They Went as Men

by Brandi Gray-Blake

The desperate need for soldiers at the beginning of and throughout the Civil War, along with a minimal screening process for the new recruits, led to the ability of women to impersonate men on the battlefields. Women joined for a variety of reasons. While some dressed as men simply for the opportunity to contribute to the war effort, others did so because they chose to disregard established gender norms or because they identified as men. This paper will look at three individuals that fall into the latter category: Dr. Mary Walker, Sarah Rosetta Wakeman/Edwin or Lyons Wakeman, and Albert Cashier. Someone might say that by today's standards they may have been considered transgender or genderfluid.

This essay will also examine a contrasting individual, Sarah Emma Edmonds, who dressed as a man when necessary for the war effort but gave no evidence of a preference to do so. The differences between Edmonds and the subjects of this essay helps to highlight the difference between crossdressing out of necessity and crossdressing out of preference. Edmonds' accounts are more typical of the stories of women in the Civil War, as the main subjects of this essay are the exception to the norm.

Before going any further, one needs to consider some terminology. While there are terms that will not be used to be more historically accurate, there are some terms that, while modern, are more acceptably used in a historical context. Since this is dealing with women who took on personas of the opposite gender, the obvious terms that come to the twenty-first-century mind, "transsexual" and "transgender," did not come into use until 1949 and 1980, respectively, placing them well outside the nineteenth-century context for women in the Civil War.[1] To describe the three main subjects of this paper, use of the terms "transvestite" and "crossdresser" are more accurate, as they literally mean to dress as the gender opposite than the one assigned at birth. For sensitivity reasons, the term "transvestite" will not be used as "historically, the term is associated with an anti-LGBT scientific taxonomy and therefore is rarely

[1] Kara Thompson. "Transsexuals, Transvestites, Transgender People, and Cross-Dressers." *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America*. Ed., Marc Stein, Vol. 3. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 203-206. The first use of the terms "transsexualism" and "transsexuality" were used by Dr. David O. Cauldwell in 1949 to describe a person that "sought to change their sex."

used in popular discourse today."[2] Therefore, this paper will be limited to the single term "crossdresser."[3]

Many wonder how women were able to go undetected since it was technically illegal for a woman to be a soldier; however, there were many loopholes and workarounds. The most obvious way that a woman could join military service was to dress as a boy or young man and try to "pass" as such. There is evidence that shows, especially in times of desperation, the screening process was very minimal to lessen the number of able bodies they had to turn away. Lauren Cook Burgess, who wrote the introduction to *An Uncommon Soldier*, mentions that, "Sarah Edmonds, alias Pvt. Franklin Thompson, described her army medical exam as 'a firm handshake' with an inquiry about 'Frank's' occupation."[4]

Another suggestion as to how they could "pass" was that women wearing pants in the mid-nineteenth century were a rare sight. According to Burgess, "thus, if it wore pants, most people of the period would naturally assume that the person was a man. In polite society, speculating further or inquiring upon what lay beneath another person's attire would mark the questioner as less than a gentleman or lady."[5] This accounts for the fact that many female soldiers were not discovered until they were severely injured in battle and required medical attention, or upon postmortem examination.[6] Others kept their secret hidden even after their death as in the case of "Three Who Died." A female soldier helped bury the bodies of other women on three separate occasions to allow them to take their secrets to the grave.[7]

There were many women that served. Lauren Cook Burgess has documented over 135 women who fought on both sides of the Civil War.[8] Burgess quotes Mary Livermore of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, writing, "the number of women soldiers know[n] to the service… [is] little less than four hundred."[9] Frank Moore, in his post-Civil War book *Women of the War*, named each chapter after a different woman with a significant contribution to the Civil War efforts.[10] Some names such as Bridget Divers, Kady Brownell, Ellen Goodridge, Major Pauline Cushman, and Belle Reynolds came up

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[2] Ibid., 206.

