



Jane Renwick Smedburg Wilkes

By: **Phoebe Pollitt**

Abstract

Jane Wilkes of Charlotte, NC was one of the first women to volunteer to nurse sick and wounded Civil War soldiers at both the Wayside Hospital and the Confederate Military Hospital in Charlotte. These early nursing volunteers formed the Ladies Hospital Association. In 1876, as President of the Women's Aid Society of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Charlotte, Wilkes led the effort to establish the first civilian hospital in NC, the Charlotte Home and Hospital (soon renamed St. Peter's Hospital). A nursing school opened at St. Peter's in 1899. By law and custom, St. Peter's Hospital and School of Nursing served only white citizens. Wilkes saw a need for a hospital for Charlotte's African American community, so in 1892 she spearheaded the fundraising for Good Samaritan Hospital which opened that same year. Good Samaritan opened a nursing school to educate African American women in 1902. Jane Wilkes, Civil War Nurse from Charlotte wrote a letter to the Historical Department of the Charlotte Observer on May 20, 1896 page 4, describing the Confederate Hospital in Charlotte.

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Jane Renwick Smedburg Wilkes

By Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN

Biography of Nurse Jane Wilkes

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Jane Wilkes of Charlotte, NC was one of the first women to volunteer to nurse sick and wounded Civil War soldiers at both the Wayside Hospital and the Confederate Military Hospital in Charlotte. These early nursing volunteers formed the Ladies Hospital Association. In 1876, as President of the Women's Aid Society of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Charlotte, Wilkes led the effort to establish the first civilian hospital in NC, the Charlotte Home and Hospital (soon renamed St. Peter's Hospital). A nursing school opened at St. Peter's in 1899. By law and custom, St. Peter's Hospital and School of Nursing served only white citizens. Wilkes saw a need for a hospital for Charlotte's African American community, so in 1892 she spearheaded the fundraising for Good Samaritan Hospital which opened that same year. Good Samaritan opened a nursing school to educate African American women in 1902. Jane Wilkes, Civil War Nurse from Charlotte wrote a letter to the Historical Department of the Charlotte Observer on May 20, 1896 page 4, describing the Confederate Hospital in Charlotte.

Jane Renwick Smedbury Wilkes: North Carolina Nurse Pioneer

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Prior to the Civil War, in North Carolina, as in most other states, the lives of most white women were restricted to domestic duties. Women were legally barred from voting, owning property, attending state supported colleges, and engaging in most professions. Few women were active in the political, economic or social affairs of the day (Scott 1991, Faust 1996). War, it has been said, is the great liberator of women. This was surely the case for middle and upper class white women in NC during and after the Civil War.

When the men went off to fight and die, women went to work to support the soldiers and the war effort. Some women became teachers and nurses. Many women took over jobs formerly held by men. They managed plantations, became journalists and some disguised as men even joined the military (Faust, 1996). For the first time, NC women in large numbers were organizing themselves into groups such as the Ladies Aid Society and the Soldiers Aid Society.

At the outbreak of the war, there was no equipment ready to care for the sick. The people of NC had not taken care, even among rumors of war, to prepare for war in a time of peace (Wyche 1938). Many basic services taken for granted today had not even come into practice. Sanitation practices were crude. Few standard medications were available. Overcrowded, unsanitary hospitals lacking adequate food, bedding and medicines were ill equipped to meet the needs of the thousands of sick and wounded soldiers (Anderson 1926, Wyche 1938).

Under these circumstances, a few NC women volunteered their services, time, money and supplies to decrease the pain and suffering of the soldiers. In addition to traditional nursing duties such as preparing meals, feeding patients, bathing dirty and wounded soldiers, and housekeeping duties, many women also learned new skills in administration, finance, and public relations (Faust 1996, Scott 1991). One of these women was Jane Renwick Smedbiirg Wilkes.

