

The Union's "Other Army": The Women of the United States Sanitary Commission

Introduction

On March 18, 1864, President Lincoln stood in front of a crowd of thousands at the closing ceremonies of the Washington D.C. Sanitary Fair, one of several fairs in major cities across the North and Midwest during the Civil War.¹ These events had raised nearly \$3 million for sick and wounded soldiers by offering entertainment, food, and exhibits of activities and products from the region.² When Lincoln addressed the crowd that day, he thanked the women who had been the chief organizers of the fairs, saying: "Of all that has been said by orators and poets since the creation of the world in praise of women applied to the women of America, it would not do them justice for their conduct during this war."³

The Sanitary Fairs were one of the many efforts set up by the United States Sanitary Commission (the "Commission" or the "USSC") to collect donations for the Union troops. The Commission had been formed at the beginning of the war as a civilian organization that provided supplies and help to the Union Army. Commission historian Charles Stille, who described the USSC as "the most successful method of mitigating the horrors of war known in history,"⁴ estimated that it raised \$50 million of goods and funds⁵, or over \$1 billion in today's currency.⁶ According to historian Allan Nevins, the USSC was invaluable to the Union, providing "money, goods, and personal help ... In a nation which had no medical association, no nursing schools, no apparatus for meeting a sudden strain on hospital facilities, it mobilized the best talents available for the war

Figure 1: United States Sanitary Commission Seal



USSC Seal from frontispiece of Charles Stille's *History of the United States Sanitary Commission: Being the General Report Of Its Work during the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866).

emergency.”⁷ However, the story of the USSC is not just an account of an important institution that had a crucial impact on the Union’s war effort, but also a history of the changing role of women at the time.

In the official documents of the USSC, the importance of women’s contributions is not immediately clear. The Commission’s seal (Figure 1) shows only an angel floating down from the heavens to help two injured soldiers on the battlegrounds. In the official account of the Commission written by Charles Stille in 1866, *History of the United States Sanitary Commission: Being the General Report of Its Work During the War of the Rebellion*, the “organization” section lists only the names of several prominent men, such as architect Frederick Law Olmstead and Reverend Henry Whitney Bellows.⁸ These executives headed the USSC and are memorialized in its historic records; however, it was actually the women of the Union, as recognized by Lincoln at the Washington D.C. Sanitary Fair, who performed the bulk of the USSC relief work.

Although women’s roles in the North during the Civil War are often told through famous personalities like those of battlefield nurses Clara Barton, Mary Ann Bickerdyke, and Dorothea Dix, tens of thousands of other women were working for the Union troops as well, as noted by President Lincoln. Most were anonymous, sewing clothing or working in army hospitals. As part of the USSC, women organized an “army” of their own, with chains of command and complicated plans for their work. They handled business problems and reached out to women from different classes and regions. Although a small group of men had the title of “Commissioner,” the women did things their own way, independent of the men’s opinions. Women saw that many of the activities they had done at home had financial value, and they learned how to provide medical care “on the job.” In the process, many women gained the tools to change their place in society.

Women on the Eve of the Civil War

Figure 2: The Sphere of Woman



"The Sphere of Woman"

Full page engraved illustration for an article from *Godey's Lady's Book*, (Philadelphia: Published by L. A. Godey, 1850), Vol. 40 (March 1850): P. 209. Caption: "Translated from the German of Goethe." Clifton Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia.

The illustration from the March 1860 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*, titled "The Sphere of Woman," represents the popular antebellum sentiment regarding women's roles: women lived in the "domestic sphere," where they took care of the house and their children. They were expected to be self-sacrificing, virtuous, and pious.⁹ In contrast, the "men's sphere" was outside the home, in a professional job.

However, this ideal mostly applied to middle-class and wealthy women. Those who were poorer had to support themselves by doing domestic activities like sewing, or making and selling clothing or home-cooked goods. Some women taught school. Sometimes women worked in factory jobs where they "typically toiled six days a week, earning a pittance for dreary stints of twelve or thirteen hours," say historians Thomas Bailey, David Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen.¹⁰ One of the only activities that middle-class women could do outside of their home without social disapproval was reform work: it was widely believed that the desire to do reform work was a result of women's compassion and virtuous character. The Second Great Awakening, beginning in 1800, had resulted in Americans' renewed interest and commitment to religion. With this movement came people's desire to solve social problems and fight "earthly evils" like alcohol and prostitution. Between the years 1820 and 1860, during the Age of Reform, women worked to improve care for the mentally ill and other disadvantaged people. They campaigned against slavery. They raised money for the improvement of jails, hospitals, schools, and programs for widows and orphans.¹¹

