



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

Voices of the Past

CIVIL WAR

Highlights:

- Jane and Bell both served as nurses and caretakers in different locations and hospitals over their four years of service during the Civil War.
- Jane & Bell kept their family informed by writing letters periodically to their parents and siblings.
- Their letters reveal experiences with Soldiers, civilians, Southerners, and newly freed slaves.

Read more of the Robison's letters at www.armyheritage.org

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Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation's Educational Series

Jane & Bell Robison: Angels in the Wards

(Washington, D.C., 1861-1865) Jane and Isabella (better known as Bell) Robison spent over four years working as nurses during the American Civil War. Letters addressed to friends and family reveal their personal experiences and feelings during this tumultuous and bloody chapter in American history. Sisters in a family of twelve children, Jane, the second eldest was born in 1818 and Bell in 1831. Their parents William Robison and Betsey Barton resided in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.

Jane lived in western Pennsylvania and worked as a teacher in the 1840's. In the 1850's she moved to Washington, D.C. with her husband Lynde Eliot. When war broke out she went to work as a nurse in the hospitals throughout Washington, such as the General Hospital at the U.S. Patent Office and the Armory Square Hospital. A letter from Jane's mother



Bell Robison. Photo from inside cover of *Dear Pa – And So It Goes*.

to her sister reveals that by the spring 1862 Jane had accepted nomination as the Directress of the Hospital, although the letter does not specify which hospital.

Bell also worked as a nurse in Washington, D.C., though during the war years she moved around more frequently than her sister. Bell spent time in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and returned home to Bloomsburg in 1863 to assist her mother when her father, William Robison, developed a horrible facial affliction. With her two daughters away nursing in combat areas and two sons serving in the military, Betsey needed help caring for her sick husband.

As 1864 rolled into 1865 both girls continued nursing. Jane remained in Washington, D.C., where she remodeled a house that she would



Jane Robison. Photo from inside cover of *Dear Pa – And So It Goes*.

"All the convalescent were sent from the hospitals last night + to-day to make room for the wounded from Manassas. Most persons think tomorrow will be the decisive day. I am afraid our green troops are being mowed down like grass."

~Jane Robison August 31, 1862 describing Second Battle of Bull Run



The chapel at the Armory Square Hospital, Washington, August 1865. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection

eventually open as a boarding house. Bell traveled, visiting the Chesapeake Bay and Philadelphia before returning to Bloomsburg.

The Robison family did not survive the war unscathed. The life of a nurse in time of war is full of pain and loss and endless toil. In 1864, the war hit home when their younger brother Isaiah died at the Battle of Peach Tree Creek in Georgia. Despite these losses, these hospital angels managed to survive a terrible period of history without greater tragedy to themselves or loved ones. Their writings reveal their hardships, coupled with gratification from the Soldier's whose lives they touched.

Washington
_____ 28, 1862

*Dear Bartie,
I was very much pleased to hear from you and also pleased to see that you write so well hope you will keep on improving and you will get to be an excellent writer. I suppose you have had lots of _____ this Winter. I would liked to have had some with you. This is a picture of the building I am in the upper part of it I'd like to have had a whole sheet but couldn't get it. We have a greatmany sick Soldiers here now some are wounded not in a battle but by accident we had a ball shot through both knees one man was wounded in battle on top of the Alegeny mountain and the rebels took him prisoner in December he was released in February had his leg taken off before the knee and their wasn't flesh enough to cover the bone consequently he will have to hav the operation performed again it will have to be taken off above the knee. Some of the men expect to leave here tomorrow belong to the seventh New York Cavalry Pa will see I was mistaken about my bonnet thought my green casing bonnet was comming. Tell _____ Kinzey she can look out for an answer to her letter the gentlemen who got it suspected me and I could hardly convince him that I didn't write the letter. The closed drawers are very large they were nice and the shirts are nice too but when you make bedshirts again put string on instead of buttons. I like the dressing gowns very well but how are they to be worn with or without hoops the first _____ made of mine was between two + three this morning had to get up and get clothes for a man who died I gave them one of shirts you sent also. I must close this so as to mail it will write more particulars next time. Just rec a letter from Isaiah was pleased to hear from him once again they were at _ipperville. By the papers they've disbanded as my paper is full I must close with love and kisses for all of your affectionate*

Aunt Bell

Please visit www.armyheritage.org/education-and-programs/educational-resources/soldier-stories to find more of Jane & Bell's letters, articles relating to their service, and other Soldier Stories.

The letters presented here and online are transcriptions. These transcripts retain the original spelling, punctuation, syntax, and other stylistic elements of the original documents. As with all transcriptions of hand written documents, there are issues with legibility, which may lead to occasional errors.

Sources

Johnson, Gertrude K. *Dear Pa - And So It Goes*. Business Service Company: Harrisburg, PA, 1971.

Pardee-Robison Family Papers. Box 1. Folder Bell Robison, Volunteer Nurses Correspondence, June 1862 - June 1864. USAMHI.

Pardee-Robison Family Papers. Box 1. Folder Jane Robison, Volunteer Nurses Correspondence, August 1861 - September 1863. USAMHI.