In November of 1918, an Armistice ended hostilities between the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary and the four top Allied powers (Britain, France, Italy and the United States). Celebrating the centennial anniversary of that event in 2018, this paper looks at the transformation of nursing as an active and increasingly professional role for women during the course of that global conflict. The Army Nurse Corps had been formed in 1901 and was headed by Dita H. Kinney. At the outbreak of the First World War, the Corps consisted of just over 500 (active and Reserve) nurses; by the close of the war, there were more than 21,000 active nurses stationed at home and abroad. Given the short duration of U.S. involvement in the First World War, the shift in perception and training of women in the service is nothing short of remarkable.

Nursing in the Late 19th Century

In 1875, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* reviewed the publication entitled “Hand-book for Hospital Sisters” written by Miss Florence Lees. While formally edited by a male physician, Miss Lees’ practical experience and nursing authority was noted as coming from years of experience in military hospitals across Europe, specifically Denmark, Germany, and France. In Britain, following the ground-breaking initiatives by Florence Nightingale, Lees trained nurses at both Kings College Hospital and St. Johns House. Echoing the words of the male editor who oversaw Lees’ work, *Godey’s* reviewer noted that her Hand-book is “not more remarkable for its high tone and elevated standard of duty than for the care and precision with which it treats of the many small matters that may be made contributory to the comfort and well-being of the sick. No nurse, however skilful, could read it without profit; and it should be not only in the hands of every probationer, sister, and superintendent, but also in those of every lady who takes personal interest in the nursing arrangements of the hospitals to which she may be a contributor.” The formal training process for nurses in Britain at the time took approximately two years, but the reviewer noted that similar training programs were currently being introduced for nurses in the United States and suggested that Miss Lees’ work might be useful in their formation.

Clara Barton’s formation of the American chapter of the International Red Cross in 1881 fueled further awareness of the need for trained personnel for dealing with medical emergencies following natural disasters. However, there remained significant hesitation over women serving as nurses in military settings. Prior to 1901 and the reorganization of the military, including the formation of the Army Nurses Corps, the Surgeon General of the time had expressed concern over a perceived need to provide women with such niceties as rocking chairs (*Highlights in the History of the Army Nurses Corps, C. Fellar and C. Moore, U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1995, page 6*). However, such hesitations were overridden. Rather than having contract nurses supplied by such entities as the Daughters of the American Revolution or the American Red Cross, the creation of the Army Nurses Corps meant that nursing staff would be made answerable to military needs and authority.

Hostilities Break Out in Europe

As reported in the November 12, 1914 issue of *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*, war preparations in France created a call for nursing. The Société des Dames de France took on the role of organizing needed training. “From every class they came, the banker’s wife and the carter’s daughter, to master the mystery of bandaging a broken head or plugging an ugly bullet wound. Caste, which in time of peace plays so large a part in the intercourse of Frenchwomen, had ceased to exist. Shoulder to shoulder they sat or stood and made notes as the demonstrating surgeons and nurses outlined the work. How to splint a fractured arm, how to cauterize a sword-thrust, how to put the catgut stitches in a sabre-gash, how to observe the rules of simple hygiene, these and a thousand other matters their flying pencils caught from the lips of their teachers and when the lecture was over they found means to apply its precepts and made theory and practice go along together.”

In Britain, the International Red Cross recruited nurses to further supplement the medical need in France. The number of aristocratic names are documented in the September 3, 1914 issue of *Leslie’s Weekly*: 
“Owing to the number of Americans in Great Britain the activities of American women there are greatest in the aggregate. A committee of American women, which includes the Duchess of Marlborough, Lady Arthur Paget, Lady Gerard Lowther, Mrs. Lulu Harcourt, Mrs. Walter Burns and Mrs. Ava Willing Astor, have leased the country house of the Duke of Devonshire and fitted it up as a hospital under Red Cross administration.

An American Women’s War Relief committee has been organized in London, in which all of the above ladies are interested, together with many others, among whom may be mentioned Mrs. W. B. Leeds, Mrs. Owen, who is Secretary Bryan’s daughter; Lady Randolph Churchill, Mrs. J. P. Morgan, Mrs. Whitelaw Reid, Mrs. Cavendish Bentick, Mrs. J. H. Schiff, the Duchess of Roxburghe, the Princess Hatzfeldt, Countess Pappenheim, Lady Monson and the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava.”

