

Fort Stanton's Forgotten Heroes of Soap Suds Row

Lincoln Historic Site

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Essential Question: What was life like for a military laundress and what purpose did she serve to the troops?

Overview: In this lesson, students will learn how military laundresses were the first women sanctioned to serve, first to be recognized as part of the military structure and first to be paid by the government. In addition to providing laundry services for the troops, they were some of the first women on the frontier and acted as midwives, nannies, housekeepers, caregivers for the sick and lonely, and provided a feminine presence in a male-dominated world.



The 1876 laundress quarters and a volunteer laundress at Fort Stanton Historic Site

Photos by Tiffanie Owen

Learning Objectives:

After completing this lesson, student will be able to:

1. Describe the difficulties of daily life for a military laundress.
2. Explain the important roles that these women filled as some of the first Black and White women on the frontier.
3. List the ingredients and steps for making lye soap to wash garments.
4. Describe the tools of the trade for a military laundress.

Background:

Although women have always followed the military and laundresses were utilized as far back as the Revolutionary War, they were not officially sanctioned as a part of the military structure until 1802. Laundresses served in an official capacity with the military during the War of 1812, the Civil War and the Indian Wars.

Although the work was backbreaking, dirty, and often meant difficult living conditions for the laundress and her family, it was preferable in some ways compared to the life available to most women of the times. Laundresses received military food rations, housing and made their own money, which was typically more than an enlisted man made. A single laundress often didn't stay single for long. For a soldier, marrying a laundress was considered a sound investment due to the food and financial benefit she could bring to the relationship. It wasn't until a soldier made the rank of First Sergeant that his salary would come close to matching his laundress wife.

Laundresses had to be tough. They hauled their own water from the river, chopped their own wood to heat the water and washed, hung, mended and ironed between 500 to 800 lbs of laundry. To do these tasks, they used heavy copper or iron cauldrons, laundry bats, washing dollies, mangles, and hot, metal irons that might weigh 9 lbs or more.

Additionally, laundresses usually made their own soap. The time-consuming process used animal fat, rainwater and ash that formed a chemical compound that, if not mixed properly, could burn, blind or kill.

Since laundresses worked behind the scenes, we don't know as much about their lives as we do about the soldiers. But some laundresses like Susie King Taylor, Sarah Bowman and the notorious Mrs. Nash of the 7th cavalry, each have unique and completely different stories that have kept them vividly alive in history.

Military laundresses were just being phased out of service in 1876 when the new laundress quarters at Fort Stanton were constructed. Although they were renovated into apartments during the Public Health Service era at, the original buildings still exist so that visitors can imagine what it was like to be one of only a handful of women at a very remote frontier fort.

Additional Resources for Interested Students:

Lawrence, Jennifer J. *Soap Suds Row*. High Plains Press, 2016.

Oliva, Leo E. *Fort Union and the Frontier Army in the Southwest*. A Historic Resource Study. Fort Union National Monument, Fort Union, New Mexico. Southwest Cultural Resources Center, Professional Papers No. 41; National Park Service Division of History, 1993.

Stallard, Patricia Y. *Glittering Misery: Dependents of the Indian Fighting Army*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

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Activity Introduction:

K-4- Sorting Laundry Back Then & Today

5-8- Clothesline Trivia

9-12- “A Tale of Two Socks” Creative Writing Activity

Social Studies Standards Grades K-4

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

K-4 Benchmark I-A—New Mexico: Describe how contemporary and historical people and events have influenced New Mexico communities and regions.

K-4 Grade Performance Standards

(2nd Grade) 1. Describe how historical people, groups, and events have influenced the local community.

(3rd Grade) 1. Describe how the lives and contributions of people of New Mexico influenced local communities and regions.

(4th Grade) 1. Identify important issues, events, and individuals from New Mexico pre-history to the present.

STRAND: History

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K-4 Benchmark I-B—United States: Understand connections among historical events, people, and symbols significant to United States history and cultures.

K-4 Grade Performance Standards

(3rd Grade) 1. Describe local events and their connections to state history.

(4th Grade) 1. Describe local events and their connections and relationships to national history.

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

K-4 Benchmark I-C—World: Students will identify and describe similar historical characteristics of the United States and its neighboring countries.

K-4 Grade Performance Standards

(3rd Grade) 1. Identify and compare components that create a community in the United States and its neighboring countries.

(4th Grade) 1. Explain how historical events, people, and culture influence present day Canada, Mexico, and the United States (e.g. food, art, shelter, language).

STRAND: History

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K-4 Benchmark I-D—Skills: Understand time passage and chronology.

K-4 Grade Performance Standards

(Kindergarten) 1. Understand the concept of past and present.

(2nd Grade) 1. Correctly sequence historical events.

(3rd Grade) 1. Interpret information from multiple resources and contexts to determine chronological relationships.

(4th Grade) 1. Describe and explain how historians and archaeologists provide information about people in different time periods.

STRAND: Geography

Content Standard II: Students understand how physical, natural, and cultural processes influence where people live, the ways in which people live, and how societies interact with one another and their environments.

K-4 Benchmark II-B: Distinguish between natural and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define regions, their relationships with other regions, and patterns of change.

K-4 Grade Performance Standards

(2th Grade) 1. Describe how climate, natural resources, and natural hazards affect activities and settlement patterns.
2. Explain how people depend on the environment and its resources to satisfy their basic needs.