Jane Renwick Smedburg was born on November 22, 1827 in New York City. She was the seventh of thirteen children. Her family accumulated great wealth through her father's shipping business. The family had many servants including maids, cooks, governesses, and gardeners. Jane was well educated, beginning school at the age of four. In 1854, Jane married her first cousin, John Wilkes. Together they moved to Charlotte, NC, a small backwater community (Wilkes, 1903).

In the last half of the 1850s, Mr. Wilkes bought and managed a flour mill, an iron mill, and a cotton mill. During this same time period, Mrs. Wilkes was busy with child rearing. Her interest in health care is apparent in a letter that she received in 1857, from her Aunt Gertrude. In response to Jane's concerns about immunizing one of her children, presumably against smallpox her Aunt Gertrude wrote:

"Learning through your mother of your troubles with your baby as to vaccination, I have procured some from my doctor which he has been so kind as to give, and recommend as most excellent- was taken from the arm of a fine, healthy child, which was vaccinated with the same as my baby- you must turn a small plate upside down, lay the matter on it, and moisten with the tiniest drop of water. Then rub it soft with a knife, make the incision, and put it on. I am thus particular, because I do not know whether you have a physician near, you can do it yourself perfectly..."(Wilkes 1903).

The Wilkes acquired over 30 slaves, most of whom worked in the mills. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Jane's family in Charlotte remained loyal to their new state by supporting the Confederacy. As was common during the war, the Wilkes family was divided over their loyalties. Jane had two brothers fighting for the Union and John's father gave money and supplies to the Union cause (Wilkes 1903).

Although Charlotte was spared as a scene of battle during the Civil War because of its location as a railroad junction, and its relatively safe location, many wounded soldiers were shipped there for care. The Confederacy established two kinds of hospitals: wayside hospitals and later more permanent and larger military hospitals. Wayside hospitals were a combination infirmary and travelers aid station for wounded soldiers traveling home from the battle front (Anderson 1926, Wyche 1938). These hospitals were described as "...hurriedly constructed along the line of the

railroads ...usually maintained by volunteer contributions. They were hastily equipped with medical supplies and crude operating tables." Charlotte was the site of both a wayside hospital established in July 1862 and a military hospital established in 1863 and housed in the converted D.H. Hill's Military Institute (Greenwood 1994).

Jane Wilkes along with other women from Charlotte formed the Ladies Hospital Association. This was dedicated to "ministering to the comforts and necessities of those who have gone to defend our rights on the tented fields" (Greenwood 1994). While taking care of her own growing family, Jane spent considerable time nursing sick and wounded soldiers at both hospitals (Kratt, 1992).

The conditions and mortality rate at the Confederate hospitals were appalling. Poor sanitation, overcrowding, shortages of food, medicine, blankets, and supplies caused undue suffering and death. Throughout her experience as a Civil War nurse, Jane was "...discouraged but undaunted", and became convinced of the good a "proper" hospital could do (Coley 1977). Wilkes wrote very little about her experiences. In 1903, in a brief family centered autobiography she wrote for her children, she recalled her Civil War days:

"All through the years 1861-1865 the war went on. Friends and neighbors were involved, death and disasters were frequent. All this time too, the women at home worked in Aid Societies, Hospital Associations, and every way women could help-knitting, sewing, feeding the hungry, nursing the sick- and in all I bore a part My family of little children, and my Jeanie's state of health, and your father's absences buying corn and wheat and then building the R.R. kept me at home and prevented as active participation as I would have liked, but in all the records of those days I find my name was entered" (Wilkes 1903).

After the War was over, Wilkes resumed her roles of wife, mother and hostess. Nearly a decade after the Confederate hospital closed its doors, the Wilkes' pastor, Benjamin S. Bronson, the rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, preached a sermon urging his congregation to establish a hospital for the under privileged of Charlotte (Morrill 1978). Mrs. Hamilton Jones, a leading member of the church at the time recalled Reverend Bronson was "...restless under the feeling that his church was not doing its duty ministering to its fellow man...Many thought his suggestion a wild experiment and it created much merriment in town...people said "What do we want with these sick folks, and why create a nuisance by collecting them in a bunch?" (Wilkes 1903). Still fresh in that generation's memory was the horrible suffering from gangrene and other infections and the terrible death rate among the sick and wounded soldiers in the Charlotte Confederate Hospital during the War Between the States (Van Landingham, 1931).