However, because of the mixed backgrounds of the Red Cross nurses who traveled to France, there were occasionally challenging circumstances. Margaret Tapp, the American wife of a British Army Officer, wrote in the October 14, 1915 issue of Frank Leslie’s Weekly, “The main trouble about my coming was I can’t speak French, and the authorities refuse to take anyone who doesn’t. However, I had taken six lessons with a Belgian refugee. After receiving Kate’s wire that it was useless to come, I came. Kate said my coming would probably get the party into trouble, as the head doctor takes the attitude that he is allowing these English Red Cross nurses to slave day and night—making order where there was chaos, cleanliness where there was filth, and comfort for the wounded, clothes and dressing where there was misery and a lack of the most necessary things—on sufferance.” Assigned away from her traveling companions, Tapp noted “I am assigned to No. 6 Division and, as luck would have it, none of our party are there, consequently no one can speak English. My first service was to tackle the dirt, scrubbing all the places, and each time of wringing out the cloths showed black water. I all but fainted to-day helping the dresser do a man’s arm. It was a few minutes before I could bring myself to concentrate. I was so ashamed, especially as worse sights at London Infirmary never seemed to affect me. This man had a huge hole in his forearm where the shot had passed through and drains had been put in. There are 53 men in my own division at present. There were 110 in these nine rooms a short time ago. I am the only American nurse. There is one doctor and one dresser to each division and seven of these. The wounded are in a fearful condition of dirt, etc., and require any amount of scrubbing, which has been long delayed. It is a very mixed company—some being quite nice chaps who take good care of themselves, others who have experienced no bath for years. There is a poor chap who is crazy. Another has a bullet wound, quite a hollow, in his head, which has affected his speech. They are all cheerful and uncomplaining.”

The Red Cross was able to muster a large group of civilian volunteer nurses in the early years of the war. During Jane Delano’s tenure as Superintendent of the Army Nurses Corps (1909-1912), nurses trained and enrolled by the American Red Cross were designated as “reserve” nurses for the Corps which was itself limited at the time. The American Red Cross “reserve” of nurses would prove to be a significant force following the United States’ entrance into the war in 1917. As documented in “Contributions of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in World War I” (by Colonel Elizabeth A. P. Vane, RN, CNOR, MS, Army Nurse Corps Historian; and Sanders Marble, PhD, Senior Historian; of the Office of Medical History, Office of the Chief of Staff, US Army Medical Command, San Antonio, Texas), many of the Red Cross nurses served initially in the combat regions of France and Belgium, subsequently returning as veterans of the Army Nurses Corps. Delano would ultimately die in an Army hospital in 1919 while on official business for the American Red Cross and subsequently be honored with the Distinguished Service Medal. She is buried at Loire. (Fellar & Moore, Highlights, page 10). Multiple references in her memory may be found in Accessible Archives’ America and World War I: American Military Camp Newspapers collection.
In the United States in 1916, the focus was on building preparedness and developing nursing skills as reported in Frank Leslie’s Weekly on July 6:

“Most spectacular of these preparations for defense or war was the Preparedness Camp for Women at Chevy Chase, Md., near Washington; the first military camp for women on this continent...The camp did not train in the use of firearms, but it did train, and vigorously, for the kind of work to which women will be called in war... the women who have satisfactorily completed the course, though not appointed as nurses’ aids, are a vast reserve from which vacancies may be filled. In case of war, hundreds of these women will be ready to extend their training to take the places in the home hospitals of the nurses called to the field, and they will be ready to give trained and efficient care to the sick at home at a time when sickness is increased and the number of doctors and nurses decreased...At the branch offices of the New York chapter of the Red Cross at 411 Fifth Avenue, volunteer workers are making thousands of surgical dressings, not only for European War Relief, but also for our United States Military reserve...”

