

**Middlesex County
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This publication was prepared for the web, as a companion booklet to Civil War resources for educators and students.

Let us know what you think of this booklet and the publication on our website about Elizabeth Keckley, seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln. Both monographs were compiled from the personal diaries of these women who were witnesses to some of the most dramatic days in our nation's history.

Hospital Sketches by **Louisa May Alcott**

**A Story
of the
Civil War**

**as Told
in her
Own Words**



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Introduction

We have chosen the writings of Louisa May Alcott to acknowledge and explore the Civil War era, during this 150th anniversary period, from 2011 thru 2015.

Many historians will discuss Civil War battles and the conflicting sentiments of the Northern and Southern states - and this is most important in our understanding of this period. The Cultural and Heritage Commission, however, is challenging what we know about the human experience and in particular, the plight of soldiers of all camps.

Louisa May Alcott was a remarkable woman, known to us for her fictional novels. But, did you know that she also played a vital role during the Civil War as an advocate for good medical care and improved hospital conditions? She was influential, at a time when women were not in the forefront of decision making.

*Anna M. Aschkenes, Executive Director
Middlesex County
Cultural & Heritage Commission*

About Louisa May Alcott

Louisa May Alcott, best known for her novel *Little Women*, was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1832. Her family moved to Boston in the 1830s, then Concord, in 1845. The Alcott family was so dedicated to abolition they housed a freed slave for a short time.

As a young adult, Alcott was a seamstress, domestic servant and teacher. Beginning in the mid 1860s, Louisa May Alcott successfully wrote children's stories, but



she is perhaps best known for her classic work and semi-autobiographical novel, *Little Women*, published in the 1880s. Louisa May Alcott's third published work, *Hospital Sketches* (1863), is based on her experiences as a nurse at a hospital near Washington D.C. in 1862. The pages that follow are excerpts from *Hospital Sketches*, in essence a journal of her time during the Civil War.

Note: throughout this booklet, text in blue signifies Ms. Alcott's own words.

As Louisa May Alcott rides in a carriage on the way to the hospital which employed her, a fellow passenger points out the more interesting landmarks of Washington D.C.

Washington, It was dark when we arrived; . . . Though I'd often been told that Washington was a spacious place, its visible magnitude quite took my breath away, . . .

The White House was lighted up, and carriages were rolling in and out of the great gate. I stared back at the famous East Room, and would have liked a peep through the crack of the door . . . I said "Splendid!" to everything he pointed out, though I suspect I often admired the wrong place, and missed the right. Pennsylvania Avenue, with its bustle, lights, music, and military, made me feel as if I'd crossed the water and landed somewhere in Carnival time.

Louisa has only been working at the hospital for a few days when she is awakened to the call that 40 ambulances are waiting outside full of wounded Union and Confederate soldiers.

They've come! They've come! Hurry up ladies—you're wanted.

Who have come? The rebels? [Alcott asked]

This summons in the gray dawn was somewhat startling to a three days' nurse like myself, and, as the thundering knock came at our door, I sprang up from my bed, prepared . . . if necessary, but my room-mate took it more coolly, and, as she began a rapid toilet, answered my bewildered question,

Bless you, no, my child; it's the wounded from Fredericksburg; forty ambulances are at the door, and we shall have our hands full in fifteen minutes.

What shall we have to do? [Alcott asked]

Wash, dress, feed, warm and nurse them for the next three months . . . [came the answer]

Louisa had been assigned to forty beds of wounded soldiers. She was to wash faces and bodies, dress wounds, serve rations, give medicine and anything else she was assigned. She described the hustle of the arriving wounded and trying to carry out her duties at the same time.

Having been run over by three excited surgeons, bumped against by migratory coal-hods, water-pails, and small boys; nearly scalded by an avalanche of newly filled teapots, and hopelessly entangled in a knot of colored sisters coming to wash, I progressed by slow stages up stairs and down, till the main hall was reached, and I paused to take breath and a survey . . .