Jane Wilkes along with most of the women at St. Peter's was members of the Church Aid Society. In 1875, the Church Aid Society spent about \$ 100,000 "assisting the sick and needy of the Parish, and others connected with it, supplying nurses, medicine and food in their homes" (Greenwood, 1994). Reverend Bronson's sermon concerning the need for a hospital must have touched Wilkes' heart. She soon was elected president of the Church Aid Society and worked to expand its mission to open the first civilian hospital in NC. By law and custom, this hospital would only admit white patients. Wilkes was a tireless worker for this cause traveling frequently to New York to solicit funds and equipment for the hospital (Kratt, 1992).

The Church Aid Society was active in local fund raising for the new Charlotte Home and Hospital as the institution was then called. They produced a tableau in 1875, and held a Society Ball in 1878. Wilkes and her companions also solicited donations from their friends and neighbors in Charlotte (Wyche, 1938). Additionally, Wilkes asked physicians to volunteer their time and money for the new hospital. In an undated letter to a Dr. McCombs, Wilkes wrote "...I wanted to first ask if you will be one of the staff of consulting physicians and surgeons for St. Peter's Hospital [the name adopted by the hospital in the 1880s]...We want to put your name in next to Dr. Brevard's...Then my second question is- you have several times said you would help us with the fund for furnishing the operating room and drug closet- please let me know what amount you can give us..." (Wilkes, 1903).

The Charlotte Home and Hospital began primarily as a female institution. It was planned by women, funded through public solicitation by women and staffed and managed by women. Within a month, the group had raised enough money to rent a four room house, hire a full time cook, and nurse and begin to care for patients. On January 20, 1876, the first two patients were admitted. They were Mrs. Vause, described as a Methodist, and Mrs. Stewart, a Baptist. While there was a cook and nurse, the 30 or so women of the Church Aid Society complemented the paid staff by bringing in soups and extra food for the "inmates" (patients), and found themselves "often holding needles, scissors and instruments for the surgeons..." (Morrill, 1978; Coley, 1977).

The prejudice against hospitals predicted after Reverend Bronson's sermon soon appeared. Several early patients were forcibly brought in by police after refusing advice from their doctors and families to voluntarily enter. Neighbors living close to the hospital feared contagion from all the sick people being brought into their midst. Some neighbors threatened to shoot into the building (Van Landingham, 1931; Church, 1936).

Fortunately, many more residents of Charlotte welcomed and supported the new hospital than resented it. Wilkes, after serving as president of the Church Aid Society for a year served as the secretary/treasurer for the next 29 years. She kept detailed minutes and accounts related to the hospital (Morrill 1978, Van Landingham 1931). For instance, the records of 1899 show 171 patients were admitted for 3876 cumulative days. Of those, 89 patients paid in full or in part for their 1803 days of care. The bills for 20 patients who stayed 538 days as a group were paid for by the city, and 62 patients totaling 1508 aggregate days were charity cases for which the hospital received no direct reimbursement. Wilkes kept records of religious affiliation, diagnosis, surgical procedures as well as method of payment. The 1899 statistics show the following affiliations of the 171 patients: Methodist 47, Baptist 38, Presbyterian 30, Episcopalian 18, Lutheran 7, Associated Reform Presbyterian 5, Catholic 3, Hebrew 1, and no church affiliation 22. The five most common diagnoses for that year were alcoholism 22, typhoid fever 17, malaria 13, diarrhea 8 and cystitis 7.

In addition to patient information, Wilkes recorded donations given to the hospital. Donations were too numerous to list for any given year. In 1893, some donated items were three dozen bandages, 6 surgical aprons, 4 pair of drawers from the Women's Auxiliary of Leakesville; the city of Charlotte gave 6000 bricks toward construction of an addition to the hospital; G.S. Hall

gave half a dozen partridges; the P. B. Key company of Statesville gave a gallon of whiskey and the Southern Express Railroad delivered it for free (Morrill, 1978).

