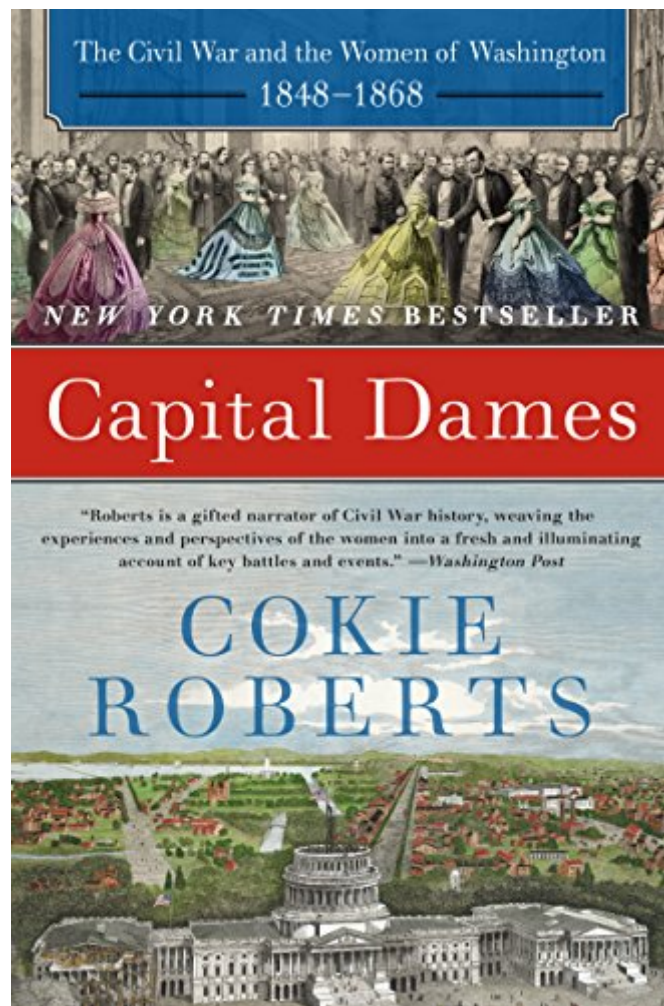


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Capital Dames: The Civil War And The Women Of Washington, 1848-1868



Synopsis

In this engrossing and informative companion to her New York Times bestsellers *Founding Mothers* and *Ladies of Liberty*, Cokie Roberts marks the sesquicentennial of the Civil War by offering a riveting look at Washington, D.C. and the experiences, influence, and contributions of its women during this momentous period of American history. With the outbreak of the Civil War, the small, social Southern town of Washington, D.C. found itself caught between warring sides in a four-year battle that would determine the future of the United States. After the declaration of secession, many fascinating Southern women left the city, leaving their friends—such as Adele Cutts Douglas and Elizabeth Blair Lee—to grapple with questions of safety and sanitation as the capital was transformed into an immense Union army camp and later a hospital. With their husbands, brothers, and fathers marching off to war, either on the battlefield or in the halls of Congress, the women of Washington joined the cause as well. And more women went to the Capital City to enlist as nurses, supply organizers, relief workers, and journalists. Many risked their lives making munitions in a highly flammable arsenal, toiled at the Treasury Department printing greenbacks to finance the war, and plied their needlework skills at The Navy Yard—once the sole province of men—to sew canvas gunpowder bags for the troops. Cokie Roberts chronicles these women's increasing independence, their political empowerment, their indispensable role in keeping the Union unified through the war, and in helping heal it once the fighting was done. She concludes that the war not only changed Washington, it also forever changed the place of women. Sifting through newspaper articles, government records, and private letters and diaries—many never before published—Roberts brings the war-torn capital into focus through the lives of its formidable women.

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Customer Reviews

I read this book on my Kindle prior to hearing Cokie Roberts discuss its writing on tour last month. It is an inside Washington book from over a century ago told as only Cokie Roberts can tell it. With her inside knowledge of the workings of Washington, Cokie can read and interpret the letters and diaries from this era with a rare understanding that brings this tragic time alive through the lives of women most profoundly affected by the conflict. With that said, however, I read another dimension to this work. There is a lot of learn-from-others advice in its pages to those of us who cope with monumental personal losses that only someone who knows the toll grief takes would bring to light. Monumental personal loss was prevalent in the lives of the women who wrote the source material from which Roberts drew the color and taste of a sad era in America's history. The strength required to just get through each day for them can often give strength to those who are struggling today.

Cookie Roberts and her wonderful histories of women are among my favorites. It is ALWAYS possible to know that any book she writes will be beautifully written with a touch of sly humor here and there but always respectful of and empathetic to the situations her leading ladies lived. In this particular book she tells stories that I, an amateur Civil War historian, did not know and brought forward women who, though major characters in their time and place, figure not at all or only briefly or tangentially in the military histories and even the more inclusive social histories available. The book is one of a kind. It led me immediately to Kindle books where many of the diaries and histories used as sources here can be purchased for under two or three dollars. Ms Roberts is sending me on a long, happy search of my own. To learn about each of these women and their fates is an enriching and enthralling read.

