what's inside...

Artifacts in the Package

- Quilt square
- Louse comb
- Toothbrush
- Toothpaste
- Mittens
- Drawers

These artifacts are representative of what might have been put in a soldiers’ aid package. Women collected used goods such as shawls, shirts, and old fabric as well as made clothing from scratch. The housewife in the soldier’s haversack and the mittens and quilt square in this package were made by Amanda Paige from the Comtu Falls US Sanitary Commission Civil War reenactors’ group of Springfield, Vermont.
Soldiers’ Aid Society Package

Background Information

Women played a strong role in the Civil War. On the home front they canvassed neighborhoods for donations, raised funds through Sanitary Fairs, and sewed and knit everything from blankets to uniforms to socks and mittens. Vermont women organized Soldiers’ Aid Societies, local branches of the New England Women’s Auxiliary Society that was the regional arm of the United States Sanitary Commission, the “Red Cross” of the time. More than 1,500 of these groups in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts raised hundreds of thousands of dollars and collected literally tons of supplies.

The establishment of this central supply system was at first difficult. Communities and family members were willing to send boxes to their own regiments or families, but were reluctant to send articles to a central depot for soldiers they didn’t know. Turning individual charity into a united home front took time. In 1861, Abraham Lincoln sent a notice to northern newspapers imploring that “the Loyal Ladies of America” help.

Brattleboro’s newspaper, The Vermont Phoenix, reveals that there were indeed soldiers’ aid societies in many small towns and that they were sending supplies to a central office rather than to individual families or regiments. Throughout the war the paper reported the ladies’ activities. Below is an example from January 15, 1863:

The Ladies Soldiers’ Aid Society of Jamaica have recently sent to the commissary department a box of hospital stores containing the following articles:

- 3 dressing gowns
- 5 flannel bandages
- 3 bags of hops
- 6 prs socks
- 6 quilts
- 8 lin napkins
- 1 bundle old linen
- 7 pillow cases
- 7 towels
- 10 prs. slippers
- 21 handkerchiefs
- 3 sheets
- 5 shroud shirts
- 8 hospital shirts
- 1 jar cranberry jelly
- 3 pillows
- 1 bundle old cotton
- 1 bundle of lint
- 1 pr. linen pants
- 10 lbs. dried apple, tracts &c.

The Williamsville Ladies Sewing Circle have sent to the hospital in this village the following articles:

- 4 bed quilts
- 2 blankets
- 4 pillows
- 16 pillow cases
- 15 shirts (12 new)
- 5 prs flannel draws
- 17 towels
- 6 linen handkerchiefs
- 6 prs slippers
- 250 yds bandage
- 3 bundles linen
- 1 paper corn starch
- 4 sheets
- 12 pincushions
- 2 pounds lint
- 1 paperbroma
- 1 bag sage
- 4 hop pillows,
- 6 skeins thread
- 2 spools thread
- 2 paper pins
- 2 paper needles
- 4 pounds dried apple

Mrs. E.P. Lincoln, President of the Ladies Sewing Circle,
Williamsville, VT
Of course, families continued to send packages to their sons, brothers, fathers, and husbands. Train service was so efficient that fresh foods could be sent to the front. At Thanksgiving time, many turkey dinners were sent from Vermont to the South.

This invoice from the Vermont Ladies Sanitary Society lists articles sent to the U.S. Sanitary Commission on December 9th, 1863. This was a local organization, formed in Montpelier in response to the call for aid to the sick and wounded soldiers. The ladies each paid twenty-five cents in order to become a member of the association. At their first meeting they raised $41.00 with which they purchased materials for hospital supplies. In addition to sewing, the ladies collected a variety of goods including bed ticks, shirts, pillows, quilts, towels, lint (used to pack wounds), bandages, thread, and reading matter. The Society met throughout the war and in 1863 it adopted a monthly subscription. In 1863 $508 in donations and 614 garments were received.

The quilt square is a copy from a quilt in the collection of the Vermont Historical Society. The original was made by Mrs. L. B. Fairbanks, formerly Caroline Bowen, of Brandon. Caroline was eighteen years old when she sewed this quilt. Her husband Luke Fairbanks had just gone back to war after spending time at home recuperating from wounds. They had married on Christmas Day in 1862 while he was on leave. One can imagine the fears and concerns of the young newlywed as she quilted and wrote the various Bible passages, such as:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{And god shall wipe away all tears from} \\
&\text{Their eyes, and there shall be no more death,} \\
&\text{Neither sorrow, nor crying,} \\
&\text{Neither shall there be any more pain.} \\
&\text{– Revelation 21:4}
\end{align*}
\]

This quilt is a rare survivor of the estimated 250,000 such pieces that were made by women and sent to soldiers.
Exploring Primary Sources

Examine the quotation on the quilt square—a reproduction of just one square from a quilt made by a lonely wife at home. Why might Caroline have chosen the quotation? Think about what it was like to be left behind with a farm to run, worrying about a husband and the future. Confederate women were not only left behind, but also had to worry about being in a war zone. Examine some of their experiences through diaries and letters at: http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/women/civilwar.html.

We collected only a few samples of goods that were sent south. What else might a soldier have needed? How did the goods get there? Examine a Beers Atlas map from the 1860s (found in your local library) and find the location of the nearest train depot.

Asking Questions

The Soldiers’ Aid Society section of this kit focuses on just one of many roles women had during the Civil War. There were others—women joined the fighting, nursed the wounded, spied against the enemy, and advocated for the release of slaves. Have students generate a list of questions related to a woman’s role, research their questions, and create a quilt square that shows what they’ve learned.

Connecting Past to Present

Civil War women held collection drives in their communities to gather supplies such as soap, toothbrushes, and clothing. They also gathered to knit and sew new items of clothing such as mittens and quilts. Research the needs of today’s troops, hold a collection drive in your community, and make a care package to send to them.

The United States Sanitary Commission was the “Red Cross” of its day. Invite a representative from the American Red Cross to visit your class and explain services offered today.