**Rapid Mobilization**

In April 1917 the United States formally entered the War. According to Fellar and Moore, the bulk of the 400 members of the Army Nurses Corps were actually stationed on the U.S.-Mexican border. By the end of June 1917, the number of active nurses had tripled; by June 1918, there would be more than 12,000 Army nurses serving in 198 locations worldwide.

It was at this point there was a burgeoning number of military camp newspapers; publications that routinely captured the ordinary experiences of those in the armed services. Accessible Archives’ unique collection of 39 newspapers in the American Military Camp Newspapers collection represents a critical resource in understanding how the role of nursing shifted at this point in time.

Previously-trained nurses were immediately deployed overseas and assigned to British hospitals. A report by Julia Stimson, acting director of the Army Nurses Corp in 1919, gave a sense of the work with which those women were immediately faced. As reported in The Camp Knox News, “These nurses were sent in response to the appeal of the British Mission for Medical Assistance. Because of the efforts of the enemy to torpedo hospital ships, England decided to retain a large portion of sick and wounded British in France instead of attempting to send them across the channel to England. The chief nurses of these units were required to take over, with usually no more than a few days’ apprenticeship, the position of matron of a British hospital already in operation and from which the British nursing personnel was withdrawn almost immediately to make room for the Americans.”

In keeping with journalistic practice of the period, the camp newspapers frequently would include only the name of a female service member. The glossing over of a woman’s role has meant that archives may need to be consulted to uncover the real contributions made. There is the work of Julia Stimson, a graduate of Vassar in 1901, who served as director of the Army Nurses Corps. Stimson’s papers are housed at Cornell University and offer this history, more detailed than would have ever appeared in a contemporary newspaper account: In 1908, she received her diploma from the New York Hospital Training School for Nurses and took the position of Superintendent of Nurses at Harlem Hospital. In 1910 Stimson moved to St. Louis, becoming the first Director of the Social Services Department for the Children’s Hospital and the Washington University Hospital the next year. In 1913 she was appointed the Superintendent of Nurses for both institutions. She returned to school, attending Washington University, and received her Master’s degree in 1917 with the completion of her dissertation on “Compulsory Health Insurance”. Stimson was also the first woman to be promoted to the rank of Major in the U.S. Army, a rank she achieved in 1920.
More in keeping with the reporting practices of the time would be single line references to active personnel: Miss Bessie S. Bell, Army Nurse Corps, formerly chief nurse at Walter Reed Hospital, Takoma Park, D. C., was the first chief nurse of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF).

In the Camp Sherman News (April 10, 1919), the arrival of nursing staff was noted as follows: “The first nurses assigned to Camp Sherman on Oct. 6, 1917, were the Misses Flora, Achunacher, Wright and Culbertson from Cincinnati. The one building assigned for these nurses was located at the eastern part of the group of hospital buildings and was far from complete. There were no furnishings, no heating system, no lights, etc., but soon after electric lights were attached in various places, oil stoves appeared and iron beds and mattresses made up for their accommodations. On the following day Miss Foster arrived from Akron for duty, and the following day Miss Catherine Leary of the Army Nurses Corps was transferred to Camp Sherman from Syracuse, N. Y., to assume the duties of chief nurse. From then on, one or two nurses reported each day for duty until the end of October, when there were 35 nurses on duty.”

In another camp paper, The Cure (November 2, 1918), there is this description of the emphasis on fully trained nurses serving in military hospitals:

“The trained nurses of the country, who were in a position to, responded to the call to arms without hesitancy and became its women soldiers. Not once have the strict requirements for admission been lowered. A candidate has to be a graduate of a recognized nurse training school and must have had a specified amount of previous training.

At no civilian hospital is the wounded or sick American soldier guaranteed such expert care as in an Army hospital. In the former institution girls in training to be nurses, as well as fully trained women, do the ward work. This is the accepted practice and it is cited merely to show on what an unparalleled high level, the Army Medical Department has been planned and organized. In the Army hospitals overseas, only graduate nurses tend sick or wounded soldiers.”

Others were happy in their service on the home front. Chief Nurse Emmeline Cleeland served in one of the hospitals at home, but encouraged her peers to become part of the Army Nurses Corp. Interviewed by a reporter for The Cure in 1918, Cleeland commended the service on the grounds “for the valuable mental discipline which comes of serving under the rigidity and completeness of army method.” Her background more fully supplied than most, the interview noted that the chief nurse had originally been rejected by the army for reasons of being underweight but had pressed upon the military her special qualifications and her eagerness to serve.

