

## Female Spies in the Civil War

### Overview

Most of the stories that we hear about from the Civil War are stories about men...the politicians whose decisions led to the war and guided its course, the generals and officers whose tactical strategies determined the outcomes of various battles, and the soldiers on both sides who fought in those battles. But women (white and black) played a pivotal role in the Civil War as well, whether on the home front, as nurses, disguised as men to fight as soldiers, or as spies gathering intelligence. In this lesson, students will explore the often overlooked role of black and white female spies during the Civil War through examination of primary sources and by researching a specific spy who operated during the War.

### Grades

High School

*\*With modified primary sources, this lesson can also be utilized with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.*

### Essential Questions

- What role did espionage play in the American Civil War?
- How did black and white women participate in the war?
- What gender roles were women expected to conform to in the 1860s?
- How did spying contradict those roles, and how did assumptions about women potentially make them more effective spies?

### Materials

- Cypher Letter, warm up image attached
- Cypher Disk, image attached
- OPTIONAL: Printable cypher disk (available [here](#)) and cardstock, scissors and paper fasteners
- Civil War Ciphers & Signals, a 4-minute clip from Morehead Planetarium's full dome "Tales from the American South" film: [https://youtu.be/Hij\\_leer-Jk](https://youtu.be/Hij_leer-Jk)
- Letters from Civil War spies (teachers will need to either provide technology to students to access these materials directly online, or print out copies)
  - Rose O'Neal Greenhow (Confederate spy) letters: <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/greenhow/roseindex.html> (For this lesson, the eight letters from June 19, 1863 to Feb 17 1864 are recommended)
  - Sarah E. Thompson (Union spy) letters: <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/thompson/sarahindex.html> (The following four letters are most useful for this activity: September 3, 1864; January 14, 1865; June 16, 1865; April 13, 1876)
- Female Spies During the Civil War, worksheet attached
- For an alternate lesson that includes Civil War spies, see Carolina K-12's "[As the War Turns: Exploring the Drama of the Civil War.](#)"

### Duration

60 minutes

### Preparation

<https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/espionage.html>

### Procedure

### Introduction: Civil War Ciphers & Signals

1. Share the image of the cypher letter written by Rose Greenhow with students without giving them any information about it. (The letter is available [here](#) and is also attached.) Ask students to consider the document (individually in writing or with a discussion partner) for 2-3 minutes considering questions such as:
  - What could this be and what evidence makes you think this?
  - Who/what created it? When was it created?
  - For what purpose do you think this was created?
  - Why might this be important?
2. Finally, explain that they are looking at a letter that was written by a spy for the Confederacy during the American Civil War in August 1861, shortly after the first battle of Bull Run, and it was intercepted by the Union Army. The letter was written using what was called a cypher code. Ask students if they know anything about cypher codes and have them weigh in on how they think a letter like this would work and/or be deciphered.
3. Show students the attached image of cypher disk and explain how it works: there are two disks with letters on them and they are aligned in a previously-agreed-upon way (C to W or A lined up to L for example) and then the code is written transposing each letter to its companion letter shown on the other part of the wheel.
  - Optional: Print copies of a [cypher disk](#) on cardstock and have students cut them out, stack and poke a hole in the center of each disk, and align them with the smaller disk on top. They should then place a brass paper fastener in the middle to make workable copies of a cypher wheel and allow students to try to create their own encoded messages.
4. Explain to students that the spy who wrote this letter was Rose O'Neal Greenhow, a female spy for the Confederacy. Discuss:
  - While history books often don't focus on the role of women during the Civil War, they were as present then as today. Why do you think men often receive more attention?
  - When we do consider the role of women, how are they usually thought about and/or what roles are they imagined in during the Civil War period?
  - In fact, there are many documented female spies during the Civil War. Why do you think a woman in particular might make for a successful Civil War spy?
    - Explain to students that, during the 1860s, women in America were expected to conform to the "cult of domesticity" - the ideal woman was pious, pure, domestic, and submissive, taking care of the home and children while men dealt with the public roles of earning wages, delving into politics, or fighting wars. In some ways, the expectation that women would remain focused on the private sphere and be innocent bystanders to the war made them ideal spies. They would not fall under the same kind of suspicion that men might.
5. Discuss with students that while we usually think about Civil War participants being men, women participated in the war effort on both sides in many ways. Some kept farms and businesses running on the home front, some raised funds and collected supplies to support soldiers on the battlefield, some served as nurses taking care of the wounded, and some even dressed as men and took up arms on both sides of the war. And some women, such as Rose Greenhow became spies, seeking out information from the enemy and transmitting it secretly to try to influence the outcome of the war. Rose Greenhow was in fact a spy so successful that the Confederate President Jefferson Davis regarded the intelligence that she provided about Union troop movements as a key factor in winning the first battle for the Confederacy. Greenhow's message was delivered by Betty Duvall, a young woman who worked with Greenhow, who placed the message in a small black silk purse and concealed it in her hair bun.