[3] Michael Bronski. *A Queer History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011). "Invert" or "inversion" was a term also used in the late 1800s to describe someone that felt trapped in the wrong body and held homosexual desires. This paper will not use the term due to the assumption of homosexuality and the esoteric nature of the term.

[4] Sarah Rosetta Wakeman. *An Uncommon Soldier*. Ed., Lauren Cook Burgess, (Pasadena, MD: The Minerva, 1994), "Introduction" 3. *An Uncommon Soldier* is a collection of letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman aka Lyons/Edwin Wakeman; the Introduction and Epilogue are written by Burgess.

[5] Ibid., 3.

[6] Thompson, "Transsexuals, Transvestites, Transgender people, and Cross dressers," 206.

[7] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 157.

[8] Ibid., "Foreword" James M. McPherson, xii.

[9] Ibid., "Introduction," 2.

[10] Frank Moore, *Women of the War: Their Heroism and Self-sacrifice*, (Hartford: S.S. Scranton, 1866), 3-4.

multiple times when researching female contributions to the Civil War.[11] *Hearts of Fire* has just under 250 accounts of women serving as soldiers.[12] Deanne Blanton and Lauren M Cook make the claim that there may have been thousands of women that cross-dressed during and after the war.[13]

Before looking more in depth at the three individuals that took satisfaction from dressing as men, one must look at a case of cross-dressing out of pure necessity. One of the most famous women who served as a Civil War soldier is Sarah Emma Edmonds Seeleye. Out of the hundreds of women who served during the war, she was one of only two who wrote and *published* memoirs of her account. Hers is the only one "confirmed as a substantially true account through biographical research."[14] Edmonds aptly named her book *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy*, as she served in all those capacities. In her heroic tales she recounts the many times she escaped capture from the rebels. She also describes going under cover using several different aliases. Her first undercover mission required her to use silver nitrate to color her skin, as she went undercover as a young slave boy.[15] She tells of another story of a Confederate widow named Alice who tried to kill her and, in turn, Sarah convinced her to join the Union army as a nurse.[16]

While Sarah Emma Edmonds' memoir is a very interesting read, there is not much evidence that shows that she ever struggled with her identity. She donned the "Franklin Thompson" persona to run away from New Brunswick to the United States where "she became a Bible salesman" to avoid an arranged marriage set up by her father.[17] She dressed as a man before and during the Civil War but made no attempt or show of desire to continue her persona of Franklin after the war. She wrote her memoir in 1864 but did not publish it until much later when trying to make a case to draw her veteran pension.[18] The rest of her life seems commonplace compared to her time as a soldier; she married a mechanic, had three kids, and settled down in Ohio. In 1891, she and her husband followed their children to Texas, where she lived until her death on September 5, 1898.[19] The next three subjects of this paper contrast greatly from Sarah Emma Edmonds.

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[11] They appear in Frank Moore's *Women of the War* and in Lee Middleton's *Hearts of Fire*.
[12] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 3-9.
[13] DeAnne Blanton, *They Fought like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 176. Recent scholarship suggests 'that transvestism... [was] not so rare and there may have been thousands of women wandering around America in the latter part of the nineteenth century'.
[14] Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 7.
[15] Sarah Emma Edwards. *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 57.
[16] Ibid., 42-51.
[17] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 136.
[18] Ibid., 137.
[19] Ibid., 137-138.

Sarah Rosetta Wakeman "was born on 16 Jan 1843 in Afton, N.Y., the first of the nine children born to Harvey Anabel and Emily Hale Wakeman."[20] The only son was still very young and Rosetta (as she was called at the time) was the primary family member who helped on her father's farm. She eventually joined the army and died two years into service. Like most soldiers, she wrote home often, which her family kept the letters and later allowed those letters to be compiled into a book, *An Uncommon Soldier*.

