

Women Workers at the Fayetteville Arsenal  
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“Where the history of the Revolution is written, the patriotism of women, modest as well as true, no less heroic than gentle, will grace its brightest page.” *Charleston Mercury via Fayetteville Observer, November 7, 1861.*

The contributions of ladies on the home front during the Civil War are widely documented by historians, newspaper accounts, letters, and diaries. As men joined the ranks of the Confederate forces, the women left behind immersed themselves in volunteerism by nursing the sick and wounded at newly established hospitals and providing clothing, blankets, and other homemade goods as fast as their fingers could work. They started Ladies Aid Societies, raised funds, and gathered together for sewing and quilting sessions, all in an effort to show their patriotism and support for the Southern cause. These were all proper activities in which the educated, wealthy, and respectable ladies of society could be engaged.

Seldom documented are the stories of laboring class women. These women were left alone to tend small farms and businesses and provide for their families and themselves without the benefit of an education or large bank account. Employment at the Fayetteville Arsenal as cartridge makers provided steady and reasonable income for young women and girls forced to find work to survive the war years. In the Governors Papers of Henry T. Clark at the NC State Archives, a payroll list for August 1861 shows 87 employees working at the Arsenal, including men, women, and slaves. The document indicates the length of time each employee has been working, their pay rate, and job description. Based on this information there were twenty-nine women and girls making cartridges at the Arsenal in August 1861 for forty to fifty cents per day. In mid July 1861, the *Fayetteville Observer* reported, “The Richmond Whig says that from 100 to 250 white women and girls are employed in one building in that city, making cartridges. We believe that 50 or 60 are similarly employed at the Arsenal here.” This number is slightly inflated based on the August 1861 payroll, but as the war dragged on, it is possible that the number of women and girls working at the Arsenal increased significantly to keep up production.

All of the workers listed as cartridge makers on the payroll are female, with the exception of James Davis and Henderson Lockaman. Davis is listed as the “Pyrotechnist Supervising Cartridge makers” with a pay of \$2.00 per day. Lockaman is listed as a laborer, “making and packing cartridges” for \$1.25 per day. Curiously, none of the female workers have been employed for longer than 14 days, and Davis is also listed as employed for only 14 days. This would suggest that the use of women workers for cartridge making had been established at the Fayetteville Arsenal for a mere two weeks by the end of August 1861, although NC militia took over the Arsenal in April 1861 and Governor Ellis signed over the Arsenal to the Confederacy in June 1861.

What is known about the women on the August 1861 roster has been gleaned from the 1860, 1870, and 1880 U.S. Federal Censuses, as well as N.C. marriage and death records. Records were found for twenty-one of the twenty-nine names on the roster, providing a general profile of these Arsenal workers. The average age of the female workers in August 1861 is twenty years old, and the youngest worker is Dicy Burkett, age 11. Dicy was only paid forty cents per day, while the majority of the other workers received fifty cents per day. Only four

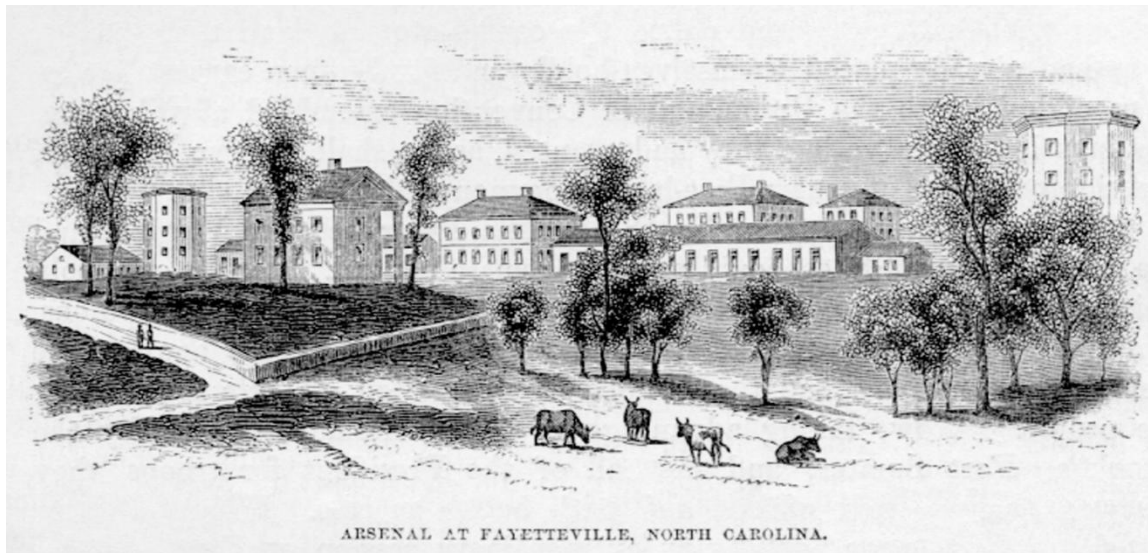
other girls were paid the forty cents wage, but it is unclear if the lower pay was entirely based on age because records were not found for all of these girls. The oldest female worker listed is Catherine Armstrong, age 36, who married Private George R. Hornrine of the NC 2<sup>nd</sup> Arsenal Guard Infantry in March 1867. A few of the other girls also married soldiers in the Arsenal Guard or had fathers who served in the guard. Since all but one of the women were single at this time, finding a husband may have been another motivation for employment at the Arsenal. One of three sets of sisters confirmed to be working as cartridge makers, Charity Ann Wright and Sarah Wright married soldiers on opposite sides of the conflict. Charity married Private Edward R. Newell, "C" Co NC 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry in December 1863, and Sarah married Private David Fields, PA 13<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in July 1865.

