

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Nurses, Spies and Soldiers: The Civil War at Carlyle House

By Sarah Coster

The Mansion House Hospital, which incorporated the 1753 home of John Carlyle and the large building in front of it, was a place of strife and suffering during the Civil War. Alexandria, the longest occupied Confederate city of the war, epitomized what it meant to pit brother against brother. It is a legacy of divisiveness that is still apparent today as we struggle to grapple with what the Civil War meant then and now. Inside the Union controlled hospital, one found struggles as well. Female nurses were verbally abused and criticized. Soldiers struggled against disease and illness, often serving only to find their pension claims denied. Everyone at the hospital missed home and peacetime.

But Carlyle House and the Mansion House Hospital, were also places of hope and triumph. Female nurses here made great strides in earning recognition and respect, paving a way for future female medical practitioners. Soldiers made miraculous recoveries as medicine advanced.

These stories and more have recently been discovered as staff worked to research the Civil War story of our site. Throughout 2011 and beyond, to commemorate the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, exhibits and programs will highlight the fascinating lives of those living here 150 years ago.

James Green, a successful furniture maker, was living at Carlyle House with his father, mother, wife and child at the beginning of 1861. His father, also James Green, ran a large and successful hotel located where the front lawn of Carlyle House is today. It was known as the Mansion House Hotel.

Green purchased a diary in January to record a year



The Mansion House Hospital, c. 1861-1865. This view is of Fairfax Street, facing south toward King Street. Notice the barricades on Cameron Street to protect from Confederate raids.

that he believed in “all probability will see the end of this Union of States.” On May 24, 1861, Green awoke to guns firing as Union boats landed in Alexandria’s harbor. “The Confederate troops had barely time to leave town,” he noted.

They were quickly replaced by Union troops, many of whom boarded at the Mansion House Hotel. “Not much sleep,” Green complained, “with our new boarders overhead dancing...” The dancing stopped a few months later when the building became a hospital.

CARLYLE HOUSE

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The Green & Bro. furniture factory on Fairfax and Prince streets still stands today. It is currently a condo building.

Shots rang out early in the morning of July 21, 1861, in nearby Manassas, Virginia. By the end of the day, over 2,000 soldiers had been wounded in the first major battle of the war, the First Battle of Bull Run. The Union Army scrambled to find space for the wounded.

James Green, the owner of the Mansion House Hotel, received a letter from the government in early November stating he had three days to vacate the premises. Even with the help of his furniture factory workers it took them over a week to remove everything.

As the war progressed, Alexandria's hospitals quickly filled to capacity, including the 700-bed Mansion House Hospital. Mary Phinney, a nurse, described the over-crowding following the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862. Fairfax Street, she wrote, "was full of ambulances and the sick lay outside on the sidewalks from nine in the morning till five in the evening . . . and to-night were put back into ambulances and carted off again." Even in a city full of hospitals, these sick and dying soldiers had nowhere to go.

During the four years of war, Union hospitals treated 6,000,000 cases of illness and 400,000 battle wounds and injuries. Two-thirds of Union deaths during the Civil War were a result of disease. Poor sanitation,

hygiene and diet caused high amounts of dysentery, typhoid and other illnesses. Infections after surgery were common and often resulted in amputation. Doctors had no knowledge of germ theory or antiseptic practices, and many soldiers lost their lives to infection.

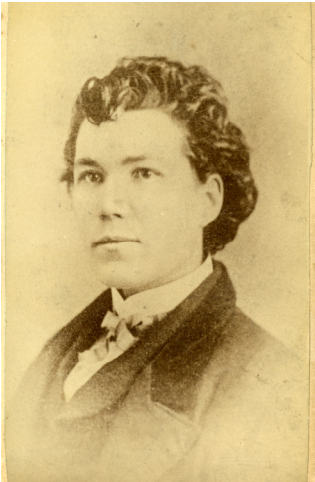
Despite their shortcomings, the doctors and nurses at the Mansion House Hospital made great strides in saving lives. Perhaps some of the greatest strides, however, were those made by the female nurses stationed here. At the time of the Civil War, the idea of a female nurse in a military hospital was a new and unpopular concept, piloted by Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War in Europe. The female nurses at Mansion House Hospital overcame prejudice and harsh treatment in order to bring comfort and aide to wounded and dying men. One surgeon in Alexandria told Nurse Harriet Dada that "A lady ceases to be a lady when she becomes a nurse." However, through their dedication and hard work, the female nurses won over many the



Interior drawing of the United States Hospital at Georgetown. This hospital, like the Mansion House, was a hotel before the war. Image courtesy of the Maine Historical Society.

surgeons and doctors and opened the door for future American women to have medical careers.