Advances in the understanding of biological sciences, medicine, surgery, nutrition and sanitation in the decades around the turn of the 20th century increased the value of the knowledge and services health care providers and institutions offered the public. The days when the very idea of a hospital was treated with "merriment" were over. Population growth coupled with the increasingly known benefits derived from professional nursing created a need for a nursing school in Charlotte. As Wilkes recalled in 1898, "Calls for trained nurses have become so frequent that the hospital must try to fill the requirement" (Church 1936). Wilkes and other nurses trained through experience, dedicated time, money and energy so the next generation of nurses could have the benefits of an organized comprehensive academic and clinical training program. In this spirit the St. Peter's Hospital School of Nursing opened in Charlotte in October 1899 with 10 students. In January 1902, Susan Mott, Effie Ellen McNeill and Alicia Anna Powers became the first of thousands of graduates from the nursing school (Strong, 1929).

In 1904, at the age of 77, Jane Wilkes resigned, after 29 years of service as Secretary/Treasurer of the Board of Managers of St. Peter's Hospital. The Board of Managers passed a resolution that read in part "... the position that the hospital has attained in our City and State is a lasting monument more durable than granite or marble, to the untiring efforts which Mrs. Wilkes has exerted on its behalf ever since its inception, in which she was an active participant and prime mover" (Church, 1936).

Although Wilkes had owned slaves and had supported the ideals of the Confederacy, her heart went out to the sick, poor African Americans in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Wilkes spearheaded the effort to establish a hospital for blacks in Charlotte. Greenwood (1994), discusses her role: "In 1882 veteran reformer Jane Wilkes, a former Confederate hospital nurse, founder of the Charlotte Home and Hospital, and member of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, began collecting funds from northern Episcopal congregations for a black hospital. In 1888, she had raised enough money to purchase a lot on Hill Street in the Third Ward, and in December 1888, she had the cornerstone laid for the hospital. Three years later the hospital opened. Although the funds for establishing Good Samaritan seem to have come almost exclusively from whites, the black residents of Charlotte played a key role in administering the hospital."

The laying of the cornerstone was a major cause for celebration for blacks in the Charlotte area. According to a local newspaper, a procession left St. Michael's, a black Episcopal church in Charlotte, at 3:00 in the afternoon. It was led by a black Masonic fraternity, followed by clergy of both races. Then the dignitaries of the city came, including Dr. Mattoon, the President of Biddle College (now Johnson C. Smith University), Mayor McDowell, and Captain and Mrs. Wilkes. The cornerstone was laid with full Masonic Rites. There were prayers and speeches welcoming this needed new addition to Charlotte (Huffman, 1985).

Wilkes was an active member of the Board of Governors of Good Samaritan Hospital. She solicited funds, encouraged the founding of the nursing school in 1902 (the second school open to blacks in the state) and encouraged white doctors and pharmacists to donate their time and supplies to keep Good Samaritan operational (Wilkes 1903).

Jane Wilkes died in her adopted home of Charlotte in 1913. Her tireless work as a nurse, both at the bedside in the Wayside Hospital, Confederate Hospital, and St. Peter's Hospital, and as an administrator instrumental in founding two hospitals and helping establish two schools of nursing, assured her place in the hearts of many residents of Charlotte. A portion of her obituary in the Charlotte Evening Times reads "Never in the history of the church and seldom in the history of the city has there been such a gathering. The rich and the poor, white and black, came together to pay the tribute of appreciation, or gratitude as the case may be, to this great woman" (Great, 1913).