Women were considered "natural nurses"¹² because of their compassion and motherly instincts, but nursing was not yet an established profession for American women. Prior to the war, few middle class women would ever *consider* working in hospitals as nurses because hospitals were considered dirty and unsavory. Among middle-class families, sick people were cared for at home, and only the poor or mentally ill ended up in hospitals. Historian Jane Schultz further explains: "In the mid-nineteenth century, hospitals were charitable institutions that served the indigent and insolvent. Shunned by the middle class for lack of order or hygiene, hospitals became associated with squalor and moral debility."¹³ In addition, women who trained to be physicians, such as Elizabeth Blackwell, considered the first female doctor in the United States,¹⁴ faced extreme social disapproval and obstacles in setting up their practices.¹⁵

While *Godey's Lady's Book* upheld the idea of the "domestic sphere," the editor, Sarah Hale, was actually a supporter of Elizabeth Blackwell, and she even printed a profile of Blackwell after she became the first female physician in the United States.¹⁶ Hale used the argument that women could be physicians for other women and children, since women, dedicated to the idea of piety and virtue, might not tell male doctors "intimate complaints."¹⁷ (The prevailing idea was that if women should provide healthcare, it would be only to help other women and children.) Thus, as the Civil War approached, there was already tension between women's idealized domestic role, and their potential as valuable members of the medical profession and the work force in general. The "Sphere of Woman" illustration from *Godey's* disguises this movement that was forming under the surface. With its widespread publication on the eve of the war of 150,000 subscriptions,¹⁸ it represents an important primary resource for viewing the prevailing image of women in antebellum America as mistresses of the "domestic sphere."

Women's Initial Efforts to Join the War and the Formation of the USSC

When the Confederates attacked Fort Sumter in April 1861, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to quell the rebellion.¹⁹ While the North frantically prepared for war, its women were ready to help. Women immediately began collecting, preparing, and making items for the troops,²⁰ and women flooded the government volunteering to be nurses.²¹

The earliest efforts to provide support for the troops reveal the nation's lack of preparation for war. As previously mentioned, women were rarely skilled nurses before the Civil War, and many young women who offered themselves as nurses at the outbreak of the war had no training or preparation for work in hospitals. After the fall of Ft. Sumter in 1861, well-meaning women tried to send supplies to the troops, mostly with unfavorable results. Mary Ashton Livermore, who would later become a USSC manager, described the scene: "Baggage cars were soon flooded with fermenting sweetmeats ... Decaying fruits and vegetables, pasty and cakes in a demoralized condition, badly canned soups and meats were thrown away en route. And with them went the clothing and stationary saturated with the effervescing and putrefying compounds which they enfolded ..." ²²

In addition, women formed sewing circles and began creating items such as velvet slippers that were not useful in war, and thousands of Havelock hats for heat protection that men did not want to wear.²³ Says historian Mary Elizabeth Massey, "An observer concluded that the luckiest man in the Union Army was the one with fewest relatives and friends, for he would be less encumbered with havelocks. Few soldiers ever used them for the purpose intended, although they enjoyed devising new and unusual uses for this strange headgear."²⁴

Figure 3: Havelock Hat



David H. Strother, "Personal Recollections of the Civil War." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1866) Volume 33, Issue 193, p.141.

Boy wearing Havelock Hat: drawing by D.H. Strother.

It soon became clear that the supply effort needed to be centralized and organized in order to avoid wasteful production and distribution. The Women's Central Association

of Relief (WCAR) was founded a few weeks later, in late April. A large crowd of New Yorkers came together for a meeting led by Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell; a Board of twelve men and twelve women managers was created.²⁵

