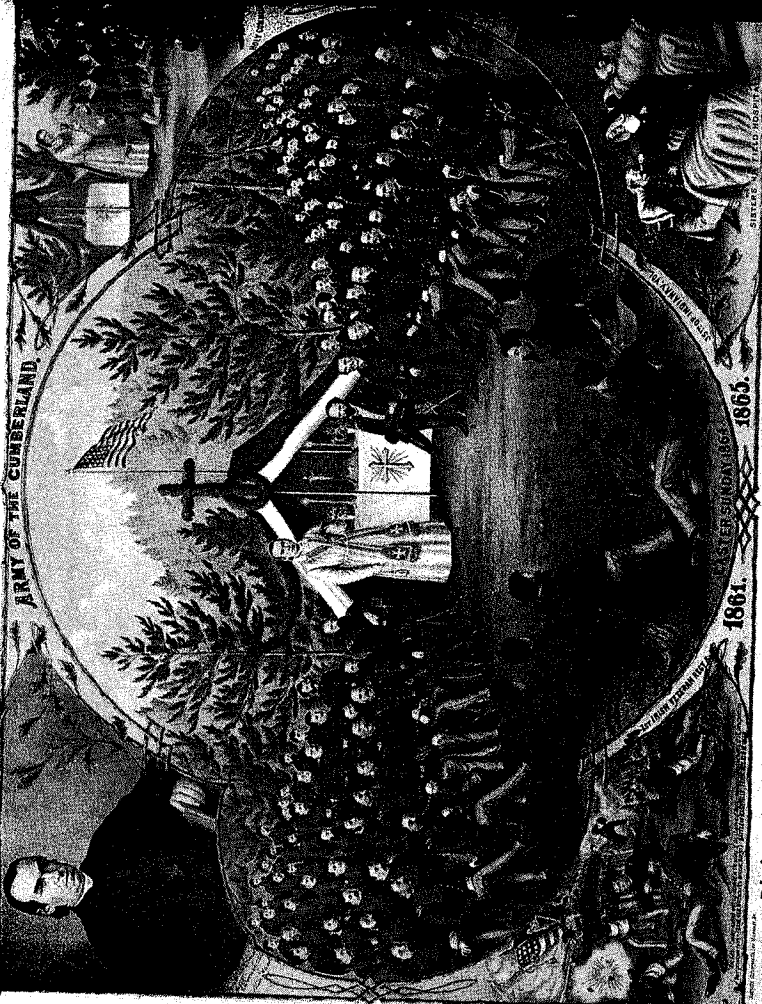


ATLANTA CAMPAIGN.



Divine Service by Rev. P. P. COONEY, C. S. C. Chaplain Gen. of Ind. Troops in the field.

Atlanta Campaign. Army of the Cumberland. Divine Service by Rev. P. P. Cooney, C. S. C. Chaplain Gen. of Ind. Troops in the field (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC)

SOLDIERS of the CROSS, the Authoritative Text

*The Heroism of Catholic Chaplains
and Sisters in the American Civil War*

DAVID POWER CONYNGHAM

Edited by

David J. Endres and William B. Kurtz

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS
NOTRE DAME, INDIANA

The Sisters of the Holy Cross

Their response to the call of suffering humanity—Their devotion, their services, and their sacrifices—Governor Morton of Indiana gratefully accepts the offer of the sisters' services—The sisters under charge of Mother Mary Angela in care of the hospitals at Paducah—Their zeal not abated by their hardships—Scenes and sufferings in the hospitals—The sisters' trials and triumphs—How they conquered prejudice by meekness, charity, and good works—Touching incidents—Mother Angela at Mound City.

INTRODUCTION: The Sisters of the Holy Cross were first established in France in 1841 as a female religious community attached to Father Basil Moreau's Congregation of Holy Cross. Two years later, the first sisters arrived in New York and made their way to Notre Dame, Indiana, where their help was needed in making Father Edward Sorin's dream of a Catholic college in the rural Midwest a reality. Although many of the first sisters were from France, perhaps the most important was an Ohioan who entered the community in 1853. Eliza Maria Gillespie (1824–1887) followed her brother, Father Neal Henry Gillespie, to Notre Dame, and became Sister Mary of St. Angela. After studying in France, she returned to Notre Dame and became Mother Angela.

Heeding a call for sister nurses from Governor Oliver Morton of Indiana delivered on October 21, 1861, Mother Angela led a group of sisters to care for wounded Union soldiers that would

eventually total sixty-three sister nurses by the end of the war. Her education and family connections to the Ewing and Sherman families of Ohio proved useful during the Civil War, helping to secure the aid of General Ulysses S. Grant in getting positions for her sisters in hospitals despite occasional opposition from army doctors or female Protestant nurses.

Conyngham's handwritten manuscript contains five chapters on the Sisters of the Holy Cross. The first three are a complete first draft narrative of the Sisters of the Holy Cross during the war, with a note stating: "This has been corrected by the sisters themselves." These first three chapters are much longer and more detailed than the last two, which are essentially an abridged second draft. Because Conyngham's final table of contents refers to only two chapters, whose subheadings perfectly match the last two chapters in the draft manuscript, only the shorter version of the Sisters of the Holy Cross's Civil War story is included in this edited edition.



Through the good and charitable works, performed by the sisters of the various orders, during the war, in their attendance on the sick and wounded, though they have made a grateful impression on the public mind, and have done much to remove groundless prejudices against both their order and holy religion, still, owing to the untiring disposition of the sisters, they have not been given due publicity, while trifling but more ostentatious services have been made the themes of poets and historians. Meek, humble, and retiring, laboring alone for the glory of God and expecting no earthly reward for their services, it is no wonder that they shrank from parading their Christian labors and good works before the eyes of the world.

