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Carte-de-visite image of "The Heroine of New Bern," Kady Brownell, in modified Zouave military uniform. Although undated, this image was made sometime after the end of the Civil War; RIHS Collection (RHi X17 1098).

Sourcing a Rhode Island Legend

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Students of history employ many different types of resources to construct their narratives and arguments: diaries, census records, newspapers, letters, books, paintings, artifacts, oral accounts, photographs and many other types of materials. No one of these sources alone tells a complete story of a moment in time, a historical event, or the lives of individuals. However, taken together, information gathered from many diverse sources can be artfully arranged to craft an argument, support a thesis, or tell a story. Where first-hand accounts and verified facts are lacking, contemporary writers are ever eager to step into the void to create a fictionalized version of events, often a version that rapidly becomes a legend in which fact and fiction freely intermingle. Even when “first-hand” accounts exist, memory can be shaped by hearsay, by stressful situations and, later, even by the repetition of legends themselves.

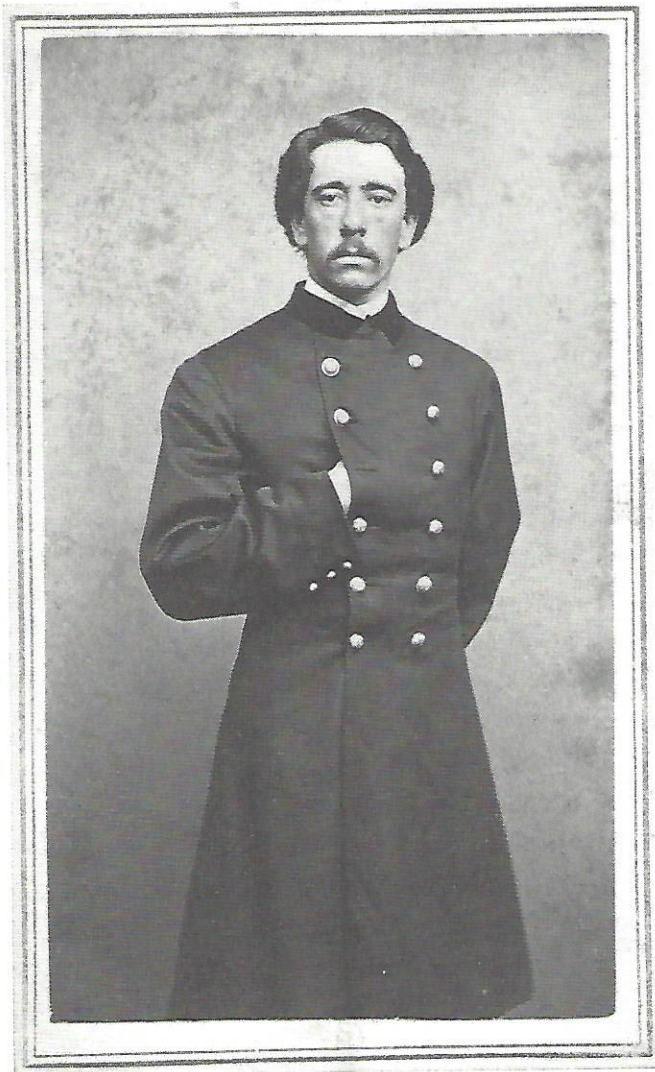
This short essay examines diverse sources that a historian, writer, or student might use to construct an argument about Kady Brownell, a Rhode Islander who participated in the Civil War alongside her husband. The sources include photographic images, poetry, newspaper accounts, previous historical research (part of the Civil War “historiography”), and even myths and legends. This is a brief exploration of how these sources can be arranged to tell all sorts of stories, some scholarly and some popular legend, and how memory can be a mutable part of both.

The Civil War was a watershed moment in the history of war journalism. While photography had been used during the Crimean War, in the United States it was the American Civil War that became the first photographically documented military conflict.

