

EDWARD FOLEY

THE THIRD MAINE'S ANGEL OF MERCY:
SARAH SMITH SAMPSON¹

Sarah Smith Sampson's exciting career as a Civil War nurse illustrates the important role women played in giving aid and comfort to soldiers near the field of battle. Traveling with the troops or laboring in nearby Army hospitals, Sampson participated in the great events of 1861-1865 as a representative of the Maine Soldiers' Relief Association, assigned to accompany the 3rd Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Author Edward Foley, a resident of Brewer, attended Bangor schools, Fryeburg Academy, and Husson College. He served with the 1101st Combat Engineer Group during WWII. Recalled to active duty with the Air Force during the Korean War, he served two more years. He was also a member of the Maine Air National Guard. He has contributed to CIVIL WAR TIMES ILLUSTRATED, the BANGOR DAILY NEWS, the BANGOR-BREWER REGISTER, and to a 1989 centennial booklet tracing Brewer's history.

Following the attack of Fort Sumter in April 1861, President Abraham Lincoln called 75,000 men to arms for the Union Army. In Maine, his call was answered immediately by the only existing regiment of the State Militia. Shortly after, however, the Maine Legislature authorized nine new regiments of volunteers, among them the 3rd Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which was organized in Augusta on June 4, 1861.



Shortly after the Civil War began, women both North and South organized into sewing circles to supply troops with articles of clothing and bandages. Others left their homes to work in field and Army hospitals closer to the lines of battle.

Kouwenhoven, ADVENTURES OF AMERICA, 1857-1900: A PICTORIAL RECORD FROM HARPER'S WEEKLY (1938).

As eager young men signed up by the hundreds, Maine women were also organizing, realizing that the soldiers would need support from those at home. Ladies Aid Societies, organized in cities and towns all over Maine, gathered in sewing clubs

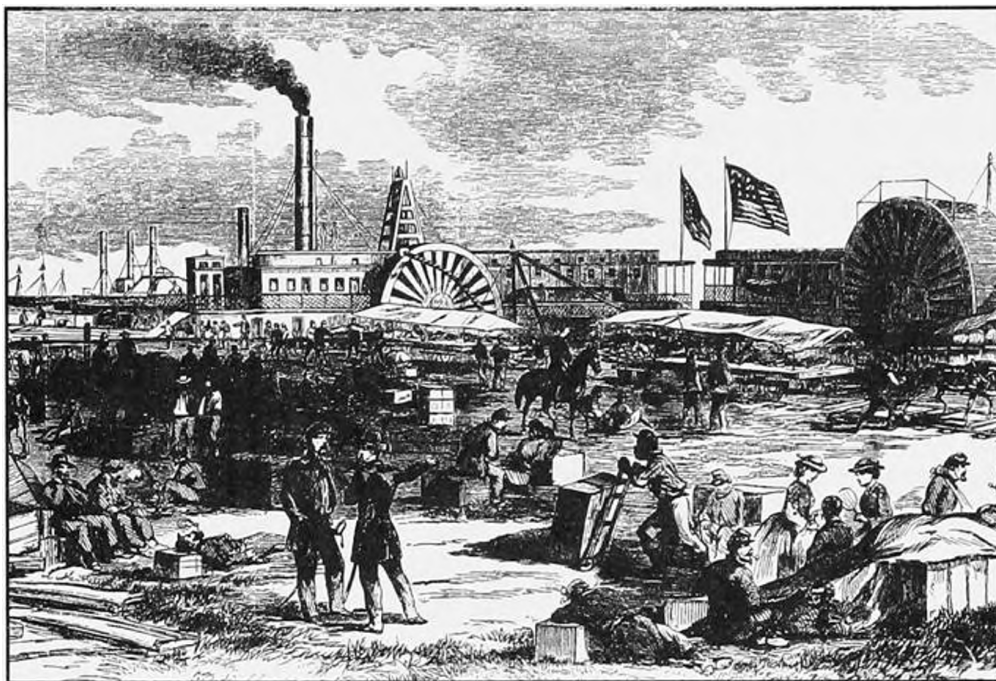
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and circles to make mittens, flannel shirts and underwear, handkerchiefs, towels, blankets, and bandages. These and similar women's associations sent agents to the Washington D.C. area, where they received a steady stream of donated supplies to distribute to Maine soldiers. Later in the war, women responded to urgent calls from regiments in the field by providing barrels of flour, crackers, potatoes, corn, oatmeal, salted fish, and coffee.

