

“Angels of Mercy”:  
Confederate Nurses in  
the War Between the  
States.

By: Haggan Allcock

The War Between the States brought about unprecedented devastation and suffering. In this crucible of conflict, female Confederate nurses emerged as beacons of hope. Despite the dangers of war and the constraints of gender roles, these women displayed remarkable courage by volunteering for nursing duties. Through first-hand accounts and historical records, their stories attest to their unwavering resolve to alleviate the suffering of soldiers, often at great personal risk. Lucy Mina Otey, a widow at the age of 60, endured the grievous loss of three sons and a son-in-law during The War for Southern Independence. In response to the pressing needs of the time, she undertook a commendable initiative in Lynchburg, Virginia, rallying a collective of women to produce essential medical supplies such as bandages and uniforms. As the war escalated, women assumed increasingly vital roles, transitioning into positions as hospital nurses and matrons. However, the path to such involvement was not without obstacles, particularly exemplified by the resistance encountered from local military authorities such as Dr. William Otway Owen. Dr. Owen adamantly opposed the presence of women in hospital settings, issuing a categorical directive at one point: "No more women, no more flies." [1]

He advocated for a traditionalist perspective that relegated women solely to domestic duties, emphasizing the sewing of uniforms while disallowing their participation in patient care.

Undeterred by such opposition Mrs. Otey exhibited remarkable determination, undertaking a journey to Richmond where she petitioned President Jefferson Davis for authorization to set up an Independent Ladies' Relief Hospital. This initiative, situated in the confines of the former Union Hotel, boasted a capacity of 100 beds and was meticulously staffed by an assembly of 500 women, with Mrs. Captain Otey serving as the esteemed president, despite facing the brunt of the war's casualties, Mrs. Otey's hospital achieved a notable distinction for maintaining one of the lowest mortality rates among military medical facilities. Yet, even in the face of such undeniable

success, Mrs. Otey encountered further challenges. In the harsh throes of the first winter, she requested that the women who dutifully staffed the hospital to be granted the privilege of procuring supplies from the commissary on par with officers. Regrettably, this entreaty was met with denial.

Kate Cumming of Georgia, a native of Scotland, left her home in Mobile, Alabama, in early April 1862, Kate and a small group of women traveled to Tennessee, hoping to assist the Army of Tennessee. Along the way, they learned about the Battle of Shiloh. When the women volunteered their services at a military hospital, they were refused.

Cumming later wrote in her journal; “The surgeons entertain great prejudice against admitting ladies into the hospital in the capacity of nurses.”

In fact, the chief surgeon: “carried this so far that he will not even allow the ladies to visit his patients. I only wish that the doctors would let us try and see what we can do!” [5.b]

On April 10, 1862, the women nurses were allowed to go to the main Confederate hospitals in Corinth, Mississippi. The scene Cumming saw when she arrived in Corinth was worse than she could have imagined. The camp of the Confederate army was all mud. “As far as the eye could reach, in the midst of all this slop and mud,”[2] she wrote, were the tents of the men, “suggestive of anything but comfort.”[2]

Although Kate Cumming had tried to prepare herself emotionally for the work she was about to begin, she wrote that: “Nothing that I had ever heard or read had given me the faintest idea of the horrors witnessed here. I do not think that words are in our vocabulary expressive enough to present to the mind the realities of that sad scene.” Shiloh was the first major battle in the Western Theater of the war, resulting in more than 23,000 men being killed, captured, or

wounded. The untried Confederate medical system collapsed before the battle ended. Arriving three days after the Battle of Shiloh, Kate Cumming noted that wounded men were still being brought to the hospitals in Corinth. Many of the men who had come earlier and who were too badly injured to take care of themselves, had not even been fed, let alone treated. The first thing Nurse Cumming did was to try to feed the men. Supplies were so short that she had to offer them some of her own bread, biscuits, coffee, and tea. The hospital did not even have plates, so she passed out the meager food to the men from her hands to theirs. [5.b]

On April 13, Cumming wrote in her journal: “The confusion and want of order are as great as ever. The amount of good being done is not near what it might be if things were better managed. Someone is to blame for this state of affairs.” [2]

Unlike most women nurses, who served only temporarily, Cumming continued as an active nurse for the duration of the war. After a two-month respite in Mobile, AL, She traveled to Chattanooga, TN, to volunteer at Newsome Hospital, where she remained for the next year. The Confederate Government decreed in September 1862 that hospitals could legally pay nurses rather than rely on them as volunteers. [5.b]; for the war’s duration, she was officially enlisted in the Confederate Army Medical Corps. At the end of the war, she was serving in Southwest Georgia. After the war, She returned to Mobile, AL, and published an account of her nursing experiences; *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee from the Battle of Shiloh to the End of the War*. Later, She moved to Birmingham, where She became a teacher. Phoebe Yates Levy Pember stands as a shining example of Southern resilience and dedication during The War for Southern Independence. Born into a prominent Jewish family in Charleston, SC, Pember's loyalty to her homeland, the Confederacy, was unwavering. Her commitment to serving as a nurse and hospital matron for the Confederate Army transcended personal

affiliations, showcasing her profound sense of duty and compassion. Throughout the war, Pember selflessly devoted herself to the care of wounded Confederate soldiers, serving primarily at the renowned Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, Virginia. In the heart of the Confederacy's capital, Chimborazo Hospital stood as a beacon of hope amidst the chaos of war, providing essential medical aid to countless soldiers in their hour of need. Pember's tireless efforts within its walls undoubtedly ameliorated the suffering of many brave men who had sacrificed everything for their cause. As a hospital matron, Pember's responsibilities extended far beyond mere nursing duties. She meticulously managed the hospital's resources, ensuring that medical supplies were efficiently distributed and that the hospital operated smoothly despite the challenges of wartime shortages. Her organizational skills and steadfast leadership were instrumental in maintaining the hospital's effectiveness amidst the chaos of war. Pember's contributions as a nurse and hospital matron were not merely acts of duty; they were profound expressions of her deep-seated love for the Confederate cause and its people.