These photographic images were combined with poems, memoirs, songs and novels to tell the tales of brave and noble soldiers—from both the North and the South. According to Andrew Huebner, a historian specializing in images of soldiers, historian David Blight notes that “romance triumphed over reality” in many of these accounts. Although images could reveal the gory realities of battle, coupled with triumphant and heroic nostalgic narratives, we are left with a romanticized view of individual soldiers, if not, as some have argued, the entire practice of war.¹

Carte-de-visite photographs—small, posed images—of soldiers, generally in full uniform, form a distinct category within the oeuvre of Civil War photography. These cards were small enough to be placed in envelopes and sent to loved ones. They were also discrete enough to be carried on one’s person, both at war and at home. Today, the archives of libraries and museums throughout the country contain hundreds, if not thousands, of images of mustachioed young men, draped with sashes, wearing shiny boots, kepis firmly on, sabers in hand, staring steadfastly into the camera. The Civil War soldiers’ *cartes-de-visite* represent staged, yet very touching, images of young men who have seen, or are about to see, far too much horror.

Women are represented in a handful of these small, portable images from the Civil War era; they are wearing feminized versions of military uniforms. Who were these women? Why did they don improvised military attire when American women would not be welcomed into combat until the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early twenty-first century? The Rhode Island women pictured in this article, Kady Brownell and Julianna Parker



Carte-de-visite image of Rhode Island Civil War soldier, Elijah Hunt Rhodes. Rhodes advanced from private to colonel in the Second Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry. Photograph, n.d.; RIHS Collection (RHi X17 156).

Monroe, served in the Civil War as vivandières. Such women would follow a family member, particularly a husband, into the Civil War volunteer service. Many of the more famous images show women wearing feminized versions of the Zouave uniform, inspired by the renowned North African regiments of the French army. The male uniform was quite flamboyant, featuring a bright blue jacket that was frequently embroidered, a vest, sash, distinctive red baggy knee-length pants, and a fez. Women who

served as vivandières adapted this uniform, and other later, simpler versions, by wearing a matching skirt over their trousers. Sadly, the black and white images cannot capture the vibrancy of their uniforms.

Vivandières served alongside soldiers, occasionally in the midst of combat and close to the battlefield, supplying food and water, and nursing the sick and wounded. Often these women were vital members of a regiment, although not officially “mustered in.” At times, vivandières were so highly regarded that they became regimental mascots, dubbed, “Daughters of the Regiment.” Such apparently was the case with the most famous Rhode Island vivandière, Kady Brownell.

There are two photographs of Kady Brownell that accompany this essay. One, from the Rhode Island Historical Society collections, is a *carte-de-visite* image; the other, from the Library of Congress, may have been a *carte-de-visite* as well. It is not known exactly when the images were made, although it is likely that they were not taken before, or even while, Brownell was serving on the battlefield. Rather, these photographs were probably taken after the war, while Kady Brownell was an amateur actress in Bridgeport, Connecticut. How do we in the twenty-first century understand these post-Civil War images of Kady Brownell, and what part did they play in the legend that exists about her life, before, during and after the war?

THE LEGEND OF KADY BROWNELL

Many Civil War enthusiasts are familiar with the legend of Kady Brownell. In her paper, “Kady Brownell, A Rhode Island Legend,” Sara L. Bartlett asserts that the legend begins with Kady Southwell’s birth to the French wife of Colonel George Southwell, a Scotsman in the British army, on a battlefield on the Eastern Cape of South Africa.² Since 1815, British troops long occupied this region, engaging in constant skirmishes with indigenous people and Dutch settlers. Many storytellers have traced Kady’s later military service to her birth and upbringing in an army family living

on the frontier. According to Frank Moore, who published his book *Women in War, Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* just after the end of the Civil War, Kady was “[a]ccustomed to arms and soldiers from infancy, she learned to love the camp.”³ Not long after her birth, Moore’s narrative contends, Kady’s mother died, and she was taken in by family friends, the McKenzies, who brought the young child with them to Rhode Island.⁴

Little is known of Kady’s early life in Rhode Island. At some point after arriving in America, she secured a job in a mill, working up to the position of weaver in a Central Falls factory where she met and fell in love with millwright Robert Brownell. According to the popular legend, eighteen-year-old Kady and Robert married in 1861, just days before the Civil War broke out. Not long after they wed, the call went out for ninety-day volunteers to suppress the Southern rebellion. Robert, a member of a militia club called the Mechanics Rifles, joined the war effort immediately as part of the First Rhode Island Volunteers.

