“Worth a Dozen Men:”
Dorothea Dix and the Gender Roles Women Experienced throughout the Civil War

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1 Marital status of female Union hospital workers
Abstract

Dorothea Dix was tasked with creating regulations for women to follow if they wished to become nurses during the Civil War. The regulations that she created impacted the way that the nursing profession was formed. By allowing women to become nurses and give aid to fallen soldiers, they achieved a feeling of purpose and equality outside the home. This feeling of purpose can be read in the diaries and letters of Civil War nurses themselves through their descriptions of their own experiences. The sights that nurses witnessed during the Civil War while in hospitals and at the battlefields stuck with them. They saw the horrors of war first hand even though they were not on the front line of the battles themselves. These experiences that nurses dealt with can be compared as the equivalent to what a soldier who was fighting on the battlefield would have seen.
Introduction

Approximately 620,000 soldiers died over the course of the Civil War. Two-thirds of this number was caused by disease and battle wounds.¹ This is already a tremendously high amount of lives lost, but this number would have been even greater if it had not been for the women who dedicated their time and lives to be on the front during the Civil War. These women provided aid to wounded and sick soldiers who relied on them. Before the Civil War there was no definition for a nurse. There were also no women at that time who were trained to be nurses. Dorothea Dix generated the criteria for nursing regulations that was used to appoint women during the Civil War. The criteria that she produced created the nursing profession itself, thus impacting the women of Dix’s time period as well as women of future generations to come. Although the criteria that Dix created was very strict towards women who applied. Today these regulations are not used in the nursing profession. The creation of these rules as well as allowing women to become nurses and give their aid to fallen soldiers provided women a feeling of purpose outside the home for one of the first times in history. This is outlined in the women’s diaries and letters who served on the front during the Civil War. Many Wisconsin women wrote to the Governor of Wisconsin asking him to send them South to give aid to sick and wounded soldiers. Many were opposed to allowing women to become nurses because their purpose in society was to stay home, care for the family, and not to be independent. Women leaving the home to care for men who were strangers to them was a major change society had to adjust to. Women being up-close and personal with the aftermath of the fighting on the battlefields took a toll on them. Nurses during the Civil War saw as much blood and gore as a soldier had fighting on the battlefields.

themselves. On top of this nurses also found themselves aiding sick soldiers who had anything from infections, to Typhoid Fever. These courageous women who volunteered their time to be nurses aided wounded soldiers through surgeries, and had to watch those who could not be saved, die in the hospitals.

**Historiography**

Before the Civil War, it was uncommon for women to work outside of the home, or provide medical aid to anyone who was not a part of her family. The Civil War was the first step to women gaining some forms of independence, as well as them feeling needed by men instead of the other way around. Many historians have captured how these women became nurses as well as what was going on behind the scenes while they were in the hospitals. Although the diaries and letters from women of the time period who served on either side of the fighting tell the women’s actual accounts and stories of what they actually went through from their own points of view.

Jane Schultz’s book, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America*, she provides information about women while they were on duty as nurses.² These are the details of what they had to do to get where they were, and the tasks that the job entailed. Schultz also notes public scrutiny about women becoming nurses because of the risk of them losing their reputations. This was a major change for society to grasp at the time. Schultz broke this down into a North vs. South contrast because each side provided the women with a different experience. She also notes that this was the first time that women were feeling like they had some of the power amongst gender roles. Men in these situations were wounded and powerless.

These men relied on these women to save their lives. They relied on them if they were gravely injured from the fighting, merely wounded, or had fallen ill to an infection or other illness. They needed these women to provide them with the proper necessary aid for either situation.

Libra Rose Hilde wrote, *Worth a Dozen men: Women and Nursing in the Civil War South*; this book provides mostly information about Confederate medical aspects and nursing of the Civil War. Hilde mentions how there were no programs before the Civil War for the proper training of nurses. This means that women had to bring previous knowledge that they had learned of medical work from the home, and learn the rest by physically doing the work when they were in the hospitals themselves. This book also notes why women were the best choice for the nursing positions. Women at this time were seen as having a natural sense at easing suffering and disease. This sense was better than any man’s and was in their domestic sphere of providing aid.

*Heroines of Mercy Street* authored by Pamela D. Toler and Suzanne Toren provides background information about Dorothea Dix as well as information about her childhood. Dorothea Dix lived away from her parents for most of her life. She moved around many times between several relatives, throughout her childhood. When living with relatives in her young adult years, Dix found a love for teaching others lessons of reading and writing. This soon developed into providing those who couldn’t speak for themselves the rights that they deserved. Dix first displayed this in aiding those who were mentally ill in prisons across the east coast. After the Civil War broke out Dix switched from the mentally ill to providing Northern women

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3 Hilde, *Worth a Dozen Men*, 1.
4 Hilde, *Worth a Dozen Men*, 3.
with the ability to become nurses. Dix provided the first ever rules and regulations that women needed to follow in order to become nurses in the Union Army.\(^6\) This is how she came to be so influential in the Union nursing world.

