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## Before The Post: The Women Journalists of The Waterford News

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# Before The Post: The Women Journalists of The Waterford News

## Abstract

Long before Katharine Graham and Arianna Huffington established themselves in the traditionally male-dominated world of journalism, three women living through the uncertainty of the Civil War years broke into the field by controversial means: subversion. Lida Dutton (19), Lizzie Dutton (24), and Sarah Steer (26) were staunch Unionists of comfortable wealth living in Loudoun County, Virginia, a pocket of Unionist sentiment and abolitionist Quaker faith, in 1864 when they established the *Waterford News*, a pro-Union newspaper written, edited, and distributed in Confederate territory. *The Waterford News* provided an illustration of daily life in a southern town while simultaneously boosting morale for Federal soldiers (often in the form of editorials, riddles, and poems) and criticizing Confederate sympathizers. In May of 1864, for example, the women published a poem titled, “To President Abraham Lincoln” that consisted of a few four-line rhyming stanzas. Proceeds were donated to the [U.S. Sanitary Commission](#). Running until the end of the war, *The Waterford News* allowed these three young women to voice their dissent while directly supporting the Union cause through financial means, all while living in an increasingly hostile Southern environment. [excerpt]

## Keywords

Journalism, War correspondence, Waterford News, Women's History

## Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

## Before The Post: The Women Journalists of The Waterford News

By [Anika Jensen '18](#)

Long before Katharine Graham and Arianna Huffington established themselves in the traditionally male-dominated world of journalism, three women living through the uncertainty of the Civil War years broke into the field by controversial means: subversion. Lida Dutton (19), Lizzie Dutton (24), and Sarah Steer (26) were staunch



Unionists of comfortable wealth living in Loudoun County, Virginia, a pocket of Unionist sentiment and abolitionist Quaker faith, in 1864 when they established the *Waterford News*, a pro-Union newspaper written, edited, and distributed in Confederate territory. *The Waterford News* provided an illustration of daily life in a southern town while simultaneously boosting morale for Federal soldiers (often in the form of editorials, riddles, and poems) and criticizing Confederate sympathizers. In May of 1864, for example, the women published a poem titled, “To President Abraham Lincoln” that consisted of a few four-line rhyming stanzas. Proceeds were donated to the [U.S. Sanitary Commission](#). Running until the end of the war, *The Waterford News* allowed these three young women to voice their dissent while directly supporting the Union cause through financial means, all while living in an increasingly hostile Southern environment.

*Lida Dutton. Photo credit: Waterford Virginia 18th, 19th, and 20th Century History, [waterfordhistory.org](#).*

These women broke new ground by choosing to overcome traditional female domestic confinement and serve the war effort by sharing their voices publicly. Steer and the Dutton sisters were brought up in Quaker households where girls were educated alongside boys and where slavery was scorned as sinful. They held similar Unionist views as their families, which had to reconcile two Quaker sentiments: nonviolence and abolition. While some Quakers did break convention and join the army to help end slavery, James Dutton, Lida and Lizzie’s brother, chose to head north to Maryland in an

attempt to escape Confederate enlistment. Before launching their newspaper, the Dutton sisters and Steer even cared for Union soldiers and hid them in their homes. Furthermore, the world of journalism—especially war correspondence—was traditionally dominated by men, so by lending their voices to their cause in the face of adversity and fear, the women of *The Waterford News* joined a select group of outspoken women whose rhetoric influenced the war. There were, of course, a number of women writers documenting their wartime experiences, including Mary Chesnut and Harriet Beecher Stowe, but Steer and the Duttons distinguished themselves as journalists, rather than memoirists or novelists. After the war, Lizzie and Lida married Union veterans and left Waterford, while Sarah became a teacher at Waterford's first school for black children, established by the Freedman's Bureau with the help of local Quakers.

# THE WATERFORD NEWS.

UNION FOREVER; Loudon Co., Va., 5th Mo. 28th, 1864. VOL. I, No. 1.  
PRICE, 10 CENTS.

## FOR PRESIDENT, ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

### ORIGINAL.

While war is stalking thro' our land,  
And treason rears its serpent head,  
And hearth-stoves sad and desolate,  
And mothers mourn their patriot dead;

While loving sisters feel the loss  
Of brothers to their country given,  
And wives are grieving yet for those  
Who've from once happy homes been driven;

Can we forget the ones whose hearts  
Are blackened by those deeds of madness—  
Once cherished as our neighbors—now  
The cause of all this gloom and sadness?