Figure 4: Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell



US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health
nlm.nih.gov

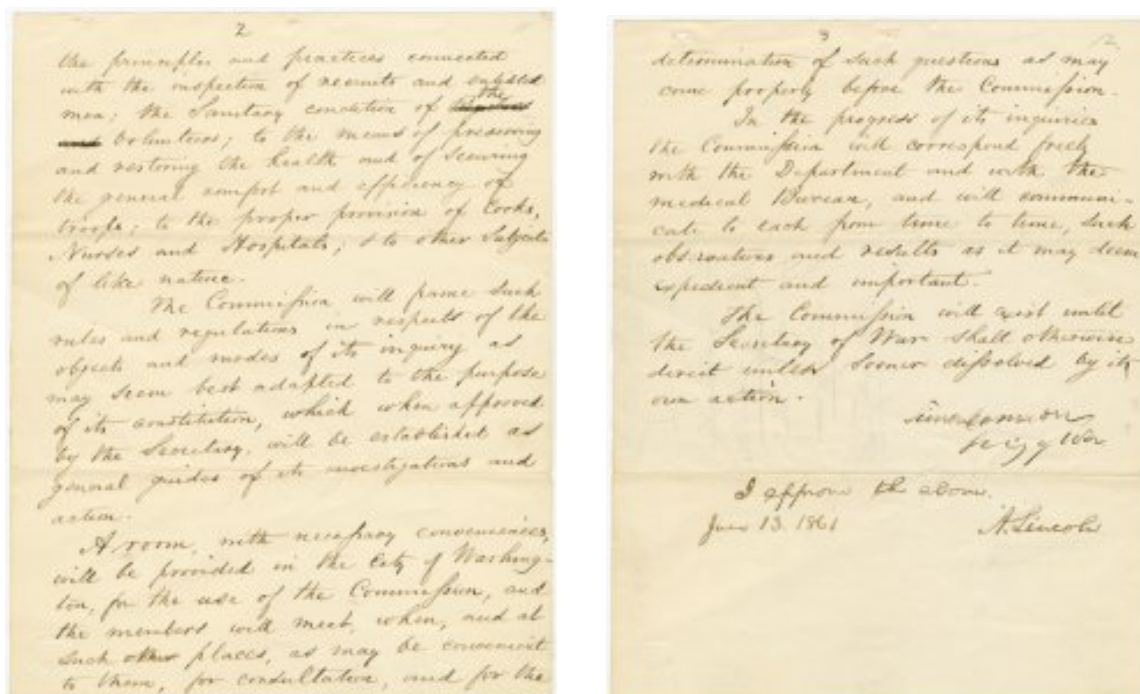
Blackwell wanted “to organize the whole benevolence of women of the country into a general and central association,” according to USSC nurse and historian Katherine Wormeley.”²⁶ The WCAR would coordinate and organize the local relief efforts of northern women, communicate directly with the Army’s medical department about the soldiers’ needs, and perform the selection, registration, and training of women nurses.

Blackwell had encountered numerous obstacles in getting her degree and setting up her practice. She had learned that having the support of prominent men was important for success. The WCAR asked its Vice President, Reverend Henry Whitney Bellows, to take a committee to Washington D.C. to meet with the Army Medical Department and the Secretary of War Simon Cameron. After touring Union hospitals and seeing that many soldiers were in bad health, Bellows saw that there was also a need to work with the Army to improve the conditions, procedures and sanitation of Army hospitals and

camps. Bellows and his colleagues proposed a civilian sanitary commission based upon Florence Nightingale's British Sanitary Commission in the Crimea.²⁷

The Army was at first resistant to working with a civilian group. After Bellows met with Army medical official Dr. R.C. Satterlee, he later wrote that Satterlee believed that the proposed Commission was "obtrusive" and "likely to grow troublesome if [it] did not die down."²⁸ In response, Bellows and his colleagues sent a letter to the Secretary of War Cameron pointing out how women everywhere wanted to support the troops, and describing how the Commission could actually provide protection to the Army by acting as the intermediary between the military and the thousands of women who were offering their help. According to the men, "The War Department will hereafter inevitably experience in all its bureaus the incessant and irresistible motions of [women's] zeal, in the offer of medical aid, in the applications of nurses, and the contributions of supplies."²⁹ The Commission proposed to shield the Army by providing a "masculine discipline,"³⁰ so that the women's help would be "least hurtful to the army system."³¹ Lincoln signed this declaration on June 13, 1861.³²

Figure 5: Order Creating the USSC



Order creating the United States Sanitary Commission, signed and approved by President Lincoln on June 13, 1861. United States Sanitary Commission Records, 1861-1872, New York Public Library. Image ID: 1947303

Women's Work with the USSC

The USSC Branch Network: “A Sisterhood of States”

Once the USSC was formed, the work of collecting supplies and money to help Union troops was now part of the new Commission’s responsibilities; however, the WCAR insisted upon being recognized as an independent organization.³³ It became the USSC’s chief auxiliary, and was in charge of working with local aid societies across the country to solicit, collect, sort and allocate clothing, food and supplies for the troops. A young woman in her mid-twenties named Louisa Lee Schuyler became the head of the auxiliary.³⁴

To accomplish its goals, the WCAR capitalized upon antebellum America’s women’s associations that were already established for helping the poor and disadvantaged, and now were helping with the war. By doing so, the WCAR combined the idea of the “domestic sphere” with the more progressive idea of women as an organized force in the Civil War. Over time, more groups were established in various cities and towns. The women created a system of regional managers, with branches in many cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Chicago. The Northwestern branches had 3,000 local aid societies alone. By the end of the war, it was estimated that the USSC network consisted of approximately 7,000 soldiers aid societies across the North and Midwest.³⁵

