Civil War Nurses

Union Nurses

Davida Michaels

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Civil War Nurses Union Nurses

Introduction

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” \(^1\) and were expected to nurse ill members of their families and neighbors. \(^2\)

The American edition of Florence Nightingale’s book *Notes On Nursing* was published in 1860 and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* wrote of her experiences in the Crimean War. \(^3\) 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. \(^4\) 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. \(^5\)

Revenby \(^6\) credits the Civil War experiences of women who had either nursed during the war or participated in the Sanitary Commission or other relief agencies for the reformation of hospitals and nursing. \(^7\)

“With their Civil War experiences freshly behind them and the Nightingale model for hospital and nursing reform already in place in England, the efforts of a number of elite reformers thus turned toward hospitals and nursing. The Civil War campaigns had given these women a political education in organizational battles as they became skillful in the intricacies of infighting and pressure politics.” \(^8\)

The efforts of these women reformers led to the first Nightingale inspired model training schools in New York (Bellevue), Boston (Mass General) and New Haven CT (Connecticut Training School for Nurses).

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3. Godey’s Lady’s Book was a popular women's magazine that was published in Philadelphia from 1830–1878. It was the most widely circulated magazine in the period before the Civil War.  
4. Reverby, p 44  
5. Ibid  
6. Ibid p.47  
7. Considering the South and the Southern economy was devastated after the war, my belief is that these conclusions applied primarily to the North.  
8. Ibid p 47
A Selection of Union Nurses

Among the better known union nurses are Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, Louisa May Alcott, Jane Stuart Woolsey, Georgeanna Woolsey, Katharine Prescott Wormeley and Walt Whitman.

Several recorded their memoirs – some sent letters home which were later published.

Dorothea Dix: 1802 – 1887

Dorothea Dix offered her services as a nurse and, although she had no formal training as a nurse, she was appointed Superintendent of the United States Army Nurses on June 10, 1861. Dix was described as “a strict captain, requiring that all of her nurses be over thirty, plain looking, and wear dull uniforms. She earned a reputation for being firm and inflexible, but ran an efficient and effective corps of nurses”.

Dix “convinced skeptical military officials, unaccustomed to female nurses, that women could perform the work acceptably, and then recruited women. Battling the prevailing stereo types-and accepting many of the common prejudices herself-Dix sought to ensure that her ranks not be inundated with flighty and marriage-minded young women by only accepting applicants who were plain looking and older than 30. In addition, Dix authorized a dress code of modest black or brown skirts and forbade hoops or jewelry”.

http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarnurses.html Downloaded 9/17/2017

Dorothea Dix: Mental Health Reformer and Civil War Nurse by Alyssa DesRochers, Intern, Institutional History Division on March 29, 2012

http://www.civilwarhome.com/dixbio.htm download 8.25.2017

According to “Caring For The Men,” http://www.civilwarhome.com/medicenehistory.html “It was not long before outraged surgeons virtually went to war with Miss Dix’s nurses. These were strong-minded middle-class American women, accustomed to ruling within the home and to receiving the respectful attention of their husbands and male acquaintances. For the most part they had no nursing training. The surgeons complained that they often substituted their own nostrums for the drugs prescribed and that they sometimes were loud and interfering when attempting to prevent amputations.
Clara Barton

Clara Barton, best known for founding the American Red Cross, like so many women of that time, her only prior nursing experience was caring for her invalid brother. According to a short history in the "Historical Times Encyclopedia of the Civil War:

“When Barton learned that many of the wounded from First Bull Run had suffered, not from want of attention but from need of medical supplies, she advertised for donations in the Worcester, Mass., Spy and began an independent organization to distribute goods. The relief operation was successful, and the following year U.S. Surgeon General William A. Hammond granted her a general pass to travel with army ambulances "for the purpose of distributing comforts for the sick and wounded, and nursing them."

