

LESSON 7: NAVIGATING THE MEDICAL WORLD OF MEN

INTENDED AUDIENCE

High-school students; first- or second-year undergraduates in history, social studies, or science

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- *Define what “nurse” meant to military officials at the beginning and end of the war.*
- *Identify the opportunities and constraints imposed upon women nurses.*
- *Describe how women imposed values of manliness upon their soldier patients.*
- *Describe the duties and responsibilities of nurses in Civil War hospitals.*

TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON

The background questions serve as a sound introduction to the role-play assignment. In one class period, the background discussion questions can be accomplished within a half hour. Allow an hour in class to discuss the role-play assignment. The debriefing question is intended as a supplementary exercise to provide broader context to the classroom discussion.

KEY TERMS/WORDS

nurse, matron, Dorothea Dix, Florence Nightingale

MATERIALS REQUIRED

Readings that accompany this lesson.

BACKGROUND QUESTION

Although the vast majority of nurses were male during the Civil War, more than 20,000 Northern and Southern women—black and white—served in hospitals and provided care and support to the sick and injured. Field hospitals and camps were usually off limits to women volunteers, but they were received, although with some reluctance, at military hospitals. These women—who were of varied social backgrounds and races—were volunteers and were generally without any professional training in the field of medicine. In the North, Dorothea Dix headed an official women’s nursing corps. The Confederacy did not have an equivalent. While doctors resisted and resented the presence of female nurses during the early stages of the war, the women’s contributions were undeniable as they provided medical assistance as well as handling a range of tasks from cleaning, laundry, and cooking, ward management, to writing letters home for those men who were unable. The days were extremely demanding for nurses, usually beginning at dawn and going well into the evening. Female nurses typically earned around \$12 per month if they were white and \$10 per month if they were black.

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The sacrifices of these women were undeniable, and the risk to their own health well documented. Although attitudes softened toward their presence, hospital wards were tense places and many clashes occurred between nurses and doctors and their patients. Social class, race, and gender animated these disagreements. White nurses were disdainful of black nurses and of black staff generally, critical of soldiers who were not manly enough in enduring their suffering, and combative with doctors whose treatments were considered excessively harsh and extreme. Not surprisingly, they brought their own class and racial assumptions to the sick rooms of Union and Confederate armies.

- Ask students to imagine how a reading public in the North might interpret the experience of being a nurse from the Harper's Weekly illustration (September 6, 1862) below. What does this illustration reveal to us about the diverse roles of nurses and how soldiers might have seen them?
- Are these images romantic, sexualized, or matronly?
- Note the clothing, demeanor, and behavior of the women depicted in the illustration. What can students infer from these women about the work they are performing in relation to their social status or role? In what tasks are these women likely to be most effective? Least effective? How does their social status influence their effectiveness?



"Our Women and the War", an illustration showing the roles played by women in the Civil War, published in the September 6, 1862 issue of Harper's Weekly.

ROLE PLAYING QUESTION

Ask students to imagine that they have a daughter, who has recently turned 21 and lost her fiancé at the battle of Shiloh, and who now wants to join the nursing corps and move to Philadelphia. [Read to students:] She is in a state of mourning, but you admire her sincere desire to express her patriotism now that her future husband has died for the Union cause. She is young and idealistic, and you need to prepare her for the challenges ahead.

- *Based on the three documents below, write a letter to your daughter that will help her contend with the challenges in the hospital ward and also with the general prejudices in society against women serving in hospitals.*
- *Your daughter has seen the editorial from *The Medical and Surgical Reporter* which is especially aggressive against nurses. In your letter, help your daughter understand why the writer of the editorial focuses so much on the physical appearance of women nurses. What is the writer suggesting can happen to women in a masculine environment?*

The writer insists that his men should be able to leave the ranks during battle and take care of their own. It seems humane to allow men to take care of their comrades in the spontaneous flow of battle, but students need to counter this point. Moreover, the outraged officer needs to understand how troops will be evacuated and why students think more lives will be saved.

General Order 351 in William Grace, *The Army Surgeon's Manual* (New York: Bailliere Brothers, 1864), 86.

Note that the complete manual may be found on-line at:

<https://archive.org/details/62510310R.nlm.nih.gov>

[Lesson 7 Attachment 1]

S. D. Gross, *A Manual of Military Surgery* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1861), 39-41.

Note that the complete manual may be found on-line at:

<http://jdc.jefferson.edu/milsurgusa/>
<https://archive.org/details/manualofmilitary01gros>

[Lesson 7 Attachment 2]

No author listed, "Editorial" in *Medical and Surgical Reporter*, Vol. 11. (April 30, 1864), 268.