STRAND: Geography

Content Standard II: Students understand how physical, natural, and cultural processes influence where people live, the ways in which people live, and how societies interact with one another and their environments.

K-4 Benchmark II-C: Be familiar with aspects of human behavior and man-made and natural environments in order to recognize their impact on the past and present.

K-4 Grade Performance Standards

(1st Grade) 1. Identify examples of and uses for natural resources in the community, state, and nation.

2. Describe the human characteristics of places such as housing types and professions.

(2nd Grade) 1. Identify ways in which people depend on natural and man-made environments including natural resources to meet basic needs.

(3rd Grade) 2. Identify ways in which people have modified their environments (e.g., building roads, clearing land for development, mining and constructing towns and cities).

(4th Grade) 1. Explain how geographic factors have influenced people, including settlement patterns and population distribution in New Mexico, past and present.

2. Describe how environments, both natural and man-made, have influenced people and events over time, and describe how places change.

Social Studies Standards Grades 5-8

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

5-8 Benchmark 1-A. New Mexico: explore and explain how people and events have influenced the development of New Mexico up to the present day.

5-8 Grade Performance Standards

(7th Grade) 4. describe how important individuals, groups and events impacted the development of New Mexico from 16th century to the present (e.g., Don Juan de Oñate, Don Diego de Vargas, pueblo revolt, Popé, 1837 revolt, 1848 rebellion, treaty of Guadalupe Hildago, William Becknell and the Santa Fe trail, buffalo soldiers, Lincoln county war, Navajo long walk, Theodore Roosevelt and the rough riders, Robert Goddard, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Smokey Bear, Dennis Chavez, Manuel Lujan, Manhattan project, Harrison Schmitt, Albuquerque international balloon fiesta);

6. explain the impact of New Mexico on the development of the American west up to the present, to include: availability of land (e.g., individual, government, railroad, tribal, etc.); government land grants/treaties; transportation (e.g., wagons, railroads, automobile); identification and use of natural and human resources;

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population growth and economic patterns; and cultural interactions among indigenous and arriving populations and the resulting changes.

6. explain the impact of New Mexico on the development of the American west up to the present, to include: availability of land (e.g., individual, government, railroad, tribal, etc.); government land grants/treaties; transportation (e.g. wagons, railroads, automobile); identification and use of natural and human resources; population growth and economic patterns; and cultural interactions among indigenous and arriving populations and the resulting changes.

(8th Grade) 1. compare and contrast the settlement patterns of the American southwest with other regions of the United States.

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

5-8 Benchmark 1-D. Skills: research historical events and people from a variety of perspectives:

5-8 Grade Performance Standards

(5th Grade) 1. differentiate between, locate and use primary and secondary sources (e.g., computer software, interviews, biographies, oral histories, print, visual material, artifacts) to acquire information; 2. use resources for historical information (e.g., libraries, museums, historical societies, courthouse, worldwide web, family records, elders); 3. gather, organize and interpret information using a variety of media and technology.

(6th Grade) 1. organize information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, drawing inferences and conclusions.

(7th Grade) 2. demonstrate the ability to examine history from the perspectives of the participants

(8th Grade) 1. demonstrate understanding and apply problem-solving skills for historical research, to include: use of primary and secondary sources; sequencing, posing questions to be answered by historical inquiry; collecting, interpreting and applying information; gathering and validating materials that present a variety of perspectives.

STRAND: Geography

5-8 Benchmark 2-B: explain the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define regions, their relationships with other regions, and their patterns of change:

5-8 Grade Performance Standards

(5th Grade) 1. describe human and natural characteristics of places.

(6th Grade) 1. explain how places change due to human activity

(8th Grade) 1. describe how individual and cultural characteristics affect perceptions of locales and regions; and 2. describe political, population and economic regions that result from patterns of human activity, using New Mexico as an example.

Social Studies Standards Grades 9-12

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

9-12 Benchmark 1-A. New Mexico: analyze how people and events of New Mexico have influenced United States and world history since statehood:

9-12 Performance Standards

2. Analyze the geographic, economic, social and political factors of New Mexico that impact United States and world history, to include: d. role of the federal government (e.g., military bases, national laboratories, national parks, Indian reservations, transportation systems, water projects).

5. Explain how New Mexico history represents a framework of knowledge and skills within which to understand the complexity of the human experience to include: analyze perspectives that have shaped the structures of historical knowledge; describe ways historians study the past; explain connections made between the past and the present and their impact.

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

9-12 Benchmark 1-B. United States: analyze and evaluate the impact of major eras, events and individuals in United States history since the civil war and reconstruction:

9-12 Performance Standards

9. Explain how United States history represents a framework of knowledge and skills within which to understand the complexity of the human experience, to include: a. analyze perspectives that have shaped the structures of historical knowledge; b. describe ways historians study the past; c. explain connections made between the past and the present and their impact.

Language Arts Standards
Grades K-4

STRAND: Language Arts

Standard: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

K-4 Grade Common Core Standards

(Kindergarten) 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on kindergarten reading and content.

(1st Grade) 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 1 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies

Language Arts Standards
Grades 9-12

STRAND: Writing

Standard: Text Types and Purposes

9-12 Grade Common Core Standard:

(9th-12th Grade) 3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.