**Nursing Background Information**

Before the Civil War, nursing was not a known profession. Those who were sick or injured were treated in the safety and comfort of their own homes by the women in their family. “Doctors examined, treated, and even operated surgically within the confines of the home”.\(^7\) Before women’s help to wounded soldiers was accepted, enlisted men found themselves feeding and aiding their own fellow soldiers who were injured or ill. In the 1860’s, the term “nurse” lacked a clear definition. It was a broad term that included matrons, unpaid volunteers, convalescing soldiers, religious sisters, hospital visitors, and members of voluntary organizations. It took women a lot of persuasive hard work to be allowed to give their aid to wounded soldiers. At this time it was not seen as acceptable for women to give aid to strange men that they had never known before outside of their own homes.\(^8\) Women advocated that caring for wounded soldiers was their duty and in their “sphere of activity” because caring for them would be an extension of their domestic duties as mothers.\(^9\) The caring aspect that they would feel over these soldiers would provide the wounded with the best care. The soldiers would feel that they were back at home being cared for by their own mothers. “Women were seen as being better with this type of work because they had a natural inclination to ease suffering and

\(^{6}\) Toler and Toren, *Heroines of Mercy Street*, 1.  
\(^{8}\) Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 49.  
\(^{9}\) Lesniak, *Advances in Nursing Science*, 34.
disease.”¹⁰ Members of society were worried that soldiers wouldn’t see the nurses in a motherly way and instead go the opposite direction seeing these women in a way of sexual appeal. They also feared that women were only wanting to become nurses to find a husband and would forget their duties to the other wounded soldiers around them once they had found one.

Some feared that women would be subject to the whims of sexually aggressive soldiers and that the air of moral laxity in hospitals would encourage romantic attachments and jeopardize reputations. Women who joined the service in 1861 were well aware of the social forces arrayed against them. Some spent time justifying their actions to doubters, insisting that their intent was not to flirt or find husbands. Others sought anonymity for fear that the decision would make them vulnerable to public scrutiny. The power of public approval was strong enough to deter some from pursuing positions altogether.¹¹ Once the Civil War broke out these thoughts eventually subsided with the realization of how great the need was for nurses and their assistance. It was evident that there was a need for anyone who was willing and able to help. Women who were already nurses in the Civil War advocated for others to want to get involved as well. This was because of the amount of help that was needed for the amount of sick and wounded men.

At the beginning of the Civil War the South did not even have a set up for medical aid for their wounded soldiers. The South was so focused on setting up a new form of government and the fighting of war itself that they missed this major step. “Sickness in camps after the first few battles led Southerners to confront the need for hospitals, steady stream of medical supplies, and food for the sick and wounded soldiers.”¹² This was the cause for a great amount of loss of life at the beginning of the war. This could have been prevented if a medical system had been set up on the southerner’s side at the beginning of the Civil War.

¹⁰ Hilde, *Worth a Dozen Men*, 52.
¹¹ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 49.
¹² Hilde, *Worth a Dozen Men*, 27.
Where women lived, either in the North or the South also played a factor in the type of work they performed. It also determined the location that they worked at, either in a Union hospital, their own homes, or at a hospital that was recently created because of the battle that had just occurred. More battles took place in the South; this made it easier for women who were already in the South to provide aid. On the other hand, women in the North had to travel to get to the wounded. This meant that they had to leave their homes and families behind.

The great majority of Northern workers served in urban general hospitals; Southern workers’ experience was more local because work took place at home or in makeshift hospitals near home. For confederate and Union workers alike, the kind of hospital and its proximity to military action determined what kind of work was performed. Depending on the hospital’s distance from a battle site, workers might encounter freshly wounded men or those already treated in the field. When remote from fighting, general hospitals treated the less critically ill and those who could stand travel. Confederate women were often closer to battlefield carnage and thus the recipients of more critically ill soldiers than workers in Union hospitals.13

This made it easier for Southern women to give aid because they were closer to the fighting as it was occurring. Southern women did not need to be assigned a designated hospital; they typically could aid wounded in their own homes, or they went to the hospital closest to them. They were also typically close enough to their homes to be able to go home and take care of their families when their services were not needed. Northern women did not have that simplicity. They had to determine who would care for their children, if they had any, in their absence. Northern women also had to establish how they were going to get to the hospital they had been assigned and determine if they were going to travel solo or with the protection of a male. Northern women had to also determine what they needed to pack without knowing how long they were going to be gone. This affected Northern women once they reached their final destinations.