One of the first challenges the WCAR faced was the need to identify the leaders of each local society, learn what they were already doing to help the war effort, and connect them all into a large network. The women then had to persuade these societies to contribute their carefully made or collected clothing and goods to a centralized bureau. For communities that had been focusing on the needs of the troops from their own town, this was a huge change. In addition, the societies needed to be assured that even small donations made a difference, as many of their members were poor women struggling to survive while their men were at war. To connect with the societies and make them see the value of their contributions, Schuyler and her colleagues wrote personalized notes to women in cities and towns. They tried to talk about things that they had in common with the women. For example, according to historian Judith Giesberg, Louisa Schuyler included messages such as “I shall always remember the morning with you at Norwich with the greatest pleasure,” and “Miss May of Boston, your niece I believe, was with me in Washington.”³⁶ In this way, the WCAR was able to reach out to women in distant cities and towns and engage their help, creating what branch manager Abby May called a “sisterhood of states.”³⁷

To ensure the local groups’ continued participation, the WCAR was flexible, generous, and communicative. It wrote regular reports, which were published by the USSC. Its branch managers traveled all over the Northeast and Midwest providing information and encouraging donations. They toured hospitals and camps to better understand how they could support the troops.³⁸ The branch leaders used letters and visits to tell the various aid groups how individual regiments might have too much of one item while others didn’t have enough, showing the importance of a centralized supply bureau. Some societies wanted to keep some supplies and donations for the troops from their own area, and the WCAR was flexible about this request in order to keep the wide-ranging network of societies from splintering. When smaller, poorer groups said that

they could not contribute, the WCAR offered to match any funds received from small societies with money from the USSC's treasury. The USSC also agreed to pay for freight when donors were worried about the transportation costs of goods to regional depots, and to pay for cloth so that volunteers could continue to sew clothing for donation even after running out of supplies of ready-made items. The branch women were so successful in reaching out to faraway contributors that even the Pacific coast donated approximately \$1.5 million to Civil War relief.³⁹

Figure 6: Supplies Report from the Indiana Branch of the USSC

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Shipped to Bowling Green, Ky. Nov. 6th, 1862, care Dr. Reagen.

12 Pillows.	55 Handkerchiefs.
50 " cases.	30 Pairs Mittens.
50 Shirts.	100 Pounds dried apples.
50 Pairs drawers.	200 Pounds dried peaches.
50 Towels.	68 Cans fruit.

Shipped to Perryville, Ky., Nov. 17th, 1862, care Dr. Bosworth.

100 Blankets.	30 Bushels onions.
200 Pounds dried apples.	100 Pounds dried peaches.
50 Bushels potatoes.	

Shipped to New Albany, Ind. November 24th, 1862, care New Albany Sanitary Commission.

1 Cotton Matrass.	26 Coats.
1 Bed Tick.	3 Vests.
39 Sheets.	78 Pairs pants.
27 Pillows.	6 Dressing Gowns.
106 Pillow cases.	9 Pairs Drawers.
15 Quilts.	183 Shirts.
77 Pads and cushions.	87 Towels.
234 Bandages.	42 Handkerchiefs.
9 Arm slings.	7 Housewives.
65 Pounds rags.	1 Can fruit.
20 " lint.	300 Pounds dried apples.

Shipped to Memphis, Tenn., Dec. 4, 1862, Care Sister St. John.

199 Pillows.	94 Pairs socks.
341 Pillow cases.	245 Pounds rags.
73 Sheets.	70 " lint.
3 Quilts.	314 Pads and cushions.
3 Blankets.	800 Bandages.
250 Towels.	2 Bbls. Rusk.
55 Handkerchiefs.	39 Cans fruit.
2 Coats.	30 Pounds starch.
1 Pair pants.	50 " sugar.
439 Shirts.	60 Gallons pickles.
165 Pairs drawers.	125 Pounds dried apples.

Excerpt from a page of the Indiana Sanitary Commission report to Governor Morton, listing the goods shipped to soldiers in November 1862. Source: *Report of the Indiana Sanitary Commission Made to the Governor, January 2, 1865*, (Indianapolis, 1865)

As the war progressed, the USSC women used Sanitary Fairs as a way to raise additional money, and revive morale and support for Union soldiers. The fairs provided exhibits that celebrated locally made items and provided entertainment and food. The branch women traveled across the country to meet and negotiate with civic and business leaders, organizing construction of temporary buildings and deciding what would be

offered at the fair. Planning for these events was time-consuming, but well worth it: as previously mentioned, the fairs raised nearly \$3 million for branch treasuries, or over \$60 million in today's currency,⁴⁰ which helped them continue to supply donations for the USSC.