Moore’s account then relates the circumstances of Kady’s military service. He asserts that she was so distraught at the prospect of losing her new husband to the Union Army that she attempted to board the ship with his regiment. Robert forcibly removed his wife from the ship, chiding her that, “war was no place for a lady,” according to a newspaper account written some years later that derived from Moore’s seminal account of Kady’s wartime contribution. Plucky Kady, however, would not be deterred. She decided not to dally with functionaries, but instead pleaded with Governor Sprague himself to be allowed to accompany her husband and his regiment to war.⁵ Impressed by her spirit, the governor granted her wish and Kady followed Robert to Virginia, where she saw action in the First Battle of Bull Run. She then returned to Rhode Island when her husband’s ninety-day enlistment was up. Robert Brownell re-enlisted

some weeks later; Kady returned to the South with him and, again, saw action on a battlefield in North Carolina, led by Rhode Island’s most famous Civil War officer, Brigadier General Ambrose Burnside.

Frank Moore’s 1866 account attempts to smooth the cultural disquiet created by the story of a woman living among soldiers and taking part in military engagements. He asserts that, “this Daughter of the Regiment was resolved not to be a mere water-carrier, nor an ornamental appendage. She would be effective against the enemy, as well as a graceful figure on parade, and applied herself to learn all the arts and accomplishments of the soldier.”⁶ In turn she became an expert shot, known for quickness and accuracy, and handled a sword as well as any man could. In fact, Moore states, in her first battle, at Bull Run, Kady became an “unmoved and dauntless” color-bearer around whom the men could rally amid the smoke and chaos of battle. And despite the confusion that set in as the battle raged, Kady was not shaken and did not move until a young Pennsylvania soldier grabbed her and compelled her to run for safety into the woods. After her rescuer fell, decimated by a cannon ball to the head, Kady grabbed a horse and rode to find her regiment. It was at this point that Kady Brownell heard that her husband had been killed.⁷

In Moore’s version, Kady was ever the intrepid and spunky heroine. Retreating from Bull Run on horseback, she rode on to find her husband. Fortunately for Kady, while injured, Robert Brownell was very much alive. He received a regular discharge after his three-month enlistment was up, and he and Kady headed back to Rhode Island, only to re-enlist, in the Fifth Rhode Island Regiment. The couple left Rhode Island as the regiment travelled to the Neuse River in a Union advance toward New Bern, North Carolina. It was on this expedition, Moore contends, that Kady Southwell Brownell was transformed into “Kady Brownell: The Heroine of New Bern.”⁸ Again Kady marched with the men through treacherous



Another image of Kady Brownell in simple clothing adapted to her military role. Her "uniform" in this photograph may more closely resemble the attire that Kady wore into battlefield service during 1861-62. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Reproduction No. LC-USZ62-110631).

conditions, but was not satisfied to be a nurse and daughter of the regiment. She yearned to carry the regimental colors into battle once more. It was agreed; she donned the “coast uniform” and crossed the muddy, river terrain. Moore’s version recounts Kady’s bravery as soon as the regiment arrived at the battle location in New Bern:

As the various regiments were getting their positions, the Fifth Rhode Island was seen advancing from a belt of wood, from a direction that was unexpected. They were mistaken for a force of rebels, and preparation instantly made to open on it with both musketry and artillery, when Kady ran out to the front, her colors in hand, advanced to clear ground, and waved them till it was apparent that the advancing force were friends.⁹

Kady had saved the men’s lives. Yet, she was rewarded by having the colors handed to another. Despite this disappointment, she was at the ready when word came that Robert had fallen in battle. She quickly assumed a more culturally proper role as a wife and vivandière, caring for him and tending to other wounded men.

Moore’s nineteenth-century words capture beautifully the essence of Kady Brownell, as a northern, idealized Civil War heroine:

She went out where the dead and wounded were lying thick along the breastwork, to get blankets, that would no longer do them any good, in order to make her husband and others more comfortable.