In they came, some on stretchers, some in men's arms, some feebly staggering along propped on rude crutches, . . . All was hurry and confusion; the hall was full of these wrecks of humanity, for the most exhausted could not reach a bed till duly ticketed and registered; the walls were lined with rows of such as could sit, the floor covered with the more disabled, the steps and doorways filled with helpers and lookers on; the sound of many feet and voices made that usually quiet hour as noisy as noon; and, in the midst of it all, the matron's motherly face brought more comfort to many a poor soul, than the cordial draughts she administered, or the cheery words that welcomed all, making of the hospital home.

The hospital was actually a hotel, and the ward on which Louisa served was the ballroom. She describes the first steps of caring for the wounded; making sure they are clean.



I pitied them so much, I dared not speak to them, though, remembering all they had been through since the rout at Fredericksburg, I yearned to serve the dreariest of them all.

Presently, Miss Blank tore me from my refuge behind piles of one-sleeved shirts, odd socks, bandages and lint; put basin, sponge, towels, and a block of brown soap into my hands, with these appalling directions:

[Ms. Blank said to me] Come, my dear, begin to wash as fast as you can. Tell them to take off socks, clean shirts, and the attendants will finish them off, and lay them in bed.

Very often, Louisa's most important contribution to the health of the wounded soldiers was neither the medicine she administered, nor the many times she washed and scrubbed but rather the kind words she offered to depressed men who needed reassurance.

Another with a gunshot wound through the cheek, asked for a looking-glass, and when I brought one, regarded his swollen face with a dolorous expression, as he muttered —

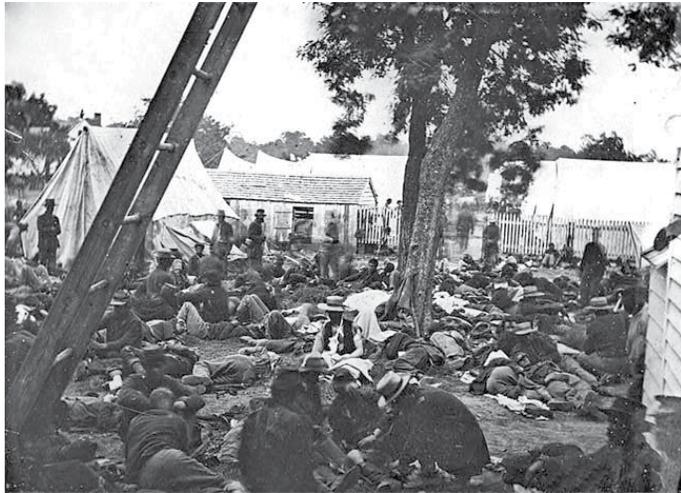
I vow to gosh, that's too bad! I warn't a bad looking chap before, and now I'm done for; won't there be a thunderin' scar? And what on earth will Josephine Skinner say?



Civil War nurse believed to be Louisa May Alcott.



This is an actual surgeons kit used in a Civil War field hospital.



Civil War hospital in the field, near Washington, DC. Note the number of soldiers that have no beds or protection from the elements.

Contrast this with the Civil War hospital image to the right.



He looked up at me with his one eye so appealingly, . . . and [!] assured him that if Josephine was a girl of sense, she would admire the honorable scar, as a lasting proof that he had faced the enemy, for all women thought a wound the best decoration a brave soldier could wear. I hope Miss Skinner verified the good opinion I so rashly expressed of her, but I shall never know.

Wounded Union and Confederate soldiers were not cared for in separate sections of the hospital and were frequently placed in beds next to each other. While continuing with her responsibilities, a Union soldier expresses disgust that Confederate soldiers are given the same care even though they are the enemy.