Wilkes contributed much to the advance of nursing in NC. At a time when many respectable women did not consider nursing a respectable profession, Wilkes rolled up her sleeves and went to work. During the Civil War, she nursed, fed, and cleaned wounded men. At a time, when few women were speaking out and acting confidently in the public domain, she volunteered time and money to help indigent and minority patients. She organized women's groups to be active participants in finding solutions to the problems of their day. Wilkes was perhaps most unusual for her time in interracial work. The last decades of the 19th century saw a rise in the number of lynchings, discrimination and the "Jim Crow" laws across the south. In this climate, Wilkes worked with and on behalf of fellow citizens suffering from the effects of racism.

Both of the hospitals Wilkes helped to establish, St. Peter's and Good Samaritan have been closed, incorporated into the Charlotte Hospital Authority in 1940 and 1961, (Huffman, 1985; Morrill, 1978). Her legacy, however, lives on through the new larger hospitals and through graduates from the nursing schools who continue to practice and who themselves have established new health care institutions and have taught new generations of nurses both black and white, who today work to relieve suffering throughout North Carolina.

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Civil War

"When one goes nursing, all things must be expected" Mary von Olnhausen, Nurse for the union Army in New Bern, NC, 1864.

Prior to the Civil War, in North Carolina as in most other states, the lives of white women were restricted to domestic duties. Women were legally banned from voting, owning property, attending state supported colleges and engaging in most professions. Few women were active in the political, economic or social affairs of the day. It has been said that war is a liberator of women. This was surely true for middle and upper class white women in North Carolina during and after the Civil War. When men went off to fight and die women went to work to support their families and their communities. Many women took over jobs formerly held by men. They managed plantations, kept books, taught school, became journalists and some, disguised as men, and even joined the military (Faust, 1996). For the first time, North Carolina women in large numbers were organizing themselves into groups such as Ladies Aid Societies to work for the betterment of those suffering from the effects of war (Scott, 1991).

At the outbreak of the Civil War, in the spring of 1861, there were no trained nurses, nursing schools or general hospitals in the state of North Carolina. The leaders of the Confederacy were busy organizing a new government, establishing foreign relations and fighting the War. A common misconception was that the Civil War would be quickly and easily won. Because of this error in judgment, no provisions were made for the care of the wounded and sick soldiers. Early in the Civil War deadly epidemics of measles, malaria and assorted fevers swept through the soldier's camps killing and incapacitating thousands of men. Additionally, extensive casualties on the battlefields of Virginia in 1861-62 shocked many women in the new Confederate States of America into action (Wyche, 1938).

Because there were so few resources on or near the battlefields to care for the sick and wounded soldiers, many soldiers were sent by trains back to their homes for recuperation. Frequently, soldiers arrived back in North Carolina with contagious diseases, festering wounds and fevers and were frequently unable to make the lengthy trips from the train station back to their homes and farms. Under these circumstances, a few North Carolina women donated their services, time, money and supplies to decrease the pain and suffering of the returning soldiers. They initiated a new institution - the "Wayside Hospital". Large buildings, close to the depots, such as barns and churches were converted into makeshift hospitals to care for the ailing returning soldiers. The needs were so great that Wayside Hospitals sprang up all over the Confederacy. North Carolina women in the railroad towns of Weldon, Goldsboro, Charlotte, Greensboro, High Point, Tarboro, Salisbury, Fayetteville, and Wilmington opened Wayside Hospitals in their towns (Anderson, 1926). They performed traditional duties such as laundering clothing and bed linens, preparing meals, feeding and bathing patients, and generally keeping the environment clean. Many of these women also learned new skills in administration, finance, public relations and advocacy. One of the women who volunteered in all of these capacities at the Charlotte Wayside Hospital was Jane Wilkes ("Great tribute", 1913).

Charlotte was never the scene of battle during the Civil War, but because of its location as a railroad junction and its relative safety, many wounded soldiers were shipped there for care. In addition to the Wayside Hospital, the Confederate government established a Military Hospital in Charlotte in 1863. Jane Wilkes along with other Charlotte area women formed the Ladies Hospital Association. The organization was dedicated to "ministering to the comforts and necessities" of the soldiers. Relying on herbal remedies and the recently published "Notes on Nursing" by Florence Nightingale, female volunteer nurses provided higher quality care with lower death rates than the enlisted men who were paid for their nursing services (Wyche, 1938).