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13 Schultz, Women at the Front, 33.
The Union had a developed medical aid system at the beginning of the war. Due to this they have better medical records involving those who volunteered their time into the service of the Union army. This graph displays the data that the Union army did have. Out of the 2,335 women who listed marital data on their record forms, 516 or 22 percent of these women listed themselves as single. This number does not include the 450 nuns who devoted their time in the Union army during the Civil War. If nuns were included into the single category the percentage of single women would rise to 41 percent. The last section of this graph goes to married or widowed women who served in the Union Army. These women make up the remaining three-fifths of the data. There is no data that sets apart the percentage of married women who were also widowed. This data implies that all women answered the call to lend their services. The percentage being higher towards married and widowed women could be because of the regulations that Dorothea Dix created in allowing women to become nurses in the Union Army. Dix only accepted women over thirty years of age. Women were typically already married by this age, causing the percentage to be higher in this category over single women.

Catholic sisters also played a very large role in nursing during the Civil War. “617 sisters representing 12 different orders from 21 separate communities nursed the sick and wounded
from both the Union and Confederate sides."14 Sister nurses performed similar duties to other nurses who were working the hospitals, but they added their own religious aspect to their care. “They provided comfort to soldiers, encouraged the dying to seek God’s forgiveness, baptized soldiers who wished it and prepared the dead for burial.”15 These sister nurses provided more of a religious aspect to these soldiers. If the wounded did not have much hope for recovery, they were able to seek comfort in these nurses.

**Dorothea Dix**

Dorothea Dix would help create the starting basis of the nursing profession during the Civil War. She fought for a right to have a say in the medical world which was a predominantly male profession. She put her heart and soul into her work, made sure that wounded soldiers got the best aid possible, as well as ensuring her nurses received the respect they deserved from surgeons. In allowing her work to be her life, Dix felt the pressures, “This dreadful Civil War has as a huge beast consumed my whole of life”.16

Dix was born on April 4th, 1802 in northern Massachusetts which today is now Maine.17 Her father, Joseph Dix was a Methodist minister who traveled most of the time for his career, he was also an alcoholic. Her mother, Mary Bigelow Dix suffered from depression after the birth of her third child. After the birth of her third child, her depression became so bad that she was unable to leave her bed. Dix was the oldest of the three children and found herself doing most of the caring for her younger siblings since her mother could not provide consistent support for

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them. When Dix was fourteen years old she moved to her great-aunt Sarah’s in Worcester. Here she opened a school for young children where she developed her own curriculum for teaching her students reading, writing, ethical living, and the natural sciences. The school was run in an old printing shop. Dix had about twenty students attending and the school ran for three years. She would teach for the next fifteen years in Boston until she had to take time off due to tuberculosis. After two years of healing, Dix began to do work with those who were mentally ill in prisons. She fought to get prisoners better living conditions and improve the prison system overall for inmates who were mentally ill. By the time the Civil War began, Dix had spent twenty years working with the mentally ill.

With society deeming it inappropriate for a respectable woman to leave her home and family to care for wounded soldiers who were strangers to her, a compromise needed to be made. This compromise was found with Dorothea Dix. She created a proposal in 1861 and presented it to the Secretary of War Simon Cameron. He accepted this proposal after three days.

The free services of Miss D. L. Dix are accepted by the War department and that she will give at all times necessary aid in organizing military hospitals for the cure of sick and wounded soldiers, aiding the chief surgeon by supplying nurses and substantial means for the comfort and relief of the suffering; also that she is fully authorized to receive, control and disburse special supplies bestowed by individuals or associations for the comfort of their friends or the citizen soldiers from all parts of the limited states; as also, under the action of the Acting Surgeon General, to draw from the army stores.

Simon Cameron found himself accepting her proposal because he was under-resourced in the medical area, and overwhelmed. The acceptance of this proposal appointed Dix to the position of superintendent of women nurses for the Union Army. This statement by the Secretary of War granted Dorothea Dix the power of directing nurses, organizing hospitals, and managing

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19 Ibid., 20-21.
supplies. She did not have authority over surgeons, but this was the most power that was given to a woman during the Civil War. Surgeon General Colonel Robert C. Wood announced that all interested women should contact Dix if they wished to become nurses. He did this so that it would prevent women volunteers from just simply showing up unexpectedly at military hospitals. The rules and criteria that she created for women to meet in order for them to become a nurse under her services were very strict. Dorothea Dix realized that society was not happy about women being so involved with the war. She accommodated her rules to this as well as because she understood that the medical field was a male-dominated environment of the war before her arrival. The rules that she created helped shape the nursing profession and form it into what it is today.

Two letters of reference are required that testify to an applicant’s morality, integrity, seriousness, and capacity for the care of the sick. Women will only be accepted if they are between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. Only women of good conduct, superior education, and serious disposition will have preference. Women should have a plain appearance, and be strong enough to turn a full-grown man over in his bed. 