I say, Mrs.! Called a voice behind me; and turning, I saw a rough Michigander, with an arm blown off at the shoulder, and two or three bullets still in him as he afterwards mentioned, as carelessly as if gentlemen were in the habit of carrying such trifles about with them. . . while administering a dose of soap and water, he whispered, irefully: that red-headed devil, over yonder, is a Reb, damn him! You'll agree to that I'll bet? He's got shot of a foot, or he'd cut like the rest of the lot. Don't you wash him, nor feed him, but jest let him holler till he's tired. It's a blasted shame to fetch them fellers in here, alongside of us; . . .



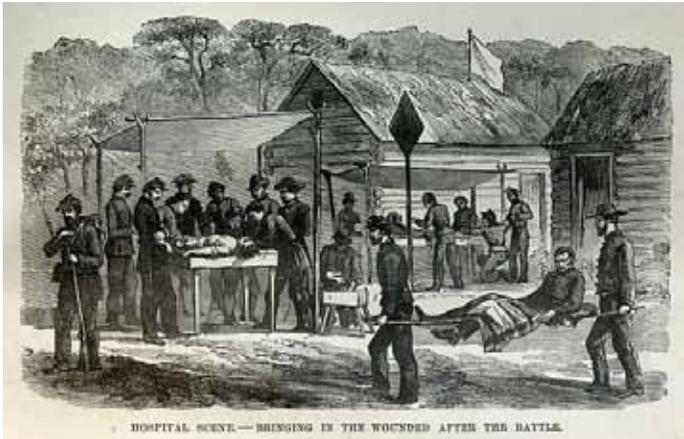
Civil War Hospital complex in Philadelphia, PA

Some Philadelphia military hospitals reused older buildings. For instance, Haddington Hospital at 65th and Vine Streets, with 200 beds, was housed in the old Vine Street Tavern. Most city hospitals had fewer than 500 beds, but two of the largest military hospitals in the country were located in Philadelphia. For instance, the Satterlee General Hospital, had more than 3,000 beds,

By the end of the war, Philadelphia hospitals had cared for about 157,000 soldiers and sailors.



Primitive field hospital for Union soldiers.



Hospital scene from etching, set up in a local barn near a battlefield.

To the patients, chowtime was always one of the more welcome routine activities that filled the days. Louisa saw changes in the wounded soldiers' faces after a "generous meal" and rest.

Great trays of bread, meat, soup and coffee appeared; and both nurses and attendants turned waiters, serving bountiful rations to all who could eat. I can call my pinafore to testify to my good will in the work, for in ten minutes it was reduced to a perambulating bill of fare, presenting samples of all the refreshments going or gone . . . Very welcome seemed the generous meal, after a week of suffering, exposure, and short commons; soon the brown faces began to smile, as food, warmth, and rest, did their pleasant work; and the grateful "Thankee's" were followed by more graphic accounts of the battle and retreat . . .

Louisa May Alcott was asked to get a cup of water for a wounded soldier, but when she returned, she noticed her patient's face had changed color, it was white. *sacrificed and suffered that hospital bed, lonely even in a crowd; for there was no familiar face for him to look his last upon; no friendly voice to say, Goodbye; no hand to lead him gently down into the Valley of the Shadow, and he vanished . . .*

Alcott told this story.

Observing the man next to him had left his meal untouched . . . thank you ma'am, I don't think I'll ever eat again, for I'm shot in the stomach. But I'd like a drink of water, if you ain't busy. I rushed away, but the water-pails were gone to be refilled, and it was some time before they reappeared.

I did not forget my patient, meanwhile, and, with the first mugful, hurried back to him. He seemed asleep; but something in the tired white face caused me to listen at his lips for a breath. None came. I touched his forehead; it was cold: and then I knew that, while he waited, a better nurse than I had given him a cooler draught, and healed him with a touch.

I laid the sheet over the quiet sleeper, . . . It seemed a poor requital for all he had sacrificed and suffered that hospital bed, lonely even in a crowd; for there was no familiar face for him to look his last upon; no friendly voice to say, Goodbye; no hand to lead him gently down into the Valley of the Shadow, and he vanished . . .