6. Let students know that in today's lesson, they will be focusing on women spies during the Civil War. To provide additional introductory information, play Civil War Ciphers & Signals, a 4-minute clip from Morehead Planetarium's full dome "Tales from the American South" film: [https://youtu.be/Hij\\_Leer-Jk](https://youtu.be/Hij_Leer-Jk). (Teachers may need to warn students that there is a drawn shadow image in the clip of a spy being hanged for treason. The image is an outline and fairly innocuous, but teachers should consider whether this will be triggering for any students.) After viewing, discuss:
  - Who were the women serving as spies during the Civil War?
  - What made women effective spies?
  - What are some of the techniques women used to successfully deliver information?
  - Why are spies less credited today with contributing to war efforts?

### **Independent Exploration of Female Spies**

7. Students will first examine primary sources from two white female spies, Rose Greenhow (spy for the Confederacy) and Sara Thompson (spy for the Union). Divide the class into partners or small groups. Assign two different letters (from the same spy) to each pair/group so that all twelve of the letters are assigned. If time is short, you can assign just one letter.
  - Rose O'Neal Greenhow, a spy for the Confederacy:  
<https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/greenhow/roseindex.html>  
The eight letters from June 19, 1863 to Feb 17 1864 are probably the most useful for this activity.
  - Sarah E. Thompson, a spy for the Union:  
<https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/thompson/sarahindex.html>  
The following four letters are most useful for this activity: September 3, 1864; January 14, 1865; June 16, 1865; April 13, 1876
8. Provide students with the attached Female Spies During the Civil War worksheet to fill out while examining the letters. Let students know that the transcriptions are created to be faithful to the original sources, so any misspellings, grammatical errors, or partial sentences are preserved. This can make the documents hard to read, as can the more formal language of 19th century writing, so students should be prepared to wear their historian hats and work hard to decipher. A helpful strategy for better understanding letters like these can be to read each sentence out loud, then write down its meaning in your own words. Hearing the language aloud often helps it make more sense, and translating it into more modern language makes the content more relatable.
9. After students have read and considered the letters, bring the class back together to summarize each letter and explain what the letters can tell us about women spies during the Civil War.

### **"Black Dispatches"**

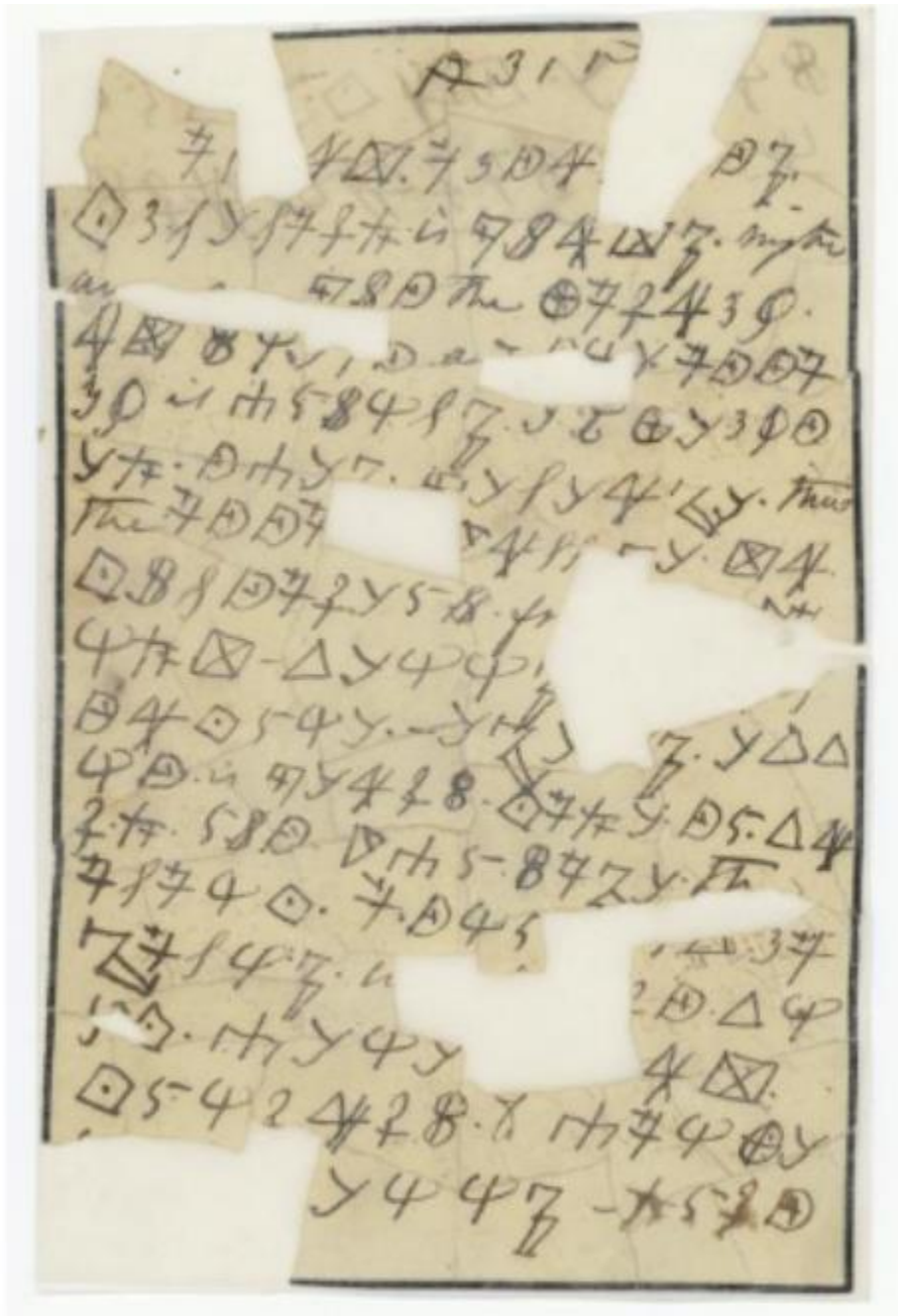
10. Next, project the 1862 quote from Frederick Douglass: "The true history of this war will show that the loyal army found no friends at the South so faithful, active, and daring in their efforts to sustain the government as the Negroes. Negroes have repeatedly threaded their way through the lines of the rebels exposing themselves to bullets to convey important information to the loyal army of the Potomac." (Remind students of the usage and evolution of the term "Negro," and that while this was considered respectful terminology to use during the 1800s, today students should use terms such as African American or black.) Discuss:
  - What message is Frederick Douglass conveying?
  - Why is the Civil War often thought of with black people as those who were enslaved, rather than also acknowledging the numerous ways they contributed to the Union efforts, regardless of their station in life?
  - Have you learned about the role of black spies, and black female spies in particular, during the Civil War? Why do we hear less about this work? (The discussion can range from the clandestine nature of the work leading to less historical evidence of such work, to the theoretical conversation of who decides what histories and stories to elevate.)

