

American Women Nurses in the Spanish–American War

The National Register Programs Division of the National Park Service's Southeast Regional Office is currently working with the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office on a number of projects to commemorate the Puerto Rico Campaign of the Spanish-American War. Our joint research has uncovered a number of primary documents, photographs, and letters associated with the human experience of this historical event — including American women nurses who served in Puerto Rico during that conflict.

Mrs. Colonel Rice and Miss Sadie Parsons tended to the sick of the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment in Puerto Rico.

American women first served their country as nurses, in 1775, when General George Washington asked for, and Congress authorized, the creation of a Medical Department to support the Continental Army. After this conflict, the size of the U.S. military was greatly reduced and hospital care was provided to soldiers by male hospital stewards at small Army posts throughout the country. During the Civil War large numbers of women were recruited as nurses in both northern and southern hospitals. The pay for these women came from government and volunteer agencies. With peace, male stewards again took over all military hospital duties.

The conflict with Spain in 1898 found the War Department scrambling to obtain the services of female nurses, as the army mushroomed from a Regular Army force of 25,000 to a figure 10 times that number in just under two months. Fortunately, in the last half of the 19th century, religious orders, professional nursing schools, and the Red Cross Society had provided excellent training to thousands of women willing to volunteer for government nursing jobs.



MISS SADIE PARSONS.



Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee, Vice President of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), was appointed by the Surgeon General to select female nurse volunteer applicants of the highest caliber and training. Between May and July 1898, almost 1,200 Red Cross nurses, Catholic nuns of the Orders of Sisters of Charity, Mercy and Holy Cross, and graduates of nursing schools were selected as “contract nurses” for the United States Army.

In the years between 1898-1901, while America established its overseas empire, slightly more than 1,500 female nurses signed government contracts to serve in the United States, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippine Islands, and Hawaii, and briefly in China and Japan, in support of U.S. Army troops committed to the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Fifteen contract nurses died of typhoid fever—the major killer during the Spanish-American War—while attending U.S. soldiers.

George M. Sternberg, Surgeon General of the United States during the Spanish-American War, had at first been unconvinced that female contract nurses should be organized into a permanent Nurse Corps at war's end. He believed that it would be too expensive to provide women with the “luxuries” they would require to serve in the Army. However, the outstanding record of the contract nurses changed his mind, as he noted in his annual report of 1899,

Miss Muriel Galt served with the 6th Massachusetts as a contract nurse during the Puerto Rico campaign.

American women may well feel proud of the record made by these nurses in 1898-99, for every medical officer with whom they served has testified to their intelligence, and skill, their earnestness, devotion and self-sacrifice.

At Sternberg's request, Dr. McGee wrote a bill to establish the Army Nurses Corp, which was enacted in 1901, as part of the Army Reorganization Act. Miss Dita H. McKinney, a Spanish-American War contract nurse, received the first appointment as Army Nurses Corp Superintendent in 1901, with control over a mere 100 nurses. This was the beginning of women in the military.

American women who served in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War did so as concerned individuals and as contract nurses. The commander of the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, Colonel Edmund Rice, was an old time Regular Army officer whose wife accompanied him to Utuado, Puerto Rico and pitched in to tend the sick in the Regiment. As noted by the Army Chaplain Captain Thomas E. Sherman, SJ, son of General William T. Sherman,

I found the Colonel's wife very busy in making egg-nog, wine jelly and other delicacies for the sick, and I am sure her name will be in benediction for many a long day in the homes of the 6th Massachusetts. There has been a "lack of woman's care" in our hospital this Summer. But this want has been recently supplied and quite abundantly, by those who came to the front, like Mrs. Rice, and did the work of many in a motherly way, deserve the highest praise from the American people.

Mrs. Rice would be joined by two contract nurses Miss Muriel Galt and Miss Sadie Parsons. These professional nurses established three hospitals in coffee houses in the town of Utuado, Puerto Rico, where half of the 6th Massachusetts Regiment were ill with typhoid fever. The soldiers had acquired typhoid from unsanitary conditions at Camp Alger, in northern Virginia, and brought it with them to Puerto Rico. The contract nurses were also aided by male hospital stewards, the ladies of the Massachusetts Volunteer Aid Society, and the Red Cross in tending to the 6th Massachusetts. A testament to the efforts of these women is that, of the more than 600 typhoid cases of this regiment, only 13 died.

Not all who served in Puerto Rico were "Old Army Campaigners" like Mrs. Rice or trained nurses like Misses Galt and Parsons. Some were society women, like Miss Margaret Chanler, who volunteered as a Red Cross hospital administrator in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Fluent in Spanish, from her many trips to Europe, she was instrumental in get-



ting American and Puerto Rican Red Cross workers to cooperate. She organized several hospitals on the island to attend to both American and Spanish soldiers. Miss Chanler later served in China, in the Boxer Rebellion, as a nursing administrator, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Army Nurses Corp. Miss Chanler — called by some the Angel of Puerto Rico — received a long-overdue Congressional Medal from President Franklin Roosevelt in 1938 for her efforts in helping the sick in Puerto Rico.

American history is made up of the names and deeds of many heroic individuals who have served their country, but whose work becomes less distinct through time. The National Park Service has prepared a computerized slide presentation on the Puerto Rico Campaign of the Spanish-American War which highlights the human side of this conflict, such as the experience of American women as contract nurses. It was recently previewed at the Public History Meetings, Austin, Texas, and future plans call for it to be placed on the Internet.

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All photos by Lt. Frank Edwards from his book on the Spanish-American War, *'98 Campaign of the 6th Massachusetts, USV* (1899).

For more information on this article or the Puerto Rico Campaign, the reader may send email to the author <Mark_Barnes@nps.gov>.

For more information about the history of the Army Nurses Corp, check out their website at <www.army.mil/cmh-pg/anc/Highlights.html>.