Unlike Edmonds, Rosetta cross-dressed as a man before joining the military. In 1862, she ran away from home and used the alias Lyons Wakeman to get a job as a boatman before joining the military under a three-year contract by means of the same alias a couple of months later.[21] To join she was given a quick exam of her hands and feet and deemed fit for duty. As her letters revealed, she held aspirations that were thought of during that time as being typical for men but not women. Her dream after finishing her service was to buy a farm in Wisconsin and live independent of her family and her old life.[22] She also was interested in and proud of her masculine appearance. In numerous letters (at least four) that she sent back home, she mentions an enclosed "likeness" of herself.[23] The third letter sent home she writes, "How do you like the looks of my likeness? Do you think I look better than when I was to [sic] home?"[24] She was constantly responding to her mother in letters and telling her that she will dress as she pleases. Under her new persona, "Lyons," Rosetta found a new sense of confidence and independence.

Once Rosetta transformed her name into Edwin Wakeman (instead of Lyons Wakeman), she became very attached to the identity and remained so for the rest of her life. Rosetta lived openly as Edwin. Whenever she wrote letters home, at first, she signed them "Rosetta," but on the letter sent December 28, 1863, she signed it "Edwin R. Wakeman or Rosetta Wakeman."[25] If she intended the use of the name Edwin to help hide her identity, then adding her birth name afterward counters that effort. All the letters after that were signed "Edwin Wakeman" or "Edwin R. Wakeman," suggesting that she was becoming comfortable with her new identity instead of trying to hide the old one.

Rosetta took leave to visit old friends and family from back home whenever they were near to where she was stationed. Even though she could get away from camp as "Rosetta," she chose to do all of her visiting as "Edwin."[26] In one letter that is particularly interesting, a cousin of Rosetta's, Frank Roberts, writes to his aunt and

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[20] Ibid., 170.
[21] Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 9.
[22] Ibid., 31.
[23] A "likeness" refers to a portrait of some sort. Usually a photograph but could have meant another form such as a drawing or painting.
[24] Ibid., 37.
[25] Ibid., 58.
[26] Ibid., 49-51.

uncle, "I received six letters yesterday… One was from Edwin R. Wakeman, Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C. I answered that last night."[27] One could argue that the referring to Wakeman by preferred name is significant, as it implies that more than just immediate family knew and referred to her as such. There is no evidence that there was a need to use her preferred name, other than out of respect for the individual.

Rosetta was insistent on living life as Edwin. She repeatedly told her family that she could not get leave for a visit home, though as Burgess reveals in the footnote of the January 20, 1864 letter, "Rosetta's pleas that she could not get a furlough to come home were rather disingenuous. She could have gone home at any time upon revealing her true identity to army officials."[28] Additionally, in a letter home to her family describing how well she is fed she said, "I am the fattest fellow you ever see."[29] She seemed to prefer life as Edwin.

Rosetta/Edwin's plans for the future suggest that she did not intend to give up the persona after her time in military service. In almost every other letter she mentioned coming home for a brief visit, but not staying long before starting life as an independent farmer. Sometimes the reason given was to be independent and sometimes she claimed that she would be "ashamed" back home.[30] In one of the clearer and strongly worded examples Rosetta/Edwin says, "I don't care anything about Coming home for I [am] aShamed to Come, and I sometimes think that I never will go home in the world. I have enjoyed my self the best since I have been gone away from home than I ever did before in my life."[31] In her last letter home she advises her family to buy a nearby farm for which she says she will help pay. She says that if she makes it out of the army alive, she will come home and, with her little brother, run both farms for the family.[32] Whether she intended to live independently or come home and act as a pseudo-patriarch, she showed aspirations that were considered typical of males and unusual of females.

Unfortunately, it is not known if she fully intended to take on such a leadership role in the family, or even go back home, as this was her last letter home. Rosetta Wakeman died in a New Orleans hospital on June 19, 1864, after battling one of the biggest killers of the Civil War, dysentery.[33] Amazingly, her identity was not discovered after her death and she was buried in a soldier's grave with a tombstone that read "4066 Lyons Wakeman N.Y."[34]

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[27] Ibid., 52.
[28] Ibid., 61.
[29] Ibid., 27.
[30] In this context, "shame" is something that the community puts on the individual and not something that they themselves decide or feel.
[31] Ibid., 58. Letter dated December 28, 1863 and signed "Edwin R Wakeman or Rosetta Wakeman."
[32] Ibid., 71. Letter dated April 14, 1864.
[33] Ibid., 82.
[34] Ibid., 84.