Ruth Mayhew of the Maine Camp Hospital and Field Association and Sarah Sampson of the Maine Soldiers' Relief Association volunteered to serve as agents in the Washington area. Sarah was the wife of 3rd Maine Company D's Capt. Charles A.L. Sampson of Bath and the daughter of Joseph B. and Lucy Smith, also of Bath. Charles was a Boston native who moved to Bath as a young man to open a studio as a ship's figurehead carver. Sarah and Charles were married in 1855.

Sarah left Augusta for Washington on the morning of June 5, 1861. Traveling by rail with the regiment, she pondered her own role in the nation's great travail. To herself, she pledged to offer relief and aid to the sick, wounded, and suffering soldiers from Maine as long as the war continued. On the morning of June 10, 1861, Sarah made her first visit to the 3rd's first hospital, a tent erected on Meridian Hill in Washington. The surgeon in charge cordially welcomed her, and she began to visit the hospital daily, devoting her time to any soldier who was seriously ill. To the Relief Association back home, Sarah sent an urgent appeal for a number of "cot bedsteads." So many arrived that the 5th Maine was given a sufficient number of them too.

During the first weeks of the war, the 3rd's hospital was relocated several times on the outskirts of Washington. After the first Battle of Bull Run in July, it was moved to Alexandria. Because sickness was also becoming rampant, the hospital was soon overflowing, and on July 28, the regiment lost its first member, George Blaisdell of Company I, to diphtheria. That fall and winter no day passed that Sarah was not at the hospital. Because medical science was so limited, many did not recover, but Sarah gave each as much care and attention as possible.



Among the sick and wounded at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, Sarah Sampson sought out Maine soldiers, helping some find passage home. She spent her evenings writing letters for, or reading to bedridden soldiers.

THE AMERICAN SOLDIER AND SAILOR IN WAR (1898).

When death came, she attended the burial and wrote to the family back home explaining the circumstances of the soldier's death and place of burial.

When the Army of the Potomac moved down to the Peninsula in March 1862, Sarah followed, after the soldiers she had been attending were transferred to general hospitals in Alexandria. Arriving at Fortress Monroe, she sought out the sick and wounded from Maine, many of them from the 7th Maine who had fought so well at Williamsburg. Even though the nearest hospital was full, steamers continued to arrive loaded with wounded. During the next three months she remained on the Peninsula aiding the sick and wounded. Evenings were spent writing letters for, or reading to bedridden soldiers. Late at night, she and the other Soldiers' Relief women did the cooking for the following day. Sarah's specialties were the delicate food and drinks prepared

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for the most feeble or for those with facial wounds. She often conveyed her gratitude to the women back home for the generous supplies they sent.

In early June, the war now well into its second year, Sarah left Fortress Monroe for White House Landing. Here she found that both Oliver O. Howard, the former commander of the 3rd Maine, and his brother had been wounded. The general's arm had been amputated, and his brother had a severe flesh wound in the thigh. Sarah cared for General Howard until he was well enough to travel back to Maine, then turned to the wounded soldiers arriving on the transports. Such suffering and confusion, she wrote, "I have never before witnessed. Many serious wounds had not been dressed for several days, and indeed, the loss of many limbs was the consequence of inattention to light wounds; but this was not the fault of surgeons, but from circumstances beyond their control."

She attended to many of the wounded and some who were beyond hope of recovery. She remembered George Gordon of the 3rd's Company I, who had been shot through both legs. Although a surgeon dressed the wounds, gangrene set in, and Gordon was told that both legs would have to be amputated above the knee to save his life. After he had been told, Gordon explained to Sarah that he would rather lose both legs "than my life; and rather my life than not to have been there."² After the operation Sarah attended the lad constantly, but he died soon after. As she had done for many others, she wrote Gordon's mother concerning the circumstances of his death and burial. She also told of the young soldier's farewell words to his family.¹