Here she saw several lying helpless in the mud and shallow water of the yard. Two or three of them she helped up, and they dragged themselves to dryer ground. Among them was a relief engineer, whose foot had been crushed by the fragment of a shell. She showed him the same kindness that she did the rest; and the treatment she received in return was so unnatural and fiendish that we can hardly explain it, except by believing that the hatred of the time had driven from the hearts of some, at least, of the rebels, all honorable and all Christian sentiments.

The rebel engineer had fallen in a pool of dirty water, and was rapidly losing blood, and growing cold in consequence of this and the water in which he lay.

She took him under his arms and dragged him back to dry ground, arranged a blanket for him to lie on, and another to cover him, and fixed a cartridge box, or something similar, to support his head.

As soon as he had grown a little comfortable, and rallied from the extreme pain, he rose up, shaking his fist at her, with a volley of horrible and obscene oaths, exclaimed, ‘Ah you d----- Yankee -----, if I get on my feet again, if I don’t blow the head off your shoulders, then God d----- me!’ For an instant the blood of an insulted woman; the daughter of a soldier, and the daughter of a regiment, was in mutiny. She snatched a musket with bayonet fixed, that lay close by, and an instant more his profane and indecent tongue would have been hushed forever. But, as she was plunging the bayonet at his breast, a wounded Union soldier, who lay near, caught the point of it in his hand; remonstrated against killing a wounded enemy, no matter what he said; and in her heart the woman triumphed, and she spared him, ingrate that he was.

She returned to the house where Robert had been carried, and spreading blankets under him, made him as comfortable as he could be at a temporary hospital. The nature of his wound was such that his critical time would come two or three weeks later, when the shattered pieces of bone must come out before the healing process could commence. All she could do now was simply to keep the limb cool by regular and constant applications of cold water.

From the middle of March to the last of April she remained in Newbern, nursing her husband, who for some time grew worse, and needed constant and skillful nursing to save his life. When not over him, she was doing all she could for other sufferers. Notwithstanding her experience with the inhuman engineer, the wounded rebels found her the best friend they had. Every day she contrived to save a bucket of coffee and a pail of delicate soup, and would take it over and give it out with her own hands to the wounded in the rebel hospital. While she was thus waiting on these helpless and almost deserted sufferers, she one day saw two of the Newbern ladies, who had come in silks to look at their wounded countrymen. One of them was standing between two beds, in such a position as to obstruct the narrow passage. Our heroine politely requested her to let her pass, when she remarked to the other female who came with her, ‘That’s one of our women—isn’t it?’ ‘No,’ was the sneering response, ‘she’s a Yankee -----.’



Mrs. C
L...

using a term which never defiles the lips of a *lady*. The rebel surgeon very promptly ordered her out of the house.

It is but justice, however, to say that in some of her rebel acquaintances at Newbern, human nature was not so scandalized.¹⁰

Thus, Kady was a heroine, but still a woman who was governed by strong passions—saved from becoming a murderer by the cool-headedness of the brave Yankee soldier who defended her honor and her soul, while recognizing and protecting the humanity of his fallen, Confederate enemy.

After the Battle of New Bern in mid-March 1862, Robert Brownell was a convalescent for some months; he and Kady never served in the army again. In the postwar years, after a brief stay in Rhode Island, they moved to Connecticut and spent their time between the Nutmeg State and New York City.¹¹ The accounts of the Brownells' life at this time are hazy. Robert apparently held a variety of jobs through the years: carpenter, millwright, agent, building custodian and perhaps, according to Bartlett, a maker or seller of tobacco and cigars. Kady, however, seized the opportunity to make something of her experiences at the front. In the 1870s the Bridgeport City Directory listed her as an "amateur actress." Bartlett notes that Brownell presented herself onstage as the valiant heroine of the Moore sketch. Her best-known performance was a tableau entitled, *Our Female Volunteer*, highlighting her war experiences. Bartlett believes that the famous photograph of Kady in her Zouave uniform is probably from this time, and that she never actually wore such an outfit during the conflict.¹²

In September of 1870, Kady was inducted into the Elias Howe, Jr. Post #3 of the Grand Army of the

