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The Experience of Confederate Nurses: Venerated in Myth But Overwhelmed by Reality

Catherine James

After General Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, a glorious myth about the Confederacy arose, whereby the gallant “boys in gray” and devoted familial slaves were united with fervently loyal, elite, white female nurses to form the heart of the Lost Cause’s tripartite description of its role in the Civil War. Only seven months following the war’s end, the Staunton Spectator of Virginia published a “Tribute to the Ladies,” whom it praised as “heroic amid danger, ‘ministering angels’ beside the cot where pain and anguish were wringing the brow of the sick and wounded soldier.”¹ This sentimental rendition of Confederate nurses lingered into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the epic 1939 film Gone With the Wind, in which Melanie Wilkes, exhausted and frail, is nursing a soldier in an Atlanta hospital. Melanie tells Scarlett O’Hara that she is not tired because “this might be Ashley [her husband], and only strangers to comfort him. No, I’m not tired, Scarlett. They could all, all be Ashley!”² Notwithstanding its romantic appeal and regional popularity, the narrative of Confederate women’s service as nurses has been more mythical than historical.

The indomitable Mary Chesnut declared in June 1861 that “every woman is ready to rush into the Florence Nightingale business.”³ In reality, very few elite white women “rushed” into nursing service and, for those

Confederate women who did begin hospital work, they embarked upon

² Gone With the Wind, DVD, 1939, directed by David O. Selznick (Burbank, CA: Time Warner Entertainment Company, 1999).
an experience vastly different from the Lost Cause myth of their service as “ministering angels.” Confederate women met with harsh opposition to their nursing because it took them into the public sphere and since, in mid-nineteenth century Victorian culture, nursing was deemed by society as an occupation fit only for males or lower-class white women. Perhaps the greatest myth surrounding Confederate nursing perpetuated the idea that young female nurses found romance among wounded, but devastatingly handsome, patients. Yet, young women were essentially restricted from nursing service, owing to their parents’ fears of physical danger and social denigration. Lost Cause myth also maintained a united homefront, which was free of class divisions; however, class fundamentally defined the Confederate nursing experience. Lost Cause myth promoted Confederate nurses’ labor at the bedside of wounded soldiers, but Confederate nursing encompassed more than hospital work. Finally, Lost Cause myth affirmed Confederate nurses’ absolute loyalty to Southern independence. While Confederate nurses did have faith in the cause, they all too often came into conflict with and lamented the Confederacy’s inefficient centralized government because the desperate needs of their patients went unfulfilled.4 If Mark Twain’s The Gilded Age captured the Lost Cause nursing myth, stating that “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 the margins of battlefields, amid the poor remnants of torn humanity, with as perfect self-possession as if they were strolling in a flower garden,” then Gone With the Wind depicted the average experience of elite female Confederates during the war in the person of Scarlett O’Hara, who

ran away from assisting with an amputation and screamed “I’m going home! I’ve done enough! I don’t want any more men dying!”

Scarlett O’Hara’s meltdown in the face of medical butchery would have confirmed the suspicions of Confederate polite society, especially men, that women by nature were not suited for nursing. Lost Cause myth emphasized the South’s calling upon women to make sacrifices for their country and, hence, women answered that call by nursing the country’s injured defenders. Myth overlooked the fact that Confederate women were challenged as to their right to nurse until necessity demanded their acceptance. Opposition to elite white women’s nursing service hinged upon established Southern gender roles that dictated female subordination and male protection. Southern womanhood required domesticity, purity, modesty, and delicacy, but the role of nurse implied none of these characteristics. In 1861, hospitals were considered to be squalid and only served the so-called dregs of society; therefore, elite Confederate women who entered hospital service would jeopardize their reputations. Moreover, the physical strain and emotional stress of nursing would be too exhausting for delicate females. Elite white women certainly nursed sick relatives and slaves, but they were not wanted in the masculine environment coexisting with military nursing. Instead, they should stay home and knit socks or roll bandages as their nursing contribution. Justification had to be found before Confederate women were accepted as nurses.