[Lesson 7 Attachment 3]



Portrait of Clara Barton

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.



Portrait of Dorothea Dix

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS

How should we remember the contributions of Civil War nurses? How they figure in our historical imaginations reveals a great deal about whether we see the war as a time of selfless patriotism, a time of radical change, a time of despair and hopelessness, or a time in which women were able to assert their individuality.

- *From the selection of Confederate nurse Phoebe Pember's memoirs, reflect on how she wants us to remember her contributions in the hospital ward. How does her depiction of the patient-nurse relationship fit into your overarching understanding of the Civil War?*
- *The name of Florence Nightingale appears in several readings. Although outside the scope of this lesson, as a further research project identify her accomplishments and why she is important to the history of nursing, and examine her influence on nursing during the American Civil War.*

Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond* (Jackson: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1959), 38-44.

Note that the complete text may be found on-line at:

<https://archive.org/details/asouthernwomans01pembgoog>

[Lesson 7 Attachment 4]



Hospital ward, Moran hospital

Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia



Nurse Anne Bell attending to two soldiers

Courtesy of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Judith Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009). E-book at:
http://www.amazon.com/Army-Home-Northern-America-ebook/dp/B008H0R4F4/ref=tmm_kin_title_0

Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004). On-line at:
http://books.google.com/books/about/Women_at_the_Front.html?id=PVc85-x1p3QC

Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). On-line at:
http://books.google.com/books/about/Daughters_of_the_Union.html?id=W9LUalsIEUAC

WEB LINKS

Background on Dorothea Dix and Clara Barton

http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/ms-dix-comes-to-washington/?_r=0

Smithsonian On-Line Exhibition- "Diary of a Civil War Nurse"

http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/nursing_1.html

Short biography of Dorothea Dix (Webster University)

<http://www2.webster.edu/~woolfm/dorotheadix.html>

Smithsonian Institution profile of Dorothea Dix's Civil War work

http://www.civilwar.si.edu/leaders_dix.html

National Museum of Civil War Medicine, two videos about Clara Barton

<http://www.civilwarmed.org/clara-bartons-missing-soldiers-office-museum/about-clara-bartons-missing-soldiers-office/>

National Library of Medicine on-line exhibit, Binding Wounds, Pushing Boundaries: African Americans in Civil War Medicine

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/bindingwounds/nursing.html>

BBC profile of Florence Nightingale

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/nightingale_florence.shtml

Jewish Women's Archive essay on Phoebe Pember

<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/pember-phoebe-yates-levy>

Pennsylvania Education Standards (see <http://www.pdesas.org/standard/views>)
PA Core History and Social Studies standards

11TH GRADE

1.2.11.A-E; 1.6.11.A-B; 8.1.UA-B; 8.3.UA-D

12TH GRADE

1.2.11.A; 1.2.12.B-D; 1.6.12.A-B; 8.1.12.A-B; 8.1.UA-B; 8.3.12.A-D

COMMON CORE 11TH-12TH GRADES

CC.1.2.11-12.A, B, I; CC.1.4.11-12.A, H, I; CC.1.5.11-12.A, D, G; CC.8.5.11-12.A-C, F, H; CC.8.6.11-12.H



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GENERAL ORDERS NO. 851

WAR DEPARTMENT, ADJUTANT-GENERAL'S OFFICE, WASHINGTON

OCTOBER 29, 1863

The employment of women nurses in the U. S. General Hospitals will in future be strictly governed by the following rules:

1. *Persons approved by Miss Dix, or her authorized agents, will receive from her, or them, "certificates of approval," which must be counter-signed by Medical Directors upon their assignment to duty as nurses within their Departments.*
2. *Assignments of "women nurses" to duty in General Hospitals will only be made upon application by the Surgeons in charge, through Medical Directors, to Miss Dix or her agents, for the number they require, not exceeding one to every thirty beds.*
3. *No females, except Hospital Matrons, will be employed in General Hospitals, or, after December 31, 1863, borne upon the Muster and Pay Rolls, without such certificate of approval and regular assignment, unless specially appointed by the Surgeon-General.*
4. *Women nurses, while on duty in General Hospitals, are under the exclusive control of the senior medical officer who will direct their several duties, and may be discharged by him when considered supernumerary, or for incompetency, insubordination, or violation of his orders. Such discharge, with the reasons therefore, being endorsed upon the certificate, will be at one returned to Miss Dix.*

SOURCE

General Order 351 in William Grace, The Army Surgeon's Manual (New York: Bailliere Brothers, 1864), 86.