Republic (GAR) in Bridgeport, Connecticut. From that moment, Kady became legendary as, "the only woman ever to join the GAR." And many male members of the organization were apparently not at all happy about her membership. In 1882, Kady Brownell sought additional, formal recognition of her role in the Civil War: she applied for a pension through a Special Act of Congress. Congress then launched an extensive inquiry into her service and in 1884 she received a government pension of \$8 per month.¹³

By the turn of the century, the Brownells were living in New York City. Kady worked for the city's Park Service in Central Park and then as the custodian for the Morris-Jumel Mansion, the former home of another famous and controversial Rhode Island-born woman, Madame Eliza Jumel, nee Bowen. New York newspapers reported that Kady was a familiar figure in the city's annual Decoration Day parade wearing her impressive Zouave costume, complete with war souvenirs and sword.¹⁴

Kady Brownell's story was certainly the stuff of legend during her lifetime, and she helped to perpetuate her fame through her tableaux at GAR entertainments and with public appearances in parades. A posed *carte-de-visite* image of Kady accompanies this essay; others exist of a uniformed Kady crouched and crawling, as if in battle.¹⁵ At the turn of the century, poet Clinton Scollard captured Brownell's romantic story in a dramatic ballad:

"The Daughter of the Regiment"¹⁶

Who with the soldiers was staunch danger-sharer,—
Marched in the ranks through the shriek of the shell?
Who was their comrade, their brave color-bearer?
Who but the resolute Kady Brownell?

Over the marshland and over the highland,
Where'er the columns wound, meadow or dell,
Fared she, this daughter of little Rhode Island,—
She, the intrepid one, Kady Brownell!

While the mad rout at Manassas was surging,
When those around her fled wildly, or fell,
And the bold Beauregard onward was urging,
Who so undaunted as Kady Brownell!

Opposite page: Detail of a Civil War vivandière on the battlefield, depicted pouring a drink for a wounded soldier. This image appeared on an envelope that was mailed in 1862. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Reproduction No. LC-DIG-ppmsca-31964; digital file from original item).

When gallant Burnside made dash upon Newberne,
Sailing the Neuse 'gainst the sweep of the swell,
Watching the flag on the heaven's broad blue burn,
Who higher hearted than Kady Brownell?

In the deep slough of the springtide debarking,
Toiling o'er leagues that are weary to tell,
Time with the sturdiest soldiery marking,
Forward, straight forward, strode Kady Brownell.

Reaching the lines where the army was forming,
Forming to charge on those ramparts of hell,
When from the wood came her regiment swarming,
What did she see there—this Kady Brownell?

See! why she saw that their friends thought them foemen;
Muskets were levelled, and cannon as well!
Save them from direful destruction would no men?
Nay, but this woman would,—Kady Brownell!

Waving her banner she raced for the clearing;
Fronted them all, with her flag as a spell;
Ah, what a volley—a volley of cheering—
Greeted the heroine, Kady Brownell!

Gone (and thank God!) are those red days of slaughter!
Brethren again we in amity dwell;
Just one more cheer for the Regiment's Daughter!—
Just one more cheer for her, Kady Brownell!

Despite Kady Brownell's celebrated life, she died impoverished in the Women's Relief Hospital in Oxford, New York on January 14, 1915. Robert and family friends pooled their resources and purchased a plot and gravestone in Providence's North Burial Ground for Kady. For reasons unknown, after Kady's death Robert moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He was eighty years old and not well. He died not long after, the proud husband of the Heroine of New Bern.

TEASING REALITY FROM KADY BROWNELL'S LEGEND

According to many sources, Kady Brownell was an uncontested and uncontroversial heroine. However, these uncritical and highly romanticized accounts of her daring exploits, which were created in the years following the Civil War, were spun from a blend of hearsay reports and embellished accounts. Kady's story appears to be far more complex and

multi-layered. Sara Bartlett's recent work is useful in helping us to differentiate "history" from "legend."