In summary, the USSC's WCAR auxiliary was a vital force in collecting supplies and funds totaling more than \$1 billion to support the Union troops.⁴¹ In the process, as its female managers traveled around the country and negotiated with civic organizations and businesses, the WCAR provided its workers unique opportunities to operate outside traditional expectations for women.

Figure 7: Brooklyn Sanitary Fair



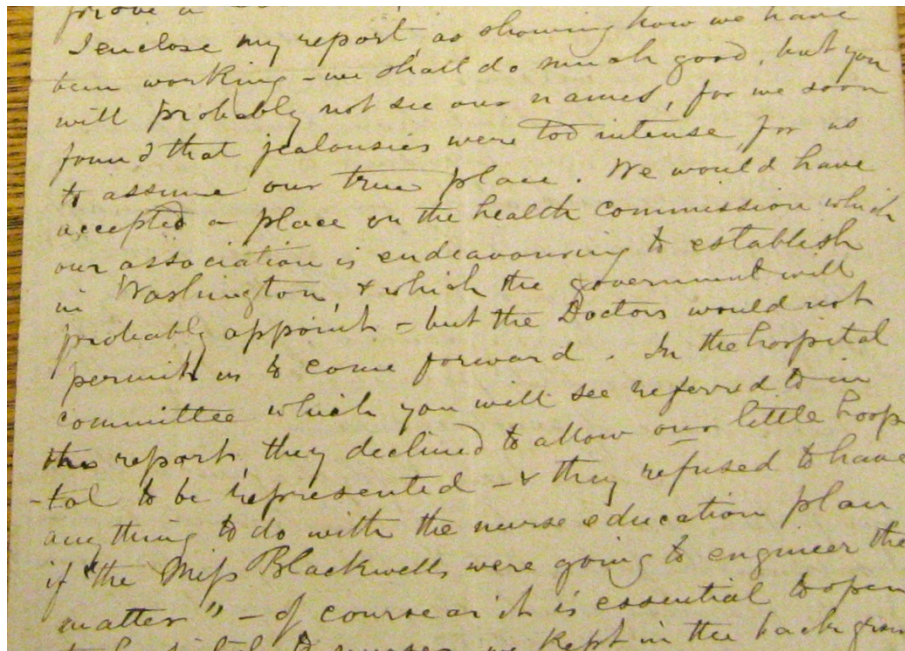
"Brooklyn Fair in Aid of the Sanitary Commission" *Harper's Weekly*, March 5, 1864

USSC Women as Nurses

When the Civil War began, a separate part of the USSC army had to wage a battle of its own to place female nurses in Union hospitals. At the time the USSC was established, Dorothea Dix had been appointed Superintendent of Women Nurses by Secretary of War Cameron. Elizabeth Blackwell was not given a role, nor was she asked to join the USSC as a medical advisor, even though she had been so instrumental in the formation of the WCAR. Her sister Emily, also a doctor, was not asked to participate either. When Blackwell wrote to her best friend Barbara Bodichon about the new Commission, she said "you will probably not see our names...the doctors would not

permit us to come forward...and refused to have anything to do with the nurse education plan if the 'Miss Blackwells were going to engineer the matter'" (see Figure 8).⁴² Initially, the reception of nurses by the Army was negative, and the WCAR noted that "women working in army hospitals are objects of continual evil speaking among coarse subordinates, are looked at with a doubtful eye by all but the most enlightened surgeons, and have a very uncertain, semi-legal position, with poor wages and little sympathy."⁴³

*Figure 8: Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell's Letter to Barbara Bodichon:
...You Will Probably Not See Our Names...*



Letter from Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell to her friend Barbara Bodichon, June 5, 1861. In the letter, she refers to the establishment of the United States Sanitary Commission. Although Blackwell had been one of the founders of the Women's Central Association of Relief, the precursor to the USSC, she was not invited to join the Commission's medical advisory board. Elizabeth Blackwell Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