ON NURSING

Finally, in order to complete hospital equipments, well-trained nurses should be provided: for good nursing is indispensable in every case of serious disease, whatever may be its character. The importance of this subject, however, is now so well appreciated as not to require any special comments here.

The question as to whether this duty should be performed by men or women is of no material consequence, provided it be well done. The eligibility of women for this task was thoroughly tested in the Crimea, through the agency of that noble-hearted female, Florence Nightingale; and hundreds of the daughters of our land have already tendered their services to the government for this object.

It is not my purpose here to point out the qualities which constitute a good female nurse. It will suffice to say that she should be keenly alive to her duties, and perform them, however menial or distasteful, with promptness and alacrity. She must be tidy in her appearance, with a cheerful countenance, light in her step, noiseless, tender and thoughtful in her manners, perfect mistress of her feelings, healthy, able to bear fatigue, and at least twenty-two years of age. Neither the crinoline nor the silk dress must enter into her wardrobe; the former is too cumbrous, while the latter by its rustling is sure to fret the patient and disturb his sleep. Whispering and walking on tiptoe, as has been truly observed by Florence Nightingale, are an abomination in the sick chamber. Finally, a good nurse never fails to anticipate all, or nearly all, the more important wants of the sufferer.

Among the things to be specially attended to in nursing is ventilation. Persons visiting the sick must at once be struck with the difference of pure air in those chambers where a proper ventilation exists and those where the reverse is the case. To insure this fresh air should always be admitted from a window not open directly on the bed, or causing the patient to be in a draught. Even in winter it is highly proper that fresh air should be admitted some time during the day when there is a good fire and the patient well protected by covering.

The pillows, bedding, and bedclothes should be well aired and often changed, as also the flannel, under-garments, and night-dress. To facilitate this, it is well, when the patient is very ill and unable to help himself, to have the shirt open all the way down in front, and buttoned up.

SOURCE

S. D. Gross, A Manual of Military Surgery (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1861), 39-41.

EDITORIAL:

WOMEN AND NURSING

But who has [in] this war developed into an American Florence Nightingale? ... The emergency which called for Florence Nightingale has not existed during this Rebellion.

Many American women have sought to emulate the English heroine. Imbued with the best, the holiest motives that can inspire a woman's heart; they have left family and home for the bedside of the sick and dying, or to kneel by the side of some wounded hero on the Rapidan [River], or the Cumberland [River]. How many have succeeded in doing the good they anticipated? Some few have, but many have completely failed.

Nurses are not born nurses. Miss Nightingale learned her business. In our general hospitals there are many, who, without attaining the fame of the fair English woman, have done much good in their humble sphere, but of those who have gone to the field, few have been of any real service.

We may be wanting in gallantry, but we are stating facts. Many of the female nurses are (in the field) positive encumbrances. Their "impediments" exceeds that of the field and staff of a regiment. They must have a tent all to themselves; an ambulance to carry them around, and a half dozen men, more or less, who could other wise be carrying a musket in the ranks, to cook for them, wait on them, and escort them around. Such women are nuisances. Others of these are quarrelsome, meddlesome, busybodies who would be a pest anywhere, while others lack those attributes, which make the true women.

One remark (which in truth will not be misunderstood) in concluding this subject: There are a few female nurses who are disqualified by reason of their extreme ugliness. We know that this is not a generally received opinion, yet we are convinced it is correct. A few army nurses are ugly to a positive repulsiveness. Every accoucheur [midwife] has recognized the fact that a repulsively ugly nurse will sometimes spoil a patient's appetite if she be nervous and impressible by slight causes. And the presence of such a nurse in a ward of sick or wounded soldiers is sometimes productive of similar effects.

Beauty is something a man looks for in a woman as an attribute of femininity, and although the want of it is seldom regarded, its positive oppositeness take away much of the charm that clusters around the name of woman. There are not a few very ugly women whose ugliness is obscured by their excellent qualities of mind and heart, but there are others in whom there are wanting, and unless they possess some peculiar qualifications for nursing, they are out of place in the sick room or the hospital where everything that meets the patient's eye should serve to make him cheerful. A frowsy-headed, toothless, clumsy handed old crone will not be apt to appear to the wounded soldier as a "ministering angel" and can well be replaced by one of the sterner sex

SOURCE

No author listed, "Editorial" in Medical and Surgical Reporter, Vol. 11. (April 30, 1864), 268.