The myths, in fact, begin around Brownell's birth. Her death certificate does list Africa as her place of birth, but it also claims that her father was British, not Scottish. Yet, in the 1860 federal census, Kady's place of birth was listed as Scotland. Perhaps a careless census taker confused Kady's place of birth with that of her father. Not surprisingly, the formal records on Kady and the McKenzies' immigration to the U.S. are absent, nor are there any records of her having been adopted by the McKenzies. Therefore, we must rely on hearsay and informal sources to uncover an account of her young life. We do know Kady ended up in Central Falls, and worked in a mill, and we know that by 1860, she worked as a weaver, according to Bartlett.¹⁷

Far more discrepancies surround Kady's relationship with her husband, Robert Brownell. It appears from divorce decrees that Robert was married at the time he met Kady. His first wife, born Agnes Hutchinson, was a Scottish immigrant. The two were married in 1853 and had three children. In 1861, Agnes filed divorce papers that accused Robert of adultery.¹⁸ These papers, filed March 25, 1861, are also of interest because if we are to believe the popular story, Robert enlisted in April of that year and he and Kady had married three days earlier. That would have required a suspiciously quick divorce; divorce proceedings in the nineteenth century were typically lengthy, especially when brought by a woman. In fact, the Rhode Island Marriage Index lists Robert and Kady as having married on November 11, 1863—a full year after Robert was mustered out of the army, and over two years after the divorce papers were filed by his first wife. According to various accounts, Robert stated that they were married on April 14, 1861 and Kady apparently asserted that their wedding date was April 17, 1861. Kady's pension records include a City of Providence Record Book # 8

reference stating that Pastor William McDonald of the Chestnut Street M. E. church performed their marriage in March, 1861—before Robert’s divorce. And later still, Kady listed April 9, 1861 as their wedding date. Bartlett suggests that Robert and Kady may have had a hasty marriage before leaving Providence in 1861 and then a more elaborate ceremony for friends and family on the 1863 date listed in the Rhode Island marriage register. Still, there is a distinct possibility that Robert and Kady were not legally married when they spent their year on the front lines together.¹⁹

Kady Brownell’s service with the Union Army is even more contested, and the real controversy began to stir, not at the time of Frank Moore’s sketch, but instead in the early 1880s when the Congressional investigation to establish Kady’s pension eligibility took place. Bartlett lists major discrepancies between Kady’s accounts of her military service and those of others who served in Robert Brownell’s regiment. For instance, Captain J. M. Wheeler of Company A of the Fifth Rhode Island gave two contradictory accounts. In his 1882 statement he asserted that Kady was “attached to the said company; that she was present at the Battle of New Berne, N.C., and [was] conspicuous for bravery in carrying the flag at the head of the battalion. That he believes she saved the lives of many Union soldiers....” Wheeler then recounted much of the story of Kady Brownell’s heroic actions that had become standard legend by that time.²⁰

However, in the immediate postwar period, before Brownell had become such a well-known figure, Frank Moore had written to Wheeler requesting information about Kady’s military actions at the Battle of New Bern. Wheeler’s response then differed quite markedly from his account almost twenty years later:

Though I think she is deserving of great praise for her kindness to the sick and wounded, and I have no doubt she would have distinguished herself had she

been allowed to have her way, . . . On the morning of the battle, [she] begged me to allow her to carry the American flag at the head of the regiment just as we were coming under fire of our enemies’ rifles. . . . When I ordered her to the rear, she complied with the greatest reluctance.²¹

Newspaper reporters played a significant role in propelling Kady Brownell into the national spotlight and perpetuating stories of her legendary heroism. In 1905, the *Providence Journal* featured a story about Kady titled, “Rhode Island ‘Vivandiere’ in the New York Parade.” The reporter noted that, “She was glorified in the New York papers yesterday as a heroine of the war, her battle record being given to the extent of a half column or so.” But, the *Providence Journal* reporter went on to add a statement that the New York columnists never did: “By local veterans of the regiment some of the thrilling details of this record are regarded as mythical—the result of somebody’s vivid imagination in trying to depict an effective allegory.”²² This disclaimer, however, did not keep the Providence newspaperman from recounting all of the “mythical” stories about Kady Brownell, thus promoting the legends about her as accepted fact. Although he did not include accounts that would have challenged the plucky battlefield heroism of Kady Brownell until near the end of his article, nevertheless, the Rhode Island journalist appeared to give credibility to reports that might have challenged accounts of Kady Brownell’s legendary behavior.