The establishment of the Army School of Nursing in mid-1918 was expected to provide the degree of training required beyond that of the nurses’ training aids mentioned previously. Later in the year, that same newspaper, The Cure, proudly announced the arrival of 26 students to the school established at that particular base. Their training was to be rigorous -- far more so than that prescribed in Miss Lees’ Hand-book forty years prior.

“According to an official announcement, the Army School of Nursing established by the Surgeon General under the Medical Department of the Army, offers to women desiring to care for the sick and wounded soldiers a course leading to a diploma in nursing, should the military hospitals continue in operation for the full period of the course. Should the cessation of hostilities occur before the completion of this period, credit for all branches of nursing completed will be given in a certificate by the Army School of Nursing, which certificate will entitle the holder to recognition by such civil hospital training schools as may subsequently accept her as a student. The school proper is located in the Surgeon General’s office, Washington, D. C., the training is given in the various military hospitals and through such affiliations as may be required to complete the course.

In the school at this base, as in others, experience will be provided in surgical nursing, including orthopedic, eye, ear, nose and throat; medical, including communicable nervous and mental diseases. Experience in the diseases of children, gynecology, obstetrics and public health nursing will be provided through affiliations in the second or third year of the course.

The course extends over a period of three years. Credit of nine months, or approximately an academic year will be given to graduates of accredited colleges.”

While trained nurses were shown in publications back home in pristine white uniforms, amidst orderly rows of beds and patients, the realities of their experience at the front were grimmer than usually reported. In “A Rose In No Man’s Land” an account appearing in The Listening Post in 1919, noted that the work of the Nursing Corps was never as static as such photographs might suggest.
“Nearly every illustration depicts a glowing young creature of ravishing beauty garbed in stiffly starched and smartly tailored uniform with flowing headgear marked with the insignia of the Red Cross. Her function is evidently but to gaze upon the pain-racked features of the bed-ridden soldier and heal the wounds and assuage the sufferings of battle by some mysterious personal magnetism. Her hands, instead of holding bandages, shears, or forceps, the implements of action, lie idly by her side.

In actual life the Army nurse wears a very plain grey uniform and neat white cap, no frills nor fancy trimmings. She is too busy to pose or merely sigh over some unfortunate victim of shell fire or bullets. ...There is no glamour about her work. It is all splendidly prosaic, the routine of bed-making, preparing diets, dressing wounds, and the thousands of little attentions that make a patient comfortable in body and mind.

Many of the hospitals are portable wooden buildings set up in fields near small villages. These hospitals, instead of glass, have screen windows through which cold air constantly blows, making work unpleasant and requiring many wraps in order to keep warm. During the rainy season, a time when the dirt around the hospital grounds is a mud wallow, the nurses wear sou’westers, slickers, and rubber boots to work each morning. Does one ever see a picture of them thusly attired plodding to work in the dawn of a chill, gray morning?”

Other descriptions of hardship wouldn’t emerge until after the Armistice had been signed. In March 2, 1919 issue of The Listening Post, three nurses were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by the Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker:

“The three women are reserve nurses of the Army Nurse Corps and were decorated for displaying heroism under fire. During a German night air raid, while on duty with a surgical team at the British Casualty Clearing Station No. 61, British area, Miss MacDonald continued at her post caring for the sick and wounded until seriously wounded by a German bomb, which destroyed the sight of one eye. Despite her injury she remained on duty with the American forces, serving as chief nurse with Evacuation Hospital No. 2 for a period of nine months.

Miss McClelland of Base Hospital No. 10 occupied the same tent with Miss MacDonald, cared for her when she was wounded, and stopped the hemorrhage from her wounds while under fire caused by bombs from German aeroplanes.”