Sarah packed her supply wagon and hurried to the field on June 25, after hearing of the battle near Richmond. All day long she worked among the suffering soldiers, preparing drinks, dressing wounds, and comforting, as much as possible, those mortally wounded. By noon the next day her supplies were depleted, and she returned to White House Landing to restock. There she found the area had been hastily evacuated; most of the wounded were already aboard waiting steamers. Before boarding, Sarah went to get her trunk, which she had left at the home

of a local Union sympathizer. Confederates had overrun the area and the house had been demolished. Borrowing a change of clothing, she rushed aboard the *Louisiana* as the vessel departed for Washington. After spending a day in the hospitals in Yorktown, Sarah took a mail steamer for Fortress Monroe, where she again passed a few days among the wounded, "often being recognized by those who [sic] we had cared for at the front." On the transport *State of Maine*, Sarah made her way to the James River. Early the next morning the wounded were brought ashore in small boats. "The groaning of the poor fellows, as they were lifted from one boat to another, was heart-rending."

Taking the train to Savage's Station, Sarah was given carriages to convey supplies to the various hospitals. The quartermaster "advised that we make this our headquarters," she wrote, "as farther in advance we might not be safe; and farther in the rear, [we] might not be available in case of battle." Sarah set up operations in an old mill, which she used as a storehouse.

We invariably found the soldiers grateful for what we brought them, but more so that we had come ourselves. Some told us they had not seen a woman for three months. The medical officers were also gratified that we had come, and General Kearney's Division Surgeon, who was with us one day, said our 'presence did the sick more good than medicine.'

Every day was full of interest. We were constantly being sent for to come to this hospital or that, and on our way not infrequently come across some sick, who, by accident, were not in regularly organized hospitals. One day we found Captain Harvey of the 3rd Maine, very ill and delirious with fever, in an old building without windows and doors, and with only a canteen from which to take his drink. He died the following day.³

Sarah's husband Charles, who had been promoted to lieutenant colonel, found his health failing in early summer in

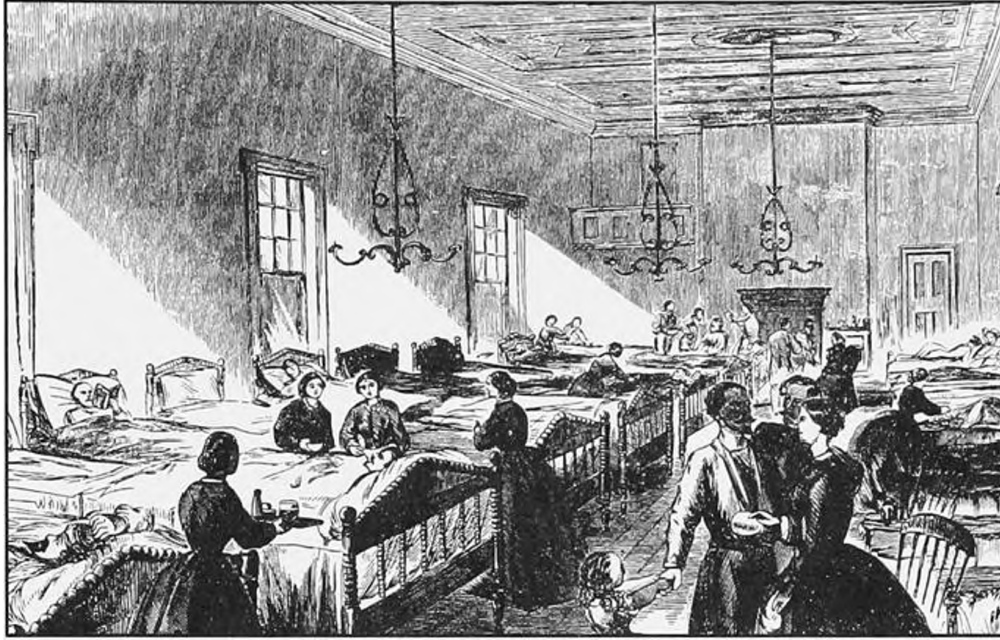
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the second year of the war and resigned his commission to return home. Sarah, exhausted to the point of illness, accompanied her husband to Bath, where she remained for the summer. By late September she felt well enough to return to Washington, and on the first of October she resumed her mission.