11. Explain that while the letters students just reviewed were from white women spies, [black spies](#) (often called [black dispatches](#), often played an even more pivotal role. While the research may be sparse, there are incredible stories of black women risking their lives for the Union effort.
  
12. Tell students that they are going to now learn about some of these brave women by first researching the life of a female spy of the Civil War era and then writing up a brief about her as if it was coming from the opposing side of the war. (For example, a brief on Rose Greenhow would be written from a Union perspective, warning the Confederacy about her work and describing her so that Confederates could keep a look out for her.) The brief should include:
  - A brief biography of the woman (when and where she was born, her life before the Civil War, her family, etc.) If you find that this information is sparse, acknowledge this in the brief and infer why this might be the case.
  - A summary of her most important achievements as a spy and describing how she has gotten away with her espionage activities
  - 2-3 sentences assessing how much of a threat this spy is from the perspective of the enemy
  - Point out to students that this assignment should be based in their research and include facts about these spies, but it will also contain an element of inference and fiction.
  - Teachers can optionally include an artistic component to the assignment, and instruct students to make their brief look “official,” and/or look like it is from the Civil War era.
  - Black female spies students can research include:
    - Mary Elizabeth Bower/Mary Jane Richards Denman
    - Mary Louvestre/Mary Touvestre
    - Susie King Taylor
    - Lucy Berington
    - Ann Stokes
    - Harriet Tubman
  
13. Teachers may want to have a conversation regarding historical research before students begin their work. [This article](#) discusses the way that the story of Mary Bowser, the enslaved black woman who was said to have spied on President Jefferson Davis, has often been distorted with only pieces told, or exaggerated to make the story more compelling. (This is similar to the myth that enslaved people wove secret messages into quilts for the Underground Railroad, a falsity that has been debunked.) So, as students embark into the excitement of “spy stories,” it is also important to maintain the stance of a historian, responsibly “doing” history.

### Sample Sources

- The National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/spies.htm>
- *Smithsonian* magazine: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/women-spies-of-the-civil-war-162202679/>
- The History Channel: <https://www.history.com/news/secret-agents-in-hoop-skirts-women-spies-of-the-civil-war>
- Black Spies Played Pivotal Roles in the Civil War: <https://www.arkrepublic.com/2019/05/27/black-spies-played-pivotal-roles-in-the-us-civil-war/>
- The Clara Barton Museum: <https://www.clarabartonmuseum.org/spies/>
- Rachel Sapp, “Armed with Intelligence: Women Spies of the Civil War” from the journal *Historia* of the Eastern Illinois University Department of History: <https://www.eiu.edu/historia/Sapp2014.pdf>

Warm Up Image



Civil War Cypher Disk



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Female Spies During the Civil War**

A. Name of spy: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Letter: \_\_\_\_\_

Important points/information shared in letter:

Do you have any questions about this letter (i.e., anything you found confusing or unclear?)

B. Name of spy: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Letter: \_\_\_\_\_

Important points/information shared in letter:

Do you have any questions about this letter (i.e., anything you found confusing or unclear?)

**C. The Importance of Female Spies**

Based on these letters you read, what kinds of information did they gather, and how was it used?

Did you see any evidence of gender role assumptions in these letters? Note specific examples.

Why do you think these women were effective as spies? How important do you think their spying activities were?