Dr. Mary Walker was different than Rosetta in that she never used a male persona. While she began wearing the "women's trousers" invented by Amelia Bloomer, Mary Walker eventually developed a preference for wearing men's suits.[35] She went back and forth between wearing a modified version of the *Vivandiere* uniform and a man's suit. According to one source, "in the decades between the Civil War and her death shortly after World War I, Walker was arrested several times for dressing in men's clothing (or disturbing the peace, based on public reaction to her appearance)."[36]

Cross dressing was not the only unique thing that Dr. Mary Edwards Walker did; she was also a doctor. Supported by her progressive family, she attended Syracuse Medical School, where she was the only woman in her graduating class.[37] When she married Albert Miller, a fellow classmate, she did three unusual things for a woman in the mid-nineteenth century. First, the couple removed the word "obey" from their wedding vows. Second, she refused to take her husband's last name. Third, they started a medical practice together, in which they were *equal* partners.[38] Ironically, it was Mary's choice of profession and wardrobe of "nontraditional attire" that eventually caused the couple to divorce.[39]

Her service in the Civil War earned her a Medal of Honor. She was originally turned down as a surgeon because she was a woman and served as a volunteer nurse instead. After making a name for herself, the general under which she served ordered that she be given the title of "regiment's Assistant Surgeon."[40] She was paid, but not as an officer, as she did not have a rank. She spent four months in a Confederate prison after being captured on a battlefield in Tennessee, and afterward, President Abraham Lincoln commissioned her as a First Lieutenant.[41] Still, no one would officially recognize her as an officer, so she wrote to Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson. In November, Johnson signed the citation awarding Dr. Mary Edwards Walker the Medal of Honor. A little more than two months later, on January 24, 1866, Mary received her medal.[42]

Mary spent the remainder of her days doing as she pleased. After the Civil War she traveled the country recounting her experience in the war. During this time, she was arrested multiple times for dressing as a man. When the criteria for Medal of Honor recipients changed in 1917 to include only those that were involved in "combat with an enemy," Congress attempted to revoke her award. In her rebellious nature, Mary wore

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[35] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 174.
[36] Ellen Greenblatt. "Mary Edwards Walker is Awarded the Medal of Honor." In *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Events*. Ed., Kenneth T. Burles, 1st ed. Vol. 1. (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2007), 8.
[37] Ibid., 7. Mary graduated in 1855.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 175.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Greenblatt, "Mary Edwards Walker is Awarded the Medal of Honor," 8.

her medal every day until her death in 1919 at the age of 86. Her medal was later officially reinstated by President Jimmy Carter on June 10, 1977.[43]

The final subject of this essay, Albert Cashier, was born in Ireland in 1843 as Jennie Hodgers.[44] It was a tough time for Ireland because of the Great Potato Famine. "Jennie" decided to do as many people were doing and leave for America. On the way to the boat "Jennie" changed clothes and started going by the name "Albert D.J. Cashier,"[45] a name he kept until his death.[46]

Albert eventually earned himself a fairly impressive military record. On August 3, 1862, at the age of nineteen, Albert joined the army and was assigned to the 95th Illinois.[47] Just like in Rosetta's military screening, Albert was only required to show his hands and feet. Something else Albert had in common with Rosetta, Albert stood at only five feet tall and served in the Red River Campaign. Albert's war record included "the Red River Campaign, at Nashville, Vicksburg, Gunntown, and in the Meridian Campaign."[48] There are several tales of his brazenness on the battlefield. His sergeant said of him, "he might be the littlest Yankee in the company, but by golly, he sure carries his share of the fight!"[49] LGBTQ history writer Sarah Prager also said, "a fellow soldier remembered: 'He was a right feisty little bastard. Sooner fight than eat!'"[50] Amazingly, even with the remarkable record, Albert never had a single injury in his three years of service.[51]

