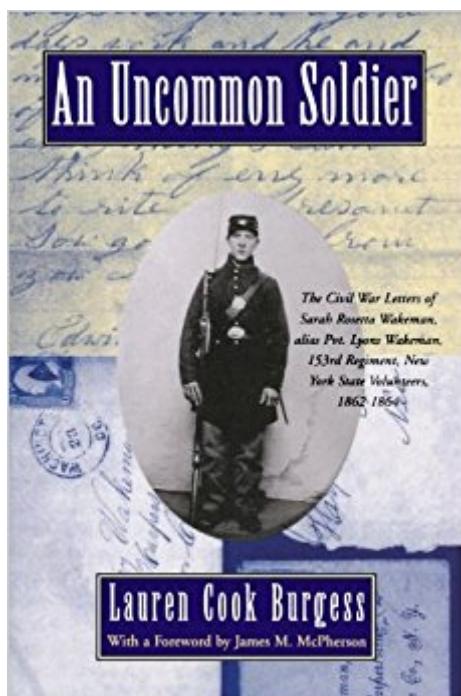


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# An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters Of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, Alias Pvt. Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1862-1864



## **Synopsis**

"I don't know how long before i shall have to go into the field of battle. For my part i don't care. I don't feel afraid to go. I don't believe there are any Rebel's bullet made for me yet."--Pvt. Lyons Wakeman. Similar sentiments were expressed by tens of thousands of Civil War soldiers in their diaries and in their letters to loved ones at home. What transforms the letters of Pvt. Lyons Wakeman from merely interesting reading into a unique and fascinating addition to Civil War literature is who wrote them--for Private Wakeman was not what "he" seemed to be. The five-foot tall soldier's true identity was that of a simple young farm girl from central New York state named Sarah Rosetta Wakeman. Her letters, the only such correspondence known to exist, provide a rare glimpse of what life was like for a woman fighting as a common soldier in the Civil War under the guise of a man. Written shortly after she left home to pursue her fortune in 1862, Rosetta's letters over the next two years tell of army life in the defences of Washington, D.C. and on the march and in battle during the 1864 Louisiana Red River Campaign. She wrote frequently to her family in Afton, NY, and her letters contain feelings and observations like those expressed by the majority of her fellow soldiers. We read of her determination to perform honorably the duty required of a soldier, the trials of hard marching and combat, her pride in being able to "drill just as well as any man" in her regiment, and her eventual fatalistic attitude toward military service, and her frequent expressions of faith in God and the afterlife. Although Rosetta did not survive the war, her letters remain as a singular record of female military life in the ranks, a phenomenon largely ignored by historians and researchers. Private Wakeman was not alone in embarking on her strange adventure. Hundreds of women, from both the North and South, disguised themselves as men and enlisted in the armies of our nation's bloodiest war. The experiences of these women during the Civil War are just beginning to be recognized as elemental to understanding the life of this country during those turbulent times. Little is known about these women precisely because they enlisted and served in constant secrecy, fearful of revealing their true identities. This unique collection of letters offers a firsthand look at the personality and character of a woman who defied convention to take a man's place in the Union army.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

As the debate on the role of women in the military continues, an interesting historical footnote has been brought forth: the publication of the only known surviving set of letters of one of the estimated 400 women who disguised themselves as men to fight as soldiers in the Civil War. Born on a farm in New York in 1843, Wakeman was the oldest of nine children. Few details of her family life are known, nor what exactly precipitated her flight into the army, but glimpses of this strong-minded woman are provided throughout: "I am as independent as a hog on the ice. If it is God's will for me to fall in the field of battle, it is my will to go and never return home." Private Wakeman did not return home: she is buried under her masculine pseudonym. How many more women were buried as men? Civil War historian Burgess provides an intriguing introduction to what is sure to become an area of growing interest. Highly recommended. Katherine Gillen, Mesa P.L., Ariz. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In proportion to its size, this may be one of the most expensive additions to women's studies and military history of late. Yet it should be considered very seriously. It collects the letters of an upstate New York farmer's daughter who in 1862 disguised herself as a man to enlist in the Union army. Not the least remarkable thing about the slim volume is that it demonstrates how common this uncommon soldier's experiences were. Indeed, Wakeman was much more concerned with how the family farm was going than she was about the larger issues of a war in which she served for two years before dying of dysentery. This is only the second published personal account of one of the hundreds of women known to have served in male attire in the Civil War. It is well edited, and the commentary accompanying it is free of both contemporary political jargon and historical error. Roland Green --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It is not often that readers find new stories from the Civil War. Sure, one comes across a person they may not have heard of, but a totally brand new story is a rarity. Lauren Cook Burgess gave her readers the gift of a new story in *An Uncommon Soldier*. As a re-enactor, Burgess would be familiar with the nuances of life in the Civil War era. This would include knowing that many women served as soldiers during the conflict. In fact, Burgess participated in many re-enactments as a woman. If she had not run into issues with the National Park Service and her subsequent court case, Burgess may never had heard of Sarah Rosetta (Lyons/Edwin R.) Wakeman. Thanks to a timely letter from Wakeman's great-great-niece, Burgess was granted access to one of (and possibly the only) the most complete collections of letters and memorabilia from a female Union soldier. After leaving home for a brief stint on a coal barge, Rosetta Wakeman enlisted in the 153rd New York State Volunteer Infantry in 1862 and became Pvt. Lyons

