



# VIRGINIA WOMEN AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## RECORDS AND RESOURCES AT THE LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

Anna McFadden enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve as a nurse in June 1917. Before the war, she had worked as a surgical nurse at Garfield Memorial Hospital in Winchester. After the war, she carefully filled out a questionnaire for Virginia's War History Commission documenting her service in France. She was not alone. Women from across the commonwealth served in the war as nurses and clerks, and many maintained (like McFadden) that, despite the difficulties they encountered, they remained "ready and willing at all times" to serve their country. Anne Bennett had worked as a nurse and secretary for author Ellen Glasgow in Richmond before she enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps; Lucile Douglas left St. Vincent's Hospital in Norfolk for Camp Lee, where Margaret Cowling worked as head nurse before she embarked for service in France. "I felt that it was a privilege," Bettie Jane Wingfield wrote, "to help nurse our American boys."

Not all Virginia women who went abroad were trained as nurses; some, like Helena Brennan and Bessie Hays, worked as clerks and stenographers before leaving their civilian jobs to enlist as navy yeoman. 1,071 Virginia women enlisted in the navy during the war. Some served as clerks, translators, draftsmen, fingerprint experts, and recruiting agents in the United States, while others worked overseas in France, Guam, Hawaii, and the Panama Canal. Thelma Dawson worked as a bookkeeper in Norfolk before joining the navy as a payroll accountant. Ralph Drumheller was employed as a clerk in Roanoke before she enlisted. After spending the war as a supply clerk at the Portsmouth Navy Yard, she reported that she "would like to be called back at any time that the U.S.A. needs me." Bland Hobson, a stenographer who worked in France at Base Hospital 45, felt that her experiences abroad served as a reminder of "the blessings of American citizenship."

Some of the women who served were first-generation Virginians. Anna McFadden and Katie Hoban were the daughters of immigrants from Ireland, where Ann Carson was born. Olga Demke's parents migrated from Germany to Philadelphia, where their daughter attended John Wanamaker's Commercial Institute before enlisting in the navy. Yeoman Ruth Friedman's

parents left Hungary for the United States. Women joined the service for patriotic and personal reasons. Bessie Hays signed up as a yeoman to "release . . . men to do the things I could not do"; Sarah Hunter joined because her family "had no man in the war." "I felt," she recalled, "that our family must be represented by me." Ruth Roland, a twenty-six-year-old housewife, enlisted as a yeoman when her husband signed up to serve; "I thought I could serve my country," she explained, "and also support myself."



*Hollins graduate Bettie Jane Wingfield in her uniform.*

Women worked at home as well as abroad. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the Equal Suffrage League temporarily suspended agitation for the vote and joined with dozens of other organizations, including the Virginia Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, to support the war effort. Two energetic Richmonders mobilized the commonwealth's women. Mary-Cooke Branch Munford supervised the labors of the state's white women as head of the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense. Margaret R. Johnson coordinated the work of the Working Force of Negro Women, calling on members of missionary circles, art clubs, and women's auxiliaries of fraternal orders to volunteer. African-American women planted war gardens at Hampton Institute, where students and teachers collected books for camp libraries and knitted "war afghans." Women's organizations played an important role in the war effort. "My observation is that in Virginia the women are much more completely aroused than are the men," wrote Robert Walton Moore in June 1917. A member of the National Council of Defense and special counsel to the Interstate Commerce Commission, Moore credited Virginia's women with the patriotism, economy, and energy necessary to win the war.

Women worked both in the home and in the community to support the war effort. They planted gardens, attended canning classes, and planned thrifty menus. The front lawn at Richmond's John Marshall High School was plowed under by the local food administration office for a demonstration garden; vegetable plants also flourished in neighborhood yards, flowerbeds, and window boxes. Women practiced preventive medicine learned from public health drives launched to compensate for the wartime shortage of doctors and nurses. The Woman's Committee of the National Council of Defense encouraged women to enter the medical profession, and argued (unsuccessfully) that it would be "timely and patriotic . . . to throw open the doors of the Medical College of Virginia to women."

