Early History of Nursing in the U. S. Military

In the summer of 1775, Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates of the Continental Army reported to Commander-in-Chief George Washington that, “the sick suffered much for want of good female Nurses.” Gen. Washington asked for help from Congress, which approved one nurse for every ten patients in Continental hospitals. 1 According to Roberts, 2 ‘The history of military nursing goes back to the war for independence when General Washington asked for funds to employ nurses in a ratio of one nurse to every ten patients. Feminine members of the families of soldiers were employed to care for the sick, to prepare their food, and to perform housekeeping duties. These, the first women employed by the military, received $2 a month with room and board.’ 3

Nursing during the Revolutionary War was one of the many duties asked of women, many of whom had no medical training or education. The brave men and women that provided medical care lived under the extreme conditions that come with war, but considered it a privilege and duty. While medical expertise and technology were minimal, advances in care and sanitation made leaps and bounds during this time. 4

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1 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/cate-lineberry/history-military-nurses_b_3225854.html
3 http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2014/07/first-women-nurses.html
4 https://ceufast.com/blog/nurses-in-the-american-revolutionary-war
Born in Connecticut in 1747, Abigail Corbin married Phineas Peck in 1776. With her husband away at war, her home was destroyed by the British. Putting aside her personal tragedy, Abigail nursed the wounded in the immediate area. For this compassionate service, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution recognized her as a Revolutionary War Patriot Nurse.

American Civil War

“Civil war nurses were often called ‘Angels of the Battlefield. Approximately two thousand women, North and South, served as volunteer nurses in military hospitals during the American Civil War. In the antebellum north and south women had “a duty to care” and were expected to nurse ill members of their families and neighbors.”

“The American edition of Florence Nightingale’s book Notes On Nursing was published in 1860 and Godey’s Lady’s Book (2) wrote of her experiences in the Crimean War. When war was declared and their men went off to war, women on both sides of the conflict went to their respective army hospitals to offer their services some as volunteers, some as paid nurses. Revenby credits the Civil War for bringing the attention of the American public, as the fighting in the Crimea had for the British, the dangers of a disorganized hospital and sanitary services.”

For further information on civil war nursing see: https://www.nursingeducationhistory.org/civil-war-.html

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5 http://miserybay.usanethosting.com/wordpress/2011/06/history/
6 Illustration from Louisa May Alcott, fictionalized account of her experiences in the Civil War, Hospital Sketches
7 For further information see https://www.nursingeducationhistory.org/civil-war-.html
8 Ibid
Establishment of formal Nurse Training programs

During the Crimean war the actions of Florence Nightingale and her fellow nurses proved the worth of female nurses in caring for the sick and wounded. In the American Civil War, although the volunteer nurses lacked formal training, their actions demonstrated the value of women in caring for the wounded. Still, many military physicians found it difficult to accept female nurses, believing that women were ‘out of place’ in caring for the wounded. Interestingly, females in religious orders who generally had formal training in the care of the sick and wounded were excluded from this point of view. Just as in England at the end of the Crimean war, the Civil War became the impetus for the establishment of nurse training schools in America.

In 1872 Linda Richards entered the New England Hospital for Women and Children, located at that time in Roxbury Mass; while the program was not based on the Nightingale method, when Linda Richards graduated in September 1873, she was considered America’s first trained nurse. Eighteen seventy three was also the year that three hospitals established the first ‘Nightingale’ nurse training schools in America. These were:

- New York Training School at Bellevue Hospital
- Connecticut Training School at New Haven State Hospital
- Training School at Massachusetts General Hospital

The demand for trained nurses to assist physicians and care for their patients, as well as the “haphazard and disorganized”\(^9\) nursing service in most hospitals, resulted in the establishment in America of nurse training schools based on Nightingale training schools. The establishment, and success of the first three hospital nurse training schools led to a steady increase in the number of hospital training schools in America.

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\(^9\) Kalish, Phillip and Beatrice Kalish , 2004 Chapter 3 The Founding of Early Schools of Nursing In America. In American Nursing: A History  Lippincott Williams and Wilkins. p60