After the war, Albert lived a quiet life. He moved to Belvidere, Illinois, where he settled down and lived out his life. He was a beloved member of the community and he was the one to light and put out the street lamps.[52] For a living, he did odd jobs and gravitated toward occupations like farmhand, mechanic, or handyman. It is also reported that Albert wore his Union Army uniform nearly every day.[53]Albert may have thought it risky to attempt to buy more clothing, as it would have required a fitting with a tailor (unlike the generically sized uniforms that were handed to soldiers upon enlistment).

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Sarah Prager. *Queer, There, and Everywhere: 23 people who changed the world*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017).
[45] Ibid., 62.
[46] Due to overwhelming evidence that "Albert" and male pronouns were preferred, even after being found out later in life, this essay will use both preferred name and pronouns for this subject.
[47] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 74.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Prager, *Queer, There, and Everywhere*, 64.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 65.
[53] Ibid.

The end of Albert Cashier's life was a bit tragic. In 1911, he was working on the governor's car, and his leg was run over.[54] Though his assigned sex was discovered at the hospital, the doctors were discreet. [55] It quickly became apparent that he could no longer live independently due to the injuries sustained, and he was admitted into the Soldiers' and Sailors' Home. Those who cared for him at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Home knew Albert's secret and respected his identity, allowing him "to live as a man at the home, receiving visits from fellow veterans to reminisce about war stories."[56]

Sadly Albert's health deteriorated and he was sent to the women's ward of a mental asylum, where the doctors and staff were less understanding and exposed Albert's assigned gender.[57] His story made the papers and many members of his regiment "expressed their surprise to learn that 'Albert' was a woman."[58] Unfortunately, the new facility forced Albert to dress as a woman, which Albert was not used to, resulting in a fall that caused serious injury and Albert became bed-ridden.[59]

In the end, Albert was remembered the way he was meant to be, as himself. After his death in October of 1915 at the age of 71, his fellow veterans stood up for him. [60] Many of his former comrades from the 95th Illinois, as well as the towns people of Belvidere, Illinois stepped forward to insist that Albert be buried with full military honors.[61] He was buried with full honors and his tombstone bears the name that he carried most of his life, "Albert D. Cashier."[62]

Rosetta/Edwin, Mary, and Albert all seemed to be happy with their choices in relation to how they presented themselves. While they all likely had different motives from each other, the truth is, without more evidence one can only make an educated guess. Did they feel like their fellow soldier only known as "Nellie A." who was quoted as saying that she lay awake at night "'cursing the fate' that made her a girl"?[63] There is no way of knowing for sure.

These three subjects impacted more lives than they could have ever realized. Rosetta's story wasn't even discovered for nearly a hundred years, and yet her message of independence transcends through time and encourages current generations that fight to be visible and to be heard. Mary pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable for a woman. Her rebelliousness paved the way for future female doctors and contributed to early twentieth-century dress reform. She is still the only female to receive the Medal of

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[54] Ibid.
[55] "assigned sex" is a contemporary term for the biological sex assigned to someone at birth.
[56] Ibid., 65-66.
[57] Ibid., 66.
[58] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 74.
[59] Prager, *Queer, There, and Everywhere*, 66.
[60] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 75.
[61] Prager, *Queer, There, and Everywhere*, 66.
[62] Middleton, *Hearts of Fire*, 75.
[63] Ibid., 87.

Honor. Albert, even in his attempt to live an inconspicuous life, is an inspiration to those that struggle with being true to personal identity. All of the women that served in the Civil War are historically relevant; however, these three stand out as some of the shining stars that had the courage to live their lives and express themselves to suit their identities. These are just a few examples from the many women who went as men.