On this account we have had much difficulty in collecting the materials, relative to the sisters, for our work. Through the aid and influence of kind friends we have succeeded in rescuing from oblivion

enough regarding their gentle ministrations to the sick and wounded in the hospitals, and of that sweetness and meekness which conquered prejudice and error, to make our work not only interesting, but also, to leave in history a record, that will live as a shame and a reproach to the maligners of the pious sisters and their holy religion. We know that it is a very different thing to perform good and charitable works and quite another to give to posterity an accurate and faithfully written account of them.

The very qualities of mind and heart which enter into the life of a religious make the most sublime acts of heroism, self-denial and charity, appear to her as simple acts of duty. She regards not what the world says about her; if she is but conscious that she has fulfilled her mission and done the work allotted to her by her divine Master she is fully satisfied. She courts not the vain approbation of mortals; if conscious that she has done her duty she finds her reward in that inward peace and grace which are the fruits of good and pious action.

Of these humble sisters but faithful Soldiers of the Cross, it might be justly said in the words of Gerald Griffin:

Unshrinking where pestilence scatters his breath,
Like an angel she moves, 'mid the vapors of death;
Where rings the loud musket, and flashes the sword,
Unfearing she walks, for she follows the Lord.
How sweetly she bends o'er each plague-tainted face
With looks that are lighted with holiest grace.
How kindly she dresses each suffering limb,
For she sees in the wounded the image of Him.²

Among the numerous religious houses whose members went freely forth to encounter hardships, dangers, privations, and disease in order to alleviate the suffering of their fellow creatures, the house of Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana, stands eminent for the number of sisters it sent to attend the sick and wounded.

In the early part of the war, in fact at its breaking out, the ecclesiastical superior of the mother house of St. Mary's, Notre Dame, namely, the Very Rev. Father Sorin, offered the services of the sisters

under his charge to Governor Morton as nurses in the hospitals, which offer was gladly accepted.³ In October 1861 the three military hospitals at Paducah, Kentucky, were in charge of a corps of sisters under Mother Mary of St. Angela.⁴ When they took charge of these hospitals the patients were suffering from camp dysentery and measles, which diseases were much accelerated by the lack of proper attendance and nourishments. The sisters soon effected a total change for the better and the disease rapidly declined after they had taken charge of the hospitals. So great were the labors of the sisters that two of them died from disease brought on by exposure and fatigue while several of them had to return to St. Mary's in broken health. But their places were soon filled by fresh volunteers, who immediately filled up the depleted ranks, and no less than seventy-five⁵ Sisters of [the] Holy Cross were actively engaged during the war as nurses in the military hospitals of Cairo, Mound City, Louisville, and the naval hospitals.

In November 1861 Mother Angela, at the request of the medical director of General Grant's staff,⁶ sent some sisters to Mound City to attend to the wounded who had been carried there from the battlefield of Belmont.⁷ The hospitals were a lot of improvised huts and store rooms, in which no fewer than seven hundred wounded soldiers were crowded without bed or covering. Their wounds, too, had become, from their long exposure on the battlefield, corrupted and full of creeping maggots, so that the sisters had an unpleasant task to perform to clean and wash them.

The hospital was in charge of Dr. E[dward] C. Franklin,⁸ who, with the aid of the sisters, soon had all their wounds dressed and the poor fellows made as comfortable as circumstances would permit. This was made a general hospital for the wounded from the surrounding camps, so the Rev. Mother had to telegraph to St. Mary's for eighteen more sisters. The men too were poorly supplied with nourishing food, which was necessary to strengthen them, but through the exertions of the sisters supplies soon came in, and to the honor of William H. Osborn, Esq.,⁹ President of the Illinois Central [Railroad], be it said that he authorized Rev. Mother Angela to draw upon him for whatever she needed, which generosity she liberally used for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers. During the month of December 1861 the num-

bers of the sick and wounded in the Mound City and Cairo hospitals were so great that more sisters had to be sent for to the hospital at Paducah.

Good old Sister M. De La P——,¹⁰ one of the most efficient nurses was among those called on, and as she was on the steamboat about to leave for her destination some of the Protestant army chaplains seeing her, came forward to express their regret at her departure and to thank her for the untiring care she had bestowed upon the sick. "I'm at a loss," said one of the chaplains, addressing his companion, "to know where this good old Sister ever took any rest. I have gone to the hospital at daybreak to look to some of our sick boys and there was the Sister engaged in her work of mercy. I have been there at noon and she was still at her post, and I have sometimes gone late at night and found her there still consoling the last moments of some dying soldier." "It is a mystery to me," he continued, "how those Sisters can stand at their post without ever giving up." Addressing Sister P——, he said, "How do you account for it?" But she simply smiled and pointed to the beads hanging at her side. This pantomime answer only seemed to confuse him and the sister noticing his mystified look said to Mother Angela, "I not speak good English; please you tell the gentleman." "Sister means," said Mother Angela in her office of interpreter, "that our strength is sustained and ever increased in the daily discharge of hospital labors by our frequent meditations on the life and suffering of our Lord. When our minds dwell upon the love he manifested for us in his sacred humanity it is the most natural thing in the world for us to find strength and joy in relieving for his sake the sufferings of some of these for whom he died. Now the beads we carry at our side are to us replete with an eloquence of our Lord's life in his sacred humanity from the moment that the archangel declared to the Immaculate Virgin of Judea that she should be the Mother of God, to the morning of his glorious resurrection and ascension."