EDITORIAL:

WOMEN AND NURSING

The first restraints of a woman's presence had now worn away, and the thousand miseries of my position began to make themselves felt. The young surgeons (not all gentlemen, although their profession should have made them aspirants to the character), and the nurses played into each other's hands. If the former were off on a frolic, the latter would conceal the absence of necessary attendance by erasing the date of the diet list of the day before and substituting the proper one, duplicating the prescription also, and thus preventing inquiry. In like manner the assistant surgeons, to whom the nurses were alone responsible, would give them leave of absence, concealing the fact from the head surgeon, which could easily be effected; then the patients would suffer, and complaints from the matron be obnoxious and troublesome, and also entirely out of her line of business. She was to be cook and housekeeper, and nothing more.

Added now to other difficulties was the dragonship of the Hesperides,—the guarding of the liquefied golden fruit to which access had been open to a certain extent before her reign,—and for many, many months the petty persecutions endured from all the small fry around almost exceeded human patience to bear. What the surgeon in charge could do to mitigate the annoyances entailed he conscientiously did; but with the weight of a large hospital on his not very strong mind, and very little authority delegated to him, he could hardly reform abuses or punish silly attacks, so small in the abstract, so great in the aggregate.

The eventful evening when Mr. Jones revolted against tea and toast, my unfortunate remark intended for no particular ear but caught by the nurse, that the patient's intellects could not be confused if he called his surgeon a fool, brought forth a recriminating note to me. It was from that maligned and incensed gentleman, and proved the progenitor of a long series of communications of the same character; a family likeness pervading them all. They generally commenced with "Dr. ___ presents his compliments to the chief matron," continuing with "Mrs. ___ and I," and ending with "you and him." They were difficult to understand and more difficult to endure. Accustomed to be treated with extreme deference and courtesy by the highest officials connected with the government, moving in the same social grade I had always occupied when beyond hospital bounds, the change was appalling.

The inundation of notes that followed for many months could not have been sent back unopened, the last refuge under the circumstances, for some of them might have related to the well-being of the sick. My pen certainly was ready enough, but could I waste my thunderbolts in such an atmosphere?

The depreciated currency, which purchased only at fabulous prices by this time; the poor pay the government (feeling the necessity of keeping up the credit of its paper) gave to its officials; the natural craving for luxuries that had been but common food before the war, caused appeals to be made to me, sometimes for the applicant, oftener for his sick wife or child, so constantly, that had I given even one-tenth of the gifts demanded there would have been but little left for my patients.

It was hard to refuse, for the plea that it was not mine but merely a charge confided to me, was looked upon as a pretext; outsiders calculating upon the quantity issued to my department and losing sight of the ownership of that quantity.

Half a dozen convalescent men would lose their tasteless dinner daily at the stewards table, and beg for “anything” which would mean turkey and oysters. Others “had been up all night and craved a cup of coffee and a roll,” and as for diseases among commissioned and non-commissioned men, caused by entire destitution of whiskey, and only to be cured by it—their name was legion. Every pound of coffee, every ounce of whiskey, bushel of flour or vegetables duly weighed before delivery, was intended for its particular consumers; who, if they even could not eat or drink what was issued for them watched their property zealously, and claimed it too. So what had I to give away?

The necessity of refusing the live-long day, forced upon naturally generous tempers, makes them captious and uncivil, and under the pressure the soft answer cannot be evoked to turn away wrath. Demands would increase until they amounted to persecutions when the refusals became the rule instead of the exception, and the breach thus made grew wider day by day, until “my hand was against every man, and every man’s hand against me.”

Besides, there was little gratitude felt in a hospital, and certainly none expressed. The mass of patients were uneducated men, who had lived by the sweat of their brow, and gratitude is an exotic plant, reared in a refined atmosphere, kept free from coarse contact and nourished by unselfishness. Common natures look only with surprise at great sacrifices and cunningly avail themselves of the benefits they bestow, but give nothing in return,—not even the satisfaction of allowing the giver to feel that the care bestowed has been beneficial; that might entail compensation of some kind, and in their ignorance they fear the nature of the equivalent which might be demanded.

Still, pleasant episodes often occurred to vary disappointments and lighten duties.

“Kin you writ me a letter?” drawled a whining voice from a bed in one of the wards, a cold day in ’62.

The speaker was an up-country Georgian, one of the kind called “Goubers” by the soldiers generally; lean, yellow, attenuated, with wispy strands of hair hanging over his high, thin cheek bones. He put out a hand to detain me and the nails were like claws.