Women sold savings stamps and enlisted subscribers for the Liberty Loans that financed the war. They collected food, clothing, and medical supplies for war relief in Europe, and made comfort bags (containing soap, tobacco, cigarette paper, writing supplies, razors, and other items) for the troops. The Women's Section of the Navy League in Portsmouth did their part for the sailors at home, knitting sweaters, mufflers, and gloves for those working at the navy yard. Other women made layettes and children's clothes to send overseas from patterns published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* and other magazines. The Norfolk Branch of the American Fund for the French Wounded sent hospital supplies, surgical dressings, and clothing abroad, and provided puzzles and basket-making materials for convalescing patients.

In Richmond, Mary Munford was flooded with offers of help. Mrs. George T. Hobson, the wife of a captain in the Army Corps of Engineers, sent a donation to the Soldier's Library Fund and offered to collect books and pack them for shipment overseas. "I am here with my tiny son," she wrote from an apartment in Richmond, "and long to be useful." The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Association, headed by Mrs. Samuel Cohen, donated pillows and pillowcases to hospitals, and invited soldiers stationed near the city into its homes and synagogue. A Liberty Loan drive held by the association at the Cohen Company department store in April 1918 raised \$136,500. The Council of Jewish Women joined with the women of Beth Ahabah to knit garments, conserve food, and participate in the Godmother's League. They visited Camp Lee weekly, carrying "delicacies, flowers and



*A woman in stylish "trouserettes" displaying products of her factory work, ca. 1918.*

records" to brighten the hospital wards, and many enlisted in the Red Cross canteen service and motor corps. Meanwhile, the Graduate Nurses' Association of Virginia surveyed the state's nursing resources and worked to make nurses eligible for Red Cross service.

Across the state, housewives and working women searched for ways to help the cause. Mary Somerville Gammon, an English teacher at the State Normal School for Women (now Mary Washington College) in Fredericksburg, planned to emphasize democratic themes in her literature class and encourage her pupils to provide "direct and practical service" to the war effort. Norfolk widow Nora Capps Reid was a dressmaker who worked full time, but wrote to offer her services as a volunteer. "I earnestly feel like doing whatever I can do best and will mean the

most to my country," she explained, "and will answer any call I can fill."

The Woman's Committee had abundant, energetic volunteers but little cash—only \$125 a month from the State Council of Defense. Governor Henry Carter Stuart paid for the printing of the committee's food cards out of his budget, and volunteered the House of Delegates cloakroom for office space. Soon thirty volunteers worked there. The committee's financial situation worsened in 1918, when Governor Westmoreland Davis took office. The Council of Defense resigned, and Davis appointed state officials to replace them, but provided no operating funds. As a result, the work of the Woman's Committee, Mary Munford lamented, "has been brought to a standstill." Soon the committee members resigned and were replaced by a newly-organized Women's Auxiliary of the State Council of Defense. Meanwhile, Virginia's first lady, Marguerite Davis, served as president of the Women's Munitions Reserve and volunteered at the DuPont war plant at Seven Pines, sewing silk bags and filling them with smokeless gunpowder. Two thousand women worked there, wearing practical uniforms with pants called "trouserettes" or "womanalls."

In Norfolk, suffragist Pauline Adams sprang into action, calling for the formation of a Women's Home Guard to protect area bridges. Sixty women enlisted and drilled twice a week. According to their male drill instructor, "the women went through the exercises better than the average company of men raw recruits." As local National Woman's Party president, Adams led the women's section of Norfolk's Preparedness Parade and sold war

bonds and stamps at local hotels. Other members volunteered for the Red Cross, entertained sailors with coffee and home-cooked meals, and chaperoned dances. Virginia—and especially the port city of Norfolk—was a major staging area for troops headed overseas, and women provided important social services for soldiers and sailors.