Then in as brief but forcible and touching a manner as possible Mother Angela passed before him the mysteries attached to the different decades. "Now," said she, "you can understand what Sister P—— means, which is that when worn out with fatigue she passes a decade through her fingers, meditates upon the agony in the garden, or the

painful fall in the streets of Jerusalem, she feels a new strength and a new courage to perform her duties. When the details of the sick bed are calculated to disgust us, our beads help us to recall the bitter portion of vinegar and gall (the draught for that poor sufferer, as well as for us). When our own heads throb with the weariness and the excitement attending such terrible scenes, the mere touch of our beads reminds us of the agony endured by the crowning with sharp thorns, and this does a great deal towards soothing our own pain or making us indifferent to it." The chaplain listened attentively and then exclaimed, "Well now that is indeed Christianity; I used to think the Papist beads were great mummerly, now I'll always regard them with respect. They remind me of what I myself often do. When I am at home and am going down the street my wife tells me to bring something for the family. Although I think a great deal of what she says, yet to keep it in mind, in the midst of other affairs that may attract my attention, I always tie a cotton string around my finger." "Yes," he continues, "I am convinced that there is a good deal of Christianity in those beads." The chaplain then left and the boat started with its freight, and the sisters on their way to their work of mercy.

When the news of the battle of Fort Donelson¹¹ arrived at the Mound City hospital, all the sick who could be removed from the latter place were transferred to St. Louis in order to make room for the wounded in the late bloody battle. Throughout the whole day and late at night the good angelic nurses were busy for their fresh work of mercy, which was to commence again that night. After midnight several boats came in literally packed with cargoes of wounded men. After the sufferers were placed in the hospital, one of the wards in particular presented a scene more than usually appalling. It was filled by the wounded of a certain command that had been placed in ambush during a part of the battle with instructions to be flat on the ground until the firing ceased. The order to rise unfortunately was given too soon, and as the men raised their heads they received a volley which almost placed the whole of them *hors de combat*.¹² The wounds being all received in the head, face, and neck, the sufferings of those men were dreadful. Some had to endure additionally the pangs of starvation, not being able to swallow, while one or two others frantically pulled the

tongues from their mouths and threw them on the ground. The good sisters went to work with their usual attention and alacrity and from their humane treatment of the sufferers the gratitude of the latter knew no bounds.

The very name of "Sisters" rendered the services of the angelic women, the more welcome to the sick, for the latter would say, "When we call you Sisters we feel as if we could ask you for anything we need without fearing that you will be impatient or tired of us." Even in writing to their friends the whole of their secrets and family history would be placed in the sisters' trustworthy keeping. Letters from friends of the dead would be also received by the sisters inquiring for information concerning the last sickness, last words, and dying dispositions of the departed, and it was invariably touching to read their admissions of grief for the beloved dead as well as their gratitude to the sisters for the services rendered to them in their last hours.

Throughout the hospital the sisters were everywhere greeted with, "God bless you, ladies!" "Oh, Sisters, what good you are doing here!" "How happy we are to see you here among our poor fellows," would be the exclamations of the officers and surgeons while the poor patients would say, "I don't know what we boys would do if it were not for the Sisters!" The Protestant ministers always expressed a hearty good will towards them and the soldiers engaged in the different departments, always showed them great respect and evidently felt that the sisters' presence was necessary if only to keep the soldiers to their strict line of duty in attending to the interests of the sick. In the midst of all their sufferings, the wounded exhibited the brightest [traits]¹³ of patience and resignation.

The sentiments of courage which had inspired them upon the battlefield was in beautiful contrast to their meekness and nobleness in the hospital. Their preparation for death could not have been made with better disposition even if dying quietly at home. Often and often would a soldier say to a sister while ministering to his physical sufferings, "Sister, I know I must die. Do tell us what is necessary to believe and do by way of preparation, for I am sure what you tell us must be true." Then again with all of manhood's earnestness and childhood simplicity they would emphatically say, "Teach us what to believe and

we will believe." And as such scenes were almost universal throughout the hospital, few, very few, breathed their last without a spirit of lively faith, a firm hope, and sincere contrition. In less than eleven months, fully nine hundred of those who died were baptized and well prepared for death, and this preparation for a happy death continued through the whole course of the war, in those hospitals of which the sisters had charge.

There were full fifteen hundred wounded under the charge of the sisters at Mound City hospital alone, and although their labors were unceasing still they never wearied in doing good. In addition to the nursing and caring for the physical wants and tending to the spiritual welfare of the soldiers, the sisters had another task devolved upon them, which was as praiseworthy and perhaps as laborious as either of the other two.

Many and many an affectionate brother, loving son, and faithful husband wished to transmit a note to the loved ones at home, bidding a last adieu in this land of misery and toil. It was here again that the good sisters' kindness struck deep into the gratitude of the wounded soldier's heart. Several of the most rapid writers were appointed to pass from one ward into another making it their special charge to go to those on whom the shadows of death were falling fastest, giving to them all the consolations which that supreme hour required, or at least all in their power to bestow, consoling alike the Federal and Confederates, by writing to their loved ones far away in the North or South, their last dying words, their farewell to parents, wives, and children. And when the agony was over and the face of the dead soldier settled in to the repose of death, before the camp blanket was drawn over it, the sister in attendance took care to enclose in the letter a lock of his hair as a last memorial of one so dear, who would be deeply mourned by the loved ones at home. The lock was severed by a scissors which always hung at her side with her "seven dolor beads,"¹⁴ on which beads a few moments previously her hand [had] lingered in his call through his passage across the cold valley of death.