The one thing that Dorothea Dix did not ask women when they were applying to become a nurse underneath her was about their experience. This was because she just assumed that no women applying would have any nursing experience that was beyond caring for members of her own family in her own home. Nursing had not been a profession for very long, and there was no school that you could attend to learn the work in order to gain the experience that Dorothea Dix was looking for. Dix turned away many women who applied to be a nurse under her services because she thought that they were too young, attractive, or frivolous. The nurses under Dix were to wear only brown, gray or black dresses for practicality. These darker colors were preferred so that stains like blood, vomit, or pus would not show as easily. Bows, curls, jewelry, and

\[20\text{ Toler and Toren, Heroines of Mercy Street, 21.}\]
\[21\text{ Ibid., 25.}\]
especially hoop skirts were forbidden. Hospitals were crowded and a hoop skirt would only get in the way of the wounded soldiers and beds.\textsuperscript{22} The criteria that Dix had made to ease society’s nerves in allowing women to provide the soldiers was helpful in making it acceptable for women to serve. The soldiers themselves were very thankful that the women were around to aid their wounds and illnesses as well. Kate Cummings, a Confederate nurse wrote in her diary about the gratitude that she received from wounded soldiers. “Although many were skeptical of letting women give aid to the soldiers, the soldiers themselves were very thankful. If I were to live a hundred years, I should never forget the poor sufferers’ gratitude; for every little things done for them- a little water to drink, or the bathing of their wounds- seemed to afford them the greatest relief.”\textsuperscript{23} Dix was right in her intentions to fight society’s thoughts of preventing women to help during the Civil War. In the end they made a significant difference in lives saved and comforting those who were unable to be saved.

**Wisconsin Women Wanting To Serve Their Country**

After the first battle of the Civil War, the battle of Fort Sumter, applicants from women wishing to be accepted as nurses were received at an extraordinary rate from across the country. Women were motivated for many reasons to volunteer their services. Either they had a duty to their country, they had husbands, brothers, or sons fighting in the war and they wanted to ensure their safety, or they had just heard of a recent battle. Women wanted to do more than just collect supplies or sew shirts that could be sent to hospitals. They contacted anyone that they thought might be able to get them a position in a hospital. Women of Wisconsin contacted their governor, Governor Solomon, with their requests of being sent to the South to provide aid. These were very

\textsuperscript{22} Toler and Toren, *Heroines of Mercy Street*, 26.
determined women who wanted to do what they felt was right for their country. Mrs. Almeda Clark from Deansville, Wisconsin wrote to Governor Salomon on April 22nd 1861, and again on January 6th 1863. Her first letter reads:

Knowing by report that many of the noble sons of the North are called to go to the South to protect the Union and there engage in battle. I would and if the services which I might be able to render would be acceptable, as nurse among the wounded; I am thirty years of age, have had considerate experience among the sick as physician and nurse. Have not collegiate advantages nor do I make great presentations. I wish only to assist and to where it was proper for a true woman to be. But if the services of the northern daughters are needed why should they be withheld in the time of contest.24

Mrs. Clark did not go through Dorothea Dix when trying to find a way to become a nurse. Instead she went through the Governor of Wisconsin. In her letter she writes information about why she feels she is qualified to be a nurse. The qualifications that she has listed, seem that she would have been an accepted candidate by Dix. Mrs. Clark either hadn’t known to contact Dix, or had thought that going through her state’s governor was a better option. The reply she got from the Governor is not seen, but it seems that there was not a place open for Mrs. Clark to go to in the South. The fact that Mrs. Clark found herself writing to the governor again two years later says that her services probably weren’t accepted in 1861. When she wrote the governor a second time in 1863, this time she was more determined to be accepted than before.

As the present state of our country seems to demand the best and finest efforts of all freedom loving people. I wish to know if the services of a woman of my age and ability would be acceptable among the sick and wounded in any of the established hospitals under your provision. I am now past 31 years of age. Have had experience among sickness especially fever. I have had some medical knowledge both theoretical and practical. And some degree of satisfaction in the relief that nature designated me to some degree for the position. I know I am but a woman yet I cannot feel content to sit and fold my hands and say were I a man I would go and do something for my country. I would love to go now could I and that by your approval and in the bounds of right and propriety. I thought to write you in hopes you would favor me with your views upon the subject. I think I could obtain recommends from residing physicians and others if you think necessary. For I would

be true to my God, myself, and my country and is there a nobler work on earth than that of administering to sick and dying ones that fight for freedoms cause and our common country.  

Mrs. Clark was a woman who only wanted to do what she felt was right and just for her country. She believed that she owed it to her country to serve since she was able. She felt it unfair that she was a woman and could not devote her services the same way that a man could. In her second letter she wrote about how she cannot just sit and fold her hands in her lap. This was most likely because it had been what she had been doing for two years after she was not called to help after her first letter to the governor. In this second letter she wanted the Governor to know and understand that she was informed about the war, she is a patriot and that she was more than capable of handling herself in the South. She is just asking to be accepted in and to have a seat at the table.

Many other women in Wisconsin found themselves with the same thinking as Almeda Clark. Mary E. Carrs from Fitchburg Wisconsin, wrote to Governor Salomon on July 17, 1863. She had also heard that he had been sending nurses to the South, and wanted to know if she could do her part as well.