Nearly thirty-five thousand American women served overseas during World War I, creating what the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* called “a wider horizon for every woman.” Twenty-one thousand enlisted in the U.S. Army and Navy Nurse Corps; thirteen thousand joined the Navy Active Reserves and the Marine Corps to perform clerical work; and more than two hundred were deployed to Europe with the Army Signal Corps as telephone operators. All except the nurses were discharged from active duty immediately after the war ended. Women treated patients, took dictation, fried doughnuts, drove ambulances, and operated switchboards. Soon after the war ended, the Nineteenth Amendment gave American women the right to vote. Other changes followed. With inventions in domestic science and innovations in food preparation, the home functioned more efficiently. Bicycles and automobiles, along with less restrictive clothing and shorter skirts, gave women a newfound mobility. Many women continued to work—as nurses, clerks, and in community organizations.

Approximately 80,000 Virginians served in the war. In 1919, the General Assembly established the Virginia War History Commission to collect, assemble, edit, and publish information about the commonwealth's participation in the war. (Among the commission's members was Mary Munford.) From its office in the Capitol, the commission conducted a survey of Virginia's veterans and nurses. Many of the nearly 15,000 responses included photographs, as well as frank observations on the war and its aftereffects. Nurse Verna Mae Smith,

a native of Clifton Forge, replied from Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. “You asked me to write you something of my experience over seas,” she began, “and I must admit it is a job, for so much happened it is hard to know just what to write.” She remembered how enthusiastically “the American boys” greeted the nurses: “They gave one yell—AMERICAN GIRLS!—and ran up and almost shook our hands off. We really thought we were going to get kissed and by george we wouldn't have cared.”

Life overseas was difficult and dangerous. More than 100,000 Americans lost their lives during the war. Verna Mae Smith quickly learned how to use a gas mask, and carried one wherever she went. Camilla Atkins, a nurse from Blackstone who spent the war at a hospital in France, reported on her questionnaire that working conditions were poor. Asked to list the “handicaps” of the situation, Atkins listed “lack of heat [and] water in buildings, no sewerage, so much rain and mud,” along with “poorly cooked food.” Irma Fortune, a nurse who worked at Camp Lee and in France, confessed that she suffered a breakdown after she returned to the states. “I suffer a great deal from nervousness,” she wrote, “and am easily discouraged.” Despite these difficulties, Fortune felt that her service in the war was important and worthwhile. “My experiences were most educational,” she concluded, “and I will never regret them no matter how long the readjustment period lasts.” Lucy West fell seriously ill with influenza in 1918, but recovered and re-enlisted at the end of the war in the Navy Nurse Corps. After nurses Victoria Good and Annie Reveley died in service, their families returned questionnaires to the commission. These moving and informative records are available on microfilm at the Library and are also accessible through the Library's Web site. Listed below are other selected materials at the Library of Virginia that shed light on women's experiences at home and abroad during the first World War, and on the conflict itself.

## ARCHIVAL RESOURCES

American War Mothers, Richmond Chapter  
Records, 1928–1957  
Accession 30149

Organized in 1917 for mothers of sons and daughters who served in American wars and were honorably discharged. Includes membership applications, minutes of monthly meetings, and correspondence.

Barton Heights Woman's Club (Richmond City)  
Records, 1908–1967  
Accession 26770

Including minute books, scrapbooks, and rosters of club officers and members. Box 4 contains a 1916–1917 scrapbook (marked “From the War Relief Association of Virginia and the American Red Cross, Richmond Chapter”) documenting the club's efforts during World War I. Volunteer work included fund raising, sewing, and knitting garments for fighting men overseas. The club also worked to relieve suffering among civilians, especially women and children in war zones.

Includes two field service postcards and a letter from Sgt. Raymond W. Rector, a member of the 318th Infantry Regiment, to his godmother, Elizabeth (Mrs. R. W.) Miller, and a clipping from the *Richmond News Leader* announcing that he was killed in action.