Faced with the unforeseen demands of an escalating war,

5 Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, The Gilded Age (New York: Penguin Classics Series, 2001), 101; Gone With the Wind, DVD.
8 Mary Elizabeth Massey, Bonnet Brigades (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), 44.
particularly massive casualty rates which resulted in lost manpower and the lack of trained medical personnel in the South, necessity took priority over traditional female gender limitations and allowed women to nurse, a transformation supported by the example of Florence Nightingale. She served as a British nurse in the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and, in the process, single-handedly changed nursing into an acceptable profession because of her elite social position and according personal respectability. Her example determined that Confederate women’s virtue and compassionate nature enabled them to perform nursing service.\textsuperscript{9} Even so, a stigma remained attached to Confederate female nurses, as their memoirs attested, and many men and women in Confederate society felt that “nurses were not truly women, but in some sense men in drag.”\textsuperscript{10} Some of the Confederacy’s most famous nurses had reservations about their service and its impact upon their life. Phoebe Yates Pember was a widow of high social standing from Charleston, South Carolina, who worked as a nurse at the Confederacy’s flagship hospital – Richmond, Virginia’s Chimborazo complex. Yet, upon entering service, she considered that “the natural idea that such a life would be in injurious to the delicacy and refinement of a lady – that her nature would become deteriorated and her sensibilities blunted, was rather appalling.”\textsuperscript{11} Unlike Pember, Kate Cumming, arguably the Confederacy’s best-known nurse, faced opposition rather than expressing anxiety about nursing’s propriety. A twenty-seven-year-old resident of Mobile, Alabama, Cumming began nursing in Corinth, Mississippi after the battle of Shiloh. Her well-off

\textsuperscript{9} Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 92-95.


family opposed her decision to volunteer for nursing duty, but Cumming replied, “I wonder what Miss Nightingale and the hundreds of refined ladies of Great Britain who went to the Crimea, would say to that!”12 After a year of nursing duty, Cumming admitted that “scarcely a day passes that I do not hear some derogatory remarks about the ladies who are in the hospitals, until I think, if there is any credit due them at all, it is for the moral courage they have in braving public opinion.”13 Overall, Confederate women believed that they faced a choice: to nurse and serve the cause or to preserve their genteel status.

Given the opposition to elite Confederate women’s nursing, the question of how many Confederate women actually served as nurses during the war naturally arose. Lost Cause myth generated the notion that every elite woman in the South did her duty and “taught [her] fair, and heretofore, rather idle fingers to work for the soldiers [and went] into the hospital and attended to the sick and wounded.”14 It has been difficult to accurately count the number of nurses since the Confederacy lacked an official management organization such as the United States Sanitary Commission.15 According to a recent survey of Confederate nurses, elites represented a small percentage of total female hospital workers – a direct contradiction of the Lost Cause story.16 If white elite women did not comprise the majority of Confederate nurses, the Confederacy must have relied upon a group of individuals that Lost Cause myth consciously chose

13 Ibid., 178.
The Lost Cause myth of Confederate nursing stated that female nurses most often had patrician backgrounds. In its postwar “Tribute to the Ladies,” the *Staunton Spectator* proclaimed that “whosoever shall write the story of those times, will slander his theme if he assign not to the ladies of the South – and God bless them! – a peculiar merit and a special praise.” Thus, only “ladies” made up the population of the Confederacy’s women nurses in the Lost Cause narrative. In reality, the Confederate nursing workforce relied upon men, especially convalescent soldiers, slaves, and white lower-class women rather than elite white women. The average nurse was a male soldier, either assigned to a specific regiment or already in a hospital and in presumably better physical condition than the newly wounded. Among the Confederacy’s nurses, the male-to-female ratio was five to one. Kate Cumming signified the small percentage of elite white women who served as nurses; however, she would have been referred to as a “matron” instead of “nurse” owing to her social status. “Matron” conveyed the proper respectability and authority due elite white women, whereas “nurse” was common. Overall, Confederate hospitals were dependent upon the labor of white lower-class women and slaves. Slaves were forced to perform the most difficult hospital work, often hired out by their owners for a profit or meals in exchange for their work. Male slaves usually served as custodians and lifted or transported patients, while female slaves typically

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17 “Tribute to the Ladies,” *Staunton Spectator*, 2, The Valley of the Shadow Project.
cooked and washed the patients’ linens.\textsuperscript{21} The sphere of Confederate nursing included all classes and black and white, but, ironically, elite white women maintained their higher status and, hence, helped to shape Lost Cause myth.