Three days after the battle of Pittsburg Landing,¹⁵ additional wounded to the number of two thousand were brought to Mound City Hospital. At the same time several eastern surgeons arrived to assist the

regular corps in charge. Among these was a young physician—Dr. M. who attracted attention by his great devotedness to the sufferers confined to his care. After a few weeks he was missed from his wards and was supposed to have been removed to another post. One afternoon however an attendant informed the mother superior that Dr. M. was quite sick and wished to see her. She went immediately to the suite of rooms assigned to the surgeons where she found him in bed and surrounded by several of his brother physicians. On beholding her he exclaimed in an excited voice, "Oh Mother, how glad I am to see you, I am going to die, tell me do you think I shall be saved?"

"Of course you will, M.," soothingly replied one of the physicians, "Ah Doctor," said the sick man, "I did not ask you that question! Keep to your pill shops [for] there you are at home; but I fear you know very little about the next world." Judging from his manner that he was under the excitement of fever and not wishing to make the subject of religion a matter of comment for those present, the sister quietly endeavored to soothe him, and as she left the room she called aside the surgeon-in-chief to ask if Dr. M. was really in danger. He replied that it was impossible for him to live, that he had fallen a victim to his devotedness to others. On hearing this all the sisters in the hospital assembled in their little chapel in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and offered up their prayers with the greatest fervor for his conversion.

At every leisure moment each sister's beads passed through her hands while her heart invoked the Mother of Mercy to be with him at the hour of death.

In the meantime the mother superior returned to his bed side when he again exclaimed, "Sister, I have never been baptized; my parents are both Unitarians. I have never really thought of the next world, but I came to the West full of high ambitious dreams of winning fame and renown in the surgical ranks. The devotedness of the Sisters to the suffering and the dying attracted my attention from the first, and now, when I am dying myself, I turn to you for some consolation." He then listened with the docility of a child to her instructions, and whenever she left the room he would say to the other sister in attendance, "Sister, continue to repeat those little prayers, so that they will not pass from my mind." There being no priest in the village a letter was written for

the one at Cairo, but did not reach him in time; and as the clamming hand of death was settling on the brow of the sick man, the same sister, who had instructed him, then baptized him.

After death the countenance of the dead physician bore a beautiful and heavenly expression, and all who saw him were deeply affected by it, and the sisters whispered low to each other, "How could he look otherwise, when the Blessed Mother Virgin Mary heard their requests and obtained for him the grace of a happy death!"

Among the patients in the hospital at Mound City was young W. who had been brought up the river with some twenty or thirty of his regiment all sick with typhoid fever. From the moment of their arrival it was easy to see what a general favorite he was in his company, for all his comrades appeared as much concerned in his recovery as they were in their own. The soldiers who had been detailed from the regiment to assist in nursing them were so attentive to W. that a stranger would suppose him to be a relation to all of them, but in spite of all the kindness and attention shown to him, he grew weaker and weaker every day. Seeing this, the sister in attendance (as usual when any of the patients would be in danger) slipped a medal under his pillow, and, at evening prayer, beads were said in common for his conversion. W. had never been baptized and when the sisters spoke to him of his danger and the value of his immortal soul, he listened with the docility of a child who had never will[ingly] done wrong; and with an earnestness that delighted and edified all who heard him, he would frequently say, "Sisters, I want to believe just as you do, I know you will teach me what is right, only tell me what I must believe and what I must do to be saved, and I will gladly believe and do it." As if inspired, nothing seemed more easy or more natural to him than to love the Blessed Virgin Mary. There being no priest near, the sisters had not only to instruct him but to baptize him. His death was affecting in the extreme.

At his earnest request two of the sisters said the prayers for the dying while all his companions in arms, who were able to leave their beds, were either kneeling or standing around him. Those who could not rise were propped up to take a last look at their beloved companion who was partially supported in the arms of two soldiers so that he would be seen by all. So long as his strength lasted he joined in the

prayers, and he seemed to have more than ordinary strength at that supreme hour for he exhorted his companions to embrace the true faith and thereby find in life and in death the consolations he then felt. He died invoking the names of Jesus and Mary; and his death touched many among his comrades, leading them to think seriously and effectually of their own eternal salvation.

In addition to the labors which the good sisters had to undergo in the sick wards of the hospital, their duties in the kitchen attached thereto would to some persons be almost incredible. Dr. E. C. Rogers¹⁶ who was sent down from Chicago to inspect the hospital complained of the [want?] of accommodation for cooking provided for by the sisters. When the doctor asked how they could cook with such implements, the lady superior exclaimed laughingly, "If you find fault with our cooking stove, Doctor, what will you say to our washing machines?" and held up her little fists with their ten digits raw from work at the soldiers' wash tubs. "This was too much for civilized humanity!," Rogers said, "[W]e could only beat a retreat, with a tearful assurance to the laughing Sisters, that we would never rest until we knew they were provided with everything necessary for carrying forward their sublime work of charity and self-denial."

In April 1862, the Mississippi and Ohio rivers had a grand overflow and Mound City as well as other places were affected by the swell—even the hospital came in for its share of the deluge. After several days' watching with anxiety from the sisters, physicians, and employees, the water began to ooze through the floors. This caused great inconvenience and occasioned many comical expressions of vexation. The officials exclaiming that they were writing with their feet in their desks and their coat-tails in the water, while the nurses would declare that they were wading to the dining rooms and rowing themselves through the kitchen. The good Dr. Franklin, whose energy always exceeded his patience, was beset on all sides with difficulties and questions, and one day was so annoyed that he declared he could not run an institution under water unless he was himself a fish and his patients oysters. "I don't mind," said he, "but these people—why they must think I can turn back the Ohio—doctors, stewards, clerks, cooks, ward masters, nurses, and washerwomen beset me on every side." Mother Angela at

once tried to pacify him by reminding him how necessary it was for one of his energy and experience to have command during this trying and perplexing affair, but the good doctor went off reiterating his resolution of giving up his commission if the Ohio did not back down first. On Low Sunday,¹⁷ the water being an inch above the level of the first floor, it was decided that the sick should be removed to St. Louis.