Having been informed that you have been sending young ladies, as nurses to the southern hospitals- and feeling a desire to send a helping hand in this, our country peril. I would gladly volunteer my services to aid the sick and wounded soldiers, and should chase any other opportunity off its self. I will hasten to embrace it- and will be in readiness on any short notice. Should of course prefer going with other ladies.  

It seems that these Wisconsin women knew that they wanted to help but were not sure how until word of mouth spread from others around them that the Governor had the power to send them to the South to give aid. Her application could also have been rejected by Dix, because she makes

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25 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 2, Folder 4.  
26 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 1, Folder 4.
note to write that he sends “young women” in her letter to the Governor. Mary Carrs also prefers to be sent with other women and not by herself. This could be because she is aware of how society feels in sending women to the South to provide aid to sick and wounded men who are strangers to them.

Women who were widowed either due to the Civil War, or other reasons also felt the need to provide service to their country. Mrs. Mary A. Wethenkend, a widow from Appleton, Wisconsin wrote to Governor Salomon on January 26th, 1863.

I am a widow and live in the city of Appleton. I am alone and have nothing to do or prevent me from going to one of the hospitals as nurse. I should like to go and do all the good I could. I have a great desire to do all I can for the poor soldiers. If you kind Sir think it best for me to go. I should do so with pleasure providing you can find me a place and send me a free pass please kind Sir write and let me know and you will oblige one that wants to do good.27

Mrs. Wethenkend felt that she could do more than just sitting in her home in Appleton, Wisconsin. Women who had suffered personal losses felt that it was easier to get over their own grief by helping to save the lives of others in whatever way they were able. These Wisconsin women were asking the Governor to send them to the South where most of the fighting was taking place, except for the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. They required his assistance because they could not always afford to make the journey themselves and did not have anywhere that they knew of to stay once they had arrived. This connects with one of the reasons that the Governor was not able to send every woman who wished to volunteer their time.

An obstacle that some Northern women did not always realize that they should take into consideration was the enormous climate difference in the South compared to the North. One woman, Mary H. Munsell, wrote to Governor Salomon from Milwaukee, Wisconsin on March

27 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 1, Folder 5.
17th 1863 making sure to note that she is aware of the climate change and that she has had experience working in it. “I desire to go to [illegible] to attend our sick soldiers. I am a very skillful nurse and acclimated to that climate having long been there and in South Carolina, and Louisiana for about fifteen years. I am therefore just what you need there and my [illegible] for the union as well as sympathy for the suffering induces me to make this offer.”28 Not all women were as willing to work in the southern heat as Mary H. Munsell. A letter written by N. M. Millar from Cambria, Wisconsin on July 28th, 1863 has a position all lined up to go to Memphis but she isn’t satisfied with the time that she is to go.

It has been proposed to me of late that I should labor for my country. I have had a good situation offered to me; as matron in the hospital [illegible] offered me- expense free- from and how my home with the [illegible of illegible] interesting for only sixty days. The only one objection that I did not like was that it’s so far South in this season of the year. As it is too Memphis- but if matrons are needed- I am willing to go after the hot season is over. 29

With so many women being told that their services weren’t needed, it is interesting to read a letter of a woman with a position that is expense free to her that does not wish to go on right away. The summers in the South were nothing to what Northern women were used to. It was enough to prevent Mary H. Munsell from accepting an expense free position.

Emilie Quiner of Madison, Wisconsin wrote a diary about her experiences serving in Memphis, Tennessee in the summer of 1863. She experiences many of the similar situations as the other women who wrote to the Governor. Quiner began almost every one of her diary entries talking about how warm the weather was. She was 24 years old when she was serving as a nurse in a Memphis hospital. During her time here she saw less battle wounds, and cared for men who

28 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 1, Folder 5.
29 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 1, Folder 6.
were ill or had caught an infection. In her diary she wrote on Monday, August 10th 1863, about an event involving an overdose of opium.

In my ward and Ward B all day. There was a boy about 19 in Ward B who has been under the influence of opium for two days so that he was perfectly stupid an could not be roused. The Dr. told me to give him strong coffee every half hour, all day. I did so but it did not good and about 8 o’clock in the evening he died. I felt very badly about it as I believe he died from an overdose of the drug.30

This is a sad example of doctors and nurses not really understanding dosages to give patients. The doctor telling Quiner to make him drink coffee would never have been able to reverse an overdose of opium. Uses of drugs like opium were better perfected throughout their uses during the Civil War. Many advancements in medicine were able to be made from a mistake similar to the one done on this young 19 year old soldier.