Not long after returning to Washington, Sarah was asked by the agent in charge of the Maine Soldiers' Relief Association to serve at the area's general hospitals, caring for the growing number of Maine soldiers bedridden there. She visited each of the several hospitals in Washington, Georgetown, and Alexandria, in addition to the Fairfax Convalescent Camp – in all, sixteen hospitals – finding in each one wounded or sick soldiers from Maine who needed specialized care. To facilitate her duties, she was given the use of a two-horse ambulance and assigned a convalescing soldier as a driver. Not only did she put in long days at the hospitals, but whenever a train of wounded soldiers arrived at night she and her driver made their way through the cars giving food and drink to the soldiers while they waited for the ambulances.

The Battle of Fredericksburg, in December, was a disaster for the North. Wounded soldiers continued to arrive, it seemed to her, endlessly. She was particularly horrified at the manner in which the wounded had been treated by the enemy: "The poor fellows had been in the hands of the enemy for several days, who had taken their clothing from them, and left them without shelter....One young man, who being unable to move after he was wounded, and after he was...brought to the hospital, the flesh dropped from his body, and he died a shocking death."⁴

During the early months of 1863 a new task came before Sarah. Learning that there were Maine soldiers dying in field hospitals in Virginia, she made her way to Falmouth to visit members of the 3rd, 4th, and 17th Maine regiments. Some, knowing they could not recover, begged her to arrange their passage home, so that they could die among family and friends. Sarah received approval from the head surgeon and, with her patients on stretchers, left the field hospital in ambulances for the railroad station. She described her journey: "On Sunday...I



After recuperating in Maine, Sarah returned to Washington, where she served in several hospitals caring for a growing number of bedridden Maine soldiers.
Wright, OFFICIAL PORTFOLIO OF WAR AND NATION, 1906.

left the hospital with 16 patients, 13 of whom were from Maine, and none able to sit up. We rode to the station in ambulances and the Quartermaster gave us a car to ourselves; and though without straw upon which to lay the sickest, we went very nicely.”⁵ Sarah’s charges were transferred from the railroad to the transport *Juniata*. Here again, “Our accommodations...were very poor, but the steward allowed me use of his stove to cook the farina I had brought along for the patients...It was a long tedious night, and we gave thanks when morning brought us to Washington.”

Sarah immediately made arrangements to take her patients to the Soldiers’ Home. After a few days, other relief workers were assigned to take the soldiers back home. Sergeant Haywood of the 3rd Maine, however, began failing rapidly. Sarah remained at his side to the end, then made arrangements to send

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his body to his parents in Sidney, Maine. Returning to the hospital in Falmouth, she made another trip to Washington with eleven more patients who had asked her to help them get home.

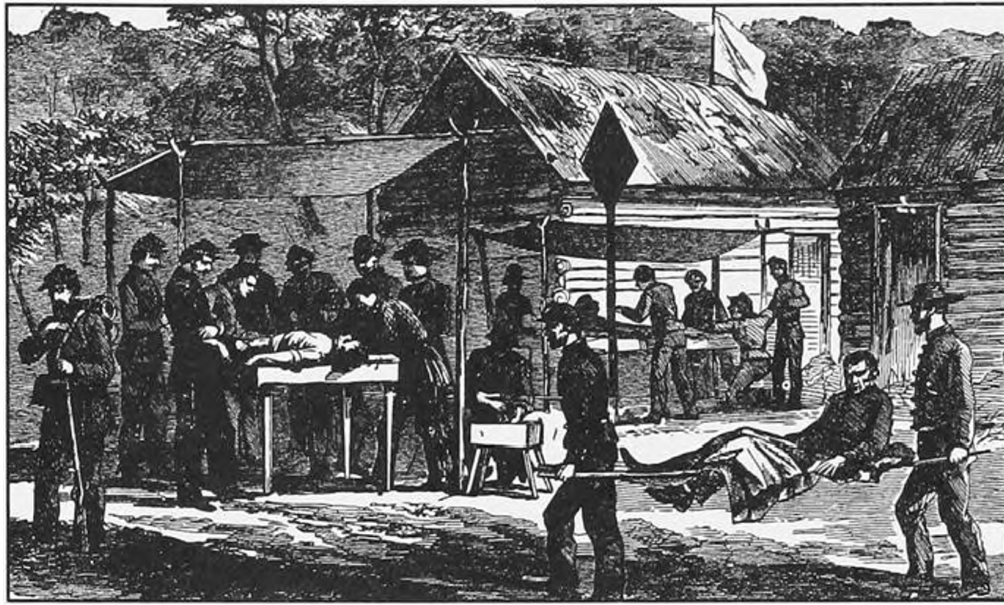
In early May the wounded from the Battle of Chancellorsville were brought to the hospitals in and around Washington. Sarah responded to letters and telegrams of inquiry from Maine, but so many soldiers were still on their way from field hospitals that she found it impossible to answer them all. During this period, her days were passed in the hospitals and at the Relief Agency, where she was