Equal Suffrage League (Richmond City)

Records, 1909–1935

Accession 22002

During the war, the Equal Suffrage League suspended its work for the vote in favor of volunteer work. Boxes 5 and 6 include minutes and reports of wartime meetings, as well as a report of the Equal Suffrage Auxiliary of the Richmond Chapter, American Red Cross Society (Folder 291). The league distributed information on food conservation to its members (Folder 394), along with a recipe for Canadian War Cake and instructions for making machine-knitted socks. The league supplied towels, washcloths, soap, and magazines to the hospital at Camp Lee, and provided hand-knitted sweaters and Christmas candy to nurses stationed with the “McGuire Unit” (Base Hospital 45) in France. Correspondence includes a letter by Virginia physician Rosalie S. Morton describing conditions in Serbia in October 1919 (Box 1).

Inventory available. Equal Suffrage League activities are also documented in the Mary-Cooke Branch Munford Papers, Box 16, Folder 16 (Report of the Woman’s War Service Bureau) and Box 17, Folder 16 (Questionnaire in Regard to Food Conservation by Women’s Organizations in the State).

Henley, Bernard J.

Papers, 1917–1989

Accession 33623

Box 8, Richmond–Topical, 1914–1960

A librarian at the Richmond Public Library for thirty-seven years, Henley abstracted newspapers and often included information on women. His abstracts of Richmond’s wartime newspapers document enlistment drives, Liberty Loan campaigns, and shortages in the city.

Kern, Margaret Ethel Kelley (Richmond City)

Papers, 1907–1938

Accession 23481

Kern participated actively in volunteer work during World War I. Several notebooks (Box 1, Folder 8) concern her work as president of four organizations: Richmond War Camp Community Service; the Godmother’s League; Woman’s Auxiliary, American Legion Post No. 1; and Woman’s Committee, Armistice Celebration.

Lynch, Theresa B. (Winchester)

Diaries, 1860–1933

Accession 36773

Lynch’s thirty-five diaries record her activities and those of her husband and five children, as well as weather observations, births, marriages, deaths, and household activities. Some photographs and diary entries concern her son Harry’s service in World War I. “This was a year of years,” Lynch mused in December 1918, “the most bloody war ever fought on Earth. Old year goodbye forever.”

Munford, Mary-Cooke Branch (Richmond City)

Papers, 1881–1935

Accession 28142

Munford was involved in the Richmond Women’s Club, the Richmond Education Association, the Urban League, the League of Women Voters, and the Co-ordinate College League. She was chairman of the Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense, and her papers (Boxes 16–18) contain information on food conservation and registration drives. Also included is information concerning the involvement of African-American women in the war effort. Inventory available.

United States, War Department. Pilgrimage for the Mothers and Widows of Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines of the American Forces Now Interred in the Cemeteries of Europe as Provided by the Act of Congress of March 2, 1929.

Serial Set 9225

Listing the names and addresses of mothers and widows entitled to make a pilgrimage to war cemeteries in Europe, along with the probable cost of their travel. Also included are the names of the deceased, their rank, unit, and place of burial. For additional information, see Constance Potter, "World War I Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 31 (Summer 1999 and Fall 1999).

Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs

Records, 1907–1958

Accession 25115

Records documenting the history of the federation's contribution to Virginia's social welfare, including photographs, yearbooks, scrapbooks, and club histories. The collection also includes information on homefront service during World War I. "Our share in the war," club president Janie Gray Hagan wrote, "is no small one." Clubs contributed funds and supplies to the Belgian Relief Committee, sponsored war orphans, and worked with the Red Cross.

More club histories are included in Accession 34148. For additional information, see *The Virginia Club Woman* (1928–), the official publication of the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs.

Virginia War History Commission (RG 66)

Established in 1919, the Virginia War History Commission conducted a survey of World War I veterans in Virginia through the use of a printed questionnaire. A separate two-page questionnaire was prepared for nurses, although some filled out the more extensive four-page form designed for soldiers. These are available on microfilm; a searchable database and digital images are also available on the Library's Web site.