Accordingly Dr. Thomas was appointed officer of the day and to superintend the landing of the hospital boat and transfer of the wounded men. It was a sad sight to see the poor fellows, who though so very weak and racked with pains, had to be carried on stretchers down the stairs and then lifted into the boat and thence again to the steamer while others were limping on crutches or supported by attendants as they hobbled towards the boat.



The Sisters of the Holy Cross, Continued

Removing from the hospital—Gratitude to the sisters—Incidents and scenes—Fort Charles and the Mound City affair—The men in hospital going to kill Colonel Fry—The sisters interfere—Colonel Fry vindicated—Captain Kilty exonerates Colonel Fry from any blame relative to the firing on the men blown up with the Mound City—Close of the hospital labors of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.¹

The nurses worked faithfully and showed great patience in assisting the poor sufferers from the hospital to the boat. Some of the slightly wounded presented a very grotesque appearance and the property room was so beset with applicants for clothes it was impossible for each individual to find his own uniform and therefore he had to take the first to hand, and many were obliged to leave in full hospital uniform. As the poor fellows left the hospital, many an expression of gratitude was tendered to the sisters for the services tendered them during their sickness and as a last good-bye was given, many a bitter tear coursed down a rugged but manly cheek. Those who were very feeble appealed so very powerfully to the sisters' sympathy that it was decided that twelve of them should accompany them. The patients left in the hospital numbered about one hundred and fifty. They were either in a dying condition or wounded in such a manner as to make removal dangerous. After these were all cared for, Mother Angela began to make arrangements for the comforts of the sisters. She had the apartments lately occupied by them vacated as they were in fear of being deluged

by the rising water, nor was she any too soon in her providential care, for the water began to ooze through the floors and the rats having been floated out of the cellar took refuge in the vacated apartments and even ventured to the next floor.

While the water was yet below the first floor, the sisters in the hospital in Cairo left by advice of the surgeon who feared that the land would give way and the whole town be inundated. They flocked to Mound City and the only place there that could be afforded them was the floor of the little sitting room next to the chapel. One morning one of the refugee sisters was missing from prayer. Fearing she was sick from the effect of her damp lodging Mother Angela went to see about her. She found her sitting on a bunk in a most lugubrious state of countenance and thus addressed her, "What is the matter with you Sister?" "Why, Mother!" was the response, "the rats have nearly eaten my cape, here is all that is left of it," and she held up a fragment of cloth which was certainly only a very small part of a cape. Mother Angela smiled and went and borrowed another for the poor sister and thus released her from her awkward dilemma. At breakfast that morning, nearly everyone had some ridiculous adventure to relate, and as they ate their frugal meal some had their feet in the water and others had drawn them on to their chairs to see, if possible, to keep them dry, and all this was borne in a spirit of perfect resignation and even with jocularly.

The water at one time had risen so high that a person looking from the windows of the hospital would imagine himself in a great boat becalmed on a large lake; the chapel and apartments on the second floor became submerged, and only two of the sisters, who were provided with long boats, were allowed to go below. The damp hospital dwelling was, as may be imagined, injurious to its inhabitants, and among the victims to its effects was the good amiable and faithful Sister Fidelis [Lawler],² who was one of the first sisters [who] volunteered to nurse the wounded. On the 18th of April, [1862,] when the flood was at its highest mark, the soul of that dear and loving sister went forth to meet its Maker. What a contrast in the surroundings of her death bed to the peaceful one she had no doubt anticipated among the beautiful scenes and the spiritual privileges of St. Mary's. While lying in the shadow of death in that island hospital, the pace of the military guards echo-

ing through the long halls, the beat of the military reveille taking the place of the holy Angelus bell. The half-submerged little chapel of St. Raphael, on that Good Friday morning, contrasted strongly with the Chapel of Loretto³ where sweetly warbled the birds on the trees under which she had so often lingered to say an extra decade on her rosary or her "seven dolor beads." How solemnly too the wooden clapper of Holy week was striking the quarter and half hours. All this passed through the imaginations of the sisters around the dying bed of dear Sister Fidelis, and passed too, no doubt, in some mystical and pathetic way, through the mind of the dying sister herself, but she made no complaint.

At the call of her Master she had gone forth to gather in a harvest of souls to His honor, and to glean here and there some grace for a dying soldier; now her turn had come and to her the voice of the bridegroom was one neither strange nor unwelcome. He had come a little sooner than she expected but was not this a mark of love. He had come and found his spouse willing and ready, for she was the bride of heaven.