assisting soldiers in their various wants; and evenings in writing for those not able to write for themselves, and answering letters from anxious relatives, often a dozen a day. Whenever a soldier was seriously ill, and there was no hope for his recovery, I visited him daily, and wrote his friends often; and, if they died, observed his and their wishes in regard to the disposition of his remains....

There were several deaths during those days....At the entreaty of Sgt. Jackson Ballard of Co. I, 3rd Maine, who was mortally wounded and had suffered at the hands of the enemy several days, I remained at his side [and] was with him when he died....At the request and expense of the members of his company, I procured a metal case and forwarded his body to his mother in Palemo [sic.], Maine.⁶

The day after the Battle of Gettysburg, Sarah left Washington with Ruth Mayhew, who had just arrived representing the Maine Camp Hospital Association. Reporting to the medical director of the 3rd Corps hospital at Gettysburg, they took up their duties immediately. With milk, eggs, and brandy donated by local people, they were able to furnish nourishment for the wounded soldiers.

In addition to the 3rd, 4th, and 17th regiments, the two women also attended the wounded from the 5th, 16th, and 20th



At Gettysburg, Sampson tended soldiers in field hospitals, providing food, brandy, tea, and chocolate. She cut hair, washed clothes, and made the bedridden comfortable. Wright, *OFFICIAL PORTFOLIO OF WAR AND NATION*, 1906.

Maine regiments. When time allowed, Sarah wrote in her journal, recording her activities at Gettysburg:

Morning of Friday, July 24th. But two stretchers [with deceased soldiers] appear outside the hospital tent this morning. Yesterday there were five, and three others died during the day. We made rounds of the hospital to ascertain the condition of the patients, and return to our quarters, Mrs. Mayhew to make tea and chocolate for the patients, (in spirit lamps purchased with money from the ladies of Auburn) and I to make fly screens for Sgt. Allen and Alan Sprague of the 3rd Maine, both very low with wounds. Mrs. S. of Gettysburg kept her promise in sending me a pair of shears, and I pass two hours with patients, cutting hair, and in washing and making them comfortable. Return to quarters and find Mrs. Mayhew has opened our last barrel of supplies,

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hoping to find some sheets; finding none she was sewing handkerchiefs together for a covering for one. A messenger comes from 1st Corps hospital from Jonathan Chase...who is wounded and desires to see someone from Maine. We go together and find he has lost one eye, has one arm amputated, and is quite severely wounded in the breast. We give him and others goodies we have brought along, take items to write his mother at Togus Springs, and leave with a promise to come again soon.⁷

Sarah remained at Gettysburg until the field hospital was discontinued in favor of large general hospitals. After visiting patients from the Maine regiments one last time, she left for Washington, taking a complete list of Maine soldiers who had died since the battle, as well as the names of Maine soldiers still in those hospitals. In Washington, she resumed her daily visits to the sick and wounded.

Sarah went to Brandy Station in Virginia in March 1864, where she rejoined Ruth Mayhew. Together they visited the hospitals and applied to the surgeon for the release of several of the sickest Maine soldiers. Among the thirteen to be sent home was a man named Nickerson from the 4th Maine, who thought he would die in Washington:

I told [him] I would not leave for Washington without him. Next to him, was a boy from New Jersey who begged me to take him too, even though he might die on the way. Another boy from Massachusetts laying next to Knowles of the 19th Maine who heard me tell him, 'I have come to take you home,' burst into tears, which were soon changed to smiles when I said, 'You shall go too.'...Knowles lived but six weeks afterwards, but the desire of his heart was accomplished – he died at home.⁸