The nurse's questionnaire posed twenty-four questions, including: name; place and date of birth; home address; color; church; marital status; educational background; nursing school attended; professional positions held before entering the service; date of enlistment; personal experience in camp or hospital before going abroad; details of embarkation and arrival in Europe; and "narrative including experience while with the Service throwing light on the human side."

The letters and diaries collected by the commission include material on women's work, including the Virginia Division, Woman's Committee, Council of National Defense; Women's Auxiliary, American Legion; Woman's Auxiliary, War Camp Community Service; Virginia branch, National League for Woman's Service; and other organizations. Correspondence, newspaper articles, and membership lists are included. A flyer for the Godmother's League, for example, promised servicemen that "when you are somewhere in France, a Godmother will write you Letters, will send Tobacco and Eats, [and] will help you keep in touch with the Home Folks. You can tell your Godmother your troubles." The league also provided support and supplies at Camp Lee, sending magazines, tools, games, and sewing supplies to the shell-shocked soldiers hospitalized there.

The collection also includes photographs of 104 nurses at U.S. Army Base Hospital 45, as well as a history of the "Forty-Five" and a staff roster listing nurses and clerical staff.

Miscellaneous World War I History Commission Records (Accession 28390) include ten letters by Helen Cameron, written in France while working with the Women's War Relief Corps of the American Red Cross, 1917–1918.

Virginia War Memorial Carillon

*Proposed Layout of Approach to Virginia War Memorial in Byrd Park*

Office of the [Richmond] City Engineer, 1932

Accession 34886

The Virginia War Memorial Commission was created by an act of the General Assembly on 20 March 1924 to erect a memorial honoring those Virginians who had served in the World War. The carillon, or "singing tower," was dedicated in Byrd Park on 15 October 1932. Additional information may be found in the *Report of the War Memorial Commission* (1928) and the *Virginia War Memorial Carillon Dedication Program* (1932).

World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918: Virginia.

Film 1696 (86 reels)

Under the Selective Service Act, over twenty-four million men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one were registered, and more than 2,800,000 were inducted into military service. By the third registration in September 1918, the age limits were extended to include those between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. Registration cards are organized alphabetically by county or city, and thereunder alphabetically by the name of registrants.

Registrations include order and serial number, full name, date and place of birth, race, citizenship, occupation, personal description, and signature. Edward Wesley Ayres, a thirty-three-year-old waterman from Accomack County, registered in September 1918; another thirty-three-year-old fisherman, Elmer Aydelotte of Chincoteague, registered on the same day, but noted for the record that he was blind in his right eye. These records contain no information on military service. The originals are housed at the National Archives and Records Administration. For additional information, see John J. Newman, *Uncle, We Are Ready: Registering America's Men, 1917–1918. A Guide to Researching World War I Draft Registration Cards* (2001).

WPA Life Histories Collection, 1938–1941

Accession 36002

Miscellaneous Reels 1846–1853

A collection of approximately 1,300 Work Projects Administration/Virginia Writers' Project life histories, social-ethnic studies, and youth studies. Some contain information on the war and its aftermath. Nannie Moseley, a widowed store clerk, found it too painful to discuss the death of her son in the war with interviewer Essie Wade Smith; other participants were anxious to relate their experiences, like postmaster William Colbert, who served as an ambulance driver in France. Robert Moore, a Hopewell resident, was only eleven years old when the war ended, but remembered his family "rejoicing . . . that peace was again restored to the war-sick world." A searchable database and digital images are available on the Library's Web site.

## RELATED RESOURCES

### BOOKS

American Battle Monuments Commission. *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe: A History, Guide, and Reference Book*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938. See also [www.abmc.gov](http://www.abmc.gov).

*An Atlas of the World War*. London: Dangerfield Printing Company, 1917. Special Collections.