One female nurse that worked at the Mansion House Hospital defied gender roles in a particularly stunning manner. This soldier was a female disguised as a man. Sarah Emma Edmonds was already passing herself off as a man named Frank



Sarah Emma Edmonds, in male dress as Frank Thompson. Image courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.

Thompson when the war began, working as a door-to-door salesman. When the Civil War called on men to enlist, Edmonds found the opportunity enticing. She joined the Union army, fought at Blackburn's Ford and served as a nurse at the Mansion House Hospital. She also worked as a mail carrier and even, she claimed, spied for the Union.

It is believed some 300-500 women may have served as soldiers during the Civil

War, though an exact number may never be known. Most of Edmonds' campmates assumed she was one of the young boys who snuck into the army, except for one. Edmonds' close friend and fellow soldier, Jerome Robbins, was suspicious. He wrote in his journal "a mystery appears to be connected with [Frank] which it is impossible for me to fathom." When Edmonds did reveal her identity to him Robbins kept it a secret, telling only his diary. It is in this diary, now in the archives of the University of Michigan, that Robbins recorded Sarah Emma Edmonds working as a nurse at the Mansion House Hospital during the winter of 1861-1862.

After two months as a nurse, Edmonds moved on to become a mail carrier, which certainly gave her more freedom to come and go, and thus easier to hide her identity. In 1863, Edmonds contracted malaria and deserted, rather than risk discovery. She went on to write her memoirs and was even granted a pension, one of the few women soldiers to receive one.

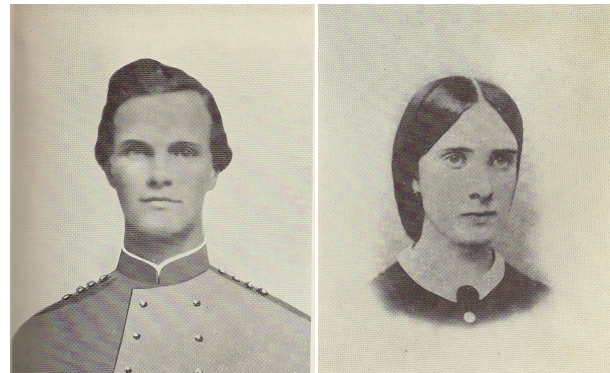
In Edmonds' memoirs, which she published immediately after the war, she claimed to have been a spy for Allan Pinkerton and the Union Intelligence Service. While little evidence exists to support her claims, it was not uncommon for spies on both sides of the war to use disguise to cross enemy lines. One

of these spies was in love with Carlyle House's own Emma Green.

Known as "Lee's beloved and trusted scout," Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow attended Episcopal High School, near Alexandria. While there he met Emma Green, the daughter of Mansion House Hotel owner James Green. Frank and Emma fell in love, but their courtship was interrupted by the Civil War.

A skinny 21 year-old at the start of the war, Stringfellow used his cunning and bravery to gather intelligence for the Confederacy. He daringly crossed enemy lines multiple times, sneaking into both Alexandria and Washington.

Stringfellow's adventures are the stuff of legends. Once, while spying in DC, he refused to drink to President Lincoln's health, and instead toasted Confederate President Jefferson Davis. He also claimed to have hidden under an Alexandria woman's petticoats to escape Union troops.



Frank Stringfellow and Emma Green.

After the war, Stringfellow married Emma, but not before refusing to take the oath of loyalty to the Union and living in Canada. Frank and Emma are buried side-by-side in the Ivy Hill cemetery in Alexandria.

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Confederate Army to General Ulysses S. Grant. He may have signed the terms of his surrender on a desk made at James Green's Alexandria workshop. Carlyle House and the Mansion House Hospital were returned to the Green



family and they soon reopened it as a hotel.

Alexandria and the hotel never returned to their former glory. The city fell into a slow decline and by the 1970s the buildings were crumbling into decay. The Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority stepped in to save Carlyle House from destruction, opening it as a museum on January 1, 1976.

During the restoration, the former Mansion House Hospital buildings was torn down, but not before artifacts from its days as a Civil War Hospital were recovered from underneath the floorboards and behind the walls. These artifacts will be featured in our upcoming exhibit, which will open on March 31, 2011.