After the War was over, Wilkes resumed her roles of wife and mother. Almost ten years after the Confederate hospital closed its doors, Wilkes's pastor, Father Benjamin Bronson, of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Charlotte urged his congregation to establish a hospital for the care of the underprivileged in town. Wilkes wrote in a family memoir "Many thought his suggestion a wild experiment and it created much merriment in town ... people said "what do we want with these sick folks and why create a nuisance by collecting them in a bunch?" (Wilkes, 1903) Fresh, in that generation's memory was the horrible suffering as well as the high death rates at the Charlotte Confederate Hospital a decade earlier.

Something in Reverend Bronson's sermon must have touched Wilkes heart, for she became the president of the Women's Aid Society of the church. This group established and managed the first civilian hospital in North Carolina, the Charlotte Home and Hospital (later enlarged and renamed St. Peter's Hospital). On January 20, 1876 the first patients were admitted. While the Society employed a full time nurse and cook, the 30 or so members of the Women's Aid Society helped out by bringing home cooked meals for the patients and found themselves "often holding needles, scissors and instruments for the surgeons" (Wilkes, 1903).

Neighbors living close to the hospital feared contagion from the sick people being brought into their midst. They threatened violence to the hospital and the patients, hoping to encourage its relocation. Fortunately many more residents of Charlotte welcomed and supported the hospital than resented it. The patient census as well as donations and public respect for the institution grew over the years (Church hospital, 1936).

As advances in understanding of the biological sciences, sanitation and nutrition expanded in the late 1800s the need for trained nurses became apparent. Wilkes and others, who had learned nursing through experience, again dedicated themselves so the next generation of nurses could have the benefits of a comprehensive, academic training program. The St. Peters Hospital School of Nursing was opened in October, 1899 with 10 students. In January 1902, Susan Mott, Effie McNeill and Alicia Powers were the first nurses to graduate from the nursing school (Wyche, 1938).

Wilkes was not content with her work with St. Peter's Hospital and the St Peters' Hospital School of Nursing. By law and custom, these institutions served white citizens only. Although her family had owned slaves before the Civil War and her husband and sons were Confederate veterans, her heart went out to the poor and sick African Americans in the Charlotte area. By 1882 Wilkes was spearheading efforts to establish a hospital for local African Americans. Using donations primarily from the local African American community and northern Episcopal congregations, a cornerstone was laid for Good Samaritan Hospital in 1891. In 1902, the second nursing school for African Americans in the state opened at Good Samaritan under Wilkes guidance. Good Samaritan Hospital and its school of nursing provided care and education for thousands of people over many decades (Coley, 1977).

Jane Wilkes worked tirelessly as a bedside nurse at the Charlotte Wayside Hospital, the Charlotte Confederate Hospital and St. Peter's Hospital. In addition she was a talented administrator, fund raiser and public relations expert instrumental in the founding of two hospitals and the establishment of two schools of nursing. Wilkes, and others in her generation, contributed much to the advancement of nursing in North Carolina. At a time when most middle and upper class white women did not consider nursing a respectable profession, Wilkes rolled up her sleeves and went to work. During the Civil War, she and her companions nursed, fed and cleaned wounded men who were not members of their immediate families. At a time when few women were speaking out and acting confidently in the public sphere she spearheaded efforts to establish community institutions. She organized women's groups to actively solicit funds and find solutions to the problems of their day. Perhaps most laudable of all was her interracial work.

The last decades of the 19th century saw a rise in lynchings, discrimination and Jim Crow laws across the south. Wilkes was a woman ahead of her times in working with and for all of her fellow citizens who suffered from injuries or disease. As the Charlotte Evening Times reported in her obituary: "Never in the history of the church and seldom in the history of the city has there been such a gathering. The rich and the poor, white and black, came together to pay the tribute of appreciation, or gratitude as the case may be, to this great woman." (Great tribute, 1913).

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