



Nancy Garrison Scripture. *With Courage and Delicacy: Civil War on the Peninsula—Women and the U.S. Sanitary Commission*. Mason City: Savas Publishing Company, 1999. ii + 242 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-882810-39-0.

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Women and the Peninsula Campaign

Nancy Garrison Scripture takes on a tremendous challenge in *With Courage and Delicacy: Civil War on the Peninsula—Women and the U.S. Sanitary Commission*. It is not simple to understand why educated, well-connected women, for whom philanthropy had always been civilized, neat, and clean, would leave their homes to take on work that many of their class would find not only objectionable but also inappropriate for women. But Scripture tries to help us understand, weaving a compelling story from many sources that have been underused and others that have never been used in conjunction.

Scripture's journey with the women of the U.S. Sanitary Commission started in an unusual way. A visit to the summer home originally owned by her husband's ancestor, Katherine Prescott Wormeley, and an encounter with her diary, set Scripture on the task of understanding not only what Wormeley did during the Civil War, but also why she did it. In Scripture's quest to understand the experiences of one woman, she came to closely examine the lives and experiences of a small group of women whose lives intersected with the horrors of McClellan's 1862 Peninsula Campaign.

The Peninsula Campaign lasted just nine weeks, but inflicted a terrible cost in lives. Scripture's use of this short campaign gives us an opportunity to glimpse, in microcosm, many of the facets of women's work during the war. Wormeley and sisters Georgeanna Woolsey and Eliza Woolsey Howland served as agents of the United States Sanitary Commission on hospital transport ships—possibly the grimmest of hospital work. These women were the equivalent of the triage nurses in a modern field hospital, receiving the wounded in their worst condition straight from the battlefield. Scripture uses the women's words and the words of others who worked beside them, like Frederick Law Olmstead of the Sanitary Commission, to tell a story almost too gruesome to imagine. Olmstead writes on June 3rd about the transportation of the wounded after the Battle of Fair Oaks:

“The wounded were arriving by every train, entirely unattended, or at most with a detail of two soldiers to a train of two hundred. They were without beds, without straw, and they arrived dead and alive together, in the same close box, many with awful wounds festering and alive with maggots. The stench was such as to produce vomiting with some of our strong men, habituated to the duty of attending to sick and wounded. Shall I tell you that our noble women were always ready and eager, and almost always the first, to press into these places of horror, going to them in torrents of rain, groping their way by dim lantern light, at all hours of the night, carrying spirits, ice and water, calling back to life those who were in the despair of utter exhaustion, or catching for mother or wife the last priceless words of the dying” (pp. 112-113).

The main actors in Scripture's tale are prime examples of the blurring of gender behaviors that came with the rigors of war. These young women lived the maxim, “From those to whom much has been given, much is expected.” Women used management skills to impact circles beyond home and benevolence work. Men worked as kind and gentle caregivers. Unlike the experiences of other women who worked for the health of the soldiers, the Woolseys and Wormeley experienced little animosity from their male counterparts and the doctors in charge. Their shared animosity was saved for contract surgeons who wanted no part in caring for the men and for the “voyeurs” who came to the Peninsula but did not turn their hands to helping the soldiers.

Scripture has had the pleasure of reweaving the words of very eloquent diarists and letter writers. Wormeley asked correspondents to save her letters. The Woolsey sisters corresponded with family members, some of whom would later join them. Olmstead sent reports of activity on the Peninsula back to the Sanitary Commission Headquarters. Their detailed experiences provide Scripture with several perspectives, giving us a

chance to see how an incident would be described with different emphases depending on the author and the intended audience.

Scripture argues that these Sanitaricians were women who lived their convictions and that their service to the soldiers was an extension of their lives of active service to others. Although women of wealth, their willingness to uproot themselves and work in the most difficult conditions revealed their belief in the physical, emotional, and psychological strength of women. Beyond the expression of their own identities and belief systems, these

women are exemplars for future generations of women who glean personal satisfaction from their work in arenas previously closed to them. It is in the difficulty of the work that they found fulfillment.

Katherine Prescott Wormeley says it best. Writing to her mother from the Peninsula, she said, "They say that a lady must put away all delicacy and refinement for this work. Nothing could be more false. It is not too much to say that delicacy and refinement and the fact of being a gentlewoman could never tell more than they do here" (p. 121).

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