It was not till January 1862 that the Sisters of the Holy Cross commenced their labors in the hospitals at Louisville, Kentucky. This was in consequence of a fanatical opposition. Dr. Spalding⁴ proffered their services at the beginning of the war, but not until Dr. Weed⁵ was appointed head surgeon would the fanatics in charge hear of the sisters being there. And even after Dr. Weed had given notice that the sisters were coming no place was prepared for them and the beds on which they were compelled to rest after their arrival were miserable excuses; still they never murmured. It was not long before the good people of Louisville were aroused in behalf of the sisters, and means and supplies, which had been cut off from the sufferers, poured in to an abundant extent, and folks who had hitherto been in opposition soon came forward with the most friendly feelings and, confessing their previous prejudices, pledged themselves to make ample amends. Even the prejudice which existed against the Catholic priests vanished to such an extent that if a Catholic soldier stood in need of the services of a priest, a Protestant lady would go and tell the priest or sister about it. And this was all brought about by the meekness of the sisters, by their attention to the sick, and their undoubted sincere charity.

The following incident is worthy of notice. One of the patients at the Cairo hospital was made happy by the arrival of his good mother who spent three weeks at his bedside before she could take him home. A few days before his departure, she addressed the sisters as follows: "How often have I heard the Catholic Church, its priest[s] and nuns, injuriously spoken of in my own house. I blush to remember it, but I promise that so long as I live such conversation shall be henceforth banished from my house. You and I have not talked much, Sisters, but my eyes and a mother's heart have told me all I need to know to refute utterly the calumnies I have heard from childhood."

Sister Elise [O'Brien]⁶ having fallen sick at Mound City hospital thought to recruit her health by returning to Notre Dame. She was only able to reach Cairo when she grew worse, sank rapidly and alas there breathed her last.⁷

As an instance of the prejudices the sisters had to overcome and the difficulties they had to encounter, we give the following copy of a letter written by a sister in the hospital at Memphis to the Rev. Mother [Angela].

Dear Mother—I must tell you something that will please you.

Dr. ——— was speaking in my presence to a newly appointed medical director, Dr. [John] Holston,⁸ telling him that the sisters had succeeded in overcoming some very strong prejudice in the mind of one of the surgeons, who, when he found them installed in the hospital, had declared his real antipathy to the *nuns* and aversion to having them around. Of this aversion I was wholly ignorant for though I saw that he was somewhat morose in his manner, I took for granted that it was *his way*, and gave myself no further trouble on the subject. But it seemed that it was the sight of *myself* that vexed him.

Well, it happened this same cross surgeon, with several others, held a council over a poor unknown dying man who had been stabbed in a street fight. The patient was past all hope so the surgeons left him. Sr. M. and I remained with the dying man for we hoped to get some word from him and felt that at least we might pray for him and suggest acts of faith, hope, love and contrition for if sensible these might cause him to raise his soul to

God in this terrible moment. Then again the poor man was covered with mud and blood and his hair all matted so we had to try to make him look decent like, and as we were working with him the blood was trickling from the wound in his side and this made the resemblance to Our Dearest Lord so striking that we found nothing repulsive in any duties, but rather a most touching tenderness, for the poor unknown. This little act of mercy brought a quick reward, for our cross surgeon had from a distance been overlooking the scene and knowing that we were ignorant of his presence, he immediately made the reparation that just and honest men always make when they find they have wrongly judged. He declared to the other surgeons that his prejudices were removed for he believed the sisters were working from a truly high and supernatural motive.

In July 1862 the Federals under the command of Colonel [Graham N.] Fitch of Indiana attacked Fort Charles on the White River,⁹ Colonel Fitch was supported by the gun-boats of the Western flotilla, which bombarded the fort from the front, while the land troops acted in the rear. After a sharp contest, the commander of the fort, Colonel [Joseph] Fry,¹⁰ being severely wounded, the Confederate forces surrendered. During this engagement occurred one of the most distressing aggravations of the horrors of war, with which the sisters came in contact while in the hospital.

Colonel Fry, seeing that the naval forces from some of the iron-clads were attempting to land in small boats, gave orders to fire upon them.

At this moment the boilers of the gun-boat, Mound City, exploded, severely scalding the commander, Captain [Augustus H.] Kilty,¹¹ and about fifty of his men; most of whom, in the frantic agony of their sufferings, sprang into the river, and received through their par-bolled bodies the shots fired from the forts. With almost superhuman energy on the part of the crews of other boats, nearly all of these poor sufferers were rescued from the water.

As soon as the news of this disaster reached Commander [Charles H.] Davis at Cairo, he telegraphed to the sisters at Mound City, to send if possible, some sisters on the hospital boat to the scene of

the disaster. There it was that the following touching incident took place.

A Federal officer of high rank discovered in the wounded commander of the Confederate forces, Colonel Fry, one whom he had known well in by-gone days. And at such moments all the best feelings of the human heart display themselves. Seated by the wounded man, he forgot the foe and remembered only his friend; in tones of the most earnest sympathy he asked what he could do for his relief. In that quick hurried utterance that ever tells how the ball has touched the lungs, he answered, "I shall be most grateful if you shall write a line to my wife, informing her of my situation."

The Federal officer beckoned to an orderly to bring writing materials, and the Confederate officer continued: "Tell her that the medal she placed around my neck, when I bade her good bye, has saved my life. The surgeon says that it rested on my left lung and turned aside the bullet, which glanced from it, inflicting a serious but not mortal wound."

"Ah!" interrupted his amanuensis, "that must be I am sure, the medal of the Virgin! I fully believe in its wonderful effects. I wear one constantly myself, and would not go without it." And as the wounded man with trembling hand drew forth the medal to prove what he had said, by the dent on its surface, so did the Federal officer reverently draw forth from the bosom of his military coat, which was decorated with all the insignia of his official rank and bravery, his also. The bright rays of the summer sun shone on those two miraculous medals of the Immaculate Conception, which in the midst of sufferings, and carnage of war, gleamed like a sign from Heaven! Both officers, non-Catholics as they were¹² and deadly foes on the battlefield, at that moment cordially united in one feeling, namely that the medals of the Virgin given to one by a Catholic wife, to the other by a Catholic friend, were their powerful protection amid the horrors and dangers of war.