Wakeman. Burgess's careful editing of Wakeman's letters offered readers an easy to read glimpse into the everyday life of the typical soldier. She wrote about drill and guard duties, troop movements, and the different locations where she was stationed. Wakeman wrote of her concerns about her relationships with family members and asked for news on those from her hometown who had also been drafted. One of her most consistent topics showed her concern for the financial status of her family. She often sent money home to help with the family debts and for individual family members to purchase things to remember her by. However, throughout the letters the reader can glean how Wakeman became accustomed to her independence. Had she survived the war, it would be easy to speculate that she would have continued to live independently, perhaps keeping up the masculine charade and permanently becoming either Lyons or Edwin R. Wakeman. Interestingly, Wakeman never seemed to fear discovery through her letters as she signed most of them with her given name. It was not until her unit was well into Confederate territory in Louisiana that she began signing letters with a male alias. In modern times one often expects that letters home from members of the military are opened and read in case any sensitive information is included. In the nineteenth century, soldiers were apparently afforded more privacy in their communications. *An Uncommon Soldier* benefits both scholars of Civil War and women's history. It adds yet another facet to the intricately woven stories of everyday soldiers during the war and shows that the soldier experience is universal regardless of gender. The book documents how women contributed to the war effort by doing more than nursing the sick, the typical nineteenth century image of women during the Civil War. Burgess's research and documentation of other women soldiers adds to the understanding of Wakeman's experience. In addition, the background she

provided on the circumstances surrounding Wakeman's narrative of her time in the 153rd places the letters in their historical context. This book would be an excellent addition to any undergraduate or graduate course on the Civil War. It was easy to read and digest and provided the reader a look back in time to life as a soldier during the Civil War.

Burgess provides substantial historical background to accompany Sarah's letters home, and has done an excellent job in 'modernizing' to help 21st century readers. This is a must read for anyone who has, or thinks they might have female ancestors who were active in the war efforts, whether those ancestors were nurses, soldiers or otherwise supporting the cause. Also a good historical read for any young woman who wants to get more insight in women's progress towards independence over the past 150 years.

Told through Sarah's letter's written to her family back home, this small book is a rare and accurate glimpse of the experiences of a female living in the 1850's who enlisted as a soldier in the War Between The States--Civil War. There is nothing glamorous here, no gripping plot but you will find yourself sitting beside a campfire, just as Sarah did or marching on an empty stomach not knowing where you are, tired, hot, sick. This is not a long book and it will leave you with many questions that simply can not be answered but in my opinion anyone interested in the War will not want to miss this piece unique find.

Very interesting book about a little unknown soldier

This is an ancestor of mine, so my review is definitely biased! However, aside from Sarah being my relative, I enjoyed reading this book as the letters clearly showed the type of person Sarah was as well as her experience and love of her family. Coupled with the fact that there are no other records of a set of letters from a female soldier who served in the Civil War (according to the author Laura Cook Burgess), it makes for good reading for anyone interested in the Civil War or women soldiers.

This is a very unique and interesting read. As a civil war reenactor who is a female in uniform, this is a valuable resource in addition to being a one of a kind look into the thoughts and life of a woman soldier during the civil war.

Very thin book, so a very quick read, but a fascinating one. Almost worth picking up for the

introduction alone, which provides lots of fascinating background on the 400 or so (known) women who dressed up as men and fought in the Civil War. I especially appreciated the social commentary on how exactly they could hope to get away with it -- cursory physical exams, badly fitting uniforms, dependence on clothing to indicate gender ("if it wears pants, it's male"), presence of lots of young boys in the Army whose voices haven't changed yet and weren't shaving, and of course, the extreme modesty of the society at the time, which didn't make it at all unusual for a young soldier to choose to bathe alone and shy away from using the public latrines. The funniest moment for me was the description of the soldier who wrote home to say that his sergeant, who had been sharing a tent with his Captain had had a child. (paraphrasing a bit...) "What need have we of women, when we soldiers can have children of our own?" How much that was tongue in cheek and how much sheer willful obtuseness isn't clear from the introduction. My 2008 self declares that he must have been joking, but the editor of these letters believes that he may actually have just been expressing the extreme denial so many Army men had ("no woman could possibly handle this") that protected these women from discovery. I very much enjoyed this book.

Interesting insight into the short life of a woman who dressed as a man and served for the Union during the Civil War. Some background biographical information but mostly just her letters home. Although it is estimated that as many as 400 women served while disguised as men, not much is known about most of them. For many even their names have been lost.

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