“Why do you not let the nurse cut your nails?”

“Because I aren’t got any spoon, and I use them instead.”

“Will you let me have your hair cut then? You can’t get well with all that dirty hair hanging about your eyes and ears.”

“No, I can’t git my hair cut, kase as how I promised my mammy that I would let it grow till the war be over. Oh, it’s onlucky to cut it!”

“Then I can’t write any letter for you. Do what I wish you to do, and then I will oblige you.”

This was plain talking. The hair was cut (I left the nails for another day), my portfolio brought, and sitting by the side of his bed I waited for further orders. They came with a formal introduction,—"for Mrs. Marthy Brown."

"My dear Mammy:

"I hope this finds you well, as it leaves me well, and I hope that I shall git a furlough Christmas, and come and see you, and I hope that you will keep well, and all the folks be well by that time, as I hopes to be well myself. This leaves me in good health, as I hope it finds you and——"

But here I paused, as his mind seemed to be going round in a circle, and asked him a few questions about his home, his position during the last summer's campaign, how he got sick, and where his brigade was at that time. Thus furnished with some material to work upon, the letter proceeded rapidly. Four sides were conscientiously filled, for no soldier would think a letter worth sending home that showed any blank paper.

Transcribing his name, the number of his ward and proper address, so that an answer might reach him—the composition was read to him. Gradually his pale face brightened, a sitting posture was assumed with difficulty (for, in spite of his determined effort in his letter "to be well," he was far from convalescence). As I folded and directed it, contributed the expected five-cent stamp, and handed it to him, he gazed cautiously around to be sure there were no listeners.

"Did you writ all that?" he asked, whispering, but with great emphasis.

"Yes."

"Did I say all that?"

"I think you did."

A long pause of undoubted admiration—astonishment ensued. What was working in that poor mind? Could it be that Psyche had stirred one of the delicate plumes of her wing and touched that dormant soul?

"Are you married?" the harsh voice dropped very low. "I am not. At least, I am a widow."

He rose still higher in bed. He pushed away desperately the tangled hay on his brow. A faint color fluttered over the hollow cheek, and stretching out a long piece of bone with a talon attached, he gently touched my arm and with constrained voice whispered mysteriously:

"You wait!"

And readers, I am waiting still; and I here caution the male portion of creation who may adore through their mental powers, to respect my confidence, and not seek to shake my constancy.

Other compliments were paid me, perhaps not of so conclusive a nature, and they were noticeable from their originality and novelty, but they were also rare. Expression was not a gift among the common soldiers. "You will wear them little feet away," said a rough Kentuckian, "running around so much. They ar'n't much to boast of anyway." Was not this as complimentary as the lover who compared his mistress's foot to a dream; and much more comprehensible?

At intervals the lower wards, unused except in times of great need, for they were unfurnished with any comforts, would be filled with rough soldiers from camp, sent to recuperate after field service, who may not have seen a female face for months; and though generally too much occupied to notice them, their partly concealed, but determined regard would become embarrassing.

One day, while directing arrangements with a ward-master, my attention was attracted by the pertinacious staring of a rough-looking Texan. He walked round and round me in rapidly narrowing circles, examining every detail of my dress, face, and figure; his eye never fixing upon any particular part for a moment but traveling incessantly all over me. It seemed the wonder of the mind at the sight of a new creation. I moved my position; he shifted his to suit the new arrangement—again a change was made, so obviously to get out of his range of vision, that with a delicacy of feeling that the roughest men always treated me with, he desisted from his inspection so far, that though his person made no movement, his neck twisted round to accommodate his eyes, till I supposed some progenitor of his family had been an owl. The men began to titter, and my patience became exhausted.

“What is the matter, my man? Did you never see a woman before?”

“Jerusalem!” he ejaculated, not making the slightest motion towards withdrawing his determined notice, “I never did see such a nice one. Why, you’s as pretty as a pair of red shoes with green strings.”

These were the two compliments laid upon the shrine of my vanity during four years’ contact with thousands of patients, and I commit them to paper to stand as a visionary portrait, to prove to my readers that a woman with attractions similar to a pair of red shoes with green strings must have some claim to be the apple of Paris.

SOURCE

Phoebe Yates Pember, A Southern Woman’s Story: Life in Confederate Richmond (Jackson: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1959), 38-44. Note that the complete text may be found on-line at: <https://archive.org/details/asouthernwomans01pembgoog>