The city of Philadelphia played a large role in treatment of the wounded. In addition to being a center for medical education, it was located at the intersection of several train lines. There were 24 military hospitals, plus branches, in this city at one time or another, in addition to the 22 small civilian hospitals that also treated troops. By the end of the war, Philadelphia hospitals had cared for about 157,000 soldiers and sailors. There were only four military hospitals elsewhere in the state



Army issue surgeons kit. This is more complete than the one in the previous image and this was used in a hospital.

Louisa tells of her nursing days.

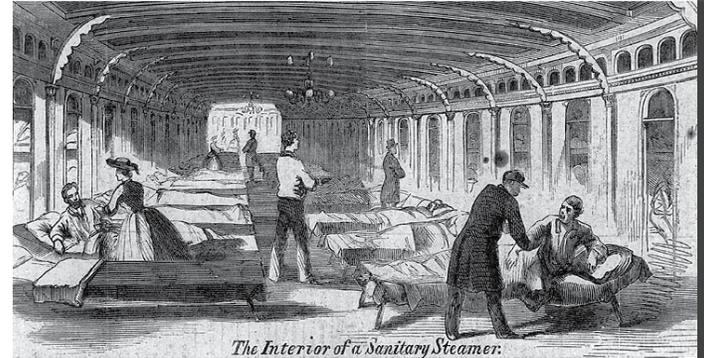
The evenings were spent in reading aloud, writing letters, waiting on and amusing the men, going the rounds with Dr. P., as he made his second daily survey, dressing my dozen wounds afresh, giving last doses, and making them cosy for the long hours to come, till the nine o'clock bell rang, the gas was turned down, the day nurses went off duty, the night watch came on, and my nocturnal adventure began.

Louisa May Alcott learned that soldiers were wounded not just in the body. Louisa observed that a New Jersey soldier kept thinking about the battles he fought, often the soldiers relived the horrifying details over and over again.

My headquarters were beside the bed of a New Jersey boy, crazed by the horrors of that dreadful Saturday. A slight wound in the knee brought him there; but his mind had suffered more than his body; some string of that delicate machine was overstrained, and, for days, he had been reliving, in imagination, the scenes he could not forget, till his distress broke out in incoherent ravings, pitiful to hear.

In previous wars, wounded soldiers had sometimes remained on the battlefield for days before being rescued. During the Civil War, however, special ambulance corps moved patients to field hospitals, helping to ensure that they received care sooner. Men who needed more extensive treatment or longer recuperation could then be transported by train to general hospitals in major cities. Some steamboats were even converted into floating hospitals.

Photo # NH 58897 Interior of Civil War hospital ship, possibly USS Red Rover



Interior of a hospital steamship above; deck of hospital ship below



For Louisa and the rest of the weary overworked nurses, frustration was typical. She described how she felt.

I am dressing Sam Dammer's shoulder; and, having cleansed the wound, look about for some strips of adhesive plaster to hold on the little square of wet linen which is to cover the gunshot wound; the case is not in the tray; Frank, the sleepy, half-sick attendant, knows nothing of it; we rummage high and low; Sam is tired, and fumes; Frank dawdles and yawns; the men advise and laugh at the flurry; I feel like a boiling tea-kettle, with the lid ready to fly off and damage somebody.

To me, the saddest sight I ever saw in that sad place, was the spectacle of a gray-haired father, sitting hour after hour by his son, dying from the poison of his wound.

Rarely does one see the Civil War era method used to take the wounded to a hospital complex but here are two images that tell a story.

The first is the image above and to the right. Here you see a rare photo of hospital staff collecting the wounded from a battlefield and placing them in a transport, to be taken to the hospital.



Below is an ambulance "train" of wagons (or hospital transports) carrying wounded from the battlefield.



Below is an image of soldiers who already had been cared for by hospital surgeons. They are in recovery. Many were sent back into the front lines of military action once they had healed.



Alcott explained her role.