According to Giesberg, physicians such as Dr. John Brinton of Mound City, Illinois showed the common negative reaction to the nurses when he described those sent by Dorothea Dix as "old hags ... surrounding a bewildered army surgeon, each one clamoring for her little wants."⁴⁴ The women assigned to help in hospitals were not always trained, and were certainly not used to the strict hierarchy of the military. But even with little experience, they saw what needed improvement and occasionally challenged the surgeons and hospital staff regarding what they viewed as cruel treatment of soldiers, or to fight corruption and theft of supplies. For example, one nurse in Illinois complained to her state governor that her soldier patients did not have enough to eat at Quincy Hospital.⁴⁵ When Nurse Hannah Ropes learned that a hospital steward was trying

to sell donated food and clothing, she spoke to the surgeon in charge. She also reported that he mistreated a boy at the hospital. When the surgeon in charge and Surgeon General Hammond did not take action, she went to the Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and he had the steward and the hospital surgeon taken to prison.⁴⁶ The nurse who was perhaps the most successful at challenging Army authority was Mary Ann Bickerdyke. In her mid-forties, she was an experienced nurse who was loved by her patients. After she accused a surgeon of wrongdoing and he complained to General Ulysses S. Grant, Grant told the surgeon, "My God, man, Mother Bickerdyke outranks everybody, even Lincoln. If you have run amok of her, I advise you to get out quickly before she has you under arrest."⁴⁷

In contrast, female nurses were welcomed on the USSC hospital transport ships. These ships, launched in the spring of 1862 in coordination with McClellan's campaign against the Confederacy in Virginia, brought injured soldiers home off of the battlefield. While the Army had had difficulties accepting female nurses at the hospitals on land, USSC Commissioner Frederick Law Olmstead, who organized the ships, wanted to bring women aboard as nurses because they could provide a "home away from home" for the sick and injured soldiers.⁴⁸ His vision was in line with the notion of the female "domestic sphere." These women nurses were responsible for organizing food and accommodations on board, tending to soldiers' needs, and assisting the medical staff. Describing her assignment, Katherine Wormeley at first compared it to "arranging a doll's house."⁴⁹

Life on the ship turned out to be very different for these women, however. The doctors and nurses on board were overwhelmed with sick and dying soldiers; during one three-day period, they cared for approximately 2,000 men.⁵⁰ Harriet Whetton wrote about receiving Union soldier prisoners of war in Virginia: "At the first sight of the old Flag the poor boys set up a weak cheer and were so eager that they began to tumble and hobble out almost before the train stopped." However, she said, the men "were in a wretched condition, their wounds full of maggots, their clothes full of vermin and nearly starved."⁵¹ Similar to the experience of the branch women, traditional gender roles and spheres broke down as the women triaged patients and worked alongside surgeons. According to Giesberg, they set aside traditional feminine values and clothing, and even went as far as to copy a flannel shirt stolen from a Dr. Agnew. They wore these "Agnews" with their skirts (see Figure 9).⁵²

When there wasn't enough equipment on the ship to make the hundreds of meals necessary, the women crept off the ship and stole a stove from a general's quarters. "Kleptomania," said Katherine Wormeley, "is the prevailing disease among us ... we think nothing of watching the proprietor of some nicety out of the way, and then pocketing the article."⁵³

The women believed their work to be vitally important. Wormeley said later: "we worked together under the deepest feelings, and to the extent of our powers, shoulder to shoulder, helping each other to the best of our ability, and no one failing or hindering another."⁵⁴ Olmstead was proud of the women as well: "God knows what we should have done without them, they have worked like heroes night and day, and though the duty is frequently most disagreeable ... I have never seen one of them flinch for a moment."⁵⁵

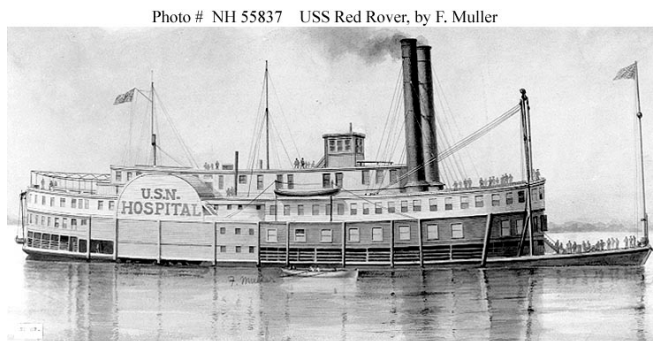
Figure 9: Katherine Prescott Wormeley in her “Agnew” Shirt



Katherine Prescott Wormeley in her hospital transport nurse clothing, including her “Agnew” shirt. *The Massachusetts Commander Military Order of the Loyal Legion and the U.S. Army Military History Institute.*

Just as gender barriers broke down on the USSC transport ships, it seems that some racial barriers may have also broken down, giving several African-American escaped slave or “contraband” women the opportunity to work as nurses. Hospital records show that while many African American women worked in hospitals during the Civil War, many had cleaning or cooking duties.⁵⁶ If they did have nursing duties it was usually to take care of African American soldiers.⁵⁷ In contrast, records from the Hospital Muster Rolls show that several hospital ships set up by the USSC in the Midwest carried female “contraband” as paid crew, and many were promoted to nursing positions.⁵⁸ At least one African American woman, Anne Stokes, went on to claim a pension for her nursing work on the USS Red Rover.⁵⁹ Historian Steven Roca describes the African American women aboard the USS Red Rover as “the first nurses in the United States Navy.”⁶⁰

Figure 10: Hospital Transport Ship



USS Red Rover (1862-1865)
Sepia wash drawing by F. Muller, circa 1900.
Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection, Washington, DC.
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph.