The one major aspect that society was worried about in letting women provide aid to men who were strangers to them was either of the two parties not being able to control themselves. This was why Dix had made specific age restrictions for her particular nurses. Although there were other ways to be sent as a nurse to a Civil War hospital as was seen from Wisconsin women writing to the Governor to be sent to the South. Women who wrote to Governor Salomon and were accepted by him were sent to where he thought they were most needed. A report written by Mrs. J. S. Colt, from where she was stationed in Nashville, Tennessee on April 24th 1863 describes a similar scenario. She wrote in her report “I find it impossible to resist any appeal from a man wearing the uniform of our beloved country”.31 It is not stated in this report the age of Mrs. Colt, but would show whether Dix’s age requirements were held up or not. It would be easy for women to be attracted to these men. If they had lived a sheltered life that society

31 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 2, Folder 3.
approved of before the war, then they probably had not had many relations with men who they were not related to. Cornelia Hancock, convinced her family to allow her to become a nurse by telling them that she would not be living in “a scandalous manner as a nurse and the men would not be attempting to seduce her.”32 One of the most interesting letters written to the Governor was one from a man on July 22nd 1861. C. D. Stephens was writing from Sheboygan, Wisconsin for a Mrs. J. D. Butler who had previously been approved to become a Civil War nurse by Dorothea Dix herself.

I write to you at the request of Mrs. J. D. Butler of Milwaukee (now visiting friends in Sheboygan) who has been commissioned by Miss Dix of Washington as a nurse in the Army. She has been assigned to the 5th or 6th regiment- whichever she may chose- She would esteem it a special favor if you would form at the names of the surgeons and their assistants in both regiments will probably leave. She is acquainted with Dr. Leaunaw of Milwaukee and thinks she would prefer going with the regiment to which he belongs should it leave soon.33

Leaving your home environment to go somewhere completely different is very hard to do. It took a lot of bravery and courage for these Wisconsin women to leave their homes to go to the South. Mrs. J. D. Butler knew that she wanted to serve her country, but felt more comfortable doing it in the regiment of a doctor that she was already acquainted with. Writing to the Governor requesting to be sent somewhere was the first step, being accepted and making your way to the South was the next. Once women arrived at their designated hospitals, they saw the horrors of the Civil War firsthand.

**Civil War Nurses Equivalent to Soldiers on the Battlefield**

Diaries from women go into detail about sights that they saw throughout their service in the war that they never imagined they would see. Clara Barton, Cornelia Hancock, Kate

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33 Wisconsin. Governor. Relief Work, Box 2, Folder 4.
Cummings, and Hannah Ropes wrote in their personal diaries of the sights that they witnessed while serving in Civil War hospitals and in places near where the battles had taken place. Clara Barton was a very determined Civil War nurse. She saw the horrors that resulted from the fighting while she provided aid to the wounded soldiers who needed it. “While tending to a wounded soldier, I felt a bullet rip through my sleeve and then strike the soldier in the chest, killing him instantly. Myself and the other nurses began to move the other wounded men into the barn out of harm’s way. I used my pocket knife to cut a bullet from the cheek of a wounded man.” Background information about this story from Clara Barton gives further detail about what these nurses went through from an outside perspective.

The nurses, going back under fire, continued to tend to the wounded, comfort the dying, cook for the living, and pray for the fighting. At the end of the day they continued to assist the surgeons, chloroforming and restraining surgical patients, as needed. Their hands were raw, lips chapped, mouths filled with the taste of gunpowder, lungs burning from the hot, sulfurous air of battle, and their ears ringing from the loud sounds of war.

For these nurses to continue pushing to save other wounded soldiers when so much was happening around them is remarkable. The only way to continue to push forward in that type of situation would be to block out the realities of the situation that these nurses found themselves in.

Cornelia Hancock arrived shortly after the battle of Gettysburg had finished. She was only twenty-three years old at the time, meaning that she could not have gone through Dix to become a nurse. She could have obtained her position through writing to her Governor as many women in Wisconsin did, or else she could have known someone and obtained a position through them. This was her first time offering assistance as nurse after a battle. She wrote in her diary of what she witnessed.


35 Lesniak, Advances in Nursing Science, 33.
Earth was the only available bed during those first hours after the battle. A long table stood in this woods and around it gathered a number of surgeons and nurses. This was the operating table, and for seven days it ran blood. A wagon stood near rapidly filling with amputated legs and arms; when wholly filled this gruesome spectacle withdrew from sight and returned as soon as possible for another load.36

Cornelia Hancock notes as well that she was shocked by the “overwhelming demand for any type of aid that could be given quickly.”37 Even though it was thought of as inappropriate for her to be so close to sick and wounded soldiers the reality of the situation was greater than what was thought to be proper in society. If Cornelia Hancock would not have gone to give her aid that day, more men would have died due to their injuries and illness overtime than there actually was.

Kate Cummings, a Confederate nurse serving during the Civil War wrote in her diary how nothing could have prepared her for the sights that she saw the first time she was around a regiment directly after a battle.

