

Role of Catholic Nursing Sisters in the Civil War

On July 16, 1862, Dr. Hammond, the Union Surgeon General wrote the following letter to President Lincoln praising the contributions of Sisters of Charity .¹

I think it is a fact that the Catholic nurses predominate. This is because we found in the Sisters of Charity, a corps of faithful, devoted and trained nurses ready to administer to the sick & wounded[.] No such organization exists among the Protestants of this country, and those whom we have employed cannot compare in efficiency and faithfulness with the Sisters of Charity. The latter are trained to obedience, are of irrepro[a]chable moral character and most valuable are their ministrations.

I am a Protestant myself and therefore cannot be accused of partiality.

I know, Sir, you would not have me discharge these faithful women to make way for others whose religious faith is different but whose qualities cannot be compared with those of the Sisters. For the future, however, I will endeavor to obtain Protestants; but it will be a difficult task, as they will not submit to the same discipline, nor undergo the same hardships. I have a large experience with both kinds and, therefore, speak what I know.

I am, Sir, with great respect Your Excellency's Obedt. Servt.

William A Hammond
Surgeon General U. S. A.

[Library of Congress: Abraham Lincoln Papers.](#)

Although Florence Nightingales book “Notes on Nursing” American edition had been published in 1861, formal schools of nursing based on her teachings did not exist in America. In 1862,

¹ The actual letter was handwritten; the letter included is a transcript.

Catholic Nursing Sisters (Nuns) such as the Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy and other Nursing orders whose vows included education in the care of the sick .

In the June 30, 2013 of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Ann Rogers article: “*Union's top military nurses were nuns*” describes the response of nuns to the needs of the wounded :²

“The Daughters of Charity at their provincial house in Emmitsburg, Md., could hear the cannons of Pickett's Charge 10 miles off. They helped their chaplain pack a wagon with medical supplies and, when the cannons were silenced, a dozen sisters rode with him to tend to the wounded.



"They had already been on battlefields in the North and the South," said Lisa Shower, who gives Civil War tours at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. In 1863, nuns were the nation's only trained nurses.”

"Nursing was deeply rooted in their heritage. Even before the Civil War they were active in hospitals in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.," she said of the Daughters of Charity.”

John Hauser's copy of painting, "Consolation," believed to have been commissioned by Abraham Lincoln to Florence Meyer

Patrick Young,³ writing about Nursing Sisters in the Civil war stated:

“When the Civil War broke out, the nursing sisters formed a cadre of trained nursing specialists already organized into disciplined structures. Unlike the upper class women who volunteered briefly as nurses , only to return home after a few

² <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2013/06/30/Union-s-top-military-nurses-were-nuns/stories/201306300137>

³ January, 2013 Nursing Nuns of the Civil War ³ <https://longislandwins.com/columns/nursing-nuns-of-the-civil-war>

months, the sisters did not have family obligations and they expected to nurse for the rest of their lives.”⁴”



Nuns of the Battlefield Memorial near Du Pont Circle in Washington The inscription on the memorial reads:

“THEY COMFORTED THE DYING - NURSED THE WOUNDED - CARRIED HOPE TO THE IMPRISONED - GAVE IN HIS NAME A DRINK OF WATER TO THE THIRSTY”⁵

Renee Standeras’ article , **Angels of the Battlefield: Catholic Sisters as Civil War Nurses**⁶ points out :

“when civil war divided the United States, among those answering the call to serve were nearly 600 Roman Catholic sisters, many of them new residents of the young nation....Some of the European sisters learned nursing skills while serving in the Crimean War alongside nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale. For centuries in Europe, members of religious communities visited the sick in their homes. . American communities established as many as 28 hospitals in the United States before war broke out. Officials from both the Union and the Confederacy were hesitant to use female nurses, but they, including President Abraham Lincoln, requested help from the Catholic sisterhoods. In the South, it was considered

⁴ January, 2013 Nursing Nuns of the Civil War ⁴ <https://longislandwins.com/columns/nursing-nuns-of-the-civil-war>

inappropriate for women to be involved in the physical contact that nursing duties required.