Soon after the Battle of the Wilderness, Sarah and Ruth Mayhew set out for Fredericksburg with many cases of supplies. Along

the way, they passed large numbers of the walking-wounded, who were making their way to Washington. Many had not eaten for days, and the ladies shared what little they had with them and passed out fresh dressings for their wounds. After setting up quarters in Fredericksburg, the ladies turned to the task of changing the dressings of the wounded who were streaming into the city. Soldiers were arriving in such numbers that all abandoned buildings, houses, shops, and churches were appropriated for the infirm. Many simply could not be sheltered inside during the first night and were forced to lie in the streets and on doorsteps.

Late the second night, Sarah and Ruth learned of numerous Maine soldiers in shops on Caroline Street. Their supplies exhausted, they could only offer sympathy:

We went down, and by the light of one solitary candle in each store, beheld such wretchedness and suffering as we have never before seen. On every counter and shelf, above the counters, under the counters and on the floor before them, without blankets even, were our noble boys, officers and soldiers sharing the same hard fate, each seriously wounded; and not only were they suffering from wounds, but from hunger and thirst and though the weather was warm, many were suffering chills. We could do little for their comfort that night, but to assure them of care on the morrow; that we had come with tokens of love from their friends who were thinking of and praying for them, and that this was surely the darkest day of their lives. It encouraged them to feel that some friends from their own state had come to their relief; some of them cried for joy and we cried with them.⁹

Soon, the provost marshal gave Sarah permission to use two of the largest houses in Fredericksburg as hospitals, and soldiers who were not ill were detailed to build bunk beds. Two surgeons from Maine regiments were placed in charge, as the houses filled

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with incoming patients. Sarah described an encounter with one of the wounded:

We ascended a long flight of stairs from the street, walked through a narrow passageway, and across a shed roof, and up a high step into an old storeroom, where he lay on a stretcher with his thigh amputated. He said, 'I heard you were in Fredericksburg, I knew you would come; you will care for me, won't you?' I told him everything would be done as soon as stretcher bearers could be found to take him to the new hospital. After he was taken there, his wound was dressed daily, but he had gone long unattended and he died. Mrs. Mayhew was at his side and, as with all, her gentle, quiet manner, and Christian spirit, won all hearts. Much of her time was passed at the bedside of the dying, to whom she whispered sweet words of comfort and promise, and received from them the precious farewell messages to those they loved.¹⁰

A sudden order came to evacuate Fredericksburg, and troops began the process of moving the wounded to steamers tied up on the river. At midnight, Sarah and Ruth left with the last group, walking a mile to reach the steamers. "Along the road, with rain falling upon them, were our soldiers being carried on stretchers; and the night being dark, and the way rough, rendering it impossible to carry them steadily, their cries and groans were terrible."¹¹

From Fredricksburg, they traveled by steamer with patients from the Wilderness to White House Landing, where they set up hospital tents. Sarah and her aides were unable to erect the tents quickly enough to accommodate the large number of wounded coming in from Cold Harbor. Having no other choice, she and the other women moved out onto the field to dress wounds and care for the soldiers, right where they had been dropped from the wagons.

Its three years completed, the 3rd Maine was relieved from active service in the summer of 1864 and prepared to return to Augusta. Many who had come to help the soldiers, including Ruth Mayhew, fell ill themselves and were also compelled to leave. It had been Sarah's original intention to return home with the 3rd, now sadly depleted of so many of its members, but she felt she simply could not leave with so many wounded needing care. She remained at White House Landing until the field hospitals were discontinued and then went to City Point, where thousands of wounded soldiers were being brought in from Petersburg. Their suffering was compounded by the intense heat and lack of good water. Sarah tirelessly made her round of the hospital tents day and night. Soon, she had many Maine soldiers – those less seriously wounded – transferred to hospitals in Washington.

In early July, Sarah returned to Washington to care for the many Maine soldiers she had first met at the front. The Medical Department policy now was to send the recovering soldiers – those able to travel – back to their states for care there. The balance of July found Sarah arranging steamer transportation to Augusta for 350 Maine soldiers.

