THE WOUND CARE NURSE’S JOURNEY
PART 1: THE CIVIL WAR

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HISTORY OF WOUND CARE

ANN BRADFORD STOKES

Stokes (1830-1903), an illiterate African American woman born into slavery in Tennessee, served as a “contraband” (escaped slave) nurse on the hospital ship USS Red Rover, the first Union Naval ship, from January 1863 to October 1864. She also received regular wages of a “first-class boy.” Notably, she was among the first women to serve as a nurse in the United States Navy and the first to serve on a U.S. military vessel. In 1890, after years of unsuccessful petitions for a pension, Stokes reapplied for a pension based on her 18 months of service in the Navy instead of as a widow of a deceased soldier. Since she was listed as a “boy” while serving on the USS Red Rover, Stokes was granted her a pension of $12 per month (the usual amount awarded to nurses at this time) by the Navy.

SUSIE KING TAYLOR

Taylor (1848-1912) was the first African American to openly teach in a school for former slaves in Georgia. In April 1862, she and other African Americans fled to St. Simons Island in Georgia. There, Union army officers provided her with books so she could organize and teach freed African Americans. She remained on the island and taught more than 40 day-school children until the island was evacuated six months later. While on the island, Taylor married Edward King, a black noncommissioned officer in the Union, and followed his regiment for the next three years. During this time, she served as a nurse and laundress, as well as a teacher for illiterate African American soldiers. Following the establishment of a freed African American children’s school, the death of her husband, and birth of her first child, Taylor moved to Boston and eventually became president of the Women’s Relief Corps.
HARRIET TUBMAN
Known for her abolitionist activities of leading enslaved African Americans to freedom through the Underground Railroad, Tubman (~1820-1913) served as cook, nurse, and spy for the Union army during the Civil War. Tubman escaped slavery and fled to Philadelphia in 1849, but returned 19 times to free more than 300 slaves using the Underground Railroad.1 During the Civil War, Tubman served in numerous military hospitals and used home remedies and herbs to heal soldiers’ wounds.1 As a spy for the Union, she was the first woman in American history to lead a military expedition, which liberated 700 slaves in South Carolina during the Combahee River Raid (1863).5,6 Following her death, she was buried with military honors in Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, NY.5 Aside from dozens of schools named in her honor, Tubman was recently designated by the U.S. Treasury Department to replace Andrew Jackson on the $20 bill.5,7

DOROTHEA LYNDE DIX
With her reputation for helping to create dozens of new institutions for the mentally ill and prisoners,8 Dix (1802-87) volunteered her services to the Union one week after the outbreak of the Civil War9 and was appointed superintendent of the Union Army Nurses in 1861 to organize Union Army hospitals and volunteer nurses.8 Dix’s strict rules on who could serve as a volunteer nurse through her direction included mandates on women dressing in black or brown clothing, being aged more than 30 years, being married or widowed, and being “physically plain” in appearance.9,10 While in this position, Dix received the nickname “Dragon Dix” for her autocratic style, for often clashing with military officials, and for widely being feared and disliked by other volunteer female nurses.9,10 One of the nurses who served under Dix was Louisa May Alcott, author of Little Women.8 Following the war, Dix returned to advocating for the mentally ill until her death.9

MARY ANN BICKERDYKE
Working as a nurse during the cholera epidemic of 1837, Bickerdyke (1817-1901) entered the Civil War via the residents of Galesburg, IL, entrusting her to deliver the town’s purchased medical supplies for soldiers serving at Cairo, IL.11,12 Here, Bickerdyke established a Union hospital and spent the remainder of the war traveling with Union troops, including Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.12 By the end of the war, she established about 300 field hospitals to treat sick and wounded soldiers.11,12 Bickerdyke was also known to have risked her life by searching for wounded soldiers at night with a lantern, and she denounced the officers who did not provide for their men.11 As a testament to her behavior and actions, soldiers referred to her as “Mother Bickerdyke.”11 Throughout the war, Bickerdyke worked tirelessly to help soldiers, and after the cessation she fought for veterans and nurses to receive pensions.12,13
PHOEBE YATES LEVY PEMBER

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Pember (1823–1913), a Jewish woman from a prosperous family in South Carolina, was caring for her tuberculosis-stricken husband. Following his death, she moved to Richmond, VA, to help the Confederacy. After the Matron Law was passed in the Confederacy, Pember served as matron of the Chimborazo Military Hospital in Richmond, which was the largest military hospital at that time. As matron, she tended to more than 15,000 men and fought to keep her authority when challenged by her male counterparts. With the lack of medical and general supplies in the Confederate army, Pember often had to keep soldiers from pillaging the supplies, especially whisky. On one occasion, she threatened a man at gunpoint. Known for her commitment to the wounded, Pember was regarded with high praise in Richmond society. In 1879, she went on to publish her experiences, A Southern Woman’s Story: Life in Confederate Richmond.

WALT WHITMAN

Known first and foremost as one of the most influential writers in American history, Whitman (1819–92) also volunteered as a nurse for the Union, serving in more of a psychological manner than physical. When the Whitman family feared one of the sons, George, had been killed serving the Union in the war, Whitman went to Fredericksville, VA to find his brother. While his brother only received a superficial facial wound, Whitman was horrified by the pile of body parts heaped outside of a mansion-turned-hospital. As a poet who revered the human body, this sight forever changed Whitman. Prior to his mission to find his brother, Whitman had spent time at the bedside of injured New York stagecoach drivers. When he joined the war efforts as a volunteer nurse, he served in a similar capacity by providing soldiers with gifts of food, books, writing materials, and his friendship. In order to do this, he solicited and readily gave money to help soldiers.

Whitman’s name was already widely known at the outbreak of the war, even to President Abraham Lincoln. It’s reported that in 1857, Lincoln was so enraptured by Leaves of Grass that he began reading it aloud to colleagues in his Springfield law office. Whitman was mystified by Lincoln from the beginning to the end of his presidency, but after his assassination, Whitman wrote two of his most famous poems: O Captain! My Captain! and When Lilas Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d. Although a multitude of diaries and letters portray the Civil War from the battlefields and hospitals, it’s the scenes Whitman paints in his wartime prose — most profound in Drum Taps (1865) — that are still taught in schoolrooms around the world.

References
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