When within a few miles of the place, we could realize the condition of an army immediately after a battle. Nothing that I had ever read or heard could have given me the faintest idea of the horrors I witnessed here. I do not think the words are in our vocabulary expressive enough to present to the mind that realities of that sad scene. Certainly none of the glories of the war were presented here. Gray-haired men- men in the pride of manhood- beardless boys- Federals and all mutilated in every imaginable way, lying on the floor, just as they were taken from the battlefield; so close together that it was impossible to walk without stepping on them.38

Before the Civil War the most aid that women had provided had been to their family members inside their own homes. They were skilled at curing illness or even a broken bone, but they were not prepared for the massive quantity of blood or the high number of gunshot wounds, and amputations that were happening around them. The sight that Kate Cummings wrote that she will

36 Cornelia Hancock, Letters of a Civil War Nurse: Cornelia Hancock, 1863-1865, ed. Henrietta Stratton Jaquette (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 5.
37 Ibid, 7.
38 Cumming, Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse, 14.
never forget is the only time that she walked by the amputation room. “A stream of blood ran from the table into a tub in which was the arm. It had been taken off at the socket, and the hand, which but a short time before grasped the musket and battled from the right, was hanging over the edge of the tub, a lifeless thing.”³⁹ After months in the hospital and witnessing more sights like this Kate Cummings found herself wishing that she could become more emotionally hardened like some of the other nurses that surrounded her. “I often wish that I could become as callous as many seem to be, for there is no end to these horrors”.⁴⁰ Becoming emotionally hardened would only make the work that needed to be done easier. This way Kate Cummings would not find herself becoming emotional at the death of soldiers, or being moved by the amount of blood and wounded men around her.

Union Civil War nurse Hannah Ropes from Bedford, Massachusetts found herself viewing similar situations in her own experiences. In one of her letters to her daughter Alice she described one of her first encounters with wounded men, “I saw a sight today that I hope you never witness. There bent, clung, and stood in dumb silence, fifty grim, dirty, muddy, and wounded soldiers at the base of the stairs in the entryway.”⁴¹ Hannah Ropes developed what Kate Cummings wished that she could: the ability of being callous in these difficult situations. In her diary after Hannah Ropes saw these injured soldiers, she immediately jumped into action without even blinking an eye. She washed them, tended to their wounds, and even fixed those who had broken arms or legs because that was what she was there to do. She wrote that that is a date that she will never forget, July 5th 1862. She wrote letters mainly to her daughter Alice; she

⁴⁰ Ibid.
commonly told her that she wished to be back near her daughter but that she could only do that if her daughter needed her more than the soldiers do. She wrote to Alice of stories of patients who she felt the most connected with. “I sat up with a soldier who was shot in the lungs. I sat up and talked with him until he died. I promised him that in a few moments he would be free from all his pain. He believed me, and soon his breathing grew more gentle, and ending as softly as an infants.” 42 This story is not as gruesome as some that Kate Cummings told in her diaries but it is a very touching story that would hit home to anyone who is a mother caring for injured young soldiers. Hannah Ropes wrote to her daughter Alice that she had to pause in her writing because a soldier she had been sitting next to had just died. “I have stopped again, Alice, to close the eyes of a gentle German boy who has no one in this country to mourn for him. His parents live in the father land, and all the record there will be is a number on his grave.” 43 Learning about these soldier’s lives while they are tending to them and then watching them die before you would have been very traumatic. Being around all of the death is one thing, but to have begun to get to know the particular soldier throughout the days they had been in the hospital is another. This would have taken the same amount of strength and courage to deal with as would fighting on the battlefield. The hardship that nurses endured would leave the same impact on them after the war, as a soldier would have when they returned home.

Catholic sister nurses devoted their services during the Civil War and in turn saw their share of hardships and horrors that came from the battlefields. Sister M. Calista wrote “It was terrible to see the wounded. Many men had been neglected on the field, frozen fingers, ears, and feet. Some were blind, their eyes being shot out. After one battle there were seven hundred in the

42 Ropes, Civil War Nurse, 67-68.
43 Ibid, 70.
hospital with only four Sisters to wait on them.” There is no record of any Sister nurse being shot while offering her services, but there is a record of a few of the nurses dying of infectious diseases that they had contracted from the wounded soldiers. The Sister nurses that had died were given military honored deaths. They were escorted back to their church to be buried in their cemetery at Saint Mary’s by military escorts.

A reporter from the New York Daily Tribune gave an outsider’s perspective of what he saw when he visited a Civil War hospital when writing a story for the paper. “Men, dying and just dead, covered the floor, and filled the rear yard with frightful misery” An address given by Edwin S. Barrett at the Town Hall, in Concord Massachusetts in 1866, titled “What I saw at Bull Run” described his own experience in a Civil War hospital right after a battle. “The mortally wounded men lay so thick around that I could hardly step between them, and every step was in blood… I gave them what little assistance I could, until becoming faint and sick, I was compelled to leave.” Nurses did not have the ability to simply leave the hospitals if they were feeling overwhelmed. They had signed up or volunteered for this duty and they had to persevere through the horrors that they were witnessing around them. Being overwhelmed was part of the job, and there were very few easy days during the Civil War.

