

The Forgotten Woman: Unrecognized Female American Veterans of the First World War
Presenter: Allison S. Finkelstein

Abstract:

During the Great Depression, veteran politics played a significant role in the turmoil experienced in the United States. Most famously, the 1932 Bonus March brought thousands of World War One veterans to Washington, D.C. to protest for the early payment of their bonus. The “Forgotten Man,” a term popularized in a 1932 campaign speech by Franklin Roosevelt, eventually came to include World War I veterans as a key demographic of men forgotten by their government amid the crisis.

Yet, the term the “Forgotten Man” obscures the influence, struggle, and legacy of the thousands of American women who also served in World War One and lacked government recognition for that service. The “Forgotten Woman” served her nation, but unlike her male counterparts, the government did not acknowledge her as a veteran or provide any benefits. Only a minority of the American women who supported the military during the war were eligible for official veteran status. Instead, gender-based restrictions meant that most women served as civilians and did not qualify for veteran status.

These overlooked women form the central players in my forthcoming book, *Forgotten Veterans, Invisible Memorials: How American Women Commemorated the Great War, 1917-1945*. My book investigates how American women who served or sacrificed during World War One commemorated that conflict. I argue that these female activists considered their community service and veterans advocacy to be forms of commemoration just as significant and effective as traditional methods of commemoration such as memorials. As part of their commemorative work, many of women these advocated on their own behalf to gain veteran status and the benefits they believed they had earned.

In my conference paper, I will examine how these women combined commemoration with their campaign to be defined as veterans. I will query what it means to be an unrecognized veteran and show how this cohort of women navigated their postwar challenges. Using examples from different communities of women, I will demonstrate how their experiences shaped the future of both women’s service in the American military and the long-term development of veterans benefits in the United States.

Bio:

Allison S. Finkelstein is the Senior Historian at Arlington National Cemetery. Previously, she worked as a historian at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services History Office and Library and as a historical consultant at the American Battle Monuments Commission. She earned her Ph.D. in U.S. History from the University of Maryland, College Park, where she also studied Historic Preservation. A specialist on World War I, from 2017-2018, the Arlington County Board in the state of Virginia appointed her as the Chair of the Arlington World War I Commemoration Task Force. Her first book, titled *Forgotten Veterans, Invisible Memorials: How American Women Commemorated the Great War, 1917-1945*, will be published by the University of Alabama Press as part of their “War, Memory, and Culture” series in the summer of 2021. Her scholarship has also been published in *Buildings & Landscapes: The Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* and in the National Park Service’s book of essays, *World War I Remembered*. As a public historian, Allison’s work encompasses the creation of museum exhibits, documentary films, interpretive panels, and other projects. Allison frequently lectures and presents at scholarly conferences and was featured on the C-SPAN television channel’s “American History TV” series as an expert narrating two World War I era silent films.