For 3 years she followed army operations throughout the Virginia theater and in the Charleston, S.C., area. Her work in Fredericksburg, Va., hospitals, caring for the casualties from the Battle of the Wilderness, and nursing work at Bermuda Hundred attracted national notice. At this time she formed her only formal Civil War connection with any organization when she served as superintendent of nurses in Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butlers command”

As time passed, younger and less self-righteous nurses began to appear in the army, furnished by the Western Sanitary Commission or some other relief agency. Some surgeons learned to suppress their male-chauvinist behavior. In September 1863, the War Department approved a new nurse policy that, although ostensibly a victory for Miss Dix, really defeated her. Under this edict, hospital commanders could send away Dix appointed nurses but were forced to accept Dix appointed replacements unless the surgeon general authorized the appointment of someone the surgeon-in-charge preferred. The surgeon general was always willing. “

13 Historical Times Encyclopedia of the Civil War
Mary Ann Bickerdyke, known as “Mother Bickerdyke, was a nurse and health care provider to the Union Army during the American Civil War. The following are excerpts from the Ohio History website:

“Bickerdyke was born on July 19, 1817, near Mount Vernon, Ohio. She enrolled at Oberlin College, one of the few institutions of higher education open to women at this time in the United States, but she did not graduate.”

Upon leaving Oberlin, Bickerdyke became a nurse. She assisted doctors in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the cholera epidemic of 1837. On the death of her husband, she continued to work as a nurse to support her two young sons.

At the outbreak of the American Civil War, residents of Galesburg purchased medical supplies worth five hundred dollars for soldiers serving at Cairo, Illinois. The townspeople trusted Bickerdyke to deliver these supplies. Upon arriving in Cairo, Bickerdyke used the supplies to establish a hospital for the Union soldiers. Bickerdyke spent the remainder of the war traveling with various Union armies, establishing more than three hundred field hospitals to assist sick and wounded soldiers. During battles, Bickerdyke commonly risked her own life by searching for wounded soldiers. Once darkness fell, she would carry a lantern into the disputed area between the two competing armies and retrieve wounded soldiers. She was present at the Battle of Shiloh, the Atlanta Campaign, and many other engagements.

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14 http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Mary_Ann_Bickerdyke  Downloaded 9/10/2017

15 http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Mary_Ann_Bickerdyke  Downloaded 9/10/2017
Walt Whitman\textsuperscript{16} best remembered as a poet, over 40 at the time of the civil war, volunteered as a nurse.

Elizabeth Hamik\textsuperscript{17} writes:

“Few know Whitman as a nurse, and yet his service to nursing was exemplary. He wasn’t, of course, registered or even formally trained. He lived long before either recognition existed, yet his years as a nurse included service harsher and more demanding than many modern nurses will ever see.

At the start of the Civil War, Whitman was already in his forties and too old to enlist. Like many others, he thought the war would last a few weeks. Several of his brothers (he was one of nine children) did join.

In 1862 his brother George was injured and taken prisoner in Virginia. Whitman went to care for him and encountered, in a way few civilians do, the horrors of war: men dead, injured, and broken.”\textsuperscript{18}

Outside one mansion in use as a hospital, he encountered a “heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands” (Walt Whitman archives).

Through his work, he gained the trust of the battlefield doctors. Soon he was in charge of a trainload of wounded being transferred to boats for a trip up the Potomac. Whitman moved to Washington D.C. and volunteered his services for the rest of the war.”

\textsuperscript{16} Elizabeth Hanink, RN, BSN, PHN  http://www.workingnurse.com/articles/Walt-Whitman-American-Writer-and-Civil-War-Nurse
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid
"The Wound Dresser, 19" one of Whitman’s "Drum Taps" poems, described his service as a nurse during the Civil War. 20

Excerpt from : The Wound Dresser

“On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!) The crush’d head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,) The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine, Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard, (Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death! In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand, I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood, Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv’d neck and side falling head, His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump, And has not yet look’d on it.”

19 For the full text of the Wound Dresser see https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53027/the-wound-dresser
20 https://www.aahn.org/gravesites/whitman.html  ( Downloaded 9/24/2017)
Memoirs: Amanda Aiken and Clara Barton

Amanda Aiken

Armory Square Hospital on the Mall, ca. 1864
PREFACE

Perhaps it is not known to many that the Armory Square Hospital was constructed through the desire of President Lincoln to have one as complete and comfortable as could be devised, near the steamboat landing. In 1862 he called D. Willard Bliss, Surgeon, United States Volunteers, from a Michigan regiment, to organize a system of general hospitals in and about Washington. One result of his coming was the speedy erection of this one, on Government land, about the Armory, opposite the Smithsonian grounds. All of Dr. Bliss's far-seeing suggestions and ingenious, though simple, arrangements to aid in caring for the sick and wounded were discussed weekly with the President. So later the hospital came to be considered

A. A. S.

Akinrude, Quaker Hill, N. Y.
September, 1863.

[7]

[8]
Louisa May Alcott is best remembered as the author of “Little Women” but she served in the Civil War as a Union nurse from December 13, 1862 to January 21, 1863 in Washington, D.C. at Georgetown’s Union Hotel Hospital referred to in her semi-autobiographical book Hospital Sketches as hurly-burly-hotel. Her service was cut short after she contracted typhoid pneumonia.”

The Smithsonian’s American History website “O Say Can You See” compared the experiences of volunteer nurses Louisa May Alcott and Amanda Aiken:

“Hospital Sketches, though partially fictionalized, offers an interesting perspective into the life of a Civil War nurse, especially when compared to Akin’s memoir—and not simply because the two women served for different lengths of time (Alcott for two months, Akin for fifteen). They both served in Washington, D.C., but in two completely different hospital settings. The three-story Union Hotel Hospital in which Alcott performed her duties, for example, had poor ventilation, damp cellars, and no provisions for bathing; conversely, the ten, single-story wards composing the Armory Square Hospital where Akin labored not only allowed for light and air, but also facilitated the containment of infectious disease.”

The following excerpts from Hospital Sketches share Alcott’s perspective:

“Being fond of the night side of nature, I was soon promoted to the post of night nurse, with every facility for indulging in my favorite pastime of "owling." My colleague, a black-eyed widow, relieved me at dawn, we two taking care of the ward, between us…

21 http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2011/07/scenes-from-the-hurly-burly-hotel-louisa-may-alcotts-civil-war.html
22 Amanda Akin - The Lady Nurse of Ward E,
23 http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2011/07/scenes-from-the-hurly-burly-hotel-louisa-may-alcotts-civil-war.html
My ward was now divided into three rooms; and, under favor of the matron, I had managed to sort out the patients in such a way that I had what I called, "my duty room," my "pleasure room," and my "pathetic room," and worked for each in a different way. One, I visited, armed with a dressing tray, full of rollers, plasters, and pins; another, with books, flowers, games, and gossip; a third, with teapots, lullabies, consolation, and sometimes, a shroud.

Wherever the sickest or most helpless man chanced to be, there I held my watch, often visiting the other rooms, to see that the general watchman of the ward did his duty by the fires and the wounds, the latter needing constant wetting. “… 

The narrative continues with Alcott’s recollection of a dying soldier:

"Shall I write to your mother, now?" I asked, thinking that these sudden tidings might change all plans and purposes; but they did not; for the man received the order of the Divine Commander to march with the same unquestioning obedience with which the soldier had received that of the human one; doubtless remembering that the first led him to life, and the last to death.

"No, ma'am; to Laurie just the same; he'll break it to her best, and I'll add a line to her myself when you get done."

So I wrote the letter which he dictated, finding it better than any I had sent; for, though here and there a little ungrammatical or inelegant, each sentence came to me briefly worded, but most expressive; full of excellent counsel to the boy, tenderly bequeathing "mother and Lizzie" to his care, and bidding him good bye in words the sadder for their simplicity. He added a few lines, with steady hand, and, as I sealed it, said, with a patient sort of sigh, "I hope the answer will come in time for me to see it;" then, turning away his face, [Page 62] laid the flowers against his lips, as if to hide some quiver of emotion at the thought of such a sudden sundering of all the dear home ties.

These things had happened two days before; now John was dying, and the letter had not come. I had been summoned to many death beds in my life, but to none that made my heart ache as it did then, since my mother called me to watch the departure of a spirit akin to this in its gentleness and patient strength. As I went in, John stretched out both hands:

"I knew you'd come! I guess I'm moving on, ma'am."

He was; and so rapidly that, even while he spoke, over his face I saw the grey veil falling that no human hand can lift. I sat down by him, wiped the drops from his forehead, stirred the air about him with the slow wave of a fan, and waited to help him die. He stood in sore need of help—and I could do so little; for, as the doctor had foretold, the strong body rebelled against death, and fought every inch of the way, forcing him to draw each breath with a spasm, and clench his hands with an imploring look, as if he asked, "How long must I endure this, and be still!" For hours he suffered dumbly, without a moment's

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24 His brother
respire, or a moment's murmuring; his limbs grew cold, his face damp, his lips white, and, again and again, he tore the covering off his breast, as if the lightest weight added to his agony; yet through it all, his eyes never lost their perfect serenity, and the man's soul seemed to sit therein, undaunted by the ills that vexed his flesh.

Below: Illustration from *Hospital Sketches*\(^{25}\) “John The manliest man on my ward”

One by one, the men woke, and round the room appeared a circle of pale faces and watchful eyes, full of awe and pity; for, though a stranger, John was beloved by all. Each man there had wondered at his patience, respected his piety, admired his fortitude, and now lamented his hard death;….

Presently, the Jonathan who so loved this comely David, came creeping from his bed for a last look and word. The kind soul was full of trouble, as the choke in his voice, the grasp of his hand, betrayed; but there were no tears, and the farewell of the friends was the more touching for its brevity.

"Old boy, how are you?" faltered the one.

"Most through, thank heaven!" whispered the other.

"Can I say or do anything for you anywheres?"

"Take my things home, and tell them that I did my best."

"I will! I will!"

"Good bye, Ned."

"Good bye, John, good bye!"

\(^{25}\) Illustration downloaded from Google Images 5/30/2017
For a little while, there was no sound in the room but the drip of water, from a stump or two\textsuperscript{26}, and John’s distressful gasps, as he slowly breathed his life away. I thought him nearly gone, and had just laid down the fan, believing its help to be no longer needed, when suddenly he rose up in his bed, and cried out with a bitter cry that broke the silence, sharply startling every one with its agonized appeal:

"For God's sake, give me air!"

It was the only cry pain or death had wrung from him, the only boon he had asked; and none of us could grant it, for all the airs that blew were useless now. … He laid himself gently down; and, stretching out his strong right arm, as if to grasp and bring the blessed air to his lips in a fuller flow, lapsed into a merciful unconsciousness, which assured us that for him suffering was forever past. He died then; \textsuperscript{27} returned elsewhere, I could not but be glad that, through its touch, the presence of human sympathy, perhaps, had lightened that hard hour. “

\textsuperscript{26} Following amputations, surgeons ordered the stumps be kept moist.

\textsuperscript{27} \textsuperscript{27} \url{https://archive.org/details/hospitalsketches00alcorich} Hospital Sketches is available as a free download. Also available at Hospital Sketches. - UPenn Digital Library at \url{digital.library.upenn.edu/women/alcott/sketches/sketches.html}
LETTERS OF A FAMILY
DURING THE
WAR FOR THE UNION
1861-1865
VOL. 1
PRINTED FOR PRIVATE DISTRIBUTION
1899
TO THE DEAR MEMORY OF THE
LOVING MOTHER
WHOSE LOFTY FAITH, UNFAILING CHARITY
AND GREAT COURAGE
WERE THE INSPIRATION OF ALL THAT WAS BEST
IN HER CHILDREN
THIS FRAGMENT OF THE WAR-STORY
IS DEDICATED

Georgeanna Woolsey
Letters of Georgeanna M. Woolsley (G.M.W)

As part of their excellent work, the Woman's Central Relief Association organized a nursing staff for the army, selecting one hundred women and sending them to the various hospitals in New York city for such drill as could be secured in a few weeks, through the kindness of the attending staff. The Sanitary Commission undertook to secure recognition for these women from the War Department with the pay of privates; and they were sent on to the army hospitals on requisition from Miss Dix and others, as needed.

I (G.) still have my blue ticket, or pass, signed by (Mrs.) Christine Kean Griffin, Secretary of the Ladies' Committee, and Dr. Elisha Harris, of the Hospital Committee, on which I, "No. 24," was admitted to the old New York Hospital for a month's seasoning in painful sights and sounds.
Volunteer Nurses selection criteria (per Dorothea Dix):

what with the requisites insisted upon by the grave committees, I came near losing my opportunity.

"First, one must be just so old, and no older; have eyes and a nose and mouth expressing just such traits, and no others; must be willing to scrub floors, if necessary, etc., etc. Finally, however, by dint of taking the flowers out of my bonnet and the flounce off my dress; by toning down, or toning up, according to the emergency, I succeeded in getting myself looked upon with mitigated disapprobation, and was at last sat upon by the committee and passed over to the Examining Board. The Board was good to me. It had to decide upon my physical qualifications; and so, having asked me who my grandfather was, and whether I had had the measles, it blandly put my name down, leaving a blank, inadvertently, where the age should have been, and I was launched, with about twenty other neophytes, into a career of philanthropy more or less confused.

"Then began serious business. Armed with a blue ticket, I presented myself with the others at the door of a hospital and was admitted for instruction. 'Follow me,' said our guide, and we followed in procession. 'This will be your ward; you will remain here under so and so, and learn
what you can; and this, yours; and this, yours.' That was mine! I shall never forget the hopeless state of my mind at this exact point. To be left standing in the middle of a long ward, full of beds, full of sick men—it was appalling! I seized another nurse, and refused to be abandoned. So they took pity, and we two remained, to use our eyes and time to the advantage of the Army of the Potomac which was to be. We took off our bonnets and went to work. Such a month as we had of it, walking round from room to room, learning what we could—really learning something in the end, till finally, what with writing down everything we saw, and making elaborate sketches of all kinds of bandages and the ways of applying them, and what with bandaging everybody we met, for practice, we at last made our ‘reverses’ without a wrinkle; and at the end of the month were competent to any very small emergency, or very simple fracture.
that first day in the ward to hear the young "house" say peremptorily: "Nurse, basin!" I presented the basin promptly, and as promptly tumbled over in a faint at seeing a probe used for the first time. I came out from this ignominy to find that my associate-nurse was dashing my face with water from a tumbler in which she dipped her fingers before offering it to me to drink from.

"Before the summons from the army, though, came sickness among our soldiers passing through the great cities. Measles and typhoid fever began almost immediately. New wards in hospitals had to be opened, and the beds were filled faster than we could make them. Such nice fellows, too, from the country villages as were brought in."
“My first patient of the war was a Duryea's Zouave, not a country boy though, but one of those poor desolate creatures, so many of whom the army has sheltered, giving them the first home they have ever known. My Zouave was dying when he enlisted; he had no friends, no place to live in, no place to die in, so he told me, and came into the army for the sake of finding one. ‘I felt the sickness coming
on, and I knew if I was a soldier they would put me into a hospital, and then I could die there.'

"Poor soul! he was young and refined, in look and manner, and so comforted by little attentions, so appreciative of them;—and never to have had anything of the kind given him through all his lonely life!

"Now, in these few last days of it there was a satisfaction in doing everything for him, in being as good to him as possible, in bringing him all that a gentleman's son might have had. So, with his poor tired head on my arm, I fed him with jellies and ices, and in little ways tried to comfort him. We owed him all the blessing we could bring into these last few moments of a dreary life.

"My Zouave died, and they buried him in his fine new clothes—the best he had ever had—and put him to sleep in his own bed; now, at last, his own, that no one would dispute with him; no one grudge him possession of forever."
THE CRUEL SIDE OF WAR
WITH THE
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC

LETTERS
FROM THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE UNITED STATES SANITARY COMMISSION
DURING THE PENINSULAR CAMPAIGN IN VIRGINIA IN 1862
BY
KATHARINE PRESCOTT WORMLEY

THE CRUEL SIDE OF WAR

WRITER'S NOTE.

THE extremely personal character of these
Letters obliges me to say that it was the
affectionate interest of the Massachusetts Com-
mandery of the Loyal Legion in all that proved
the comradeship of those who took a part, how-
ever small, in the war which led to their origi-
inal publication.

The Commandery having lately made me a
present of the plates of the book, it is now
republished, though perhaps scarcely worth it.
The name is changed from “The Other Side
of War” to “The Cruel Side of War,” because
it was so frequently mentioned, and even
noticed, as “The Other Side of the War,”
which conveyed an impression of some politi-
cal meaning.

THE SIXTH,
JACKSON, N. H., 1898.
PREFATORY NOTE.

MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES.
COMMANDERY OF THE STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS.

MOST of the writings relating to the War of the Rebellion have been confined to accounts of battles, or to adventures so closely connected with battles as to seem an essential part of the conflict itself. The book here given to the public as “The Other Side of War” touches on matters almost entirely outside the noise and smoke, the glory and pomp, of military operations. Yet it presents scenes so intimately related to the army that they seem an essential part of a soldier’s experience.

The general work of the Sanitary Commission has been fully set forth in histories and in its own invaluable papers and reports. This more personal record of its earlier labors tells a story not elsewhere told, of how it began, and under what circumstances it first carried on its heroic work. As such, these remembrances of the Hospital Transport Service are presented by the Commandery of the State of Massachusetts of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States to its Companions as a portion of its contribution to the history of those eventful days, and in grateful acknowledgment of the loyalty and devotion of those men and women whose fortitude and grace have given to the Sanitary Commission its honored place in the story of the great conflict.

ARNOLD A. RANDE,
WILLIAM P. SHERRY,
HENRY STONE.

Committee on Library.
INTRODUCTION.

The United States Sanitary Commission was an organization of private gentlemen whose voluntary and unpaid services were accepted by Government at the beginning of the late Civil War to make up the deficiencies of the Medical Department of the army.

It was the outgrowth of a demand made by the women of the country; for in the great uprising nothing was more marked than that the principle which actuated the nation was shared alike by men and women. As the men marched for the battle-field, so the women maneuvered in churches, school-houses, and parlors, working before they well knew at what to work, and calling everywhere for instruction. What were they to make? Where were they to send? The busy hands went on, but where was the work to go? Some supplied regiments with articles that were practically useless; others sent to various points on suggestions afterwards shown to be untrustworthy. Little circles and associations of women were multiplying, like rings in the water, over the face of the whole country; but they were all in need of guidance and information, and they felt it. Time and the Sanitary Commission were to show them that by a great united effort their work was to broaden out into a fundamental good to the whole army; that lives were to be saved, the vital force protected; and that women, led by the experience of men, were to bear no small part in helping to maintain the efficiency of the troops, and thus to share upon the field itself the work of husbands and brothers. 1

At a meeting of women informally called in New York, April 25, 1861, the providential idea of attempting to organize the whole benevolence of the women of the country into a general and central Association ripened into a plan, and took shape in an appeal addressed to the women of New York and others "already engaged in preparing against the time of wounds and sickness in the army." This met with such an answer as showed the deep-felt need of it; and thus began the "Women's Central Relief Association" in New York.

1 The earliest of these Associations of women were formed in April, 1861, within fifteen days after the President's call for seventy-five thousand men. The names of those organized in April that have remained on public record (there were others) are: Soldiers' Aid Societies of Cleveland, Ohio; Bridgeport, Conn.; Charlestown and Lowell, Mass.; Women's Central Relief Association, New York; Women's All Society, Newport, R. I.