But one summer afternoon, all this was changed. A report had spread that the brave Captain Kilty was dying from the effects of his severe scalds; and as a mistaken opinion had got abroad among the gunboat men, the employees of the hospital, and a company of soldiers stationed at Mound City, to the effect that Colonel Fry had ordered his

soldiers to fire upon the scalded men, when in their frenzy they were sure to jump into the water, all the men around the hospital were roused to a fearful fury against the commander of Fort Charles. The rumor was not true, but it was firmly believed at the time, and in their belief without any further reasoning on the subject, all assembled in front of the hospital, declaring in loud angry voices, "The moment Captain Kilty breathes his last, that moment we shoot Colonel Fry as he lies in his bed!"

The sister in charge of him was ordered to leave his room, and the door was locked. Several sisters were in Captain Kilty's room, expecting every moment to see him draw that last sigh which was to seal the fate of another immortal soul.

Sister J[osephine Reilly] who was in charge of Colonel Fry came to the other sisters all in tears to report what had happened.

Not a moment was to be lost. Leaving Captain Kilty in the care of sisters fully equal to the emergency in that quarter, several others hastened to the doctor in charge and asked for the key to Colonel Fry's room.

"It will be at the risk of your lives, to approach, much less to enter that room," said the surgeon with an expression on his face which made the sisters feel that he spoke what he knew, as well as feared, to be true.

"Then," they replied, "we must all without delay leave the hospital. Ours is a mission of mercy and of charity. We know neither North nor South, nor can we remain where the spirit of revenge is the ruling spirit, even for one hour. Give us the key and we remain. Refuse it and we leave instantly!"

"Then," replied the perplexed surgeon, "Then all the danger you incur rests upon yourselves. If I give you the key I do not feel certain of your lives for a single moment. These men are terribly roused, for they are honest in the belief that all the rules of honorable warfare have been violated by Colonel Fry, and we have no force at hand to prevent their acting up to the full measure of this conviction at any moment."

But every word uttered by the kind hearted doctor only convinced the sisters of immediate action. Having secured the key they at once entered Colonel Fry's room. The sick [man] listened to the terrible threats

that they would kill him in case of Captain Kilty's death. He listened to them call for blood, his powerful chest, heaving under the terrible excitement, the large eyes almost starting from their emaciated sockets, the perspiration which he was too feeble to dry from his face starting out in great drops all over him. The fierce threats and angry curses from the crowd in the yard below made the sisters feel the solemn responsibility of the moment. The savage cries for Colonel Fry's death were fierce and loud and the sisters trembled at the thought that the dreadful crime of murder would desecrate the hospital. The sisters knelt and prayed for Captain Kilty's recovery, and it pleased God that he did recover thus sparing them from witnessing the horrors of a cruel murder.

As soon as Captain Kilty was strong enough to be informed of what had taken place, he expressed great regret that Colonel Fry should be exposed to such dangers, grounded as they had been upon charges without a particle of foundation. Captain Kilty publicly declared that Colonel Fry was perfectly innocent of any blame in the matter, for the fort had opened fire just as the drum of the boiler had burst and the men were flung into the water and ceased as soon as the explosion was noticed. He further stated that he had known Colonel Fry in the United States Service, and felt confident that he was too brave and humane an officer to be guilty of anything of the kind. He also had the report contradicted in Cairo and elsewhere, and to show with what contempt he viewed it he treated Colonel Fry as a personal friend while they remained in the hospital.

From the time the sisters took charge of the Mound City hospital, Dr. [Francis N.] Burke,¹³ head surgeon of the military hospital at Cairo, was anxious to secure their services. This hospital had been in care of a matron and assistants, but things not going on satisfactorily, repeated applications had been made for the sisters. In the early part of December 1861, Mother Angela had obtained additional sisters for Mound City, and on the journey thither they stopped at Cairo. As she had even then too few sisters to answer fully to the needs of Mound City hospital, she had no idea of leaving any at Cairo. When they called at the hospital they received a hearty welcome from Dr. Burke who supposed they had at last acceded to his request. On finding the hospital in such readiness for them, even to the apartments for their special use, Mother

Angela found it impossible to refuse the assistance so much coveted and certainly so much needed.

After passing through the whole building, which had four floors, all of which were crowded with the wounded from Belmont, and as the sisters thought they were about leaving the hospital, Mother Angela turned to Sister A[ugusta]¹⁴ and said, "You will remain, and you, and you," pointing to two young sisters in the party.

"Remain, Mother?" "Yes!" "But what shall we do?" "Go straight to work," and with a smile at their perplexity she took her departure for Mound City. The decision was so sudden and the sisters having been without sleep for three nights they were for a moment confused; but this feeling passed off quickly and to work they went at once. As soon as the change could possibly be made Mother Angela sent to Sister Augusta three sisters of experience in place of the two young sisters she left with her, so that there was one sister for each floor. Sister A[ugusta] and her faithful and efficient coadjutors continued in this hospital, whatever might be the changes going on with surgeons and officials; and to the end of the war the Marine hospital remained in charge of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.

The surrender of Memphis [on] June 6th [1862]¹⁵ gave another opportunity to the Sisters of the Holy Cross to pursue their work of mercy and at the suggestion of General [William K.] Strong the commander at Cairo this opportunity was immediately improved. The Overton hotel had been occupied by the Confederates as a hospital and before leaving it they took everything portable away with them. When Mother Angela and the sisters arrived at Memphis, they found everything was in a scene of direct confusion. It was not even safe to walk the streets, and in consequence they were obliged to remain on the hospital boat until some order was restored.