Clarke, Ida Clyde. *American Women and the World War*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918. See pp. 515–523 for a directory of national women's war work organizations. Virginia state organizations are listed on p. 543.

Davis, Arthur Kyle, ed. *Publications of the Virginia War History Commission*. 7 vols. Richmond: Published by Order of the Executive Committee, 1923–1927. See volumes 6–7, *Virginia Communities in War Time*, for information on war work and relief organizations.

Ezekiel, Herbert T., and Gaston Lichtenstein. *World War Section of the History of the Jews of Richmond*. Richmond: Herbert T. Ezekiel, Printer and Publisher, 1920.

*Hampton in Wartime*. Hampton: Press of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, 1918.

Haulsee, W. M., F. G. Howe, and A. C. Doyle, comps. *Soldiers of the Great War*. 3 vols. Washington, D.C.: Soldiers Record Publishing Association, 1920. Volume 3 lists Virginia soldiers.

Nims, Marion Relief, comp. *Woman in the War: A Bibliography*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1918. Compiled by the News Department of the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense.

*Michelin's Illustrated Guides to the Battlefields, 1914–1918: Amiens Before and During the War* (1919); *Lille Before and During the War* (1919); *Rheims and the Battles for its Possession* (1920); *Soissons Before and During the War* (1919); *Verdun and the Battle for its Possession* (1920); *Ypres and the Battle of Ypres* (1920).

Olcott, Jane, comp. *The Work of Colored Women*. New York: Colored War Work Committee, War Work Council, 1919. For Virginia, see pp. 13–15, 36–39, 46–49, 52–54, 56–57.

Seeley, Charlotte Palmer, comp. *American Women and the U.S. Armed Forces: A Guide to the Records of Military Agencies in the National Archives Relating to American Women*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1992.

## ARTICLES

“Art as Ammunition: Posters, World War I, and the Virginia Home Front.” *Virginia Cavalcade* 41 (Spring 1992): 158–165.

Breen, William J. “Black Women and the Great War: Mobilization and Reform in the South.” *Journal of Southern History* 44 (August 1978): 421–440.

Crews, Edward R. “A Virginia Hospital Abroad: U.S. Army Base Hospital No. 45 in the Great War.” *Virginia Cavalcade* 42 (Spring 1993): 178–191.

Crump, Nancy Carter. “Hopewell During World War I: ‘The Toughest Town North of Hell.’” *Virginia Cavalcade* 31 (Summer 1981): 38–47.

*Virginia Cavalcade* 50 (Summer 2001). A special anniversary issue featuring articles on the War History Commission, the National Guard, Virginia women and the war, veterans’ questionnaires, European pilgrimages by war mothers and widows, and the atlas of the American Expeditionary Force.

Yockelson, Mitchell. “They Answered the Call: Military Service in the United States Army During World War I, 1917–1919.” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 30 (Fall 1998): 228–234.

## POSTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Of the approximately thirty-five World War I posters in Special Collections at the Library of Virginia, a third relate to women. Topics include war savings stamps, Liberty Loan campaigns, and food conservation. For additional information, see Walton H. Rawls, *Wake Up, America!: World War I and the American Poster* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988) and Anne Classen Knutson, “Breasts, Brawn, and Selling a War: American World War I Propaganda Posters, 1917–1918,” Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1997. The Library’s Picture Collection is also a rich resource for World War I–era photographs. Posters include:

*Oh Boy, that’s the Girl! The Salvation Army Lassie. Keep Her on the Job. United War Work Campaign.*

*For Every Fighter a Woman Worker. Care for her Through the YWCA. United War Work Campaign.*

*Liberty Day. Opening U.S. Gov’t Bag Loading Plant, Seven Pines. Women’s Munitions Reserve.*

*War Gardens Victorious. Every War Garden a Peace Plant—National War Garden Commission.*

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*Pictured next to the title is Minnie B. Parker, of Norfolk, who nursed soldiers in France at U.S. Army Base Hospital 45.*