” Sisters of Charity from Cincinnati were among the first medical teams to arrive by steamboat at the battle of Shiloh. The first U.S. Navy hospital ship, Red Rover, was staffed by Sisters of the Holy Cross from Notre Dame, Indiana as the first Navy nurses. . . . Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy in Charleston, South Carolina, were sent to Greenbrier White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, to manage a hospital there. Those left behind visited soldiers held as prisoners-of-war.”⁷



8

Sisters of Mercy with Union soldiers during the Civil War

⁵ http://www.dcmemorials.com/index_indiv0001660.htm#info Civil War Nurses Memorial (Nuns of the Battlefield) (ca. 1924) SE of DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C. by [Jerome Connor](#)

⁶ ⁶ <https://civilwartalk.com/threads/angels-of-the-battlefield-catholic-sisters-as-civil-war-nurses.132121/>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ <http://irishamerica.com/2013/08/hospital-nuns-from-the-civil-war-to-today/>

They were there on the war's bloodiest battlefields. At Shiloh, where some 25,000 fell, Sister Anthony O'Connell, a Cincinnati-based Sister of Charity, speaking of her initial reaction to the battlefield recalls she was”

“unable to bear the terrific stench from the bodies on the battlefield. This was bad enough, but what we endured on the field of battle while gathering up the wounded is beyond description . . . Day often dawned on us only to renew the work of the preceding day without a moment's rest.”

One soldier said of Sister Anthony:

*“Amid this sea of blood she performed the most revolting duties for these poor soldiers. She seemed like a ministering angel, and many a young soldier owes his life to her care and charity. Happy was the soldier who, wounded and bleeding, had her near him to whisper words of consolation and courage. She was revered by Blue and Gray, Protestant and Catholic alike; and we conferred on her the title of the 'Florence Nightingale of America.' Her name became a household word in every section of the North and South”.*⁹

When surgeons wanted to amputate a soldier's limb, she would say: "Wait and let me see what I can do for him." And she often saved it. In 1897, she was buried with a full military honor guard.”¹⁰

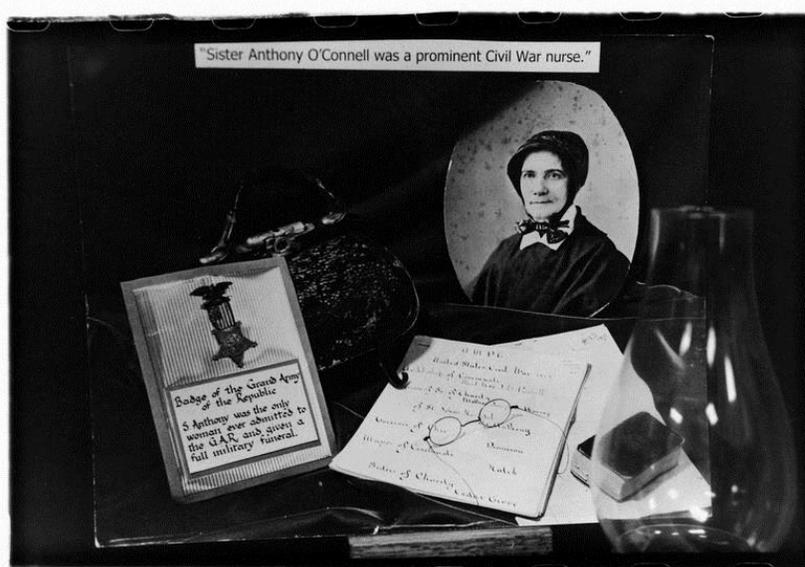


Figure 1A display on Sister Anthony O'Connell at the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse

Figure 2A display on Sister Anthony O'Connell at the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse

⁹ May 30, 2011 by Pat McNamara <http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/05/catholic-sisters-and-the-american-civil-war-pat-mcnamara-05-31-2011>

¹⁰ <http://wvxu.org/post/cincinnati-sister-anthony-oconnell-angel-civil-war-battlefield>