Thus, after listing all of Brownell’s supposed heroics, the reporter wrote:

A large part of the foregoing would seem to be a beautiful fairy tale. The Army records in the office of the Adjutant General contain no specific mention of Kady Brownell and her name is not on the muster rolls of either the First or the Fourth Rhode Island Volunteers as it certainly would be if she had been an ‘enlisted soldier’ in either command. [Kady was in the Fifth RI Regiment.]

Col. William Goddard, who went to the front as a Major with the First Rhode Island has an indistinct



Juliana Parker Monroe was a Rhode Island woman who also accompanied her husband while he served in a Rhode Island unit in the Civil War. Her "modified uniform," like Kady Brownell's military outfit, reveals the distinctive attire that women adopted while with the Union Army during the Civil War; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8831).

remembrance of such a woman, who followed her husband to the front, but he is quite positive that she had no official connection with the regiment and he is unable to remember that she ever went into battle and did any terrific slashing with a sabre.

Col. Charles H. Merriman was Adjutant of the First Rhode Island and he remembers Kady Brownell very well. 'She followed her husband with the regiment,' he said. 'She called herself a vivandier and wore a sort of uniform with knee-length skirts. She never was officially recognized by the regiment and never had any connection with [words indecipherable] marching in the ranks and never heard that she took part in any battle. . .²³

Also in 1905, the *Providence Journal* included a letter to the editor from James Moran, dated June 8, 1905. Moran was perhaps compelled to write after seeing the article on Kady's participation in the Memorial Day parade in New York that year. ". . . There was nothing particularly noticeable in the record of Mrs Brownell up to the time of the battle of Newbern," Moran wrote, "except that she was patriotic, useful and energetic in many ways in good acts, a devoted wife and respected by all. On the morning of the day of the battle, March 14, 1862, some of us, myself amongst the number, were talking of the fact we had no flag or colors." The men had improvised, Moran recounted, using a "bunting flag," that someone had carried from Woonsocket. Discussion ensued among the men about who should be the color-bearer. Moran remembered:

Finally Mrs. Brownell—in speaking of her we used to call her Kitty, not Kady—wanted to carry it and as we were very soon to fall in and move on to the front, I gave her the flag, and when we did move, she marched with us, not in the ranks, but on the side of the road, until we reached the point where Gen. Burnside and some members of his staff, mounted, were waiting in front of the rebel abatis, directing the movements of the troops as they came along. At this point, we were ordered to change direction, we were given the 'double quick' and Kady and the flag were left behind and were not seen by us for the remainder of the day. . .

She certainly had no official connection with our regiment that any of us were aware of, and certainly

there was nothing official in her carrying that flag I gave her the morning of the battle of Newbern, although she exhibited qualities of pluck, patriotism and good intentions.²⁴

After so many years have passed, it is hard to decipher where the truth lies about the Battle of New Bern. Were these veterans who minimized Kady Brownell's contribution loath to admit the heroics of a woman in battle? Were they jealous of Kady Brownell's celebrity? Did Kady Southwell Brownell, herself, seek an opportunity to add a layer of fame and valor to her otherwise difficult and unremarkable life by helping to create and expand on her own legend? Was the legend essentially true, perhaps embellished by zealous postwar authors, like Frank Moore, who, in his compendium on women in the war, noted the many women who had stepped out of culturally-prescribed roles to promote the Union cause, not only as vivandières and daughters of the regiment, but as hospital workers, Sanitary Commission officials, Soldiers Aid Society leaders, government clerks, munitions factory workers, and teachers of formerly enslaved people during the conflict?