When they took possession of the Overton house it was in a most desolate condition, its walls, floors and ceilings were bare, and the suffering soldier had merely his knapsack for a pillow and his blanket for a mattress, but order and comfort were restored under the hands of the good sisters. At the same time that the Overton Hospital was a home for the sick and wounded in the southern campaigns, the Pinknetary Navy Hospital at Memphis and the hospital boat running between

Memphis and New Orleans were put under the care of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.¹⁶

When Mother Angela returned to St. Mary's to obtain sisters for Memphis, a young and accomplished young lady from Baltimore, a Miss H. Sumner, was spending the warm months there. On finding out the object of the mother's mission, Miss Sumner volunteered her services in company with fifteen sisters who were to accompany the mother. The noble intellectual young lady, during the few months she remained at Memphis, shared every duty with the sisters in the same spirit as if she were one of themselves until her impaired health made it an imperative duty to return North.

One evening in the summer of 1862, while the full tide of hospital duty was in progress at Memphis, the sisters' frugal supper being over, the religious were holding a little cheerful conversation together before returning to the different wards; conversation which told how sincerely each one was interested in the sufferers under her charge. The happy face of Sister M—— however bore an expression of sadness altogether unusual, and she began to tell what had saddened her heart even more than her face. It seems that a large number of wounded had been brought to her ward, among them one in a very dangerous condition. The surgeon said he must die, but the poor fellow was determined not to believe it, although most grateful for every attention paid to him. When the sister heard his name, she exclaimed, "Oh, [that is a good] Catholic name in the old country." ["Well," said he, very impatiently, "what if it is? That is [no reason of my being a Catholic.?"] There was some [thing in his tone, and even in his] words, which convinced the Sister that this man had] been educated a Ca[tholic, but the least mention of] a preparation for [death excited his anger.]¹⁷

Despite all his professions, when he found death approaching, he became penitent, confessed that he was brought up a Catholic, and died a good penitent after receiving all the rites of the Catholic Church.

Quite a large proportion of the patients were New Englanders and among them was one who at first continually passed sharp witticisms at the expense of the sisters. Near him lay another New Englander who rebuked him sharply for his conduct. The sister in charge finding out what was going on said to the man of gratitude to not mind him, but

let him proceed as he wished and he would soon drop it when unnoted. Soon the malady of the former obtained a dangerous character and extra attention had to be given him and during this attention the kindness he received from the sisters not only saved his life but won his heart, and he vowed ever after, to be a sincere friend of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.

Several of the Sisters of [the] Holy Cross were assigned duty in the hospital at Washington, which continued only one year under their charge.¹⁸ At the end of that time great irregularities appeared with regard to the class of patients sent to the hospital and great irregularities as to discipline. It was no longer a strictly military hospital under military rule and the superior telegraphed to the sisters to return to St. Mary's. During all the first year it was a most edifying work of charity, and the little chapel bore witness to the desire of the patients to make some return to the sisters for their assiduous attendance. In consequence, an offering was made by the soldiers of a small sum sufficient to furnish this humble chapel, which act of courtesy the sisters have never forgotten.



EPILOGUE: During the war, two Sisters of the Holy Cross, Elise O'Brien and Fidelis Lawler, died from exposure to disease during their work as nurses, and many others carried illnesses with them back to Notre Dame. Nonetheless, the community determined to continue its work in nursing in addition to resuming its prewar labors in the education of young women. A number of sisters served as nurses during the Spanish American War and the community built a network of hospitals across the United States. In addition to founding other schools in America, Saint Mary's Academy in South Bend became a college in 1908. Relics of their Civil War service, two

Confederate cannons captured from Island No. 10 on the Mississippi River, were proudly stationed near the school's entrance until 1942 when they were finally donated to a scrap metal drive during the Second World War. Nonetheless, the college remains very proud of its Civil War nurses who served in so many hospitals across the North during the conflict. Not only do special government markers at St. Mary's mark the graves of those who were wartime nurses, but one of the college's main buildings, Bertrand Hall, was paid for in part by the money Holy Cross Sisters earned for their wartime nursing services.

SOURCES: The Sisters of the Holy Cross Archives at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, has many relevant sources including letters, recollections, the community's annuals, and a good collection of secondary sources related to their community's Civil War service. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., *The Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac*, ed. James T. Connelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 276–91; M. Georgia Costin, *Priestess Spirit: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1841–1893* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 7–18, 72–74, 179–94; Barbra M. Wall, “Grace Under Pressure: The Nursing Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1861–1865,” *Nursing History Review* 1 (1993): 71–87; Ellen Ryan Jolly, *Nuns of the Battlefield* (Providence, RI: Providence Visitor Press, 1927), 124–57; Cindy Intravartolo, “St. Mary's Goes to War: The Sisters of the Holy Cross as Civil War Nurses,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 107, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2014): 370–91.

See also: Sisters of the Holy Cross, *A Story of Fifty Years: From the Annals of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1855–1905* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, [1905?]); Sisters of the Holy Cross, *Our Mother House: Centenary Chronicles of the Sisters of the Holy Cross* (Notre Dame, IN: Saint Mary's of the Immaculate Conception, 1941); Barbra Mann Wall, *Unlikely Entrepreneurs: Catholic Sisters and the Hospital Marketplace*,

1865–1925 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005); James M. Schmidt, *Notre Dame and the Civil War: Marching Onward to Victory* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010), 41–50, 121–23.