In August, during the last summer of the war, Sarah served aboard the hospital ship *Atlantic*, which was charged with gathering the wounded from points on the Peninsula and carrying them to hospitals in New York and Philadelphia. Ending that duty in early September, she again returned to the hospitals in the Washington areas where she was struck by an intense fever. She recuperated in Maine, and it was February 1865 before she returned to Washington. She remained at the capital until early April, then transferred to City Point to care for the wounded from the battles at Petersburg. Mortality among the seriously wounded was very high, due to the long distances they traveled on rough roads. Sarah and Ruth Mayhew, who had also recovered from her illness, were the only women so far forward at the front.¹²

The war ended on April 9, but Sarah remained in Virginia until all Union soldier patients had been transferred north. She

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then left on the *State of Maine* for Washington, where she continued her duties at the hospitals and helped getting discharge and transfer papers for homeward-bound patients. She continued her work through the summer and early fall until only five wounded soldiers from Maine were left in Washington. Now able to travel, the five soldiers left with Sarah for Augusta where they arrived on October 9. Sarah's last duty was to escort them to Cony Hospital in Augusta. Only then did she return home.

In her report to Maine's Adjutant General, Sarah explained why she stayed in Washington when her services ended with the Relief Association: "I felt I was pledged as strongly to those who suffered in striking the last blow to the rebellion, as the first, and I would not leave them while they required my care." Except for two periods of illness, Sarah Sampson served her state and country for nearly four and a half years. Being paid by the Relief Association for expenses only, she drew \$40 a month during the first two years, and \$60 a month during the last two. Still, she felt she had been "rewarded a thousand times for all I have sacrificed or endured for soldiers. Sacred tears of gratitude, blessings from pale lips, and seats beside the deathbeds of our country's noblest sons, have been mine."¹³ Henry A. Worcester, the military agent appointed to look after the interests of Maine soldiers in Washington, wrote that Sarah Sampson and Ruth Mayhew had "gained...the most grateful remembrance and esteem of the people of the state. Tireless in their efforts, fearless in their movements, frequently exposed to dangers and hardships,...their labors saved many a life, and soothed the last moments of many a gallant soldier whose life had been given to his country."¹⁴

Sarah remained conscious of the continuing needs of former soldiers and their families, and especially of the children whose fathers died in the war. She and other Bath women established the Bath Military and Naval Orphan Asylum in 1866. By 1870, the home was suffering from a shortage of funds and the trustees appealed to the State Legislature for an annual appropriation of \$15,000. When the appropriation encountered resistance, Sarah took action. She bundled up more than fifteen children from the home and took them to Augusta to

lobby for appropriations. Their presence proved to be effective, and the money was approved.

Sarah continued her dedication to the orphaned children of Union veterans for many years. Her husband Charles died in 1881, leaving Sarah a widow without means of support. She came to the attention of her old friend General Howard, who procured a position for her with the Pension Bureau in Washington. Selling her home in Bath, Sarah moved to Washington to reside with a sister, where she lived for the remaining twenty-five years of her life.

Sarah returned to Maine many times to attend reunions with other veterans of the 3rd Maine. Her last was the reunion of 1907 held in Gardiner. She died the following December. Fittingly, Sarah Simpson was laid to rest at Arlington, among the Civil War soldiers she had served so well.

NOTES

¹Sarah, as time permitted, kept a journal of her activities. At the end of the war she wrote a report to Maine's Adjutant General. Information in this article, including the quotations, comes from that report, which was published in the Adjutant General's Report for 1864-1865 [hereafter, AJR], pp. 100-128. Further information about Sarah Sampson can be found in *_Centennial Booklet_* (Bath, Maine, 1947) in the Patton Library, Bath, Maine. Also deposited there is "Sarah Sampson and the 3rd Maine Regiment of Volunteers, 1861-65: A Documentary History." Sarah's grave site can be located in Section 1, Grave 1261, at Arlington.

²AJR, p. 110.

³AJR, p. 112.

⁴AJR, p. 115.

⁵AJR, p. 116.

⁶AJR, p. 118.

⁷AJR, p. 120.

⁸AJR, p. 121.

⁹AJR, p. 123.

¹⁰AJR, p. 124.

¹¹AJR, p. 125.

¹²AJR, p. 127.

¹³AJR, p. 128.

¹⁴AJR, p. 106.