



"Gordon and Henry"  
John Janney Papers, Virginia Tech



## CHILDREN AND THE CIVIL WAR



## WHAT DID THE CIVIL WAR MEAN FOR CHILDREN?

In 1860, children accounted for more than 30 percent of the nation's population. In comparison, children accounted for 24.5 percent of the U.S. population in 2007.

Historians often neglect the impact of the Civil War on children.

Although experiences varied, most children in the North and South were touched in some way by the war.

Children experienced the myriad of emotions associated with war including excitement, patriotism, uncertainty and sadness.

For many children the outbreak of the Civil War meant great excitement. Children in the North and South gathered to watch newly formed companies drill.

Children's publications at the time encouraged martial enthusiasm. Boys formed "boys companies" and girls kept journals documenting military affairs.

Children participated in home front war efforts such as raising money and volunteering.

Many children took on the duties of absent fathers and older brothers. Children suddenly became responsible for farming, household chores and younger siblings.

Young boys enlisted in the Union and Confederate armies serving in non fighting positions. Recruiters cared little about the child's age when enlisting a drummer boy.

Boys under 18 sometimes lied about their ages and enlisted hoping to find glory and adventure. It is estimated that about 5 percent of soldiers fighting in the Civil War were under 18, some were as young as 10. William Black became the youngest wounded soldier at 12 when an exploding shell shattered his left arm and hand.

Boy soldiers endured all the harsh realities of war including confinement in prison camps.

Fathers wrote home of their devotion to maintaining their country for their children. Preservation of family became central to soldiers on both sides.

1100 Fort Negley Blvd.  
Nashville, TN 37203  
615.862.8470

[www.nashville.gov/Parks-and-Recreation/Historic-Sites/Fort-Negley.aspx](http://www.nashville.gov/Parks-and-Recreation/Historic-Sites/Fort-Negley.aspx)

### Free and Open to the Public

#### Winter Hours (September - May)

Tuesday-Friday: Noon - 4:00 p.m.

Saturday: 9 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

And by Appointment

#### Summer Hours (June - August)

Tuesday-Thursday: Noon - 4:00 p.m.

Friday and Saturday: 9 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

And by Appointment

**Fort Negley Park is open daily dawn to dusk for  
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NORTHERN CHILDREN

Generally, Northern children were less affected by the Civil War. The fighting took place far away, many schools remained open and food was obtainable.

Children missed loved ones away in the military and older boys often volunteered with their fathers. Boys served as drummer boys, buglers and in the navy as “powder monkeys.” Girls volunteered in hospitals.



“Powder Monkeys” fetched gunpowder on Union ships.

Businesses and factories continued to operate and many families became rich by selling goods to the Federal government. Wealthy Northern children enjoyed fancy food and fine clothing.

Poor and immigrant children worked long hours in factories with their parents.

Children entertained themselves with store bought toys and attended fairs, plays, baseball games and circuses.

Children received news from the front lines in letters from loved ones and in newspapers.

Some families followed the Union Army and lived with their fathers in military camps. The children of Union officers stationed in occupied areas lived in private homes designated as officers’ quarters.

SOUTHERN CHILDREN

Most Southern children suffered a great deal from the Civil War. The fighting often took place close to home and many children witnessed troops on the march.

Food and household items quickly became scarce due to the Northern blockade of Southern ports. Families adapted to shortages with creative substitutions. Women experimented with coffee substitutions using boiled wheat or corn. Molasses served as a substitute for sugar.

Families rarely had meat during the Civil War. Marching soldiers sometimes took livestock

With men away fighting, many children growing up on plantations had chores for the first time.

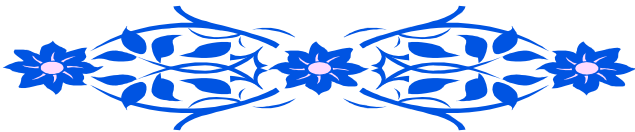
Most manufactured cloth was imported from the North. About half way through the war, the South experienced a clothing shortage. Children wore patched clothing that was too small or too big. Most people did not own shoes.

Schools closed early in the war and many were used as hospitals. Mothers taught children at home.

Children worked in munitions factories.

Children played games such as eye spy and war. Most families could not afford store bought toys. Girls played with rag dolls and boys played patriotic tunes on whittled flutes.

Children in the South, although close to the fighting waited months or even years for news. The advancing Union Army often cut telegraph wires. Paper became a luxury and many newspapers closed. News was often read aloud in public.



SLAVE AND CONTRABAND CHILDREN

The Civil War affected slave children in many ways. Many people were confused or uncertain regarding freedom.

Some slave children remained on plantations; they faced the same hardships as landholding families.

Many slave families followed advancing Union Armies. Others were forcibly relocated to isolated areas of the Confederacy.



Former slaves established contraband camps near Union garrisons and occupied towns. Poor conditions and illnesses in camps attributed to deaths as high as 30 percent.

Religious groups and charities from the North aided contrabands. Many children attended school for the first time.

Many former slaves built Union fortifications.

Some contraband camps required that women and children work on plantations and farms.

Union authorities protected contrabands and runaway slaves from bounty hunters and former owners.

In 1863, the Federal government established the Freedmen’s Bureau to help former slaves adjust to freedom.

Thousands of former slaves and southern children fled in the wake of Union invasion and became refugees far from home.

Hundreds of women and children were sent North where food, shelter, clothing and medicine was more plentiful.

BOY SOLDIERS

“Historians estimate that anywhere between 250,000 and 420,000 boy soldiers, many in early their teens or even younger served in the armies of the Union and the Confederacy between 1861 - 1865... Some 15 percent were seriously wounded or died from battle wounds, diarrhea, infections or malnutrition.”

Emmy E. Werner, *Reluctant Witnesses: Children’s Voices from the Civil War*

Boys enlisted in both armies hoping to find glory and adventure. Many young boys ran away from home. Others were enlisted by their mothers who could no longer care for them.

Boy soldiers or “ponies” adapted quickly to military life and marching drills.

Many farm boys were exposed to dangerous diseases, such as measles, for the first time in military camps.

Early in the war, boys under 18 were prohibited from enlisting in either army. As the war progressed, the Confederate army enlisted boys as young as 11.



This image of an unknown boy soldier was taken in Nashville.