Again, from the November 22, 1919 issue of the Camp Knox News, encapsulating the report of Julia Stimson, “When the armistice was signed there were 184,421 American soldiers occupying hospital beds in 153 base hospitals, 66 camp hospitals and 12 convalescent hospitals, with about 6,925 nurses short of actual needs. It is interesting to note conditions at centers where the largest number of patients were grouped. At Mesves Center the “peak” was reached November 16 with 20,186 patients in ten hospitals, cared for by 394 nurses.

At Allerey on November 17, in six hospitals, 360 nurses had the care of 17,140. Mars on November 16 had 14,302 patients in six hospitals, with 493 nurses to look after them. In seven hospitals at Toul on the 28th, 320 nurses were looking after 10,963 patients. The first group of nurses to return from France sailed early in January, 1919, from which time their return has been gradual, averaging 250 nurses a week for the first four months of the year.”

The Merritt Dispatch of May 1919 featured an article praising the Army Nurse and included a photograph of Lillian Ryan, Chief Nurse of the Camp Merritt Base Hospital. While the Dispatch had previously only noted the hospitality of the Chief Nurse in keeping up morale for the hospital staff during a dinner party, a more general assessment of the contribution of the Army nurse is offered in this fashion: “…the very nature of the work of the Army Nurse Corps forbids its deeds being blazoned forth in trumpet tones. It is a work performed “back of the curtain”—removed from the blare of public gaze and public applause. The members of the nursing corps themselves neither expect nor desire curtain calls. They have accomplished that for which they were called and look for no loud commendation of their deeds. But since they are and have been part of the Great Struggle, it is not altogether unfitting that on this, the greatest Memorial Day that has ever dawned for our Beloved Country, some mention be made of their share in the trials which have swept the earth during the period of this terrific war.”

**Accessible Archives**

Accessible Archives utilizes computer technology and a large team of conversion specialists to provide easy to use access to vast quantities of archived historical information previously available only in microformat, hard copy form or as images.

Diverse primary source materials reflecting broad views across American history and culture have been assembled into comprehensive databases. The following collections were utilized in developing this material.

**Godey’s Lady’s Book.** This collection provides the complete run of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and is the only one containing the color plates as they originally appeared. Our search and retrieval system allows searchers to limit by “Image Type,” which includes chromolithograph, color plate and color plate fashion, as well as advertisement, cartoon, drawing, engraving, fashion plate, illustration, map, mezzotint, portrait, sheet music, table and woodcut.

Particular consideration is due to The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, The Library Company of Philadelphia, Winterthur Library, and The Chester County Historical Society, without whom this project would have been impossible.
Frank Leslie's Weekly: Frank Leslie's Weekly, later often known as Leslie's Weekly, actually began life as Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. Founded in 1855 and continued until 1922, it was an American illustrated literary and news publication, and one of several started by publisher and illustrator Frank Leslie. John Y. Foster was the first editor of the Weekly, which came out on Tuesdays. While only 30 copies of the first edition were printed, by 1897 its circulation had grown to an estimated 65,000 copies.

These weekly papers were large quarto in size, about 12” by 16”, and each consisted of sixteen pages to the issue. They followed a tested and proven formula of carefully combining elements of war, politics, art, science, travel and exploration, literature and the fine arts in each issue, enhanced with between 16 and 32 illustrations.

America and World War I: American Military Camp Newspapers
This collection addresses a topic and period that continues to be of the widest interest and importance to scholars, students, and the general public—America in the World War I Era. Camp newspapers make important original source material—much of it written by soldiers for soldiers—readily available for research and fresh interpretation of events about “The War to End All Wars”.

American Military Camp Newspapers provides users with unparalleled access to unique sources covering the experiences of American soldiers during the mobilization period in 1916, in the trenches in 1918 and through the occupation of Germany in 1919.

Notes

The Army Nurse Corps Association, “Contributions of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in World War I” by Colonel Elizabeth A. P. Vane, RN, CNOR, MS, Army Nurse Corps Historian; and Sanders Marble, PhD, Senior Historian; of the Office of Medical History, Office of the Chief of Staff, US Army Medical Command, San Antonio, Texas, was written for the June 2014 issue of the French journal Soins: La revue de référence infirmière which featured medical care in World War I. https://e-anca.org/History/Topics-in-ANC-History/Contributions-of-the-US-Army-Nurse-Corps-in-WWI


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