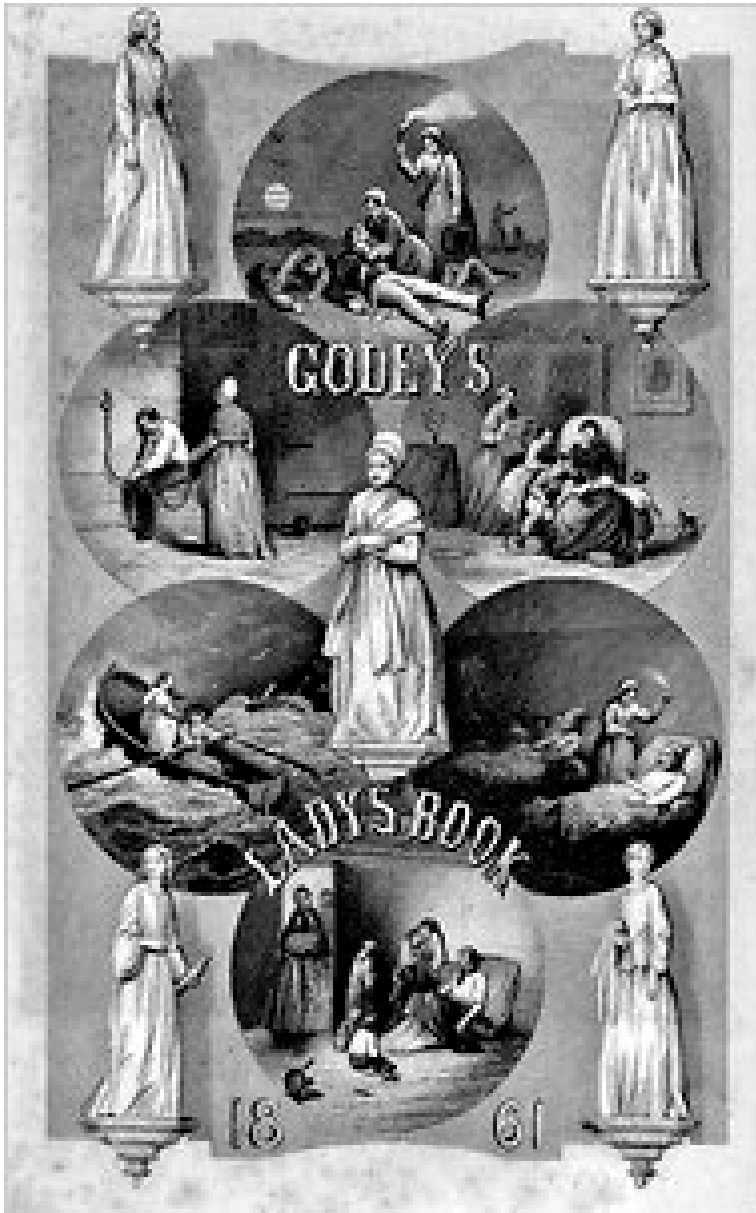
The Impact of Women's Work with the USSC

While relief societies and the reform movements of antebellum America had allowed women the opportunity to work outside the home and contribute to society, the WCAR and the USSC represented a major movement not only in the Civil War, but also in the power of women's work. One of the things women learned was the importance of a large, national base for lobbying for change. Many women had worked in local reform efforts before the war, but the USSC and WCAR enabled them to begin negotiating with the male-dominated political system. While women's suffrage was not recognized officially until 1920, the Civil War spurred growth in women's ability to organize themselves on a national level. With national membership across different regions and classes, organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (the "WCTU") and the American Women Suffrage Association (the "AWSA") had greater presence, lobbying power and momentum. Some USSC women went on to be leaders of national organizations: Mary Livermore, who had participated in temperance and abolition work before the war, later became the president of the AWSA. "Annie" Wittenmyer, who had created diet programs for Civil War hospitals, went on to become the president of the WCTU.

