



Army Heritage Center
Foundation
*Telling the Army Story...
one Soldier at a time*

Voices of the Past

CIVIL WAR

Highlights:

- Over 3,000 women served as nurses for the Union Army during the Civil War.
- Nurses volunteered out of a sense of patriotism and duty.
- Civil War nurses faced many of the same dangers as Soldiers on the battlefield.
- The praise and thanks nurses received from the Soldiers they tended helped the nurses overcome the emotional burdens of their work.

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Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation's Educational Series

They Heard the Call of Duty: Civil War Nurses

(United States, 1861-1865) With the onset of the American Civil War in 1861, able-bodied men on both sides of the conflict began marching to battlefields in service to their country. Women on both sides also felt a need to volunteer and contribute to the war effort. Most of these female volunteers served as nurses. Driven by the same patriotic desire as many of their male counterparts, roughly 3,300 women served as nurses for the Union Army from years 1861-1865.

These pioneers challenged existing gender roles and social norms. Many of their male colleagues believed that women did not belong in the hospitals and resented their presences. Civil War nurses overcame their objections through appeals to national pride, patriotic duty, and through hard work and dedicated service to the sick and wounded Soldiers that filled the nation's hospitals.

Two months after the war began Secretary of War Simon Cameron appointed Dorothea Dix as Superintendent of Women Nurses for the Union. In August 1861 Congress authorized the Surgeon General to employ female nurses in Army hospitals, and to pay them \$12 a month and provide them with food rations. The result was an influx of volunteers. From middle-aged widows to young bachelorettes, women volunteered to assist in hospitals and other medical establishments.

Older women typically had greater freedom to leave their homes to participate in this uncertain and dangerous profession. Apprehensive parents, fearful for their daughter's safety, attempted to prevent their young daughters from leaving. Beside the fears about sickness, death, or other calamities, many people, including many of the doctors the



Armory Square Hospital, Ward K, Washington, DC. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection

"From old St. Paul till now
 Of honorable women, not a
 few
 Have left their golden ease,
 in love to do
 The saintly work which
 Christ-like hearts pursue...
 ...When peace shall come
 and homes shall smile again,
 A thousand soldier hearts, in
 northern climes,
 Shall tell their little children in
 their rhymes
 Of the sweet saints who
 blessed the old war times."
 - On the Chickahominy, June
 12th 1862 (Author Unknown)



Dorothea Dix,
 Superintendent of
 Women Nurses
 for the Union.
 Photo Credit:
 U.S. Army Military
 History Institute,
 MOLLUS-MASS
 Collection

nurses worked with, did not believe women belonged in a medical setting. The women faced the same challenges as their male counterparts, including the risk of communicable diseases, unsuitable medical field facilities, and various battlefield dangers. Yet thousands of women left home to become nurses, and take care of fighting servicemen.

Nurses acted as homemakers and orderlies in their wards. Soldiers viewed nurses as holistic healers because of the strong connection they drew between physical and spiritual healing. Nurses tended to the Soldier's physical needs, but also their spiritual needs, especially among Soldiers who were not expected to survive their wounds. Numerous accounts tell of men wracked in pain that would instantly calm and be comforted by a nurse's attentiveness, conversation, or physical contact. Nurses maintained written correspondence with Soldier's families, and often assisted with a last letter home or death notification.

Hospital conditions and accommodations varied greatly depending on where the hospital was located and what sort of facilities existed there before the war. Regardless of the accommodations, a nurse could be assured of ghastly experiences dealing with bloody wounds and mangled limbs that would challenge even the hardest individual's emotional capacity. Yet these brave women faced the fear of the unknown and the daily horrors that confronted them throughout the war. Many drew strength from the Soldiers themselves, whose constant assurances helped the nurses overcome their emotional burdens.

Over four years of war nurses provided exemplary service to the fighting forces and to the nation as a whole. They persevered through dire and unsafe conditions with selfless dedication. Brave men received attentive care and would forever remember the special women working the hospital wards all around the country during these pivotal moments in American history.

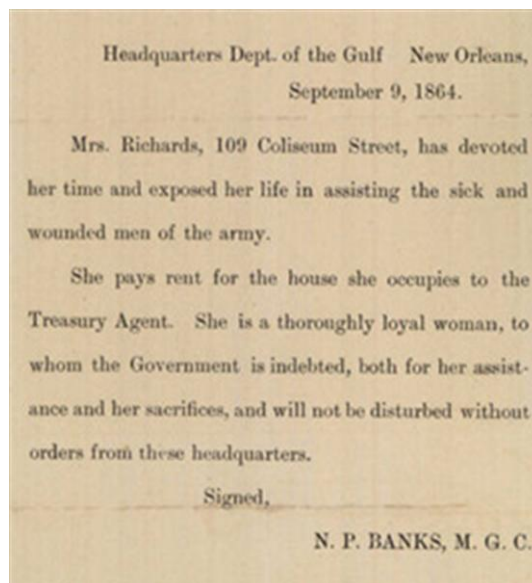
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Letter from N.P. Banks, M.G.C. about nurse Mrs. Richards, September 9, 1864. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection