A VOLUNTEER NURSE IN THE CIVIL WAR:

The Letters of Harriet Douglas Whetten

EDITED BY PAUL H. HASS

ALTHOUGH the threat of secession and civil war had hung over the United States for a generation, the federal government and the loyal citizens of twenty-three states were ill prepared for the long, costly struggle which followed the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April, 1861. The regular army numbered barely 16,000 officers and men, and it was soon weakened by the resignation of many Southerners who chose instead to fight for the Confederacy. Yet the people of the North, including their President, entered America's bloodiest war with a certain measure of optimistic enthusiasm, and Lincoln's call for 75,000 state militia to serve for three months was based upon the universal assumption that the war would be a short one. It was not until the lesson of First Bull Run sank in that the federal government began in earnest to raise the citizens' army which was, at great length and at great cost, to crush the rebellion. On that army, which eventually numbered almost 800,000 volunteers and draftees, depended the fate of the Union.

But, as the civil and military authorities in Washington soon perceived, there was a good deal more to the art of war than merely swearing a volunteer into the federal service, arming him, and pointing him south. Problems of finance and diplomacy, of patronage and state politics, of training and discipline, and of transport and supply vastly complicated the process of making war. And not the least of the problems facing Lincoln's government was that of the health and well-being of the Union armies in the field. At a time when the germ theory of disease and the application of the doctrines of Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister lay years in the future, the epidemics of typhus, malaria, and dysentery which periodically beset the troops were matters of national concern. Entire armies could be immobilized by what soldiers wryly called the Tennessee Quickstep; shattered arms or legs meant gangrene or the surgeon's charnel house; abdominal wounds meant almost certain death. For every two men who died of wounds, five died of disease—and often quite needlessly: it was just that the army's Medical Bureau was at first unable, either materially or psychologically, to cope with a crisis of such magnitude.

But the Civil War, more than any other in our history, was a people's war, and the people were fortunately able to relieve a great
deal of pain and pointless suffering. As the
volunteer regiments in their quaint and exotic
uniforms rallied to the national colors, so,
too, did hundreds of relief and soldiers' aid
societies with their quaint and exotic notions
of war relief and military hygiene. At the
outset, to be sure, there was confusion, dupli-
cation of efforts, and a grave lack of co-
ordination; the good ladies of the North, in
their enthusiasm, became temporarily ob-
sessed with the scraping, collecting, and proc-
essing of lint for bandages—to the neglect of
nearly every other aspect of relief. A
nucleus of firm, experienced leadership was
required to direct and co-ordinate Northern
relief activities, to funnel the bandages, medi-
cines, and foodstuffs to the armies, to provide
sick and wounded soldiers with volunteer
nurses and orderlies, and to assure at least
minimal standards of sanitation and super-
vision in the filthy, overcrowded hospitals
which soon dotted the battlefront from Fort-
tress Monroe at the tip of Virginia to Vicks-
burg on the Mississippi. From June, 1861,
until the close of the war, such leadership was
in large measure provided by the United
States Sanitary Commission.

The Commission was the creation of a
group of distinguished Eastern doctors,
clerics, scientists, and professional men—
powerful, well-to-do men whom the Lincoln
administration could not well ignore. The
Reverend Henry Whitney Bellows, a promi-
nent Unitarian minister of New York City,
had conceived the notion of a national vol-
unteer relief association while attempting to
co-ordinate relief efforts in his own state. He
and his compatriots told Lincoln and his
administration that only by creating a federal sanitary
commission could the United States avoid
duplicating the ghastly experiences of the
Crimean War of five years before, when more
than 16,000 British soldiers had died of disease
in the pestilential camps. Quite reluctantly,
and in the face of opposition from the Medical
Bureau, the President in June, 1861, approved
the order creating the United States Sanitary
Commission. It would, Lincoln privately feared, become "a fifth wheel to the coach."

Thereafter, the Sanitary Commission served
as agent between the armies in the field and
the hundreds of relief and soldiers' aid so-
cieties which affiliated with—and drew suste-
nance from—the national commission. De-
spite the distrust and outright malice which
it kindled among some members of the Medi-
cal Bureau, the Sanitary Commission effec-
tively distributed drugs, food, and clothing,
supervised or administered field and base
hospitals, maintained feeding stations and
soldiers' lodges, provided for dependent fam-
ilies, badgered army doctors for higher stand-
ards of hygiene, raised large amounts of
money by means of Sanitary Fairs, and or-
ganized land- and water-borne transport serv-
ices for Union wounded. In all of this, the
Commission depended upon the generosity
and good will of the people of the North—
for cash donations, for articles of food and
clothing, and for volunteer personnel such as
nurses and hospital attendants.

HARRIET DOUGLAS WHETTEN, whose
letters chronicling her experiences dur-
ing the Civil War appear below, served as
a Sanitary Commission nurse in the hospital
transport service during the spring and sum-
mer of 1862. Very little is known about this
brave and literate woman. She was a native
of Staten Island, New York; she was the
daughter by a second marriage of Captain
John Whetten (1763-1845), a doughty sailor
in the China trade and a close friend and
business associate of John Jacob Astor of the
American Fur Company. She was briefly
mentioned in the postwar memoir of another
Commission nurse, Katherine Prescott
Wormeley, who described her in The Other
Side of War (1889) as "tall [and] sym-
metrical" and noted that she had since be-
come "Mrs. Gamble of Intervale, N.H." Be-
yond that there is nothing—except her fine
wartime letters to Kate and Hextie.

It is clear that Harriet Whetten was an
unusual woman. Well bred and well educated,
she was certainly sensitive to the scenes of
misery and desolation which she witnessed
during General George B. McClellan's cam-
paign against Richmond in the summer of
1862. Yet her letters evinced neither the
girlish romanticism nor the mawkish senti-
mentality common to so many women's ac-
counts of the war; she saw people and events
as they were, and she recorded them in spare,
unadorned prose which was always readable
and often quite moving. Whether she was aboard the Sanitary Commission ships or ashore at Edmund Ruffin's plantation home, Harriet Whetton had an eye for the revealing nuance and an uncommon ability for setting it down on paper. Her letters are deserving of a place in the first rank of the many eyewitness accounts of the Civil War.

Off Yorktown
Steamer Knickerbocker
May 8th 1862

My dearest Kate,

In this strange life I am leading I have hardly time to write a line. But today the Fortress Monroe boat has gone, and I have an hour or two that I can count upon. We left Baltimore on Tuesday afternoon and steamed down the Chesapeake in the most beautiful moonlight. We reached Fortress Monroe at 8 the next morning. Caught a glimpse of Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Mr. Stanton going on board the Harriet Lane for a visit to the Monitor—and the Monitor was there in full view of our steamer. She is exactly like the pictures of her and backwards & forwards on her turret a sentinel paces all the time with his telescope pointed towards Sewall's Point. Just before we left, the alarm gun was fired, the signal that the Merrimac was in sight. We expected a fine scattering of the little vessels behind the Monitor and the Galena, that looks like a great fish with iron scales—but she must have changed her mind and gone back, for we heard no more of her. Of course we went inside the fortress, that is within the walls, and saw guard-mounting, so beautiful, by two Zouave companies and the Artillery with scarlet plumes. While we were listening to the band Dr. Cuyler came up, and Lieutenant Carling, [who] afterwards came in the boat with us to Yorktown to join his regiment in the advance. Dr. Cuyler took us over two of his hospitals—and I saw there—worse than you ever dreamed of—and what would make Sister Eliza howl and tear her hair—God help the poor boys. Some of them looked longingly after us as we left their rooms. Dr. Lente remained at Fortress Monroe. I was so sorry to part with him—and whom do you think I met next? Col. Arden—and a more lovely, hearty, kindly man than he has proved himself I never saw. I will tell you about that when I come to it. I won't describe Fortress Monroe to you because I remember your disgust at the paper-mill letter—only I must tell you that the view is very fine—Sewall's Point, Craney Island on either side, and the sea line stretching before you. The parade ground has a good many live oaks, which I thought were old twisted apple trees—not like our oaks, you know. We got on board the Nelly Baker for Yorktown about 11 or 12 (they are not in the least particular about the hours of leaving here) and enjoyed the beautiful sail up York River. It was perfectly calm and sparkling. We stopped off Yorktown about 3 o'clock, meaning to remain on board our steamer until we should be transferred to the Ocean Queen, when we heard that she was already loaded with 800 men and was to sail that night, and that we must vacate the steamer and do—we did not know what. So they put us and our luggage off on the wharf and Mr. Cory (our clerk), Mr. Proudfoot (chaplain), and Mr. Charlie Strong, who joined us at Baltimore, went off to get orders from Mr. [Frederick Law] Olmsted, Secretary of the Sanitary Commission. There we sat on the wharf of Yorktown until nearly sun-down, amidst such a scene! Fancy the ground rising in some places steep from the shore, a mass of embankments and entrenchments mounted

1 Edwin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War.
2 The celebrated encounter between the Monitor and the Confederate ironclad Merrimac occurred on March 9, 1862. The battle was indecisive, but the Merrimac remained a threat to Union vessels at the mouth of the James River until it was scuttled by the Confederates on May 9 when they abandoned Norfolk.
3 John M. Cuyler, a native of Georgia, served as senior medical officer at Fort Monroe during the early part of the war. For an account of the activities of the Sanitary Commission, the Medical Bureau, and relief and medicine during the Civil War, see William Quentin Maxwell, Lincoln's Fifth Wheel: The Political History of the United States Sanitary Commission (New York, 1956).
Harriet Douglas Whetten in Civil War nurse's garb, from a photograph made during her wartime service with the Sanitary Commission.
with large guns, two or three large old-fashioned country houses in sight—sentinels pacing the ramparts—winding down the broad road to the shore, a long train of army wagons drawn by 6 or 8 mules, a crowd of hundreds of soldiers on the shore, busy as ants, some swimming the cavalry & artillery horses—all working in what to me seemed inexplicable confusion, the wharf covered with boxes filled with shell, stores &c, great bales of hay, troops of mules and horses, biting and [blot of ink].

Just as I made that blot the word was passed “The Wilson Small is alongside.” The Wilson Small, you will understand, is our present home. So I had to rush my things into my trunk and come off. Here we are on board the little tug, and here we find two other ladies, Mrs. Howland and Miss Wolsey. We are to wait here until the wounded are brought down from West Point—but I will go back to Yorktown and the squealing mules. Amid the uproar we poor women sat and lay on boxes and logs in a pretty hot sun—but we were so interested we did not mind it. Several officers came up to speak to us, Colonel Sachett among others. He is charming and bluff and his hearty laugh cheered us. At last Col. Arden, who had come from Old Point in another boat, came up and decided at once that something must be done for us—the something we most wanted was feed, and he invited us on board his steamer to tea. Another transit in a tug, while a sentinel watched our luggage on the wharf. We had a grand time, only never a drop of milk, but good bread and a little butter. A soldier on the wharf gave two loaves “to the ladies.” Well, the next question that came up was, where to sleep? We thought of some of the old rebel quarters but Col. Arden & the surgeons on the steamer put some mattresses and empty staterooms at our disposal. Col. Arden was perfectly lovely. I never felt more grateful to a man in my life.

News came in the evening that the two hired nurses were to go on board the Ocean Queen, and as it seemed doubtful whether we should find anything to do, I volunteered to go too—and had gone so far as to send Col. Arden for some brandy & quinine when he insisted that I ought not to go, and an old fogy of a doctor told me it would be almost certain death. There were 900 men on board, lying in 3 tiers below, and all over the decks, chiefly typhoid fever and dysentery patients. I slept last night with my carpet bag for my pillow and this morning had not a drop of water to wash my face till 1 o’clock when I managed to hire a contraband to bring me a pail, but this did not occur till I had been all over Yorktown and seen I will tell you whom. This same contraband says he had to take “kear” of “massa” and himself both, reckons he can take kear of himself now just as well. This was in answer to a question from one of the gentlemen as to how he would get along now he was free. At breakfast Mr. Charles Strong came in with word that Miss Dix was at Yorktown and Mr. Proudfit brought me some flowers of the valley from her and an expression of her wish to see me. So Mrs. Strong, Miss Gardiner & I went off—having previously parted with 4 of our ladies and 3 servants, who went to New York in the Ocean Queen. I came very near going, and was stuffing down my breakfast to be ready when Mrs. Devel asked to take my place as she wished to go home. Wasn’t I glad? for I wished above all things to stay. This was the first really sad thing, parting with these ladies, for we have all grown to love each other like people shipwrecked. I tell you it is real life without any varnish, this. We reported first to Miss Dix, whose appearance and manner pleased me. She is very ladylike in both, and seemed clear and decisive. Col. Arden says she is. I offered to serve in the Hospital to be established here, but she said she could make me more useful in Washington as she was detailing experienced nurses for this service and wanted their places filled. I may possibly go on with her, in which case I want you to get some things and send them to me. My wish would be to remain here or go up the river with this party and then go home for a day or two, but I will make no objection to going, as I don’t believe, or at least I am not sure, that we shall be able to

Dorothea Lynde Dix, whose reforms in the care of the insane had won her a national reputation, was appointed superintendent of nurses by the Sanitary Commission in the spring of 1861.

Mrs. George Templeton Strong, wife of the treasurer of the Sanitary Commission.
do much here. But the work to be done here is very real and very hard and actual nursing, which includes more than reading, writing, and smoothing pillows, is what is wanted. I shall know what is to become of me to-morrow and will add a post script.

After our visit to Miss Dix we went over the entrenchments in constant though unnecessary fear of torpedoes. By the bye, one in the hospital was actually attached by a string to the lid of a plated pitcher being concealed under the table, fortunately they discovered it before it was lifted. They think it was ordered by General Raines, who to use Col. Sachett’s expression tried it on the Indians in the Florida war. It runs in the family. His brother is fond of that way of fighting. Think of it, Kate, inside the rebel entrenchments at Yorktown. Most magnificent works, they say—covered ways, trenches, pits for night shelter from our shells. How can I tell you all—one magazine has been opened by one of the prisoners—there was a train, laid ready to blow us up, if he had not shown it to us. We went to the Courthouse occupied by the Berdan sharp shooters, to the prison where the rebels are confined, one a handsome young surgeon [who] talked a little while about the health of the rebel army. He had beautiful sad eyes and looked very worn and tired, dirty, of course, but that every one does here. You would be surprised to see how small Yorktown is. One street facing the water with a few, perhaps a dozen, good old houses, and the ruins of a few others. I send you a sprig of boxwood from Lord Cornwallis’ garden—Miss Dix’s headquarters—an old brick house [with] a wide hall in the middle, paneled, with a handsome staircase. I wanted to get some relics, but it is very hard. I would have liked to get a pike for Brother W., but one was sold this morning for $20.

Col. Arden parted with us this morning and we can’t bear to lose sight of anyone we know. There was no time for a long goodbye, for Martindale’s Brigade was embarking for up the river and the hurry was indescribable. All along the beach lay men on the sand, asleep, their faces covered with the capes of their coats—having been up, and I think marching, part of the night. We had to pick our way through them and troops of mules. I saw for the first time a mule ambulance, arranged like panniers and shaped like a big snow shoe of canvas. We returned at last to the Knickerbocker descending a plank about 20 feet in the air to get to our row boat. I felt like Blondin. There is but one dock, which was injured when we shelled away some rebel vessels—there are several, however, made of boats. The river is crowded with vessels, from incessant little tugs to large steamers—this time last week there were only one or two schooners to be seen now and then. We hear no news here as we do in town. And I could not tell you if we did for our letters are liable to be opened and they might not like reports to be repeated! At dinner today we had a young captain with a plastron on his head as big as your hand—shot by a rebel sharpshooter, the same man having shot two of his men in the eyes a little before. His is only a flesh wound. Another division is off today. The men seem well & cheerful.

Off West Point. Friday morning. May 9

We left Yorktown about 5 this morning and we are now just off West Point, within 2½ miles of the enemy, who are on the road running by the river, [George B.] McClellan

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9 Brigadier General John H. Martindale’s brigade of the Third Corps.
10 A large wicker basket, often arranged in pairs for transporting goods by horse or mule-back.
11 Charles Blondin (real name Jean Francois Gravelet) was a celebrated French acrobat and tightrope walker who, after touring the United States for several years, crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope in five minutes on June 30, 1859, in the presence of a crowd of 25,000 people. In July and August he made two more crossings, one blindfold and trundling a wheelbarrow, and the other with a man on his back. In September of 1860, watched by a crowd which included the Prince of Wales, he again crossed the Falls, this time on stilts.
pushing them forward, [William Buel] Franklin's division encamped just before us to prevent their retreat upon this place. They are in a very tight place. This is just at the head of the York River. The banks all the way up the river are low but beautifully wooded, the forest trees in full leaf, several large houses on the shore with negro quarters, but not a man, woman or animal to be seen. Just here the river is crowded with schooners, steamers &c—they are now busy disembarking [Fitz-John] Porter's division. The steamers are black with men, and the little boats foam over with them (like your ale) on the way to the shore. Mr. Strong went ashore last night to see if we could come up with safety, as there was a report that a transport had been fired upon yesterday, but there has been no firing since day before yesterday, and they think the rebels must have left the battery. As yet we have had no work to do, but we were told we must expect to wait. The government will put vessels at the disposal of the Commission to-morrow—and then God help us to do our duty. I must not forget to tell you that it is no warmer here than it is at home, indeed I slept under two blankets doubled last night. Tell Simmy my bunk is not much better than his—and that we had some hard-tack for breakfast this morning. They ask 2 shillings a loaf for bread in Yorktown. Mrs. Strong has been on shore—I would give anything to go, but won’t bother the men by asking them to take me. We look as if we had received a shell—we dragged anchor last night and swung against another vessel, as the current is very strong—about four or five feet of the hurricane deck is torn away, and the shock and grind was like pulling out teeth. Mr. Frederick Olmsted is on board and Mr. [Frederick Newman] Knapp of the Commission. Mr. Colley, our clerk, has just come on board and says there are 25 wounded men lying in a log hut—how I wish I could go to them.

Off Yorktown
Sunday evening May 11th 1862

My dearest Hexie,

I asked Kate to let you know that I had arrived in Baltimore. Since then I have only had time to write her a long journalizing sort
of letter, the contents of which I asked her to write you in brief. . . . Yesterday afternoon Mrs. [Eliza] Howland and I were ordered on board the Daniel Webster to take 200 men, wounded at Williamsburg last Monday,12 to the hospitals at Fortress Monroe. We went with two of our own surgeons, found three on board, and began to work as soon as we sailed. There were no other women. The men lay about five or six inches apart all over the decks, upper and lower, and on the bulwarks. Mrs. Howland ordered pails full of soup to be warmed, and tea made—this was served out to them as soon as possible. We in the meantime washed the face and hands of almost every man on board—never while I live shall I forget the uncomplaining fortitude of these men, lying in filth and blood in a state you cannot conceive. They had nearly all been two days or more in the open field in mud and rain. Their gratitude and the comfort they took in their tea and refreshed faces was a rich reward. I could give you little instances of their disinterestedness in favour of their comrades which would bring the tears to your eyes. They were all, not comfortable, but as much so as we could make them before 11 o’clock. The Captain gave us up his state room and we never even heard the explosion of the Merrimac, though we saw the fires at Norfolk. This morning busy again serving out breakfast, feeding with a spoon those who could not feed themselves, and giving stimulants to get them strong enough to be carried ashore. We landed them all, poor fellows, by 1½ past 10. I hope their ghastly wounds are dressed nicely now and that they are comfortabler. We were telegraphed to return in the mail boat, and are here again at least for to-night in what seems our home, the Wilson Small. We have about 13 or 20 wounded on board—you see it is a busy life, not much time for smoothing hair, or using cologne water. There are half a dozen women here whom I don’t know, from New York. We went over to another ship to see some of them this afternoon. On Friday morning we went up the York River as far as West Point and at that time were about 5 miles from the enemy and 30 from Richmond. I will write a few lines to morrow as I must now take my tea (the little boat is so filled, the floor of the saloon having 10 wounded men, that we take it standing) and then comes my turn of duty.

Monday morning. We are cruising about looking for one of our ships and the jolts of the Wilson Small make my handwriting shaky. My friend Mrs. [Christine] Griffin came on board this morning, to be drafted soon, I suppose, into another ship. What a strange life it is, under orders all the time, and not knowing what number of poor suffering men we are to be sent to next. Mr. Olmsted is on our boat—dreadfully busy. . . .

Steamer Elm City

Off Whitehouse up the Pamunkey river,
15 or 20 miles from Richmond.
May 19th, 1862

My dearest Hexie,

I take advantage of this leisure time to write to you, though I don’t know when I can send the letter. I have been very busy since I wrote last. I forget whether it was before or after that I went with Mrs. Howland to Fortress Monroe with 200 wounded men from the battle of Williamsburg, some of whom had been lying out in the woods two days. . . .

When we returned from Fortress Monroe we remained with our wounded men on board our little steamer Wilson Small until last Tuesday afternoon when they were sent on board the Elm City. Mrs. Balestier (she is a good friend to me) and I had had the chief care of them and were very anxious to go with them to Washington, so we got ready, but did not know till ten minutes before starting that our wish would be gratified. We took on board the Elm City 400 sick men, and from various delays did not reach Washington until Thursday. Our wounded were disembarked that afternoon, a very slow process, and the sick men all removed by Friday afternoon. Friday morning several people from Washington visited the steamer, while we were still giving the men stimulants to strengthen them for removal. Among others, N. P. Willis came on board and in a way very characteristic of him said that “this is
It was so professional, it rather jarred, and just then in the midst of unavoidable dirt, slop, & suffering seemed rather ill-timed. All that can be done for the soldiers in these steamers is to keep life in them, and if possible improve them a little till they can be placed under systematic treatment, and without constant & tender care this cannot be done. On Friday afternoon Mrs. Strong & I cleaned, dressed and went ashore to Willard’s Hotel. Mrs. Strong is a fashionable New York woman, the last person you would have expected in such an expedition, but she has done very well in the way of ordering & arranging. She is rather too fine a lady to make a good nurse, and touches things somewhat too much with the tips of her fingers, so that the actual nursing in our ward falls chiefly on me. You must understand that there are men nurses and orderlies detailed, so that we volunteer ladies have nothing disagreeable to do. Administering medicines & food and caring for them in every way as if they were our brothers is what we have to do. The first thing I did when I landed at Washington was to go to the Hospital to see my boys—and, oh Hexie, I was more than repaid by their gratitude & affection. I sometimes wonder at God’s goodness in having allowed me a share in this blessed work.

This last voyage has been our hardest experience, as typhoid patients require incessant care, and are more difficult in every way to manage than wounded men. I will give you one sketch of me just before we landed. The decks, you know, are covered with beds; that of the ladies’ cabin was filled with our wounded men. One of them, Henry Bennett, asked me to write a letter to his wife. I crouched down between him and a man shot through the chest, gathering up my petticoats lest they should touch either of them, for Bennett himself had 3 wounds, wrote the letter, while the stump of Andrew Tyran’s leg was being dressed, about 2 feet behind me. A fortnight ago I never could have believed that I could do these things, but the sense, the blessed sense, of doing good to these brave & patient men overpowers every thing. They treat us as if we were angels. I have never heard but one profane word, and then the man did not know I was near.

Well, we had an interesting time at Washington and left there on Saturday night, dropped down to Alexandria for coal, left for Yorktown at daybreak, reached there at 6 p.m. yesterday, received orders to proceed at once to White House, anchored all night at West Point, and this morning have been working up the Pamunkey, a narrow winding river, with occasional flat meadows and sometimes wooded shores, here & there a farm house. The country looks like our richest June, and so peaceful. The negroes stop working in the fields, and wave their old straw hats and shout as we pass. This is the first time such large steamers as we & our consorts have ever gone up this little river. It winds incredibly. Here we wait for our sick men, perhaps a day or two longer, as we were hailed on the river that the army has moved today—and we must be near in case of an engagement. We passed Cumberland [Landing], which was McClellan’s headquarters a day or two ago.

Everything is so strange that nothing is strange, and it seems quite natural to me to be near the front lines of the grand army—I can give you no news of general interest, for here, we hear less than you do. . . .

As far as I know we are to remain at anchor to receive those who are not very sick, but require good care and nursing (just what we can do) to enable them to return to their regiments soon. We shall also receive those poor fellows who are wounded in the engagement which is supposed to be going on to-day. We have news from head quarters that McClellan left this place this morning.

“Stebbins”—May 30th, 1862

My dearest Hexie,

Here I am on the Island again, and able to write my Friday letter. I left White House

\footnote{Nathaniel Parker Willis became widely known as a poet while still a student at Yale. After his graduation he became an editor, foreign correspondent, and the author of a number of distinguished literary works. As a wartime correspondent for the \textit{Home Journal} he was a favorite of Mrs. Lincoln.}

\footnote{A small landing on the south bank of the Pamunkey, used by McClellan as his base of operations during much of the Peninsular campaign.}
at 12 o'clock last Monday, and arrived in New York Bay at daylight on Wednesday. We had a very stormy voyage, but happily our 331 sick men did not suffer materially. I never knew what physical suffering was to the extent I endured on Tuesday. I was ghastly sea-sick, but as Mrs. Strong (the only other lady in charge) was stretched on her back, and the four servants in the same way, I was obliged to keep up, and did, with the exception of an hour or two in the middle of the day. You would have laughed to see me sitting in the pantry, trying with my weak hands to cut bread and butter and wash tin cups in cold greasy water, my gown torn in half a dozen places by being thrown against barrels & boxes when the ship heaved, and altogether the most forlorn limp figure you can imagine. The men-servants helped me as well as they could, but they were sick, too, and I don't know what I should have done if one of the soldiers, who was a convalescent, had not found his way into the pantry and insisted upon waiting upon me all the afternoon and evening. I shall never forget that man, George Holden by name, nor his tender devotion through that hard day. Well, it was over at last, and the next morning when I went through the wards I had the happiness of finding the men, as a general thing, cheerful & improving, though they could not have had the attendance they needed, the day before. I did not get off the ship till 6 o'clock, the last patient was taken off about 5, and your friend Dr. [John W.] Draper & I drove up Broadway together shortly after. I was busy executing commissions yesterday, & came over here last evening—I am doing my best to persuade Kate to accept your invitation, and as she is strongly inclined to do so I hope she will yet take possession of the Den. I go up to town this afternoon as the steamer may sail to morrow, and I am going back—for, dearest Hexie, I cannot give up this work while I can be of any use. Your disapprobation has been a great trial to me, but I hope it is at last removed.

I don't remember when I wrote to you, for the days are confused in the strange life I have led, but I think not since I have been ashore at the White House [in Virginia], which is no White House at all, but a grey painted wooden cottage [with] two bedrooms over the main part of the house upstairs. . . .
It must have been a very pretty place—a green lawn sloping to the river with trees, locusts, I think, and on the north of the house [and] along the shore a line of tall cedars, under which are the tents of our soldiers. Forward from this fringe of trees is an immense plain trampled dead by the feet of McClellan’s army. I felt sorry for the poor young woman who thought herself obliged to leave her pretty home, and although there is but little furniture left in it, there was enough to show that they were people of refinement & taste—some very handsome copies of our old favourite books, *Lyra Germanica, Two Years Ago,* some of Ruskin’s books were lying in a heap in the garret, and before a window there stood Mrs. Lee’s easel & chair, making me think of the “Paradise” of the North Shore.

We had a boat full of patients for three days before we transferred them to the steamer *Spaulding*, for New York, and, of course, were very busy. They were chiefly fever & diarrhea patients, and required, the fever ones, constant feeding with beef tea and milk punch. We had also one poor negro on board who had lain under a tree five or six days without eating. Whenever we had nothing else to do we poured a little beef tea and milk punch down him—till at last I had the happiness of hearing him say, “Yes, Missus,” when I asked him if he were better. A messenger has just arrived from town bringing me a note to say that the *Spaulding*, our steamer, will leave to morrow at 3 A.M. So I must go off in the next boat to town, as I have not seen Laura nor Maria Daly. Kate is going up to stay with me till I go off. . . .

*Spaulding*

_June 1st 1862._

My dearest Kate,

I was tempted to emulate Major Paine, and begin a letter to you before we got out of sight of land, but better thoughts prevailed, and I spent the afternoon in lazily looking at the clouds and listening to the rush and hissing of the waves. We stopped at Fort Lafayette [at the entrance to New York harbor] for the prisoners. There are 90 of them, under a guard of regulars. Such a miserable looking crew! They came up the gangway as they were called by name, some of them in red shirts and tight shining black trousers, whom I took to be Louisiana Tigers, and hoped for a button, but the whole gang are privateersmen. After them came a procession of half a dozen or more barrels, each about one 15th full—a little coffee in one, a few potatoes in another, a handful or two of mouldy apples in a third. I can get no clear explanation of them. Frank, of course, kept up his persecutions through the day. About 4 o’clock he came booming and buzzing up to me, like a great bee. “Miss Wetting, dere is one of dem men dere sick in de holt, and dey asked for one of de misses.” I went to Charles and asked him to get me a cup of tea (one naturally turns to that) then got the permission of the Captain of the Guard to see the prisoner, and followed by Charles, who did not seem to think it right to leave me, went down the forward hatchery to the hold. It was almost dark, and in the midst of the crew of ruffianly looking fellows I felt as if I were in hell. I found the man, not very sick (he has inflammatory rheumatism) very civil and grateful and superior to the rest in his appearance & manner. But to tell you the truth I was frightened. I could be alone with hundreds of our men and feel safe and happy, but these fellows looked different. Not that they were disrespectful. Only one spoke to me, and he complained of the treatment they had received. I thought he was a mean coward to do so to a woman, so I looked him in the face, and did not answer. I went down again before bed time to take Secesh more tea and some pillows & comfortables, and this time the only light was from a lantern Frank held, and it looked more like hell than ever. We shall put them ashore at Fortress Monroe, which we shall not probably reach till 2 or 3 P.M. It has been rather rough, but I have been perfectly well, and enjoyed sitting on a coil of rope in the stern last evening. . . .

Monday morning. We reached Fortress Monroe about 5 o’clock, and sent the prisoners on board a small steamer. Before they left I went down to see the sick man again. He is a Howard of Maryland, he says, and has

15 An elite Confederate brigade, composed entirely of Louisiana troops.
followed the sea 21 years, although he is not yet 30. When I bade him goodbye he said, 
"I hope I may meet you in Virginia. Strange things happen in war times, and if I do, I may be able to return your kindness to me." So you see, if I am taken prisoner I shall have a friend among the rebels. As we neared the Fortress the mate discovered a smoke burning up from the hold. The prisoners said that one of them had lighted a paper to look for something which dropped on a bed tick, and set it on fire. It is believed that it really was accidental, but the doubt was startling enough for a sensation paragraph. The famous Baker 36 was on board, who they say is to be exchanged for Col. Coverlan. It seems that all the prisoners are not to be released, which made me think that the fellow who lighted the paper meant mischief, as the boat could have been run on shore and they might have escaped in the confusion. Just before sunset we went ashore in a little boat. It was a beautiful evening, and we walked all around the fortifications and went to see those monsters the Union & Lincoln guns that stretch their great black bodies on the beach. 450 pounds is the weight of one of the Lincoln's balls.37 The walk to the boat by the shore was delightful, the waves dashing up, and a cool delicious air. At the Express Office I found my trunk & brandy and I am happy to say they are on board, though I cannot look over my treasures as Mr. Olmsted has the key.

In the evening we sat on deck till ½ past 10. Mr. Proudfit had a short service by the light of the new moon and stars, and then they sang hymns, some of the real roaring old Methodist hymns, and *Homeward Bound*, and *Rest for the Weary*, and the *Shining Shore* &c. It was so beautiful and strange, I wish you had been there. I have a good time with little Hyde who is very gentlemanly and intelligent—and I am also somewhat amused by one of the volunteer nurses, a gentleman, you know, who is very deep and earnest and asks the most searching questions as to religion and many important worldly events. He quite exhausts me in my endeavour to follow him, but he sings "very pretty." The whole thing is too like a party of pleasure, and I shall be glad when we get home at White House and at work again. There was a report at the Fortress yesterday of a fight near Richmond on Saturday in which our troops were repulsed with the loss of three batteries, and that yesterday they regained them and forced the rebels from their position.38 If this be true there is plenty of work awaiting us, for our men would not lose the batteries without desperate fighting. Tuesday afternoon. We got to White House about 1 o'clock. The chief came on board, and told me "to keep cool," an order impossible to be obeyed—for it is very hot. We heard as soon as we arrived that wounded men were being brought in the train from the battlefield, that they were lying in numbers unattended. It was very hard to be patient & inactive. At last towards evening a man came on board who said he had just come off the *Daniel Webster* filled with wounded & suffering for care. Then came an order from the chief for a detail of our surgeons, dressers & nurses, and I "took the responsibility," left my ship where I had nothing to do, and went along. I was not sure that I should not return with an ignominious flea. I supposed there was no woman there, but to my great comfort I found Mrs. Griffin & Miss Wormley making lemonade, cracker punch &c and one of the woman nurses. But there was enough for all to do. Men to be washed and fed in the routine which I have already told you. There were a good many badly wounded, but the rebels always suffer more than our men, for they use round balls, and we conical ones, which tear badly.

The only handsome rebel I have seen was there last night—a great magnificent fellow, shot through the lungs, every breath a fearful rattle. He was very gentle & sweet, and said

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36 Probably Colonel Alpheus Baker, a Confederate commander who was captured at Island No. 10 on the Mississippi River in April, 1862. Baker was exchanged in September, returned to action, and survived the Vicksburg, Atlanta, and Carolina campaigns.

37 The Union forces relied quite heavily upon large naval guns during the Peninsular campaign, both to protect their flanks along the rivers and to reduce the Confederate earthworks.

38 This was the Battle of Fair Oaks or Seven Pines, fought just east of Richmond on May 31 and June 1, 1862.
to one of the gentlemen, with tears in his eyes, that he did not see how he ever could be forgiven—it was the cruel falsehood of politicians that had misled the men of the South. I did not know that he was a rebel till this morning, but I was much struck with his beauty and sweetness. The poor boy said half to himself as I was feeding him, "What would my mother say to this? She did not want me to go." What, indeed? helpless, torn asunder, famishing, on his bloody stretcher.

We said until 2 o'clock when as I could not get home I was hospitably entertained on board the Wilson Small, and leaving there about 9 this morning was steaming & drifting up & down the river trying to get at the Spaulding until ½ past 12 in such a hot sun—one of the frequent trials of patience one has to bear here. Rumours come in of a surprise of [Edwin V.] Sumner's division, and that to morrow McClellan will engage the enemy with his whole line. I sat at dinner today next to a Cap'n in Berdan's regiment, who leaves for the front this afternoon. God help us all—we are only just getting unladen, and there begins the work of preparation for the men. We are to take on the wounded, and as I am to remain in charge I may be in town almost as soon as this letter. I would rather not go back again when I have to return immediately—it is somewhat of a wrench. The rest and my voyage hither have done me great good. I only slept 4 hours last night, and I am not the least tired, and as strong as a horse.

I got a heavy mail yesterday of old letters. The key of my trunk was in one of them. I have on my flannel gown which is just what I want—so are shirts, aprons, pin cushions and all. Sister Julia has put in some odd little things which I did not think of which will be very useful. . . .

Steamer Spaulding
Below White House
June 14, 1862

My dearest Hecie,
I hope by this time Kate has been enjoying Little Green with you for a day or two. How cool it sounds, "Little Green"—and today it is so stifling hot—a broiling sun, and only now and then a little whiff of air between the banks of this narrow river. I dare say Kate has told you of my pleasant voyage from New York to White House. We arrived on a Monday, June 2, and received a freight of wounded men from the actions of Fair Oaks & Seven Pines. 350—some very badly hurt—more than 3,000 had been transported by the Commission when we left—which includes, of course, some rebels. We had about fifteen or twenty of them on board. I confess when a man tells me he belongs to a Southern regiment it seems as if clock work stopped inside of me for a minute—and there is a little pause before it begins again. They all have a strange half defiant look when they make the announcement. We had a good many officers on board. They are a great deal more trouble than the men. As most of them were but slightly wounded they ate like pigs, and were sending their orderlies for all sorts of things not in the Hospital diet. Col. [Edward E.] Cross' demands for eggs were so unreasonable that I almost wished myself a hen that I might satisfy him. This Col. Cross is the fighting colonel of the New Hampshire 5th, has 6 brothers in the army and 13 relations. [He is] 6 feet 3 inches long, so that a coop had to be nailed to the end of his bunk to receive his feet. In the next bunk to him, close by his side (Kate knows how the bunks lie, two & two) was a rebel Lieutenant, a handsome dark youth. They used to talk over the war and discuss the different points in an amicable & gentlemanly way. Over them was a rebel private who cried whenever he spoke. I did not relish the man, but I was very sorry for him—a simple country fellow, forced into the army only four or five weeks ago—his whole heart with his wife and "those two sweet little boys." One morning when I asked him how he was, he burst into tears, "Oh, last night I was in my own barn." Poor fellow, his brother was killed by his side when he was wounded & taken prisoner.

I was very much interested in these men—I mean our own—wounded men are easier to take care of than sick ones—unless they are desperately hurt they are cheerful & hopeful—except where the breathing apparatus is injured and then it is awful. There was one man on board whom we persuaded the surgeon not to put off at Portsmouth as we did
most of our worst cases—we knew that he was mortally wounded, and then we expected to go to New York and hoped he would be able to see his wife. But we were delayed by some red tape twenty-four hours at Fortress Monroe & Portsmouth, and Pasco died at midnight as we got into Philadelphia the next day. He asked me not to leave him, and thank God, I was able to be with him till the last. In the intervals of his insensibility from chloroform which was given him to subdue the spasms (for locked jaw began in the morning of the last day) he would put out his hand to take mine. He sent a message to his wife, and we read to him as he could hear it, a few verses from the Testament. Mr. Lockwood, who has a lovely voice, sang softly to him some hymns about Heaven while he was dying. It seemed to comfort and soothe him, and I believe he understood much if not all, for in cases of locked jaw the brain is perfectly clear. It so happened, for the surgeon was very busy, and Mr. Lockwood had other cases in his ward that he could not leave, that I was entirely alone with him at the last, and for a few minutes after stood there, before anyone came, by the side of his rough bunk, and blessed God that the poor mangled chest palpitated with pain no longer, and felt the truth of the words “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God hath prepared for those who love Him”—words which, I trust, comforted & strengthened poor Pasco’s dying heart. We reached Philadelphia on Sunday afternoon, and by 11 o’clock on Sunday night all our men were removed to comfortable Hospitals. It was very pleasant to go and see them on the two succeeding days. The young Lieutenant was writing a letter when I went in—“Perhaps my farewell one,” said he, “for my thigh is to be taken off this morning.” The next day his orderly told me that he nearly died under the operation; and the next when I went there I was told he was dying.

You must be tired by my hospital stories. They are so absorbing to me that I forget it cannot be the same for you who have never seen the men.

I had a stupid time in Philadelphia, though a patriotic lady took Mrs. Willett, the quarter master’s wife, and me out driving one day. We left on Wednesday with an immense crop of surgeons, nurses, &c—and another lady—daughter of the medical director, about 19 or 20, who appeared the next morning in a pink muslin morning dress and embroidered petticoat and has never done any thing since she came on board but flirt with one of the medical cadets. Her father ought not to have brought her—it is such people that bring ridicule on the cause. Tell Kate that Mrs. Strong was expected by the mail boat last night! She will be dreadfully disappointed that she did not come for she missed an excitement. We were sitting quietly on deck about 9 o’clock when I said to Mr. Hyde, “Why are all these vessels ranging themselves about us, and why is the Wilson Small (the Chief’s headquarters) coming up alongside?” We were ordered to get up steam immediately, and be ready for a moment’s start. A body of rebel cavalry had fired into the train about three or four miles from the White House, killing two of our men and wounding several, one mortally. Several others jumped off the cars, and whether they are hurt or prisoners we don’t know. One has come aboard within an hour, he jumped in the mud and was not hurt. I intend to hear what he has to say as soon as it gets cool enough to breathe. They attacked the railroad in two places, cut the telegraph wire, tore up the rails, and set fire to some of our hay sloops.” An attack on the post was hourly expected as it is not well-defended, and it was rumoured that these rebels were part of a brigade that had crossed the river above. So we store and hospital ships were ordered to be ready to get out of harm’s way—but I could not be frightened, the rebels had no artillery, and our ship carries three guns, has plenty of shot and shell, and arms enough for a 100 men. I did not like scampering before the rascals. In the middle of the night men were sent on shore to remove the sick & wounded to vessels. Gen. Dix arrived

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18 This was probably part of Jeb Stuart’s “ride around McClellan” of June, 1862, which alerted McClellan to his exposed right flank and precipitated the Union army’s subsequent change of base from White House to Harrison’s Landing on the James River.

19 Probably John Adams Dix, commander of the Middle Department (consisting of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and parts of Maryland and Virginia) until June 9, 1862.
at ½ past 2 this morning, and a battery is planted, and reinforcements have been going up the river this afternoon. We are ready for them, but I hope they won’t come. We are going ashore after tea to see the preparations, the fired-into cars, &c.

Just now it seems as if we were to have a long interval of leisure. We are ordered to wait for the expected engagement before Richmond, and as Gen. McClellan has only just now planted his siege guns, unless they make the attack, it may be two weeks or more before we are sent off, and as the ship is all ready, beds made &c, there is nothing to be done. Is it not dreadful to wait and make deliberate preparation for what must come? One cannot always think of it, and last night before the alarm I laughed myself weak with looking at the field hands dance a regular Virginia break down—the Christies’ [minstrels] imitation of them is perfect . . .

Best love to all. I wish I were going to drink tea with you tonight—so clean and quiet—two things strange to me—not to speak of more spiritual enjoyment.

Steamer Spaulding
June 27th 1862

My dearest Hexie,

I am home again on board my ship. We sailed from New York last evening about ½ past 6 and I wish you were by my side now breathing this delicious sea air and not a sign of land to be seen. I hardly know where to begin, because I want you to tell you everything at once. We passed a week of restless idleness in the Pamunkey after our return from Philadelphia, expecting every hour to have the ship filled, and for that reason, I suppose, not allowed by the chief to do any duty on shore. I was lying on the deck reading last Thursday morning a week ago, when a steamer came alongside with 30 wounded men from a skirmish at the front the day before. I had just time to put on my working dress and get the beef tea and stimulants ready when they were brought on board. There were so few of them that we could nurse them like kings—but the next day we stopped at Yorktown and received about 320 from the Hospitals there—not very badly wounded though—chiefly convalescents, or hurt in the hand or foot. One of them had his dog, Fanny, with him, small, black & brindled, who had been with him in three battles—in the last she never left his heels, but followed him, yelping & whining all the time, however. You may be sure I saw that she had a good dinner, and she wagged her small tail very amiably at my attentions. At Yorktown your friend Dr. Draper came on board to pay us a visit. He is in charge of the St. Mark Floating Hospital & has his wife with him. She is a pretty woman and looks like a wild wood berry—you understand—crimson & brown & tawny. Mrs. Strong is also on the St. Mark and another lady. We expected to go to Boston, but at Yorktown received orders for New York. We had a hard voyage, for our corps was not sufficient—some were sick beside, and that threw double duty on the others. We anchored off the battery on Monday morning, and after the men were all taken off and I had changed my dress I drove up to Brother William’s in time for dinner. I had a delightful three days in New York—went to the Island on Wednesday and brought Tuggie back with me to 10th Street, made her stay all night and kept her the next day. She was delighted with her visit to Hartford, and I really felt that I had been living in Little Green with you after hearing her discourse . . .

I was very much amused just as we were sending the men off the steamer at New York by a fat man with spectacles and note book who came up to me to know if we had any “interesting cases”! I could only suggest the man who had his feet shot off at Yorktown last April. But I will tell you of a boy who had what one of the nurses chose to call “St. Viper’s Dance”. Kate has told you about Frank. Well, Frank has been persecuting me to let him get a “little nigger” for me—I repeatedly declined—then he said, “Dere is de prettiest little pig on de shore I can get you.” “No, Frank, I cannot have a pig on board, I do not want one.” Just as we were getting the wounded men on board at Yorktown, Frank buzzed up at me and said “Dere is de nicest lot of cray (grey) chickens I can buy for you for 13 cents a pieces.” I had not time or strength to refuse, so I said, “Take this money, Frank, and buy as many as you please, only don’t trouble me again.” I did not see Frank again after that until about ½ past 7 or 8 o’clock when I was kneeling down
by St. Viper's bunk, trying to feed him by the light of a lantern. You can imagine that every power of mind and body was on the stretch to get the spoon in his mouth, not to choke him then to get the spoon out, and to defend myself from the involuntary blows he dealt with his arms like the sails of a windmill. Frank shambled up to me. "Miss Vetern, see what I have got for you." With that he opened a blue check cotton handkerchief and out tumbled four large striped live crabs which immediately began to scurry about the floor and make demonstrations with their nippers. "Oh, Frank," said I, "do take them up, suppose they should get at the men." "No," said he, "no—dey are beautiful." And he stood looking fondly at them. You may be sure, however, that I had them picked up, restored to the pocket handkerchief, and banished very soon. Frank paid me a visit of one hour and a half at Brother William's, and pleaded piteously to be allowed to buy him a little nigger—and rushed up to me yesterday regardless of Sister Julia & Alice & Anna French (who came down to the steamer to see me off) to show me a ladle and fork he had bought for my pantry. Alice & Anna were much disgusted with the aspect of things, and held their handkerchiefs to their noses all the time, though they persist in saying that they earnestly desire to be nurses and are sure of their success.

I have made a very pleasant acquaintance in one of the volunteer nurses. He came to see me while I was in town and gave me his photograph taken in his nurse's dress—blue & white flannel shirt, pincushion pinned to his vest, bandages & lint fastened in his waistband, tin cup and lantern in his hand. I have a lovely letter from Mrs. Pasco. I shall go to see her as soon as I can. I have been writing under immense difficulties, for the wind is blowing pretty hard and the ship rolls.

Goodbye, dearest Hexie. Write as often as possible. We are likely to have plenty to do soon, if the great battle comes as we expect.

Steamer Spaulding
June 29th, 1862

My dearest Kathern,

I had expected to have written my next letter to you "off White House," as usual, but White House I shall never more see in the flesh (and don't think I shall care to revisit it afterward). You will know all about the affair before you get this, and probably more than we do—but you can't have the sensations we went through yesterday afternoon.

We heard at Fortress Monroe yesterday morning that there had been hard fighting all along our lines, that we had been repulsed at first, but that afterwards it was all right, and the men were cheering along the front. I forget where we heard the first rumour that White House was evacuated, and in the hands of the rebels. We did not believe it, but as we went up the river we passed all kinds of craft towed by steamers and tugs. They motioned us to return, and shouted that White House was on fire. We went on, and met one after another all our old neighbours, Daniel Webster, Elm City & our store ship Elizabeth—they urged us to return, but our captain set his teeth, and held his way until we should receive new orders, for which he was greeted with an enthusiastic three times three. At last we met the Wilson Small—we hove alongside for orders. The Chief lifted his leg over the railing, shouted that we were to go on 5 miles for a tow, then lifted his leg back again and his big white cap at the same time to me and vanished. We neared Cumberland still passing a number of craft—canal boats with all sorts of things on deck, one of them covered with contraband women and children, who, I am happy to say, we hear this morning are the Lee niggers. Happy, particularly, because our poor Susan has been so anxious for her children that she left at White House, and now she will meet them at the Fortress. You can imagine that the whole thing looked pretty serious when I tell you that the forward deck was cleared and "Handy Andy" made ready for immediate use. In the midst of it, of course Frank came up, fully equipped,

23 The Seven Days' Battles, fought east of Richmond from June 25 to July 1, 1862, effectively ended McClellan's campaign against Richmond. Robert E. Lee, newly appointed commander of the Confederate army, hammered away at the Union forces in successive battles at Oak Grove, Mechanicsville, Gaines's Mill, Savage's Station, White Oak Swamp, and Malvern Hill, suffering frightful losses but driving McClellan eastward down the Peninsula.

22 Presumably one of the Spaulding's deck guns, mentioned earlier by Miss Whetten.
cartridge box &c on and flourishing his old Enfield rifle in a way very dangerous to the rest of us. “Miss Veten, I am ready,” said he, twitching his eyebrows. It was the general opinion that he ought to have his foolish ears boxed.

Mr. Hyde & I went out to the bow—there stood the Captain at the wheel between the pilot & the first wheelsman looking as if he would drive the Spaulding right through the rebel army if need were. With the Captain & Atkins the 1st officer, who acts as gunner, I would not be afraid to go anywhere. At last we came to Cumberland. The smoke from White House was heavy & thick and we heard several explosions. There are but two houses at Cumberland to be seen from the shore—one on a hill nearly covered with locust trees, very pretty, and a dilapidated old stone house used now by negroes. There was an outlying cavalry picket & a large party of the same on the hill where the house I spoke of stands. A hand of female contrabands trooped down to the shore giggling and chattering amidst the bushes—nothing could be lovelier than the colour of their clothes & turbans with the background of green. It was a beautiful evening, a delicious air blowing, birds singing and locusts rattling in the bushes. It was difficult to believe that we were almost in an enemy’s country and in the midst of a retreat. We took on our tow, and turned down the river. I suppose we anchored at West Point while I was asleep. This morning we again met the Wilson Small and received orders to go to Fortress Monroe with a tow of 14 vessels. (Just think what a beast of burden they have made of us.) There we will get further orders—we hope, to go up James River. We are all much happier this morning since we have heard the truth. McClellan ordered the evacuation of White House two days ago, that he might draw thither 40 or 45,000 of the main body of the rebels taking advantage of that movement, by which their forces were weakened, to march into Richmond. It is supposed that we are there now, but I hope with trembling. One thing is certain—that McClellan sent sloops two days ago up the James River with 15 days’ ration for the army. I suppose it is to that depot about 4 miles from the troops that we shall go. It
is very hot and the dear old ship pants and throbs with the heavy weight she has to draw. But the air here on the wide York river is not so stifling as on the Pamunkey. The steward has just sent me a glass of iced lemonade. I am sitting in a coil of rope, writing on my knees—on the whole I am pretty comfortable—so seems Mr. Hyde, who is lying asleep over the *Imitation of Christ* on a stretcher. Our sick and wounded men were of course all taken off comfortably and are now on steamers. Nearly all the stores are saved. The railway buildings and tents are burned and so is White House itself. Until this excitement we had the quietest and pleasantest voyage imaginable. I have never seen the ocean so still. The most inveterate landsman on board had no excuse for being sick. And on Friday evening about sunset we got into a school of the loveliest porpoises. They looked about 3 feet long, but the captain said they were 6. They raced alongside the ship just as I have seen dogs run after a carriage, tossing up the water with their pig snouts. Sometimes they would leap and roll about two or three abreast, all the time so eager to keep up with the ship. I can’t tell you how it pleased me to see them . . .

*Harrison’s Bar—James River*  
*Thursday July 3, 1862*

Dearest Achee,

We are in front of the [Union] Army of the Potomac, with a rebel battery on the other side of the river, and shells bursting in front of us at the distance of 3 or 4 miles. The movements of the last few days you will have learned from the papers. Our men have been fighting 6 or 7 days and marching and digging as many nights. They are nevertheless in good spirits, and are playing “euchre” in the mud on the shore . . .

We received orders to go up the James River about 4 o’clock [Monday] and started immediately. We passed Newport News and the *Cumberland*, lying over on her side, her sails yet brailed to the yards.\(^2\) It was hard to think of her as the grave of so many noble hearts (I came up on deck to see our gun-boats shell the woods—they are about 2½ miles from us. There is no small chance of a battle today. The rebel shell are bursting in the water.) Well, to go on with our sail up the James River. It was a beautiful evening. I sat on one of the loaded guns with the same sense of tranquil enjoyment as if I had been on the piazza at Henderson. The air was rich with a forest odour and the young moon made the wide river more lovely than it would have seemed at any other time. “Handy Andy” had his black muzzle pointed at the rebel shore—I am getting to have a personal affection for him. We passed James-town in the dark, and the next evening, anchored off Harrison’s Bar. It was then a beautiful farm—a large wheat-field near the shore was filled with stacks—there were a great many army wagons, to be sure, but the scene was peaceful compared to what it is now! The scenes shift so rapidly and completely in this war that we can hardly remember time & place. We remained at Harrison’s Bar until about 1½ past 11 when we had orders to go up the James River as far as Carter’s Landing. To do this we must pass the batteries at City Point. We were told that it was not likely that they would fire upon us if we should carry a yellow flag. Yellow flag we had none. So we trusted to the red San. Com. and prepared to run it. We passed the *Galena* who hailed us to keep below as we passed the battery, there being danger from sharp-shooters. Shortly after we came up with the *Monitor*, and stopped alongside of her. We had an excellent view of her, better even than if we had been on board. The pudgy captain with his East India hat, trumpet in hand, repeated the advice of the *Galena*, and added that if he heard firing about he would follow us.

After we left the *Monitor* our captain came to me with his grim smile and said “I think I’ll take those mattresses you spoke of.” We were laughing & joking in the morning about running the rebel battery when I suggested putting mattresses around the wheel house, but did not think he would do it. But the captain was in earnest, and the contrabands brought them up from the hold and piled them against the wheel house on the enemy’s side. The pilot stood up against the mast, and a mattress was fastened in the ropes so

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\(^2\) The thirty-gun frigate *Cumberland* had been sunk by the *Merrimac* in Hampton Roads on March 8, with heavy loss of life.
as to protect him partially. Then we were ordered below. I confess I went with reluctance. We would have been perfectly safe on the starboard side and I wanted to see City Point. In three quarters of an hour we had passed the danger and were at Carter's Landing—in the meantime I had arranged my hair, and eaten my dinner.

Carter's Landing is a beautiful spot. The bank of the river is high with large trees, and lying under them and on the beach were hundreds of our poor boys, wounded, sick, & worn out. They had been sent to this place from the various battlefields of the last few days. In the afternoon Mrs. Willett and I got permission to go on shore with half a dozen contrabands carrying pails of lemonade, tea, & beef tea & crackers. The road turns shortly up to a large field bordered with trees called the "outer park." By the side of it runs a wide & handsome avenue ending at an enclosure which surrounds the house. It is large & built of brick and very near it is another old one, which has been disused, but was occupied as a hospital for our men. All over the bank, all along the avenue under the trees that fringed the outer park in groups there & on the lawn & orchard were our dear boys. It seemed a hopeless task to feed them. We went first into the hospital and gave them something all round. One man, burnt up with fever, burst into tears when I spoke to him. I held his hand silently, and at last he sobbed out "You are so kind, and I am so weak." [We went] out of the old house (which I noticed had a wide wainscoted staircase and large handsome rooms) into an outhouse also used as a hospital, the floors covered with straw. One poor darling had just had a ball extracted and I could do no better for him than give him some beef tea and roll his coat a little tighter under his head. Then we were ordered by the surgeon to stand on the lawn and wait the arrival of the ambulances, so as to give something to the dusty worn out men as they arrived. One poor fellow came hobbling up to me. Why don't you know me? said he. I did not for a moment recognise him as Captain Custis' orderly whom I had known quite well—how could I? With his pale face and his bright brown eyes sunken in his head? He was shot through the lower part of his body, and yet was tottering about the field. It was more like being—in fact, it was, on the edge of a battle-field. We were obliged to be on board by 7 o'clock, and left more, many more, than half the men without a mouthful. All this time our freight was being unloaded, and we hoped to get nearly 500 of the wounded on board the next day, but just as the stores were all off we received an order to put them on again and all night we were loading again. At 4 o'clock A.M. we started and dropped down to this place. Yesterday morning we took on a few wounded and sick, and my dear Mrs Ballestier joined us also, so that I feel quite happy now that she is here.

This morning, as I said in an early part of this epistle, I was called on deck by Miles to see the gunboats shell the woods. The firing has nearly stopped now, and while I write we have weighed anchor and are on our way to a lower dock, where I hope we shall put our stores ashore and take on our men. All that is left of our Army lies stretched along the shore just in front of us. It looks a city of army waggons and tents and rest- less troops of men & horses. Reinforcements are coming up, and I suppose from what I hear, this will be head quarters for a good while yet. One of the young medical cadets walked out about 4 miles from Carter's Landing and said the men were stretched along the roads as far as he could see, and he was told that for 15 miles they were lying in the same way. The rebels are reported as coming down on Carter's Landing shortly after we left. Most of the wounded men were brought to Harrison's Bar. Some, it seems incredible, walked the distance notwithstanding their wounds. Those who were left have been taken prisoners. The rebels are now 3 miles below Carter's Landing, within shell range of us. How glad the pretty young rebel must be whom I saw standing on the balcony of Col. Carter's house in a white dress, of the change of affairs. She looked down from her height so cool and indifferent upon us loyal women hurrying about among the soldiers. One of the soldiers gave Charles a beautiful bunch of flowers for me he had picked in the garden. One was lying with a large brown hen at his feet, all her feathers
turned up, and her head off, bitten off, I suppose, and enquired of me how he could have it cooked! 4th July. Dear Hexie. I began my letter to you—turned it over [to] Alice—but concluded to send it to you, notwithstanding. No time for more, ever yours

Hare

P.S. The Spaulding was ordered up James River Monday June 30 at all hazards because she carried stores of which the army was in great need. The rapid retreat to Harrison's Bar made the run up to Carter's Landing unnecessary, and forced us to take on the stores again there and follow to Harrison's Landing. The day after we were at Carter's Landing was very rainy, in fact, a long drenching shower, and we had to leave the poor fellows to get over the seven miles to Harrison's Landing as well as they could. There were ambulances for the worst wounded but many had to drag themselves along as well as they could.

2nd voyage up the James
Steamer Spaulding
James River
July 13th, 1862

Dearest Hexie,

We are anchored in the middle of the river. The sun throws down as much heat as he can through the mist which hangs over the river and its banks. As yet, we have had no orders to move, and I am heavy with sleep and tired of inaction. You will not think it very complimentary that I should write to you in this condition, but you will be mistaken. It is the very highest compliment because it is one of the few things that could arouse me.

Since I last wrote to you I have been in New York and left there again last Friday morning. We reached Fortress Monroe yesterday at 1 o'clock, and were afraid we would not be allowed to come up the river as there are two rebel batteries just beyond here which have fired into our boats. But we were to our great satisfaction allowed to come up. We sailed again past the Cumberland, very close to her. She made a greater impression of ruin upon me than before. Then the sun went down round and red, and in good time the moon rose, as round and red and warlike as the sun, and we sped up the river with our loaded guns, and discussed the probability of being fired into, and all the sad chances that might follow, and the contrabands came on deck, and sang some most dreary hymns which under the circumstances did not enliven our glance beyond this world. You see, the reason why we push up is because we have stores for the army on board, and to deliver them we must run some risk. We were within an hour of the danger when we came up to two gunboats, who hailed us and ordered us to anchor for the night, saying that one of them would accompany us up in the morning. But the morning has come and nearly gone, and there are no signs of moving. I heard something about their sockets being out of order, whatever that meant. There is quite a fleet of sloops & schooners waiting to go up to Harrison's Bar, where the army lies. Before I finish this letter we shall have safely passed the danger, or——. That dash looks very melodramatic! I am not afraid, because I have not gone out of the way to get into danger, but I have heard what it is. The most would be a shot which should injure the machinery and make us helpless—the chance of a shell striking us is not great. But it makes me shiver when I think it is not improbable some of these strong men around me may in a few hours or less be in the same state in which I have seen too many of our poor boys.

Monday morning. You will have the same satisfaction in seeing this that one has in knowing that there is a second volume when the heroine seems at the point of death. You will perceive that we passed the batteries in safety—not a shot was fired! The gunboats manoeuvred backwards & forwards, and ordered us to slacken speed, and stop every now and then, and once said they were going to shell the rebels, and after all did not do it. We were all ordered downstairs as we passed Fort Powhatan. I staid two or three minutes and then went up with the permission of Dr. Hudson and staid on the starboard side away from the enemy. By the bye, one of our gun boats was the old Southfield, a Staten Island ferry boat. The sail up the river is very beautiful, and this time I had the advantage of seeing it all by daylight. The
mouth of the Chickahominy is very lovely—a long low point of land on one side with two single trees. There are cypresses growing in the water at different parts of the river, and one especially beautiful grove, which I wish I could draw for you, full of oriental beauty and reminiscences of Arabian nights. Now we are anchored opposite the Selden place, Westover, which I think I told you of. General Fitz-John Porter is encamped on the lawn. I had a visit from Lieut. George Catlin this morning. As I had seen his father & mother less than a week ago, he was very glad to meet me. We don’t know how long we may have to wait here. The Commodore has gone up to Richmond with a flag of truce to try and get our wounded men who are there. It is possible that we may be sent up there in the same way. Of course, I hope so, for it would be better for the boys to be put at once on board our vessel—and besides I would like to go.

Two horrid medical students are talking behind me, with voices like the creaking of a cable. They grate upon me so that I must quit.

Ever your 
Hare

Union warships and transports massed in the James River off City Point in May, 1862. The ironclad Monitor is depicted at left of center.

(In our next issue, Miss Whetten’s diary, which takes up where these letters end, will conclude her adventures as a Civil War nurse.)
A VOLUNTEER NURSE IN THE CIVIL WAR:
The Diary of Harriet Douglas Whetten

EDITED BY PAUL H. HASS

THE bright prospects of spring had dimmed. The Confederate flag still flew over the brazen spires of Richmond, and General George B. McClellan’s grand offensive in Virginia had ended on the shell-torn fields of the Seven Days. By July 4, 1862, the Union army had fallen back to Harrison’s Landing on the James River, its flanks protected by armored gunboats and its vast artillery train massed for the next enemy assault. But there was no further Confederate assault; both armies camped in the fierce midsummer heat to count their losses and to bury their dead.

In the backwash of war, there was much work for the volunteers of the United States Sanitary Commission. In the space of a week, McClellan had suffered more than 12,000 casualties, and for a few days after the fighting ended it appeared that perhaps the fortunate ones were those who lay in the shallow graves which marked the lines of his advance and retreat. The tangled gloom of White Oak Swamp, the brackish waters of a hundred winding creeks, and the hot, dirty business of marching and fighting had all taken their toll; as the troops struggled onto the broad plain at Harrison’s Landing they walked stiffly and glassy-eyed, their clothes ragged and their faces gaunt and sunburned. Thousands lay sick with malaria, chronic dysentery, untended wounds, or simple exhaustion. If McClellan’s army was not to dissolve in sickness and despair, the casualties would have to be treated and evacuated to hospitals in the North.

HARRIET DOUGLAS WHETTEN, a volunteer nurse in the Sanitary Commission’s hospital transport service, recorded the last days of the Peninsular campaign in a slim, hardbound diary which now resides in the Manuscripts Library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Like Miss Whetten’s letters* (published in the preceding issue of the Magazine), her diary presents a vivid

and diverse account of life during a period of national crisis. For this was a melancholy summer for the Union: the springtime victories of Fort Donelson and Shiloh had seemingly come to nothing; McClellan’s Peninsular campaign had failed; and Lee’s army, barefoot but victorious, was streaming up the valleys toward Washington. The North badly needed the courage, resoluteness, and devotion of people like Harriet Douglas Whetten.

_Aboard the steamer Spaulding_
_Tuesday night, July 15th, 1862._

Another day of waiting and broiling monotony. It has been excessively hot, and this afternoon that wretched Willett No. 2 appeared again and took up his old position in the cabin.¹ How I would like to shell him out! I have been overseeing a little in the way of bed-making. The ship is cleaner and in better order now than ever before—I can hardly tell how this hot day has simmered away. I have read a little and written a long letter to Maria Potter, and had several long talks with Mr. Winslow—who is personally, I believe, an excellent Christian and avowedly an infidel.

The _Monitor_ has been lying alongside of us all day. I take it now as a common place thing to lie between the Army and the _Monitor_. We have no orders yet, but there is a rumour that we may go to White House again for our wounded men from Richmond whom they will send down by railroad.² Dr. Burgess thinks the report true. I am afraid they will greatly suffer as they will not only have the railway journey, but what is worse, to come over the corduroy road through the swamp. It would be much easier to go up the river for them to Turkey Bend and take them off there, but that the rebels are waiting that we should do. The Captain of the _Monitor_ paid our Captains a visit just before tea. He took hardly any notice of me and none of Mrs. Willett, which we did not like. After tea a magnificent thunderstorm began. The forked lightning has been incessant, quenching the lights in the harbour vessels, and the next instant the black cloud would fall like a curtain over the lurid horizon. It is still raging—a crack like artillery came just now—there is another. The _Monitor_ looked like a black monster in the midst of the thick bronze waves. There was a look of Hell about her. The dust from the encampment was like a cloud. That hot encampment! It gave me today an idea of such intense heat, with its brown dusty ground, and glaring white tents, and army wagons. We sat on deck, but when Mrs. Willett came down I was obliged to come too. It is a great nuisance having the boat so filled with men. It is uncomfortable in the cabin and disagreeable to be there alone, however Mr. Hyde & Mr. Wilson generally take care of me. I do believe that odious Willett No. 2 is going to sleep in the cabin again tonight.

¹ Mrs. Willett (No. 1) was apparently a Sanitary Commission nurse attached to the transport _Spaulding_; her husband (Willett No. 2) was a lazy hanger-on for whom Miss Whetten had nothing but contempt.
² The _Monitor_ was, of course, the famous ironclad warship; the White House referred to was a landing on the Pamunkey River used by the Union army as its base of operations during much of the Peninsular campaign. For a map of northeastern Virginia, see the Winter, 1964-65 issue preceding this one (page 137).
Dr. Winslow gave me the other day an instance of rebel prejudice. The young lady in white whom I saw at Carter’s Landing or Shirley was Mrs. Robert Carter. She had been one of Dr. Winslow’s old parishioners at Annapolis and had sent for him to marry her. She had been almost like a child to him, and when they last parted in New York had thrown her arms round his neck to kiss him. He was at Shirley the morning of the day we were, superintending the removal of the wounded thither, when he went in to see the family. The old lady received him very cordially (I have heard since that she liberated all the slaves under her control) but said she did not think “Louisa” would see him, or if she did, that the meeting would not be pleasant. He said, “Let me see her at any rate.” So she came down, but would not shake hands with him said that he was now her enemy &c. I don’t know that I blame her. I think I should feel the same towards a rebel.

Wednesday evening, July 16th.

This morning began as hot nearly as yesterday. Pottered a little in the pantry and about 10 o’clock went on deck. There Mr. Hyde & Mr. Winslow joined me. The usual esthetic conversation from Mr. W. while he watched the balloon *Intrepid* mount for reconnaissance. It stands generally just behind a small house near the shore, and looks like the dome of a Mahometan mosque. Heat, heat, almost breathless until dinner time—then after dinner heat again & I laid down in the cabin and tried to sleep or read. A few moments of enjoyment on deck before tea—and then began another tremendous thunder storm. The rain drove us from our shelter near the cabin door, and then Mrs. Willett, Mr. Hyde, Mr. Winslow & I went to the pilot-house where we had a fine view of the storm—incessantly pouring rain and blinding lightning. After a little while Mr. & Mrs. W. wearied of the scene and left. I staid with my cavaliers, the

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2 The *Intrepid* was one of several balloons attached to the Union army and operated by a young New Hampshire scientist and inventor, T.S.C. Lowe. Professor Lowe’s aerostats were moderately successful in reconnaissance work, but they were somewhat unpopular with the troops because they invariably drew Confederate artillery and musket fire. See F. Stansbury Haydon, *Aeronautics in the Union and Confederate Armies* (Baltimore, 1941).
old pilot, and Hawes, 2nd mate, looking over the log. Just before 9 there were evident signs of a desire to turn in and I bade them goodnight, with Ellen, who had been playing propriety. It is rather hard that I have to spend so much time in the Willetts’ society—people who talk about “our folks” and eat with their knives. That beastly Willett No. 2 has come back again—when will he go? There is a rumour this afternoon that the rebels 60,000 strong are below us on the other side of the river to cut off our retreat—but there is little danger of that, as we have a fleet of about 15 gun boats in the river. General [Ambrose E.] Burnside arrived tonight. Dr. [Fairman?] Rogers is appointed General Superintendent of the hospitals from here to Fortress Monroe, and I hear he says he shall probably receive orders for White House in a day or two. I hope so, for his life is very ennuyant, and I am disgusted with mob of lazy hulks on board. There are two men named Kuhn who have come to find out something about their brother who is supposed to be dead. Mr. H. thinks they do not intend to serve as nurses—and if they do not I think they ought to be informed against. The number of people who live upon the Commission is shameful—Willet No. 2 at the head. I mean to see Dr. [John Foster] Jenkins about it, if I see him at Fortress Monroe. The Monitor went stealing up the river this morning close along the shore, making as little noise as possible. I hope she is after some good. The men go ashore by day and see the army. We cannot, of course, though Dr. Wilson thought I might on horseback. McClellan’s tent is within a stone’s throw of the shore, undistinguished in any way, except Mr. Hyde says that the sentinel who paces before it bears white gloves. I saw some Sisters of Charity⁴ on the deck of the Louisiana—I would like to work with them.

Thursday night, July 17.

I spent an hour or two in the pilot house this morning reading, then another hot hour or two on deck, writing to Mrs. Russel—then dear Dr. Winslow came on board and shewed me a plan of the battle of Gaines’s Mill and staid to dinner. It did my heart good to see how he enjoyed it. It was a luxury after camp fare. I asked him to find out about Richard Lockman. He went directly after dinner. I tried to read on deck, but the heat and mob of men drove me to the cabin. Slept a little while, when Mr. Winslow came to the door. I had to invite him in, and he immediately began scaling Heaven and diving into Hell, and ransacking all the intermediate space. There were not many topics he left untouched and he did not go till I had barely time to wash and smooth myself for tea. I must say for him that although he is an avowed infidel he is a good Christian in practice. This evening on deck just sheltered from the softly falling rain. Mr. Hyde has been outside the lines today on horseback and has come back used up. He slept all the evening—not a word from him. I heard this evening from Mr. Putnam that Mrs. Barlow⁵ is in the Hospital on shore. I am going there tomorrow to see her—perhaps when this service ends I may be able to do something in that way. That detestable Willett No. 2 is back again tonight—asleep in the cabin. I will find out whether it is according to Mr. Olmsted’s orders or not.

Friday night, July 18th.

Still no orders! I intended this morning to have gone ashore to see Mrs. Barlow, but Mr. Hyde dissuaded me as the mud is over one’s boots. So the morning, after the ceremonious parade through the wards with Ellen, passed drearily enough in reading Emerson and Lettell’s Living Age. It has been a grey cool day threatening rain and I have felt dull and low and appreciated fully all the loneliness of my position. Just before dinner Miss Gilson arrived for a visit. She has left the Commission or rather her boat has been taken from her, and now she starts independently to the advance. She goes with her guardian, who is Comptroller of Allotments (what-

⁴ A Roman Catholic order of nuns, also known as the Gray Sisters, which was very active in parochial schools, orphanages, and asylums.

⁵ Arabella Barlow, wife of Colonel (later General) Francis Channing Barlow of the Sixty-first New York Infantry.
ever that may be), and her black man John to establish a hospital tent for their regiment or rather a tent for distribution. She came up from the lower landing on horseback with only a cavalry saddle, and is going to live in a little tent by herself. I envy her the adventure, though I think she is foolish to go there. The afternoon was but a repetition of the morning and varied only by a walk on deck with Mr. Kuhn, whom Dr. Burgess introduced to me. His society talk, and want of earnestness, disgusted me. Mrs. Willett has been teaching the contrabands in the afternoons—how much better if I had gone down with her than staid on deck to talk. So I went down just before tea and gave dear old Moses a lesson, who bought himself a spelling book when he was in New York “cause I thought it would engage my mind.” Tea—deck—chat again—Mr. Winslow found today and brought me part of a pamphlet called the Westover Manuscripts written by the same Dr. Wm. Byrd whose monument we saw at Westover. It was a little curious that he should pick it up here. No one knows when we shall get orders—nothing is going on—and the general impression is that things will remain as they are for several weeks.

Saturday night, July 19th.

The same thing! Only it grows more & more wearisome. The morning passed on deck in reading and talking with Mr. Winslow. The afternoon on deck reading [to the] Willets without Mr Winslow. At 4 o’clock went down with Mrs. Willett to her contraband school in the hold. I taught dear old Moses & Junius. After they had got through with their lessons, I offered to read a chapter to them from the Testament. Moses went to call Junius: “Come & hear, she is goin’ to read a chapter about God’s mysteries towards you.”

The “contrabands” were Negro slaves who fled their masters and entered the Union lines, where they worked as servants or laborers and, as in this case, learned to read and write under the direction of Northern tutors.

William Byrd (1674–1744) was the son of one of colonial Virginia’s most prominent planters and politicians. His “History of the Dividing Line,” “Journey to the Land of Eden,” and “Progress to the Mines” were published in 1841 as The Westover Manuscripts.

Five or six collected around me. But before I began a scene occurred. Amy had been called on deck and came down after a while sputtering with rage, crying, trembling, and blaspheming awfully. I tried to compose her and found out they were having a trial on deck on account of the loss of a shirt. The guard accompanied the witnesses and stood there with their muskets and the poor niggers took it all in earnest. Speeches were made which were really very funny but I could see no great fun in making Amy angry and frightening her. After tea the young men took us driving, which was very pleasant, though it seemed hard the we could not go to the other side. This evening we have been on deck where the young men are still singing.

The Louisiana went up yesterday to within 12 miles of Richmond where she took on her freight of wounded men. She has been lying near us today. The nurses on board are Sisters of Charity. General McClellan visited the men on board this morning, and spoke to a great many, holding their hands and smoothing their foreheads. Our stay is becoming, of course, daily more and more irksome. It is now more than a week since
I have had any exercise. I am suffering for want of it, am restless and weary, and low-spirited.

Sunday night, July 20.

Just came down from deck. Mr. Hyde, Mr. Winslow & I went on the hurricane deck to see the sunset. I took Ellen with me pour les moeurs. Amy, who had been on shore for a visit, came up, and we made her stay to sing a hymn or two. She has had a religious conversation with Mrs. Willett this evening. Amy “speaks to be a Christian before she dies.” She had to pray two weeks before she got religion before—now if she should die she “speaks she would have to go to hell—a great many people have gone there before—she could stand it as well as any of ’em. She can’t begin to pray again till March—den de Lord will hear her—it is cool then—de Lord is fretful in hot weather.” She says she will follow me any where “scousin to de Army—oh, God, I cunnin do dat—oh no, dey git me, dey kill me, dey break my neck. De Sees soldiers come right through de Union army, leave you be and take me.”

This morning we had a sort of mongrel service on deck. The singing was really very good. Then came dinner—then a hot nap—at ½ past 3 down into the hold to teach the contrabands. Dear Moses learns very fast and enjoyed the chapters I read to him, and at the most solemn and pathetic parts he would roar with approbation. While we were sitting there a boat’s crew from a gunboat passed through. They looked so cool and handsome in their white caps. Just as the lessons were finished (Mr. Hyde & Mr. Winslow & two or three others taught) Barney called us on deck to see Handy Andy fired off. The shell hissed past and exploded in the woods on the enemy’s shore. The little one had her charge drawn. The reason of this is that we are going up to City Point to receive our wounded men on Tuesday afternoon. We are to go under a flag of truce and it is supposed that loaded guns would be inconsistent with it. Mr. Kuhn has been chaffing much over his hard fare and hard work. When I told him what he would have to do as nurse, he said he thought he ought to be broken in to it easily: “An hour’s fanning a day or so to begin with.” Willett No. 2 went yesterday, but I rejoice not—no one can tell when he may return. Amy calls her hoe her “dumb-ager.” Ellen tells me it is the common name for it in the South.

Monday night, July 21.

This morning after breakfast went on deck and sat there reading, talking with Mr. Kuhn and learning phonography of Mr. Winslow till dinner time—then nap, and teaching the contrabands. Moses is coming on beautifully. He spelt with great pride a word of six letters. Then a walk on the forward deck with Mr. Kuhn. Tea and a delightful little time in the pilot house with Mr. Hyde inside and Mr. Winslow out, looking at the beautiful evening clouds and a double rainbow. Then with Ellen sat on the ropes in the stern till after the 9 o’clock gun fired—Mr. Winslow talking deeply all the time, Mr. Hyde performing gymnastic feats in “the gloamin.” Amy told me last night that she had to work a “day in de corn and de cotton wid de dumb-ager in her hand, an I did’n dare look up de sky for I see de sun come twistin’ down on me. In de winter I grub up stumps.” This morning she explained that “dumb-ager” is another name for hoe. Why do you call your hoe so? “Cause she dumb—you call her, she carn come, you put her up dar an’ she have to stay. It is a name she called—that’s so she is dumb.”

We hope to get orders to go up the river to-morrow. I am so weary and sick of life here. It is like being in a perpetual bar-room to be with these men. I feel somehow out of place and yet I cannot stay in the cabin where it is so close. It is a comfort to be able to have Ellen with me. . . .

Thursday morning, July 31st.

Tuesday, July 22, we received orders in the morning to go up to City Point with a flag of truce to receive our wounded men, prison-

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5 Phonography, a system of shorthand based on the sounds in the English language, was the invention of Isaac Pitman, a native of Wiltshire, England. In 1852 Pitman’s brother Benn introduced phonography in the United States, where it rapidly became the most popular system of shorthand during the last half of the century.
ers in Richmond. We reached there a little while after dinner—it is only about four or five miles above Harrison’s Landing. We waited two or three hours for the train to arrive. In the meantime, as soon as we arrived at the wharf a rebel officer appeared with a white flag and several soldiers in the nearest uniforms I have yet seen. They were stationed as guards along the rail way track beyond which we were not allowed to go. This was but a short distance from & running parallel with the shore. The place is in ruins on the shore—the houses have been all destroyed with our shell. At last the whistle of the coming train sounded. I rushed from the cabin where I had been sitting with Captain Rankin to the between decks. At the first sight of the old Flag the poor boys set up a weak cheer, and were so eager that they began to tumble and hobble out almost before the train stopped. They were in a wretched condition, their wounds full of maggots, their clothes of vermin & nearly starved. Their rations while they were in prison consisted of 1/6 of a very small loaf of bread without salt and 1/2 pint of thin beef broth once a day. They do not blame the rebels for this, but say that they have hardly anything more for themselves. Tea is $16 a pound, coffee (miserable mixed stuff, I have some of it) $3, onions 25 cents apiece, and a bar of brown soap $11. Our men were thrown into a tobacco warehouse [Libby Prison] where they were obliged to lie on the floor in the midst of dirt. One of them burst into tears as he was telling me of it. “May God defend me from the like again.” God took him to himself. He died the morning we reached Phil., and all because he would not have his arm amputated. “I wasn’t going to let ’em have it in Richmond. I wanted to bring it back to old Massachusetts.” There were some men worn to skeletons with chronic diarrhea. They have since died at the hospital. Of course, I found pets. “Webster” with green eyes like a cat, a brown shadow of a man, who took a great fancy to me because I encouraged him, knowing all the time, as he said, that he was an “old granny.” At Fortress Monroe Dr. Jenkins came on board and asked if we had need of another lady. I was very glad as Mrs. Willett’s habitual sea sickness threw double duty on me. So he brought Miss Amelia Gill on board—a woman of a certain age, tall, large frame, dark eyes slightly turned, black hair, large features, clear red and white brunette complexion. She seems a very efficient, very strong-minded woman, and I am glad she is here. We had a hard voyage, for the men in our ward were very sick and wanted constant attention. We reached Phil. on Friday night, were examined by the health officers and were pronounced all right & in good order. We reached the dock on Saturday morning and the men were all taken off by 12 o’clock. I had forgotten my interview with Captain Rankin and his promise to take me to the lines on his pretty horse. Also the disgraceful scene with the rebel officers, when they and ours got tight together; and the reb asked for a pound of tea, and to my great disgust it was given to him, though I think his admission that it would be a great treat was worth a box. Another incident was the arrival of two young ladies, Southerners, but with a father of Union principles, from whom they had been detained at Richmond 15 months. One was in bad health, tall, bending, willowy. Mrs. Willett & I trembled when she came on board, for since our experience with Lina we are afraid of women. They brought two large trunks with them—and used my brush and comb! Mr. Kuhn and his brother proved themselves regular white kid heroes and went about their work manfully.

I had just settled myself to write to Maria Potter on deck after an interview with a committee from the Penn. Relief Association (imagine my going to receive a deputation of 3 women—plain, elderly, prudent—with “Reb” my grey kitten on my shoulder & a novel in my hand) when Theodosia arrived. She insisted upon my packing up my carpet-bag at once and going with her to Mrs. Sevely’s. Remonstrance was useless, so I went, and was put in an immense front room with a large dressing room. I spread myself so I thought I should never get together again. Mr. Kuhn came to see me in the evening, and Dr. Ducachet. Sunday I went to St. Stephen’s and was rejoiced to join in the service after three months privation.

Monday morning Mr. Kuhn came to take me to the West Phil. [Satterlee] Hospital to
see some of our boys. Unfortunately Theodosia, Mrs. Chilles, little Emma Chilles, & Mrs. Commodore Moore joined the party and had a long drive in the cars, and a walk of ½ mile in the boiling sun. We were too early for visiting hours but Dr. Hayes made an exception in our favour. It is the best hospital I have yet seen, exquisitely clean, orderly, and quiet. There is a Sister of Charity in each ward. Some of them looked as fresh as roses. We were delayed a long time as they make the dressings late but saw some of the men. They seemed doing well, though little Pachette I thought was more feverish. Before we left Dr. Hayes came to be introduced to me. He is the Dr. Hayes of the Arctic Expedition and I did not know it till after he left.” He has very pleasant manners and a taking face. Theodosia & I pursued on to the 4th & George Street hospital, where some more of our men were. This was a great contrast to the West Phil.—heat, flies, more noise than was good, and too little air that was good. John Holmes is here, who told me the other night that he would go through the flames of hell if it were the Lord’s will. Poor dear handsome John, a communicant of our Church. What pleasure it was the night before we left the ship when he was feverish & impatient to bathe him with Bay-water till he was cool, and then read the Evening Psalter to him, and see him when it was over fold his hands under his cheek and go to sleep like a child. Theodosia has promised to go and sing & read to him. Old Sweetwood was there, one of the ugliest men in the world. As he lay with a rag over his nose I said, “Sweetwood, they have cut off your hair, I see.” “Yes,” said he, “they have spoiled me. My hair used to curl just like yours”—taking hold of mine as I bent over him.

In the evening we went to tea at Mrs. Lathrop’s, where I met her beautiful niece Mrs. McAlister. Here Theodosia & I ate lobster salad, afterwards she drank lemonade, then Dr. Emerson an elderly physician whose sands of life are nearly run took us to an ice-cream room. I hardly thought we could live till morning. Theodosia made him buy her a dose of ginger as preventive. Tuesday we went to see the Burd Orphan Asylum, a permanent charity for 12 orphan girls. It seemed the sweetest purest safest place after all the misery and suffering I have seen—12 little white trundle beds, the children with their bantam cock & hen and little love bird, who

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9 Isaac Israel Hayes (1832–1881), physician and explorer, made three expeditions to the Arctic in search of an ice-free polar sea—in 1863, 1866, and 1869.

Farmhouse and adjacent slave quarters used as a Union field hospital after the battle of Fair Oaks or Seven Pines, May 31 and June 1, 1862.

Library of Congress

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refused to wear his black bombazine hat for my amusement. In the afternoon Mr. Winslow came to take us to the Academy of Natural Sciences, where I saw wonders of birds—but I don’t care much for stuffed things, only the hummingbirds are more beautiful than I ever dreamed of.

Then to the Episcopal Asylum, a large and very fine building, with wards ready for the soldiers they do not send. In the old house was a ward of sick women—one beautiful girl, Marian, was rescued about a fortnight ago from a miserable room where she lay on a bed of straw with her old grandfather, 93 years of age. She is dying of consumption, but it is a comfort to think of her in that white bed by the window where she can hear the wind blow through the willow branches. We drank tea again at Dr. Ducachet’s. The next day Theodosia took me up to her little garret room, scene of her little pleasures and her little tears, then off to the steamer where she and Mrs. Ducachet accompanied me. I was enabled to give them some fruit for luncheon, thanks to Mr. Kuhn, who called the night before to bid me goodbye and left a basket of beautiful grapes & nectarines. We started precisely at 12—am without the Willeys, Mr. W. and Mr. Rose are sent for to New York and I suppose were dismissed. Everyone is glad that Willeit is gone. I was sorry to part with Mrs. W., who was a kind-hearted woman, but I would rather have Miss Gill for the work. We have another lady in Ward—a Mrs. Hollowell who insisted upon coming—she is now sea-sick. I was persecuted almost to death with patriotic Phil. females who would not take no for an answer. One came before I was dressed in the morning. Brown’s Ginger sent me a package of himself with some other things for myself & the men. In fact I was fearfully lionized, and I don’t take to it kindly. Our new Medical Director, Dr. Page, ordered all the nurses to take their regular watches last night, that they might get used to the hours. We shall probably reach the Fortress at 4 o’clock today, and then will get our orders. . . .

Friday night, August 1st.

We arrived at Fortress Monroe about 2 o’clock yesterday and very shortly after went up to Newport News, where we anchored for the night. Passing the Cumberland again I was more than ever struck with the tragedy of the sight—the deep pathetic sight—fit monument—grave and monument as well of heroes. We left Newport News at 4 o’clock this morning and went up the river to James-town. Here we anchored again and had the opportunity of seeing the ruins of the old church. It is but a ruined tower of brick, with an archway. Its top is overgrown and where the body of the church stood is a clump of trees. We went on for about three miles and were delayed again till ½ past 3 waiting for the mail boat and the gun boats which were to be our convoy. Passed Fort Powhatan, which looks an insignificant earthwork enough, though well placed. We saw some rebel batteries nearer the mouth of the river but passed up undisturbed. We reached Westover about 6 P.M. and found a large fleet here. The rebels shelled us at this point last night and killed 16 men on different vessels, and in camp took off both one man’s legs and killed a horse.

Just as we arrived two steamers were lying opposite on the western bank and a long file of soldiers was mounting the bank, their bayonets glistening in the sun, in front of the stone house belonging to Edward Ruffin, who fired the first gun on Fort Sumter. Many of them had already reached the lawn—they were about 1,500 in all. They began immediately to cut down some fine large trees and in a short time fired the negro quarters and outbuildings. Then began a splendid sight—such bursts of flame and volumes of black, dun-colored & white smoke I have never seen. One large frame house was long in burning; the whole front was a wall of flames before the roof began to burn. One or two of the

10 The thirty-gun frigate Cumberland had been sunk by the Confederate ironclad Merrimac at Hampton Roads on March 8, 1862, with heavy loss of life.
11 Edmund Ruffin (1794–1865), a native Virginian and one of the most vocal Southern secessionists, is generally credited with having fired the first shot from Morris Island on April 12, 1861. For this and other reasons, Ruffin was well hated by the people of the North, for whom he symbolized the spirit of rebellion. Ruffin heartily reciprocated this feeling, and on June 18, 1865, he shot himself to death rather than submit to Yankee rule.
buildings retained their skeletons in living coals for what seemed a long time, and at last fell in with a crash. The large store house was the last fired. Slowly, very slowly, the fire made its way from story to story, we could see it through the windows, until at last it blazed out through one of the upper ones—then the tower caught, and a great wave of fire burst through the round window. It burned a long time, and towards the last spread and lowered till it seemed it seemed the remains of a wide palace, sometimes looking as if it were filled with men armed with glittering golden spears, sometimes looking like great golden organ pipes. At last only one tall chimney was left; it fell outwards, then a tumult of flame and then a steady hopeless burning, which I suspect now at 10 o'clock is not over yet. Between us and the dense rolling background of many tinted smoke the sparks fell like a shower of stars. While these nine buildings were burning our troops were drawn up silently in line, no indecent or exultant cheers. Their rigid black figures showed against the light. When it was over they embarked on the steamers and returned to camp—not all, I think. We greeted them silently by waving our handkerchiefs and this scene of the tragedy closed. Frank has a story that the family only left the house this evening and that he and Mr. White, the mate, saw a lady dressed in black come out of the house clasping her hands in great distress, with her bonnet crooked on her head! We sat on the hurricane deck till ½ past 9. Looking down all the time was the young moon, as fresh & complacent as if it were a new-mown meadow with Edwin & Angelina sitting on a haystack. . . .

I have just written to Dr. Jenkins asking him to remember that Miss Gill & I wish to continue in the service even if this branch should be discontinued. I think we might work advantageously together, but perhaps my judgment is premature. I dont think it would be as pleasant to remain in the Government service as in that of the Commission, but I am willing to do anything for the sake of the boys.

Our new lady, Mrs. Hallowell, will not please the men much, I doubt. Dr. McClellan, the General’s brother, is on board—a large strong-looking man. I think the [Army] Medical Staff is a humbug and don’t feel as com-
fortable as when she belongs to the Commission. Taught the contrabands yesterday & today—Mr. Winslow helped me this afternoon. Moses, as usual, laughed immoderately to show his appreciation of the Bible. Amy left us at Phil.—her last was worthy of her. She came into the pantry one day during the voyage with two large pieces of twisted brown paper hanging out of her nose on her long upper lip. "What is the matter, Amy?" said I. "I must send you to the surgeon for an operation." Upon which she tossed her head, laughed, and said it was to "keep out de scent of de men." The men themselves who made the scent roared with laughter as she served out the bread with her paper plugs in.

The river looked beautiful this afternoon in the sunlight, and the strange amphibious cypress grow more than ever mysterious & lonely—but oh the faint sickening heat in the middle of the day, not that it was so hot, but that it was so enervating.

Saturday night, August 2.

A tug came alongside at 1½ past 3 A.M. with orders to go up the river a little distance to get out of the way of our battery. A brush with the rebels was expected, but they did not come on. After breakfast when I went on deck I found we had placed ourselves directly under another. A cannon on the bank was opposite to me, groups of soldiers were along the shore, a squad of men passed by with axes on their shoulders to cut down more trees, I suppose. They are all gone from the Ruffin place, the whole bank is perfectly bare, not even a shrub left and a few grey & blackened chimneys [are] all that is to be seen of that comely place.

At ½ past 3 Miss Gill & I with Charles, Moses & Billy started in the boat for the Hospital, having received permission from the Med. Di. to go and take with us our escorts. We invited Mr. Winslow and Mr. Clark. It is but a short walk to the brick house which is used as a hospital. By the way side, unprotected & raw looking, is a row of graves which you can hardly avoid stepping on. Arrived at the Hospital to be led upstairs by Mrs. Harris, who introduced us into Mrs. Barlow's room. There was Arabella in sack & petticoat lying on a sofa in a very comfortably, even handsomely furnished large bedroom, books left by the Secesh, some of our old friends, nicely arranged on the étagère. She was gracious and looked very handsome. She is staying there to take care of the wines &c and goes often to see and wash the men. We went through the hospital, after leaving our 100 lemons and four bottles of wine—then through several of the hospital tents.

In one we found the men wounded by the shells fired at our camp night before last. We saw five wounded men, two very badly. One torn across the body so that part of the liver and bowels were exposed. He must die, poor boy; mortification has begun. In another bed a Michigan man consumed with fever talked with big tears in his eyes. I knelt down beside him and felt as if I could kiss them away. His name is Plum, perhaps he came on board the Spaulding. I gave him my handkerchief, to remember me by. Thank God, thank God, the boys love me. They smile when I bend over them and grasp my hand. Oh, I hope I shall be allowed to stay with them.

Mrs. Barlow walked with us and Mrs. Fogg, who was shelled out of Savage's Station—she is thin & worn looking now. What a look there is all over the land! How arid and brown the plain, how ceaseless the movement of army wagons and mules! Above, although we could not see them, our gunboats are drawn up in battle array with the Monitor in the middle of the river. No one knows at what moment a battery across the river may be opened and we may receive our share of shell.

Wednesday morning, August 6th.

Sunday passed uncomfortably enough—as usual, hot, noisy, un-Sundaylike. We had no service and in the afternoon Mrs. Barlow, Mrs. Fogg, and Mrs. Harris came on board. The latter is not Mrs. Gamp's friend but a philanthropist, who has been busy all winter for the soldiers, and now distributes stores for the various regiments. Dr. Andrews from the hospital on shore asked us to go over & help him, so on Monday morning we started with a few things and went about through the hospital and tents. I think we did some good and the men were delighted to have us
with them. Strange to say the man who was so badly wounded with shell is getting along very nicely.

Monday afternoon just as I was undressed and cooling off, Dr. Iddings (The Calmuck Tartar) came to say that a little child was very ill on board one of the sloops on our bow—would I go and comfort the mother and take some things? So I went and staid the whole afternoon—and toasted bread for toast-water and cooked jelly at the awfully hot cook's caboose. The pretty little child improved & the mother was cheered though she hardly dared to be encouraged. The father went ashore while I was there and brought back news from the quarter master's office that an attack was expected that night. A regiment of our cavalry had been thrown over the river, and a battery had been planted in front of the camp opposite to us—which was true, but as usual when expected the attack did not take place. We spent the evening, Miss Gill & I, with Mr. Winslow with some of the young men on the hurricane deck watching the sunset and the beautiful evening sky. He bothers me dreadfully with his passion for nature, and his constant demands upon me for admiration of those "faint blue & purple rays" "the golden serpents biting each other's tails in the moonlight" &c, but he is a good fellow, and infidel though he is, a better Christian than most I know.

We went ashore early on Tuesday morning with the intention of staying till ½ past 5. Miss Gill took one side of the hospital tents, and I, the other. I went also to the barn which was filled with some most deplorable cases of chronic diarrhea—men who had been ill two months—it was heartbreaking to see their feebleness & despondency. Moving from tent to tent and from thence to the kitchen shed made us very tired and by 1 o'clock we were hungry also. The heat was intense, the flies almost unendurable. There was no sign of dinner. Mrs. Barlow lay stretched on her sofa, looking very big and handsome. I went to see her, meanly hoping that there would be some offer made, if but of bread & tea, but no. About ½ past 1 or 2 they began to remove the men, most unexpectedly, to the transports. Whole tents were cleared in a very short time, and the barn also. We found ourselves hot, hungry, tired, with nothing to do, so we walked down to the wharf in such a hot sun, waited like the applewomen on a steamer, till we could hire a boat and get home. Early in the morning we had heard firing, and during the day were told it was at Malvern Hill.² We drove the rebels back—that is certain—but I know nothing more than that I saw about 20 poor wounded fellows this morning, and that they are expecting 40 more.

Thursday, August 14, after dinner.

I spent a delightful afternoon lying on a stretcher on deck and sleeping like sixty. A little talk with Mr. Winslow sitting on the ropes looking at the sunset, then early to bed. Miss Gill is not very well and is much with Miss Prescott, the State of Maine lady, and a great talker about nothing. This morning on deck reading and sleeping in a stretcher. It is wonderful how appetite & strength return as soon as the pressure of anxiety is removed. We cruised round the harbour at Fortress Monroe while the boat went ashore for letters. It brought me 3—one from Theodosia in which she tells me that dear John Holmes was dying the day she saw him. Tells me how he whispered when she sang to him "there is rest for the weary." "Yes, there is rest, I hope you and I & she will meet there." Sweetwood dead—poor Sweetwood who was so proud of his curling hair—Webster better. The other letters from Alice & dear Hexie. In a conversation with Mr. Winslow this morning he told me that I was interesting to him, even charming, but not fascinating—in short—"You could not fall in love with me," said I. "Exactly," was the answer. And I protest I had not been urging him to do so.

Thursday noon—August 21st. Foot of Bench St, N.Y.

We reached Harrison's Landing last Thursday evening. Going up the river some of the

²The battle of Malvern Hill had been fought on July 1, but McClellan's army did not entirely withdraw from the vicinity until the middle of August. Miss Whetten's reference is probably to a minor skirmish which occurred during the long lull after the Seven Days' Battles.
men saw a pontoon bridge across the Chickahominy—afterwards we met several steamers with tows. These signs were significant of a move, but probably it was only a skirmish, though some of our boys told us we had taken 4,000 prisoners. Everything looks as if a move were anticipated. The medical stores are all on board the Daniel Webster No. 2, our cargo is being taken off our vessels—all is ready, as it seems to me, for a start. I walked behind a poor boy this morning, to hold my umbrella over his head, who was going to the operating tent to have his arm taken off. Oh my God, that human beings should so hurt one another. . . .

We went over this morning to the Hospital with some wine jelly, which was just in time for the wounded men. I have never seen such a dirty disorganized place as the Hospital. The neglect of cleanliness is inexcusable. All sorts of filth, standing water, and the embalming house near the Hospital. I saw a ghastly sight there this morning. One of the men whose heads I bathed yesterday said, "Oh, that is good, it seems like a [unintelligible] from somewhere." Mrs. Harris called me up into Mrs. Barlow's room to see a curiosity as she called it. A little figure appeared, looking like a small Laplander, in a sort of uniform. "She is a woman," said Mrs. H., "and has been with her husband in the regiment." She is obliged to go home for a womanly reason. I hope they won't send her on board the Spaulding after my experience with Lena! The whole regiment knew that she was a woman and she dressed as a man by the advice of the Col. and Adjutant. I never saw such a funny figure as she is—her little feet and hands looked womanish—otherwise I never should have suspected it. . . .

Thursday, August 13.

Since I wrote last, what a world of time I have lived through! I do not remember what interrupted me, but we were very busy getting the pantry in order, when about 11 o'clock Captain Benson of the 4th Regular artillery was brought on board. He was wounded at the last battle of Malvern Hill at the close of the engagement by a piece of shell from his own battery. A compound fracture of the thigh. I saw him the day before lying with Lieut. Col. Garnetle in an out-house at Harrison's Landing. He was a noble brave man—lines of power in his face, fine head, simple and grand in all his words and

[The text is continued on the next page.]
ways, Dr. Paige & Dr. Iddings asked me to take particular care and as much time as I could spare I devoted to him. He lay on a stretcher on deck for he suffered dreadfully from the intense heat. The piece of shell was extracted after he came on board. I was assisting just after the operation & while he was still under the influence of ether. Thursday afternoon we began to receive the men, and had to wait, so slowly were the tugs sent, till midnight nearly before they were all in. Very bad cases there were of typhoid & diarrhoea, but few wounded. The young man Wm. Price, whom I walked with to the tent to have his arm taken off, was one of the patients—a sweet faced uncomplaining boy. Oh, how the silence of these men and the look in their eyes pierces my heart! We did not get to bed till ½ past 2 that night—up again at ½ past 5 next morning, and even that time not spent entirely in sleep, for Miss Gill chose to sit up all night with Col. Garntle, and that worried me. I don't remember what happened on Friday, except that we took more men on board in the morning and were delayed at Harrison’s Landing until 10 o'clock in the burning heat, which I never felt any thing like before, without ice, our men parched and the Captain’s life ebbing away. We reached Fortress Monroe about 9 o'clock that evening, and red tape held us fast until 2 on Saturday, taking in more ice (we got some just as we left Harrison’s Landing) and other stores.

Friday was a day really of great suffering, so was Saturday—the only (and that was the greatest) comfort was, that the men seemed to improve greatly as a general thing. Cap. Benson failed. Miss Gill was nearly all the time with Col. Garntle—with him night and day, so much so that my duty was too heavy and very unpleasant remarks were made on her conduct. I said all I dared about her being up with him at night, etc., but she is old enough to judge for herself. She laid aside all self-control on the last trip, giving way to her infernal temper, insulting one without any provocation, and playing the old hog generally among the servants & nurses. Good Charles says, “Elle n’est pas dame, Mademoiselle. Je n’ai pas le bonheur d’être né en ton société, mais je connais les moeurs.”

Sunday—how did Sunday pass? I did not remember the day till it was half over—it was work, work in the awful heat until soul and body both felt ready to perish. On Monday morning a great change became apparent in the Captain. I was alone with him a few moments about 11 o’clock and moved his pillow slightly for him. It did not suit him and I moved it back. Shortly after, Dr. Iddings came and he asked to be lifted up. While they were holding him he was seized with a spasmodic fainting and the agony began. He was moved to the middle of the deck and a little after 12 died. The noble brave man—I loved him—he was a man to love and he died there among strangers, with no one to shed a tear for him but his servant Everett & me. He had raised himself from the ranks & had a Lieut. Colonelcy offered him after the last battle. After I left him, my strength seemed all gone, but I had to go downstairs to serve out dinner.

We reached the Phil. quarantine at 1 o’clock A.M. Tuesday at 5, steamed up to the city, and by 12 o’clock had all our poor boys safely off. The usual crowd of patriotic Philadelphian females assembled and insisted upon feeding our boys, pouring their stuff into the eyes and noses of such as were on stretchers, and insisting upon drenching a young hearty nurse. After dinner we steamed up to Richmond, but before this we ascertained that the Sanitary Commission has no longer anything to do with transports. Orders came that the Captain was to start instantly. He did not know what to do—but at last Miss Gill & I went ashore with Mr. Winslow to look for somebody somewhere and get some information.

In a drenching rain in a strange city we started to know our future, in other words to

14 "She is no lady, Miss. I did not have the good fortune to be born into your society, but I know good manners."

15 Administration of the hospital transport service reverted from the Sanitary Commission to the Army Medical Bureau in July, 1862. The Commission had done yeoman work in transporting sick and wounded troops from the Peninsula to northern hospitals; indeed, the army claimed that the transport service encouraged malingerer by offering the opportunity for furloughs and sick leaves. See William Quentin Maxwell, Lincoln’s Fifth Wheel: The Political History of the United States Sanitary Commission (New York, 1956), 162-163.
look for a situation. Of course the Med. Director was not at his office so Mr. Winslow took Miss Gill and me to Mrs. Sevely’s and went in search of him. He returned after a while with our passes. We drank tea at Mrs. Sevely’s (such a delicious tea) and then Mr. Winslow took us back to Richmond where we were lucky enough to find our boat to take us to the steamer. We started this morning at 9 o’clock and now under government orders, I am all adrift. I don’t know anything but that it was not till we reached Harrison’s Landing that the news came to our ears that the army was again in motion—not towards Richmond. We went ashore in the little boat after tea—a gray sombre light, the wharf covered with the trembling forms of broken-down soldiers being passed on board the steamers. All who were not fit to march were sent off. We saw the guns being slowly driven away from the battery under which we had anchored before. The next morning we heard that 600 men were to be sent on board.

No time had to be lost. Miss Gill and I set the contrabands at work making beds & cleaning. We had no sheets, but had to manage with comfortables & clean pillows. By 2 o’clock all was ready and the men came on—600 of them! We were told they would be nearly all convalescent but there were about 150 very ill. Think of it! We had no medical staff, and but the remains of the San. Comm. stores. It was awful. One man died that first night. If it had not been for Mr. Forestall, the purser who attended to their being fed on deck, I don’t know what we should have done. It seems to be our fate to have sticks for quartermasters. We were told that we were only to carry the men to Fortress Monroe. We reached there on Saturday noon and after the usual weary delay received orders & rations for New York. Our hearts sank, but we had to go through with it. The Med. Director, Dr. Haven, was sea-sick all the way over. The duty fell upon a regimental surgeon & chaplain who was going home for his health. He and especially Mr. Winslow did wonders. Miss Gill superintended the hold and worked like ten. For myself I was ill and weak, and suffered in the flesh—one of the boys named Stepney called me “mother” all the time, because I nursed him “so kind.” An officer told me he had seen that day what he had never seen before—a soldier taken care of. It was the hardest, most dreadful voyage we have ever had.

We reached New York on Monday morning. In the afternoon I went to settle some business for Charles & Susan at the Commission rooms and saw Mr. Strong and Dr. Agnew, and answered their questions about the transport. Home to Kate in the evening. All day Tuesday laid on the sofa used up—but was able to go and see Mrs. Limmer and Mrs. Braisted in the afternoon. In the evening went to an exhibition of magic by Mr. Foster. Wednesday Kate and I came to town, found Mrs. Kruger & Mr. Douglas at 14th—shopped and returned to 14th to meet Kate, when sister Julia & Acehee came in. They had just arrived from West Point. They brought me a letter from Miss Wormeley asking me to join her in the charge of a Hospital at Newport. I don’t know what to say, so suspend judgment until I shall hear whether this sort of service is likely to continue.

Drove to the ship at 3/2 past 4 and found Liza & Symy there. Heard that the ship would not sail till this morning and returned to 10th Street, after taking Miss Eliza into the hold & and introducing her to nurses. The Lieut. who was still on board when I went away on Monday was too ill to be carried off until Tuesday afternoon. So Miss Gill sat up with him on Monday night, and has been ill ever since. I am now seriously uneasy about her, and if we were at Boston would urge her to go home. We may not start till tomorrow which will give her more time to rest. A Miss Crother, a friend of Mr. Forestall’s is on board who seems a nice lively person. Bates gave me his photograph this morning!

Saturday morning August 23rd.

Yesterday was delightful—bright and beautiful with sudden showers. In the middle of the day a regular squall with blinding driving rain. We took refuge in the pilot house.

—– Katherine Prescott Wormeley, a Sanitary Commission nurse whose memoirs were published in 1889 as The Other Side of War.
The dear old ship heaved and pitched, but it was soon over and the blue sky came out again. This was a taste the Captain said of the rougher weather we shall soon have. We reached the Fortress a little before 6 P.M., just as we had finished our contraband-school. The sunset was beautiful, and we enjoyed it, coiled in the ropes on the stern. All day Mother Carey chickens had been following in our wake—mites of things—no bodies, all feathers, and stinking awfully, the Captain says, of fish. They are never seen on land and follow ships to eat what is thrown overboard. The sailors believe that they hatch their young under their wings at sea! Mr. Winslow [and I] have read a good deal of poetry together, at which Miss Gill sneers much. She is better but so dreadfully imprudent that she has nearly made herself ill again. Mr. Winslow advises my going to Portsmouth General Hospital, of which Mr. Kuhn speaks in a note I had from him last night. I pray God to direct me aright, for indeed I know nothing of myself. This vessel it is rumoured will be taken immediately to transport troops, but it is not yet decided. If we are to carry sick men, we must have a regularly organized corps on board. The Army of the Potomac is broken up in effect. Part are to be sent to reinforce General Pope against whom the rebels are consolidating their forces. It is said that after the army is drafted into different corps, McClellan will resign. These are but rumours though. Yesterday, it is reported on shore, there was to be an attack by the gunboats on Fort Darling. If it should fall, of course, Richmond is ours, and our late reverses retrieved. Many of the officers & men we brought down from New York are gone ashore—we are waiting orders. We may go to Newport News, Craney Island or Norfolk to take on men, if we do not here. There are a good many vessels in the harbour and but few gun boats, which looks significant. Troops have just arrived from Yorktown.

Following McClellan’s failure on the Peninsula, Lincoln gave command of the Army of Virginia to Major General John Pope, a tactless and indecisive soldier who was promptly routed by the Confederates at Second Bull Run, August 29-30, 1862.

Thursday Morning August 28th, Herkimer Inn.

What a turn of affairs since Sunday! What strange fortunes of war have brought me here where I so little expected to be. Last Sunday morning orders came to go up to Newport News to take troops to Aquia Creek. We had quite made up our minds to stay on the steamer, the men were coming on board, when Dr Vogel came to the cabin with news of change. The steamer was to carry two regiments of Sumner’s division, and was not to start until the others did, when they were to sail in line. This might keep the troops on board a week.

It was the opinion of everyone but Miss Gill that we had better go. She held on like grim death, and grew more and more cross as she found she gained no ground. We packed in all haste, had a “hasty plate of soup” and left the steamer in a regular Virginia pour-down, and made our way through mules, horses & men up to our ankles in mud to the wharf where the steamer for the Fortress lay. Susan accompanied us with a gorgeous plaid shirt, and black jacket—they & her sunbonnet suffering much from the rain. Our intention was to establish ourselves on board the Elizabeth at Fortress Monroe, at least until the next day, and we, with much trouble on account of the drenching rain and the dashing of the waves on the deck, had got on board, and were beginning to hang up our cloaks & things amid the apologies of Mr. Furniss, when Mr. Hayward appeared & told us we had better go home that night.

Again Hayward showed fight, but it was no use, Hayward was resolute and we were taken off. Then Gill insisted upon seeing Dr. Gilbert, the Medical Director, so through mud & rain Hayward marched us, followed by Susan with much loose baggage, to his office. Here we three, Miss Gill, Crother & I sat down making pools on the floor. Miss Gill offered her services, but was informed that the hospitals were full, but that there were more than enough nurses, and no place to stay. Susan was paid off in the road, I called to a kind looking nigger to take her to the negro quarters where she would find her mother & children. I was very sorry to part with her and she showed more feeling than I would have given her credit for.
ARRIVED on the mail boat, we changed our boots which had been wet for hours and sat out on the little deck aft. It was very strong, high, whitecapped waves through which the vessel strained & laboured. A strong wind blew—I leaned over the side & enjoyed it. A senior Sister of Charity was on board—Sister Sarah of Baltimore, an exact likeness of Mrs. Henry in a widow’s cap—also an Irish officer of the 83rd who made himself agreeable in an ultra-Hibernian style. We had a weary day’s journey by sail from Baltimore—the Gill & I sick, the Crother wandering off and losing us, our Irishman very devoted. We reached New York Monday night and I took Crother home with me to Mrs. Cruger’s. I found her there, and Mrs. Douglas, and General and all the Andersons. Brother Wm. came in the evening to tell me that Dr Agnew thought as I am so strong & used to the work, it would be better for me to remain on board the transports. He must have been very kind for he spoke of getting a letter from the Surgeon General to authorize my position on the boats. The next morning I went to see him. He was much surprised to hear that the steamer was taken from us, but thinks transportation of sick must be resumed as soon as the troops reach their destination.

WHEN the government once more took over the hospital transports, Harriet Whetten was dismissed from the service. Katherine Prescott Wromeley, another Sanitary Commission nurse, persuaded her to become Assistant Lady Superintendent at the United States general hospital in Portsmouth Grove, Rhode Island. This position lasted until May, 1863, when both women again found themselves out of work. In April, 1864, Miss Whetten secured a post in a military hospital in New Orleans, but quickly found it to be unsatisfactory; it was a “mechanical and rough” kind of work in a home for transient soldiers.

Shortly thereafter, she was placed in charge of the “special diet kitchen” for convalescent troops established by the Sanitary Commission at Carver General Hospital in Washington. The dietary program was discontinued in July, 1864, but in the same month Miss Whetten was appointed superintendent of female nurses at Carver General, a position which she held until her service to the government was finally terminated at the end of the war. On June 27, 1865, Dr. O. A. Judson, the surgeon in charge of the hospital, wrote to her: “I beg you will receive my sincerest thanks (although I dare say you would have preferred not to hear anything about it) as to your services rendered to the State. The motive which prompted you to tender them will be a reward, in a measure, at least. The soldiers who received your personal attention cannot forget it, and those whose condition was improved by suggestions of yours . . . would never forget their obligations, if they knew to whom they were indebted. . . . We are fading away here by degrees. The tents are struck, the kitchen hearth is cold, the blue coats are fewer, the summer airs peacefuller, and the military life of four years past is beginning to get hazy and purple with distance.”

Harriet Douglas Whetten, like the blue-coated soldiers and her companions in the Sanitary Commission, returned to the quiet anonymity of civilian life. But in her letters and diary a record of unstinting service was preserved for all time.