The nurses in the hospitals typically started their work for the day early in the mornings and ended late at night. Many of them made note to write letters to their families telling them of their long days. Cornelia Hancock wrote in a letter home “I get up at half past six, and don’t stop working until ten o’clock at night. The work is constant.”

44 Intravartolo, “St. Mary’s goes to War”, 378.
46 Toler and Toren, Heroines of Mercy Street. 43.
47 Ibid, 43.
48 Hancock, Letters of a Civil War Nurse, 18.
daughter Alice, “We have been up from six in the morning till one at night, and then laid down ready to jump at a moment’s warning.” This would be a very tiring job after a while, but nurses persevered and continued to serve their country. This sense of duty came at a cost; many of the nurses wrote that they felt changed from their experiences in the war. Cornelia Hancock wrote “I could stand by and see a man’s head taken off” After witnessing the amount of amputations that needed to occur and the amount of blood that went with it she felt like she was ready to handle anything. This was very different from when she had first arrived at the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg, having never provided aid to the wounded before that. Kate Cummings shared a similar experience in her diary. “The foul air from this mass of human beings at first made me giddy and sick, but I soon got over it. We have to walk and when we give the men anything, kneel in blood and water but we think nothing of it at all.” Something that would have seemed so abnormal at the beginning of the war turned into just another form of everyday life for these nurses.

Custom inures the most sensitive person to that which is at first most repellent, and in the late war we saw the most delicate women, who could not at home endure the sight of blood, become so used to scenes of carnage, that they walked the hospitals and margins of battlefields, amid the poor remnants of torn humanity, with perfect self-possession as if they were strolling a flower garden.

A nurse’s decision to volunteer for hospital work can be compared to a soldiers’ enlistment. They too, were risking their lives to provide aid to men, through either being too close to the battlefield or contracting a sickness from one of the wounded soldiers. They were making a sacrifice as well to be near the battlefields. Northern women had left their families

49 Ropes, Civil War Nurse, 67.
50 Hancock, Letters of a Civil War Nurse, 10.
51 Cumming, Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse, 15.
52 Schultz, Women at the Front, 11.
53 Ibid, 47.
behind, and Southern women provided aid in their houses, or offered up supplies that they had in their own homes. They were dedicated women who only wanted to provide their services to the wounded men in need who had fought for their country.

**Conclusion**

Throughout Dix’s time in the Civil War, she appointed 3,000 nurses, which was roughly fifteen percent of the total number of nurses who served with the Union Army. This number was higher than any other person or organization involved with nursing in the Civil War. She appointed who she thought were the best women capable of being nurses. Her strict regulations did not allow for many women to become nurses through her which caused them to have to find another way to serve their country. Dix worked around the clock, taking no days off in four years. She worked hard to allow women to serve as nurses and help them achieve the ability to work alongside surgeons in the hospitals. She did not allow surgeons to deny her nurses the ability to help, or allow them to treat her nurses unfairly. Dorothea Dix died on July 17th, 1887. She created the first rules and regulations that women needed to follow in order to be successful nurses in her eyes this time period. These regulations that she created for the Union Army would provide the groundwork in creating the nursing profession itself, although none of them are used in the hiring of present day nurses. Dix made these strict regulations because of the thinking’s of society in the 1800’s, today it is more acceptable for women to provide aid to men that they have never met before.

It is difficult to read some of the diary entries and letters that women wrote home to their families about what they had endured during their time serving their country. If they are hard to

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read you can only imagine what it must have been like and felt like to have lived through the sights and events that these nurses had during the Civil War. Without these nurses making the necessary sacrifices that they had, the number of deaths would have risen to greater than it stands today. Through the aid of Clara Barton, Cornelia Hancock, Kate Cummings, Hannah Ropes, and the 617 sister nurses, the stories of what they endured were able to be told. They dealt with things in their time in the hospitals that most of us can only imagine. They are strong women who deserve the credit and recognition for what they overcame during the years of the Civil War.

The nursing and medical field made many advancements due to the Civil War. Gunshot wounds were able to be studied more closely, better anesthetics were developed, and the basic principles of sanitation became apparent. Without this research made during this war, the United States would have less knowledge involving battle wounds for the future wars to come. This information helped in saving lives for future generations to come, as well as for the future soldiers fighting in wars. This information provided surgeons and nurses with a better general knowledge because of the lessons they had learned throughout the many battles of the Civil War. They learned which methods were the most effective in saving more lives, as well as what should be avoided in certain situations.

Women had a great impact in the Civil War. Without their services there would have been more lives lost due to casualties and illness than there were. Many women answered the call to serve their country, by finding any way that they could provide aid to the wounded. Women who were accepted and found work in a hospital saw many of the horrors that come with war. Clara Barton, Kate Cummings, Hannah Ropes, and Cornelia Hancock are a few whose

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stories and actual accounts of the war describe the situations that they saw. Without their letters and diaries that they provided their work would not be able to be recognized and remembered by future generations. They saved many lives, and created peace for many who were not able to be saved.
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