Women who worked with the USSC also came to understand that domestic labor had economic value, rather than being a natural part of womanhood that did not deserve recognition or pay. The branch managers had to assign monetary value to "women's work" -- the items collected or made by the women in the aid societies. They organized and handled the financial responsibilities of Sanitary Fairs and hospital fund-raising. After the war, many feminists focused on recognizing a woman's worth and the economic value of domestic activities as part of their demand for equal rights. In addition, women campaigned for better working conditions and pay for those women working outside the home, resulting in organizations like the New York Workingwomen's Protective Union in 1865. By 1868, the Union had helped with nearly 20,000 cases in which working women had been defrauded by employers, laying the groundwork for future efforts by women for fair treatment in pay.⁶¹

In addition, the work of the USSC to train and assign nurses to hospitals changed people's minds over time about women's roles in nursing and, eventually, medicine. Prior to the Civil War, women had been discouraged from pursuing such a career; however, within a year of the start of the war, Surgeon General Hammond had decided to allow local surgeons to personally hire women to take up to one-third of nursing roles in their hospitals.⁶² As a result, more than 20,000 Union women found work as nurses and hospital workers in the Civil War.⁶³ Even *Godey's Lady's Book* celebrated the female nurse: in a cover from an 1861 edition, Dorothea Dix and Florence Nightingale are featured in a collage that notably has women caring for injured men, not just for women and for children (see Figure 11). The imagery is in contrast to the previous illustration of the "domestic sphere," where a woman sits quietly in a comfortable home with children on her lap. The nurses are pictured in dangerous situations, clearly outside the home, in

Figure 11: Women Nurses



The cover of Godey's Lady's Book from January 1861, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania. Dorothea Dix is in the upper left corner and Florence Nightingale is in the lower right.

boats and hospitals and even carrying torches in open air darkness. Shortly after the war was over, the American Medical Association said that hospitals should have training for nurses,⁶⁴ and the first two of many formal nursing schools were opened. By the mid-1880s there were twenty-two nursing schools. By the 1890s several medical schools, including the University of Michigan, opened their doors for women.⁶⁵ While most of the USSC nurses did not continue in the job after the war, many went on to do valuable work setting up hospitals and nursing schools, or other health care organizations. Clara Barton, for example, went on to found the Red Cross in May of 1881.

An important aspect of women's work with the USSC was the relationship between the wide-ranging local women's relief societies and the central, male USSC leadership. The female branch managers who led the WCAR gained skills not just in finance and logistics, but also in negotiation and communication. For example, if branch managers disagreed with the Commission men's actions or behavior, they confronted their "leaders" and told them they did not approve. The women even threw out male employees who overstepped their boundaries,⁶⁶ and complained to the Surgeon General that the first USSC nurses were not treated well.⁶⁷ They refused to allow commission leaders to change the reports in publications without their approval.⁶⁸ Although the Commission officially disbanded in May of 1864, branches in many areas continued to support soldiers and their families for years after the war.⁶⁹

Women's work with the USSC also gave them the tools and experience they needed to help push the government to take responsibility for disadvantaged people. As mentioned above, the Commission women continued to help soldiers and their families get support even after the USSC was formally shut down. After the war, many women created programs that worked with the government to help the poor and sick. Louisa Schuyler, for example, created a committee to inspect hospitals and poorhouses, and work with the state to make changes. Says historian Jeanie Attie, "Schuyler herself drafted the regulations of the association, secured its legislation, and formed a visiting committee."⁷⁰

Clara Barton later claimed that when the Civil War ended "woman was at least fifty years in advance of the normal position which continued peace would have assigned her."⁷¹ Years later, Schultz echoes Barton's words when she says women gained "new perspectives on what could be achieved, socially, politically, and institutionally after [the war]."⁷² The history of the USSC embodies this transition for women: it was a unique opportunity for women from all social classes to participate in the Union's war effort and move beyond the "domestic sphere."

The women of the Commission themselves spoke about how their own lives were transformed. Louisa Schuyler described the USSC as "a great educator to the women of the day. I regard it as one of the greatest blessings in my life to have been privileged to take part in it." Schuyler said her activities with the Commission "opened my eyes to the great value and the great power of organization – of which I had known nothing."⁷³

Through their work with the USSC, thousands of women across the nation had mobilized in an effort to provide food, clothing, money and nursing care to Army troops; they were a unique force in the Civil War, the Union's "other army."

¹ Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Roy P. Basler, ed., Vol. III “Remarks at Closing of Sanitation Fair , Washington D.C. (March 18, 1864), p. 254

² Jeanie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* Publisher (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) p. 3

³ Lincoln, p. 254

⁴ Charles J. Stille, *History of the United States Sanitary Commission: Being the General Report of Its Work During the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866) p. iv

⁵ L. P. Brockett, M.D. and Mary Vaughan, *Womans Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience* (Philadelphia: Zeigler, McCurdy & Co., 1867) p. 79

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