There are facts we do know that somewhat tarnish the legend of Kady Brownell. She was not the only woman to join a GAR post, for instance. Despite allegedly telling a *New York Times* reporter in 1913 that she was proud of receiving a regular soldier's pension, not one out of a special order, her pension was indeed from a Special Act of Congress. We know that the uniform Kady Brownell wore in performances, typically a feminized version of the colorful Zouave uniform, was not what she wore on the field. Her modified military dress consisted of a light colored blouse, a knee-length dark-colored full skirt and a tasseled sash, trousers and boots. Despite accounts that she wore a cap over her *short* hair while on the battlefield, photographs show her with flowing locks.²⁵ Notwithstanding the change in coiffure, her "uniform" at Bull Run

and New Bern probably resembled that depicted in the simpler *carte-de-visite* photograph from the Library of Congress, published with this article. Lastly, in a particularly odd twist, Kady's headstone in Providence's North Burial Ground is placed next to that of Agnes Brownell, Robert's first wife, who initiated divorce proceedings against him in 1861. Despite significant evidence that she lived well into the 1870s, this headstone states that Agnes Brownell died two years before she initiated divorce proceedings.²⁶ The erroneous date on Agnes Brownell's headstone publically legitimized the alleged 1861 date of Robert and Kady's marriage; there was no one remaining in Providence in 1915 to contest the death date of Agnes Brownell.

A handful of Southern and Northern women did go to war in 1861, whether as soldiers or vivandières, laundresses or nurses. While those who went to the front were not officially allowed to take up arms, a few armed women stood beside their husbands and brothers on the battlefield, placing themselves in grave danger. Kady Brownell may have created a more colorful and heroic past

for herself, but there was no need to lie about her bravery. Undeniably she stepped outside the typical, socially enforced roles of mid-nineteenth century womanhood when she carried the colors for her husband's regiment with characteristic pluck.

The legend of Kady Brownell lives on despite any quibbling over facts. Some of the men with whom she went into battle remembered the "facts" of her story differently at different times, due, no doubt, to the plasticity of memory. In the years following the Civil War, Kady Brownell's legend was repeatedly shared, via photographs, books, a stirring poem, newspaper articles, and her own appearances on stage and in Decoration Day parades. It was a tale of true love and romantic attachment that would brook no separation; a story of utter patriotic devotion to the Northern cause so great that it impelled a fearless woman to brazenly subvert the cultural norms of her era. It was a story of a hard-working immigrant, who took up arms to fight for her new country. It was, as David Blight might observe, romance triumphing over reality.

Notes

1. Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 4-5.
2. Sara L. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell, A Rhode Island Legend," unpublished paper in Rhode Island Historical Society Collection, CT275.B791B3.
3. Frank Moore, *Women of the War, Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* (Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton & Co., 1866), 55.
4. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 1.
5. Newspaper clipping, undated, reprinted from the "N.Y. Evening Sun." [in handwriting: "probably from the Narragansett Times, Wakefield, RI, ca. 1902—1912."] RIHS Vertical File, "Kady Brownell," MSS B882 K
6. Moore, *Women of the War*, 56.
7. Moore, *Women of the War*, 57-58
8. Moore, *Women of the War*, 55.
9. Moore, *Women of the War*, 60.
10. Moore, *Women of the War*, 60-63.
11. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 7.
12. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 8.
13. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 7.
14. See "Kady Brownell, Civil War Heroine Fighting for Life," *New York Times*, 16 Feb. 1913 and "A Rhode Island 'Vivandiere' in the New York Parade," *Providence Journal*, 1 June 1905.
15. <http://www.nyduvcw.org/tents/NYCLI.html>.
16. Clinton Scollard and Wallace Rice, *Ballads of Valor and Victory being Stories in Song from the Annals of America* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1903), 87-88. First published in 1897 by the Perry Mason Company; viewed at <http://books.google.com>.
17. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 2.
18. As found in Bartlett, page 2: "Divorce Decree of Agnes and Robert Brownell," March 25, 1861. In the decree, Agnes accuses Robert of "treating [Agnes] with extreme cruelty . . . and [neglecting] to provide necessaries for the support of [Agnes and the children, and] . . . he has been guilty of adultery."
19. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 3.
20. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 7.
21. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 7.
22. RIHS Library, Vertical File, "Kady Brownell," B882K.
23. RIHS Library, Vertical File, "Kady Brownell," B882K.
24. "Kady Brownell in Newbern Battle," *Providence Journal*, 11 June 1905.
25. Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Darling of a Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2001), 115; Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 8.
26. Bartlett, "Kady Brownell," 8.