The 1862 Hospital Act was instrumental in shaping the Lost Cause myth of elite white female nursing. Extensive casualties suffered by the Confederacy in 1861 from disease, such as typhoid, prompted the Confederate Congress to investigate if the government’s medical response was sufficient. The designated committee found a dire lack of personnel was hindering the medical response.\textsuperscript{22} Who better to fill the gap than elite white women, who already nursed their families and slaves and exhibited moral respectability lacking in lower-class white women and slaves? On September 27, 1862, by act of the Confederate Congress, women were allowed into military hospitals, with commanding surgeons employing two matrons, two assistant matrons, and two ward matrons.\textsuperscript{23} This act endorsed the hiring of elite Confederate women by using the term “matron” and inferred that white lower-class women would be subservient in hospitals. From this act, the myth of tremendous numbers of elite white Confederate women patriotically answering the call of their country was born. However, elite white women did not answer that call and chose to do their nursing in a different and much more refined fashion.

In 1862, Mary Chesnut, who considered herself to be the South’s \textbf{most elite woman}, went to a hospital in Richmond with a “carriageload of

\begin{footnotesize}21\end{footnotesize} Schultz, \textit{Women at the Front}, 17-21.
peaches and grapes [and] made glad the hearts of some men thereby.”

While Lost Cause myth has women as ministering angels at the bedside of wounded soldiers, Mary Chesnut was performing nursing duty when she distributed fruit to Richmond’s wounded. So was Grace Brown Elmore, the twenty-one year old daughter of an elite South Carolina family, who recorded in her diary in 1864 that, “on Fridays I am always much engaged, cooking in the morning for the hospital.”

Nursing was not restricted to healing men; rather, it encompassed multiple endeavors, from hospital visiting to hosting patients with minor injuries. Hospital visiting was the most prevalent type of nursing that elite women performed. Visitors read to patients, wrote letters to loved ones, and, above all, brought “delicacies” such as fruits, desserts, and buttermilk. Although visiting was socially applauded, elite women prized hosting soldiers who had only minor injuries and were of the South’s upper-crust. “In Richmond, when the hospitals were crowded, the women earnestly besought permission to take the men to their houses and to care for them there, as especially honored guests.”

Most Confederate elite women were far from the battlefield, instead “nursing” close to home. Those elite women who ventured afield found different circumstances than what their counterparts at home experienced.

According to Lost Cause myth, Confederate nurses on the battlefield and in military hospitals were calm and clean, often pictured in pristine white clothing. A realistic depiction of battlefield nursing would include “the nauseating smells, the brutal summer heat, the floors coated

with blood, and the thick swarms of black flies that tormented patients and attendants alike.”

Rats beleaguered Phoebe Yates Pember, matron of the hospital servicing the battlefield wounded in Virginia. She wrote “the coldest day in winter, and the hottest in summer, made no apparent difference in their vivacious strategy. They ate all the poultices applied during the night to the sick, and dragged away the pads stuffed with bran from under the arms and legs of the wounded.” While harsh living conditions severely affected nurses, battlefield casualties caused greater emotional suffering. When Kate Cumming treated her first wounded soldiers after the battle of Shiloh, she recorded in her diary that “nothing that I had ever heard or read had given me the faintest idea of the horrors witnessed here.” Cumming described men lying everywhere, “just as they were brought in from the battlefield. The foul air from this mass of human beings at first made me giddy and sick, but I soon got over it …. When we give the men anything [we] kneel, in blood and water; but we think nothing of it.” Cumming confirmed that nursing was the work of death and had little to do with romance.