If I recall correctly, this book was marketed as a twin to Ladies of Liberty, a thoroughly engrossing account of important women's lives during Revolutionary times. It is not. Ladies of Liberty devoted

an entire chapter to each woman, giving us a coherent account of her life. *Ladies of Liberty* is organized very differently - basically it gives a running account of the Civil War, referring to the various women at points where they fit in. As a result, I found it difficult to build a coherent picture of any of the women in my mind. Apparently there was not enough information about some of the women, who appeared briefly here and there, to paint much of a picture at all, and I found myself racing through those parts because at that point I had ceased to care about them. The main characters were worth reading about, though, and I was fascinated to learn that the bonds formed early in their Washington careers lasted lifetimes.

Unique, informative approach. Using the letters, diaries, etc. from the leading ladies of the DC set just prior to the Civil War, Roberts tells the Civil War story from a new perspective. All these women were friends, social competitors, young, pretty, and influential in ways "allowed" for women to be in the 1840's. When the war started, some went with Confederate sympathies, some stayed Union, but they often still managed to stay in touch. They all suffered in similar ways and they all worried for their families. It is NOT full of detailed battles and the usual compendium of history. So, if you're looking for that, this book is not the ticket. It was a refreshing look at the Civil War. I would highly recommend it.

CAPITAL DAMES presents an exciting narrative of U.S. events in Washington, D.C., around the time of the Civil War. Even though the focus of the book is Washington women, the author does a good job of reminding the reader of various important events at that time. I had forgotten, for instance, that Abraham Lincoln had actually been defeated at one time in a run for the US Senate. I found the historical references especially interesting. I am reminded of how young our nation really is - especially the western part of America. For example, in describing a sea voyage to San Francisco, the author describes that city as only having "three or four regularly built houses," and that there were only sixteen women in all of San Francisco society. Cokie describes some events which are similarly hard to imagine today. In the famous debates between Douglas and Lincoln, the author notes that "The combatants remained cordial," with Abe and Douglas's wife, Adele "even enjoying a train ride together on the way from one debate to the next." It's hard to imagine the contenders for U.S. president being chummy, with the wife of one taking a train ride with her husband's opponent. (However, I am reminded of two young congressmen--JFK and Richard Nixon, sharing a train car when they were young politicians.) Another historical curiosity mentioned is the infamous raid of John Brown on Harpers Ferry. Probably most readers do not realize that the army

officer who captured Brown was none other than Robert E Lee--a colonel at the time. The author sets the stage for the reader by describing the panicky and hostile environment in Washington around the time Lincoln was elected president. Fearful of violence, the newly elected Lincoln surreptitiously came into town, presenting a "ludicrous image of a panicky president sneaking into town in Scotch cap and cloak." We are reminded that the Union assumed the war would be quickly won: "As troops advanced on Manassas, Virginia, they were accompanied by hundreds of civilians who thought the whole thing was a lark. Expecting an easy victory, they brought picnic baskets for a day in the country, while they watched the action through opera glasses as if it were a play." This "picnic" was spoiled by the Confederate spy Rose Greenhow. Pretending to hobnob with powerful politicians in Washington DC, she actually passed on critical order of battle information to the Confederacy. Rose was ultimately arrested by the famous detective Allan Pinkerton, but amazingly, that didn't stop Rose. Even under house arrest, she still was sending vital information to the Confederacy: "Rose kept finding ways to receive and review information even while confined to her home prison." All of the women in CAPITAL DAMES are fascinating, but one of the most inspiring figures is Dorothea Dix. She was a tireless proponent for the mentally ill, "Establishing hospitals where there were none and inspecting the hospital was born out of her efforts. She was so admired that she was given free passes for a transportation and had access to the powerful the world over, including the Pope." During the war, Dix was a leader in recruiting nurses to help the wounded. The author notes that Dorothy had strict job qualifications, including: "No Catholic nuns; no young, good looking women need apply." In order to avoid impropriety, first priority would be given to "matronly persons." Another inspiring figure in this book is Dr. Mary Walker. She was the first female surgeon in America and actually only the second woman to graduate from medical school. Cokie notes one oddity about Dr. Walker: "She always wore men's clothes, something that caused her to be arrested from time to time." Dr. Walker was eventually captured and held prisoner under terrible conditions. After the war she received the Medal of Honor--the only woman to receive that honor. This was all new to me--very interesting! This review would be incomplete without mention of the most inspirational figure of all--Clara Barton. Clara was tireless and fearless in helping thousands of wounded men. She found her way to the front lines--an unheard of place for a woman, where she sometimes worked without sleep for several days, helping treat the wounded. At one point, Clara stayed right until the rebel forces came upon her: "Luckily she and her co-workers managed to get the last man on the train and boarded themselves just as rebel soldiers rode in and set fire to the station." Of course, the author notes, Clara Barton would later be the American division of the Red Cross, as well as fight to have the United States recognize the Geneva Convention. Finally, in

"Author's Notes and Acknowledgements," Roberts describes the terrific tragedy of the Civil War. Anyone reading of the death and suffering described here will surely be moved. As the author succinctly describes, "The southern politicians decision to secede was one of the most profound tragedies ever brought on by human beings." Of course, this decision led to the deaths of 600,000 Americans. The author describes her own personal feelings about her family history in the war, when a young boy asked which side their family was on. The author's daughter replied, "Well everyone in our family fought for the South, but it was good for the country that the North won." Nicely stated. CAPITAL DAMES does a great service in highlighting the lives of remarkable women who lived during the darkest period in America's past. These were courageous, bold, and just flat-out GOOD women. After reading about the terrible loss of life and massive suffering during this terrible time, I was glad to read about the many heroes (and a few scoundrels) that lived during that time. Highly Recommend! Advance copy for review courtesy of Edelweiss.

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