No! and our banner, once the pride  
And boast of every true Virginian,  
Now trampled under feet that bear  
The impress of Old Jeff's dominion.

But, courage, be our purpose true;  
Stand for the Union—never falter;  
We yet shall see our glorious Flag  
Enshrined in peace on Freedom's altar.

## OUR SOLDIERS.

At this time, when thousands of our gallant men are battling for our country's honor, our thoughts are specially drawn to our wounded, who are enduring terrible suffering that the right may prevail.

Far from home and loved ones, may they receive that attention to which their heroic devotion so justly entitles them. May the long and tedious hours of pain and confinement in hospitals be cheered by kind and ministering friends, who will prove, by their efforts to render them comfortable, how their deeds are appreciated.

Isolated as we are, shut out from the rest of civilization, we could do little or nothing ourselves but give our heartfelt sympathies to the sufferers, and best wishes to those engaged in the good work; and were it in our power, we would gladly devote ourselves to it. From this remote portion of Dixie's land the prayers of many loyal men and women are ascending for the Army of the Potomac. May a speedy victory for their comrades still in the field, reward the heroes who were first to fall.

Photo credit: Waterford Virginia 18th, 19th, and 20th Century History, [waterfordhistory.org](http://waterfordhistory.org).

Despite their emboldened actions, however, Lida, Lizzie, and Sarah were not unlike most other women living through the Civil War. They endured a Union blockade which, they complained, meant they could not buy nice clothes and other fineries (though, granted, other women lived through much more extreme forms of poverty). They managed family farms and businesses while the men were hiding from Confederate recruiters, taking on new and often stressful responsibilities. They worried about the safety of fathers, brothers, and friends who were fighting or hiding from Confederate forces, and, most importantly, they had to endure four long years of war and all of its accompanying hardships. Being a Union sympathizer in a southern state was particularly challenging: Lida, Lizzie, and Sarah were at risk of violence from both sides, including partisan raids by John Mosby and Federal orders to burn southern towns. The threat of angry Confederates trying to silence dissenters was pervasive. Still, Steer and the Dutton sisters can be said to embody the wider challenges that women faced during the Civil War.



*Lizzie Dutton. Photo credit: Waterford Virginia 18th, 19th, and 20th Century History, [waterfordhistory.org](http://waterfordhistory.org).*

Where, then, do we place Lida, Lizzie, and Sarah in the realm of women's Civil War history? While they endured many of the same hardships as other women, they held a certain degree of privilege afforded to them by both their gender and their race. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were not considered official political actors, nor were they believed to be publicly influential enough to warrant any legitimate threat through the written word. (Ironically, though, politicians and generals alike repeatedly appealed to women of both sides to "fulfill their feminine duties" of as "republican mothers" and contribute their "invaluable" support to the war effort through charity work, nursing, and other duties both public and private). Additionally, Victorian society emphasized gentlemanly conduct toward women, giving the Waterford women a degree of safety and allowing them to subvert Confederate authority. Unfortunately, this was not granted to all women. Black women especially were at a higher risk of violence from both Union and Confederate soldiers and sympathizers, and there are many cases of reported (and likely far more cases of unreported) sexual assault against black women by white soldiers.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women war correspondents such as Martha Gellhorn and Dickie Chapelle covered monumental events including the Spanish Civil War, the U.S. invasion of Panama, D-Day, and the Vietnam War, paving the way for future female journalists like Lynsey Addario, who has photographed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Gellhorn, Chapelle, and Addario have all faced incredible challenges as women in the field of war journalism: Gellhorn stowed away in the

bathroom of a hospital ship in order to go ashore during the invasion of Normandy, and Chapelle was killed in Vietnam. Both women had to subvert authority with a certain degree of defiance to find their place in the world of war correspondence, much like Steer and the Duttons did, and while it is highly unlikely that Gellhorn, Chapelle, or Addario had ever heard of *The Waterford News*, one cannot help but acknowledge the progress that women war journalists have made since 1864.

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## Sources

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MacLean, Maggie. [“Women of Civil War Waterford.”](#) *Civil War Women*. March 8, 2015. Posted on [April 23, 2018](#) Categories [A Look at the Past](#), [Uncategorized](#) Tags [Anika Jensen](#), [Journalism](#), [War correspondence](#), [Waterford News](#), [Women's History](#) [1 Comment](#)