According to the 1860 Census, five of the girls employed at the Arsenal were already listed as factory hands or factory operatives, and one woman was listed as a seamstress. This suggests that the pay at the Arsenal was possibly higher than what they had been earning at their previous jobs. The others list no occupation in 1860, although only four show that they attended school in the previous year. Three of the women over the age of twenty were illiterate, and five listed one or both parents or guardians as illiterate. All of this information along with the occupations of their fathers or guardians (carpenters, coopers, farmers, farm hands) placed these women and girls firmly in the lower class of society. Only two of the girls' families owned land.

Working in a cartridge factory was extremely dangerous and potentially deadly. On September 17, 1862, an explosion rocked the Allegheny Arsenal near Pittsburg, PA and 78 people were killed, mostly women and girls. In March 1863 the Confederate Laboratory on Brown's Island, Richmond, VA, exploded, killing 40-50 women and girls. Twenty-one women and girls, mostly Irish immigrants, were killed by an explosion at the Washington Arsenal in June 1864. An article in the *Fayetteville Observer* from December 15, 1862, acknowledged the assistance of "the Fire Company at the Arsenal" in putting out a fire that broke out in the downtown area about one mile away from the Arsenal site. The existence of this fire company further emphasizes the dangers of working in the cartridge factories. Additional research may be done to discover when the Arsenal fire company was organized and if this was a common practice at other arsenals.

The stigma that factory work was beneath their social status and the dangers of the occupation were the major reasons that upper class women did not participate in cartridge manufacturing. However, there are references to ladies working as clerks at the Fayetteville Arsenal. From the *Richmond Whig*, October 26, 1864: "The Commandant of the S.C. Arsenal, at Fayetteville, N.C., has inaugurated the system of employing female clerks to do the work of men detailed for the purpose. Two of the young ladies of Fayetteville are now engaged as clerks at the arsenal." It is possible that as many as four young women were employed in this manner in early 1864, according to a local historian Mrs. John H. Anderson; they included "Misses Campbell, Stedman, Taylor, and Ellison." Anderson declared that "the pay given these young ladies was black alpaca cloth, which was used in the arsenal for making cartridges. The alpaca, combined with scraps of colored silk, made the most beautiful dresses for the girls who, at the close of the war, could not procure new clothes." (John Oates, *The Story of Fayetteville*, pg 283.) Alpaca cloth was not used in making cartridges but was used to make gunpowder bags, which would have been readily on hand at the Arsenal. Payment in the form of fabric made working outside the home more palpable for these young women.

The Fayetteville Arsenal did produce weapons and accoutrements during the war; however, its greatest contribution was in the form of small arms ammunition. Records show that from January 1864 to August of that year, the arsenal produced 900,000 rounds of ammunition. This rate of production would not have been possible without the assistance of women and girls manufacturing cartridges. The value of their labor and sacrifice is immeasurable and deserves recognition. Through additional research their part in the story of the Fayetteville Arsenal can be told.



from Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial History of the Civil War 1866*, Volume I, page 386



*Filling Cartridges. Women working at the U.S. Arsenal, Watertown, Massachusetts. From Harper's Weekly, July, 1861. (Image: Library of Congress)*