Perhaps the greatest Lost Cause myth was the notion that young nurses found romance among their wounded patients. Young elite white women were restricted from nursing, owing to their parents’ fears of physical danger and social denigration. It was feared young elite women would improperly come into contact with undressed soldiers, contract diseases, and suffer mental anguish as they had been sheltered from life’s unpleasantness. Sarah Morgan, a privileged nineteen-year-old

29 Pember, A Southern Woman’s Story, 84-85.
31 Victoria E. Ott, Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age During the Civil War (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 50.
from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was prevented from nursing by her family. She complained in June 1862 that, “not a square off … lie more than a hundred sick soldiers. If I was independent, if I could work my own will I would not be poring over this stupid page …. I would stand by some forsaken man and bid him Godspeed when he closes his dying eyes. Yet it is as impossible as though I was a chained bear. Father seems to think our conduct reflects on him, there is no alternative.” Young elite women were kept from nursing since their families feared that their status would be tarnished by interaction with the “lower” classes of soldiers and white lower-class nurses. Class division was further reflected in interactions between elite white female matrons and their lower-class subordinates in hospitals across the South.

Lost Cause myth defined a united homefront, which was free of class divisions; yet, class delineated the Confederate nursing experience. Designations of “cook” and “laundress” were applied to slave women and white lower-class women, whereas elite Confederate nursing women such as Kate Cumming enjoyed the genteel title of “matron.” In her diary, matron Phoebe Yates Pember records her lower-class ward nurses did not fulfill their responsibilities, with one nurse refusing to work, sitting around and spitting snuff into a spittoon. Class divided nurses, with elite matrons like Pember expecting that lower-class nurses, as part of the “common class of respectable servants,” would be “amenable to authority.” When lower-class nurses did not show proper deference, matrons readily condemned them; however, those same genteel matrons expressed their own defiance of authority by criticizing the Confederacy.

33 Schultz, “The Inhospitable Hospital,” 370.
34 Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 49-52.
35 Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 47.
Ultimately, myth affirmed elite white female nurses’ absolute loyalty to the “cause.” Elite nurses had faith in the Confederacy, but often felt themselves to be in conflict with it because of the unfulfilled needs of their patients. Kate Cumming was deeply patriotic, but she criticized the government’s denial of medical supplies and foodstuffs for wounded soldiers. Cumming was forced to go door-to-door after battles and ask local civilians for any spare food. Elite nurses found themselves frustrated with Confederate bureaucracy and took action into their own hands, as did Mary Rutledge Fogg, an elite Nashvillian who told President Jefferson Davis that she had witnessed 50 gallant soldiers die because they lacked proper nurses. Therefore, he should expect to receive her corps of nurses in Virginia to care for Tennessee’s soldiers – whether he liked it or not. Lost Cause myth obscured elite white nurses’ conflict with the Confederacy, preferring “ministering angels” over discouraged personnel.

In the end, the war’s greatest impact was upon the individual nurse of the Confederacy. Cornelia Peake McDonald of Winchester, Virginia confessed that “nursing proved more than she could stand.” She affirmed “at the sight of one face that the surgeon uncovered, telling me that it must be washed, I thought I should faint.” She “tried to say yes, but the thought of it made me so faint that I could only stagger towards the door.” Like McDonald, countless Confederate nurses felt their desire to heal become engulfed by the ghastly nature of total war. On the other hand, Kate Cumming expressed the view of a minority of nurses that they had to act in the face of unparalleled slaughter. Cumming wrote, “are

we aware of all this, and unwilling to nurse these brave heroes who are

37 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 94.
38 Cornelia Peak McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War: A Diary, with Reminiscences of the War, from March 1862, ed. Minrose C. Gwin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 38.
sacrificing so much for us? What, in the name of common sense are we
to do? Sit calmly down, knowing that there is many a parched lip which
would bless us for a drop of water, and many a wound to be bound up?”39
Confederate female nursing was characterized by harsh condemnation
and exaggerated tributes, but a candid judgment of the experience must
state that nurses did their best and consequently elevated their service
from myth to heroism.