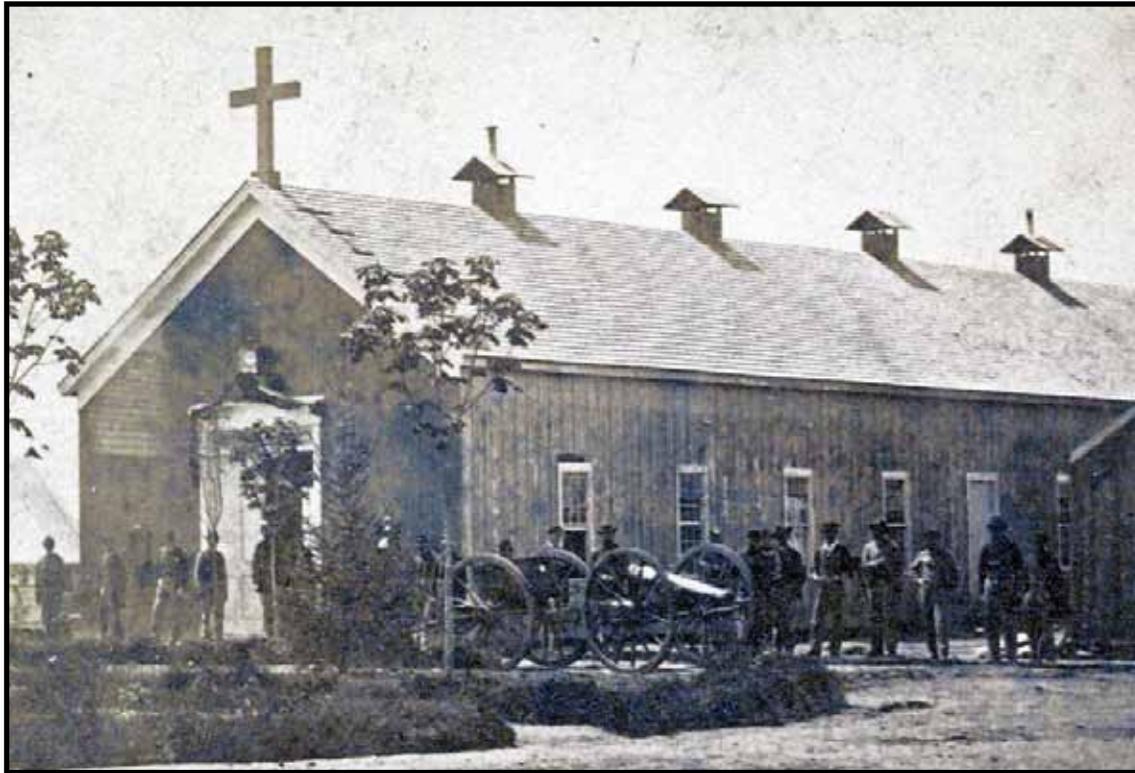
You ask if nurses are obliged to witness amputations and such matters, as a part of their duty? I think not, unless they wish; for the patient is under the effects of ether, and needs no care but such as the surgeons can best give. Our work begins afterward, when the poor soul comes to himself, sick, faint, and wandering; full of strange pains and confused visions, of disagreeable sensations and sights. Then we must soothe and sustain, tend and watch; preaching and practicing patience, till sleep and time have restored courage and self-control.

A very rare occasion was "visiting day" at a Union hospital. Note that the facility is decorated with flags and banners and the soldiers are in uniform.



Actual Civil War Union Hospital bottles. The one on the right, a citron color is very rare.





Civil War hospital in Beverly, New Jersey - originally a local church and returned to that purpose once the war had ended.

Thank you to the many sources that contributed images for this booklet, among them: Library of Congress, Federal Herald press, Washington Post archive, New York Times archive, Smithsonian Institution, the publications of Matthew Brady (Civil War photographer), the archives of Harper's Weekly and Harper's Bazaar, Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission and the City of Philadelphia.

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