Her memoir, "A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond," [2] stands as a testament to her unwavering commitment and provides invaluable insight into the trials and triumphs of life on the Confederate home front.

Juliet Hopkins was born in West Virginia, but moved to Mobile, Alabama after marrying Judge Arthur Hopkins. When her husband was appointed to oversee hospitals during the War Between the States, Juliet went to work converting tobacco factories into hospitals. At the beginning of the war, Hopkins sold her estates in New York, Virginia, and Alabama, and donated the proceeds to the Confederate Government to set up hospitals for sick and wounded soldiers. In the Confederate military system, each state was responsible for the care of its own patients. Hopkins

moved to Richmond, and in June 1861 began organizing medical services. In August 1861, Hopkins established a hospital for Alabamians. In its fall 1861 session, the Alabama Legislature assumed responsibility for supporting these hospitals and appointed Juliet Hopkins chief matron of all state hospitals. [5.a]

By November, she had established a second, larger hospital, and a third in the spring of 1862.

It was remarkable for a woman to emerge in such a position of leadership and responsibility.

Groups in Alabama sent supplies and money to assist Hopkins in her work. [5.a, 5.b]

The women of Alabama began forming organizations to help the war effort by making clothes and collecting

supplies. By January 1, 1862, there were 92 such women's auxiliaries in the state. On July 1,

1862, during the Battle of Seven Pines, Juliet was shot in the leg twice while rescuing wounded

men from the battlefield. These injuries required surgery and left her with a permanent limp.

During her recuperation from her wounds; Mrs. Hopkins wrote letters home for the soldiers,

made requests for furloughs, and supplied them with books to read. She also kept a list of the

soldiers who died and sent locks of their hair to their families in Alabama. [5.a]

Fannie Beers, a famous nurse in the Third Alabama Hospital, wrote this about Hopkins;

"I have never seen a woman better fitted for such work. Energetic, tireless, systematic, loving

profoundly the cause and its defenders, she neglected no detail of business or other things which

should afford aid or comfort to the sick and wounded. ... If she found any duty neglected by a

nurse or surgeon or hospital steward, her personal reprimand was certain and very severe.... Her

smile was the sweetest, I believe, that ever lit up a human face, and standing by the bedside of

some poor Alabamian, away from home and wretched as well as sickly, she must have seemed to

him like an angel visitant. ... To her husband alone, she deferred in all things and was gentleness

itself." [4]

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After the war, Judge and Mrs. Hopkins returned to live in Mobile, Alabama and Juliet's humanitarian sacrifices became more widely known. She became a living legend. She and her husband had lost most of their wealth during the Civil War, and she lived the rest of her life in relative poverty. Sources show that Juliet had donated between \$200,000 and \$500,000 to the Southern cause. Her daughter, Mrs. Juliet Opie Ayers, wrote that her mother gave her entire fortune to the Confederacy. [5.a]

Juliet Opie Hopkins died on March 9, 1890, while visiting her daughter in Washington, DC at the age of 71. Her funeral was attended by scores of veterans and former patients, including former Confederate General Joseph Wheeler and Union General John Schofield. She was granted a full military burial at Arlington National Cemetery. For her actions on the field and in hospital, Mrs. Hopkins was posthumously awarded the Confederate Medal of Honor; She was the only woman to be awarded such honor.[5.a]

In honoring Southron heroes like Phoebe Pember, Fannie Beers, Juliet Hopkins, Kate Cumming, and Lucy Otey, we celebrate not only her individual courage and sacrifice but also the countless unsung heroes who selflessly served their beloved Southland during her darkest hour. Her legacy serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring spirit of the Southern people and their unwavering resolve in the face of adversity. Though the exploits of soldiers and statesmen have often overshadowed her contributions, her impact on the course of history cannot be overstated. Her legacy serves as a reminder of the power of empathy to triumph over the ravages of war and has and will continue to inspire future generations to acts of selfless service and sacrifice. Despite facing daunting obstacles and hardships, these "Angels of Mercy" selflessly dedicated themselves to the care of wounded soldiers, providing comfort and solace in their darkest hours.

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[2]Cumming, Kate. "A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: From the  
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[4] Beers, Fannie A. "Fannie A. Beers, Memories: A Record of Personal Experience and  
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Experience and Adventure during Four Years of War., Part I., Page 34*

[5.a]"Juliet Hopkins." *History of American Women*, 23 Mar. 2007,  
[www.womenhistoryblog.com/2007/03/juliet-hopkins.html](http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2007/03/juliet-hopkins.html).

[5.b] "Civil War Nurses in the South." *History of American Women*, 30 Dec. 2016,  
[www.womenhistoryblog.com/2016/12/civil-war-nurses-in-the-south.html](http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2016/12/civil-war-nurses-in-the-south.html)