit, Irish Biddy, and Michigan Brigit. At Cedar Creek and Sheridan's raids she was surrounded, but rode through the enemy. At the end of the war she remained with the regiment and accompanied them to Texas and the base of the Rocky Mountains. Heartsick at leaving the army, she quickly rebounded when the Indian-fighting army needed several laundresses, one for each company, in the West. These laundresses were usually the wives of enlisted men. So happy was she, that she spent the rest of her life in the army.

Martha Lindley – Union Soldier

Martha Lindley, alias Private Jim Smith, fought with the 6th regiment of the U.S. Michigan Calvary during the Peninsula Campaign until June of 1862. Here she was detailed as an orderly for the regimental surgeon for 10 months of her enlistment. When her husband returned to war she decided she no longer wanted to be without him.

Leaving her children under her sister's care, she joined her husband and enlisted in Pittsburgh wearing his clothes, and was mustered into the regiment. Interviewed after the war she said, "I was frightened half to death but I was anxious to be with my husband that I resolved to see the thing through if it killed me." She was admired by her comrades, who never suspected a thing. They just thought he/she and William Lindley were "chums."

Jenny Hodgers – Pvt. Albert D. Cashier

One of the most famous female soldiers of the Civil War was Jenny Hodgers. Born in 1843, her pre-war life seems filled with controversies and scandal. She emigrated from Ireland, possibly Belfast, to the United States. Eventually she enlisted with the 95th Illinois Infantry and began her military career.

On May 18, 1863, Private Albert D. Cashier, one of many soldiers who served under General Ulysses S. Grant, participated in the siege of Vicksburg. The Union army shelled the city relentlessly for weeks, and during the course of the battle, Private Cashier was captured while performing a reconnaissance mission. He escaped by wrestling a gun away from a Confederate guard and was chased on foot narrowly reaching the safety of the Union lines.

Private Cashier served a full enlistment. Even well after the war his comrades remembered the slight soldier as a good and brave fighter, admired for heroic actions and dangerous assignments taken on, yet never a scratch or injury did he receive.

Dressing as a male was nothing new to Jenny Hodgers. Money tight, it has been told that Hodgers' supposed step-father dressed her up like a boy and got his "son" a job. When her mother died, she moved to Illinois and worked as a laborer, farmhand, and shepherd.

In August of 1862, she "enlisted in the army at Belvidere, Illinois. Small and diminutive in size and appearance, Hodgers resembled many Irishmen of the time. Continually she went unnoticed. No one thought anything of a quiet soldier seeking privacy for bathing and dressing. This was common. All in all, Jenny fought as an infantryman in 40 battles, with Vicksburg being the most important. Even ill with diarrhea, and seeking medical attention, she escaped being detected as a woman. Corresponding with a family from Illinois, they frequently asked Albert if he had bought a dress for his sweetie.

As intriguing as Albert Cashier's war experiences were, so too was the manner in which his secret was revealed. After the war Albert retired to Illinois. There, still disguised as a man, he worked doing odd jobs for Illinois State Senator Ira Lish. Unfortunately one day, Senator Lish ran Albert over, breaking his leg. It was there that the town doctor discovered his secret. Pleading to maintain his confidence, the doctor agreed. Remember this was a soldier with a pension. Had the secret been revealed, not only would the pension be removed, but Albert would now be subjected to the new menial life of a woman. Interestingly enough, Cashier's leg never healed and the Senator arranged for him to be placed in a rest home for male veterans. While the staff was aware of Cashier's double life, they never broke the confidence.

Over time, Albert's physical and mental health declined greatly. He was nearly declared insane by the State of Illinois. Newspapers were leaked the secret and word was about. The government now was deciding to charge Private Albert Cashier with defrauding the government in order to receive compensation as a Civil War veteran. An investigation was launched, but luckily his comrades from the 95th Illinois rallied and testified that this was not Jenny Hodgers but Albert Cashier, a small but brave soldier. Man or women, the bravery and dangerous missions overshadowed the discontent

from the State. In the end, Albert/Jenny did receive veteran status, but sadly, was shipped to a mental institution and forced to wear female clothing, greatly affecting her mental state even more with "tragic consequences." At 67 years old, frail and unfamiliar with the finesse of walking in women's clothing, she tripped and broke her hip. Unfortunately, she never recovered from the injury and spent the rest of her life confined in bed.

Albert Cashier died on October 10, 1915 in Watertown State Hospital. Upon her death, she was buried with full military honors in Sunnyslope Cemetery. Her marker reads "Albert D. Cashier, Co 95 Ill. Inf."

Jenny Hodger's is recognized inside the Illinois Memorial at Vicksburg National Military Park under the inscription, "Cashier, Albert D. J., Pvt."

Rose O'Neal Greenhow – Confederate Spy

On August 23, 1861, Rose O'Neal Greenhow was approached by Secret Service agents and placed under house arrest for conducting espionage for the Confederacy. Even while under house arrest she continued to transmit secrets and information.

Born Rose O'Neal in 1817 in Montgomery County, Maryland, she received only limited education, but she was young and attractive, and she used it to her advantage. Called "Wild Rose" when she was a girl, she was courted by many a prominent man. A move to Washington, D.C. with her sister afforded her the opportunity to grow up in a political climate leading to many benefits. At the age of 26, she married Robert Greenhow, a prominent Virginian who worked for the State Department. His death in 1850 left her a wealthy, powerful woman with many contacts. Known for her Confederate support she was recruited into a spy ring.

As time passed she imbedded herself, and other young women, deeper and deeper into the spy ring, regardless of Lincoln's aggressive counterintelligence effort. While under house arrest, she used the affections of her Irish guard towards one of her Irish maids, and continued to send information out by way of their regular strolls through town without the guard's knowledge.

President Lincoln felt the best recourse toward female spies was exile to the South. Upon her release from house arrest in 1862, Rose was sent to Richmond. One year later, she sailed to Europe to lobby the governments of France and England on behalf of the Confederacy. While there, she wrote the bestseller "My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolitionist Rule at Washington." Unfortunately, on her return home to the United States, the boat she was on ran aground off the Coast of North Carolina, and Rose drowned.