

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

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“Blushing young virgins and elderly matrons”?: Women Workers at the Indiana State Arsenal

ANITA MORGAN*

Indiana Civil War Governor Morton created the state arsenal on April 27, 1861, to repair and maintain weapons and also to manufacture gunpowder and ammunition. Recounting the creation of the arsenal to the state legislature, Morton stated that, “Persons have been employed sometimes to the number of five hundred, and profitable occupation has thus been furnished to many who otherwise would have wanted the means of support. My direction to Colonel Sturm [the superintendent of the arsenal] was to give the preference to those whose relatives and supporters were in the field.”

The arsenal payroll ledgers show that approximately 100 women and 50 men comprised the earliest work force and the number grew to a high of 369 employees (219 women and 140 men) in July 1863. Women pinched, filled, and bundled cartridges and did other work as well. Calvin Fletcher noted that some arsenal employees were the relatives of soldiers and that they were “well paid” in his words, although Fletcher greatly overstated this. A few women made as much as \$20-30 per month while working at the arsenal, but most made from \$5-15. Many women worked at the arsenal for only a few months.

This paper will describe the women arsenal workers in terms of age, nativity, economic background, whether or not they were indeed members of soldiers’ families, and how the Democratic press reported on their work. It will also look at the nefarious scheme of Loreta Velasquez, a spy who worked at the arsenal for two months and intended to blow-up the building and possibly its workers.

* Anita Morgan is Senior Lecturer at the History Department, Indiana University, Indianapolis.