



Serving With Care And Compassion: North Carolina Nurses In The Spanish-American War

By: Ashley Humphries with **Dr. Phoebe Ann Pollitt**

Abstract

Lucy Ashby Sharp born January 13, 1862, dreamed of becoming a nurse while growing up after the Civil War on the family plantation, Edgewood, near Eden in Rockingham County, North Carolina.[1] She probably imagined herself in a crisp white uniform with matching starch white cap, providing care in a clean and busy hospital ward. To this end, Lucy graduated from the John's Hopkins Training School for Nurses in Baltimore, MD in 1892. She began her nursing career as planned, but when the United States declared war on Spain on April 25, 1898, Lucy's life as a nurse took an unexpected turn. Lucy's father was a decorated Confederate officer and Quartermaster, so as her father had done, when she had an opportunity to serve her country in war time she volunteered to do her part.

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Serving With Care and Compassion: North Carolina Nurses in the Spanish-American War

By Ashley Humphries, with Dr. Phoebe Ann Pollitt, RN

Introduction

Lucy Ashby Sharp born January 13, 1862, dreamed of becoming a nurse while growing up after the Civil War on the family plantation, Edgewood, near Eden in Rockingham County, North Carolina.^[1] She probably imagined herself in a crisp white uniform with matching starch white cap, providing care in a clean and busy hospital ward. To this end, Lucy graduated from the John's Hopkins Training School for Nurses in Baltimore, MD in 1892. She began her nursing career as planned, but when the United States declared war on Spain on April 25, 1898, Lucy's life as a nurse took an unexpected turn. Lucy's father was a decorated Confederate officer and Quartermaster, so as her father had done, when she had an opportunity to serve her country in war time she volunteered to do her part.

Background of Military Nursing

When the United States entered the Spanish-American War in the spring of 1898, after the sinking of the USS Maine, professionally educated nurses served for the first time in the United States military. Women who volunteered to nurse with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War 1853-56, and those who volunteered in the American Civil War 1861-65 demonstrated the importance of good nursing care to the survival of ill and injured soldiers. Those women did not have the advantage of formal nursing training, but many went on to help establish the profession of nursing as it is known today. In the late 1800s programs to train nurses using the "Nightingale Model" were established in hospitals throughout the United States.

Shortly after war was declared in April, 1898, the United States armed forces that included the Army, Navy, and Marine Corp troops grew from about 28,000 to over 200,000 men. Most lived in make shift military camps in the southern United States waiting to join the fight in Cuba. Sanitary conditions in the camps were awful. Typhoid, malaria and various fevers raged through the camps with few qualified personnel available to care for them. Congress quickly authorized the U.S. Army to employ more than one thousand professional nurses for thirty dollars a month. Although there have been male nurses since the Civil War era, military nursing would remain a female occupation until after WWII. More nurses applied for these jobs that could be accepted.

The U.S. Army, American Red Cross, and Daughters of the American Revolution carefully selected the nurses based on their education, character, and experience. The Army did not supply uniforms, so nurses from ninety-one different schools proudly wore their school uniforms when on duty. They spent most of their fourteen hour shifts (with a twenty minute lunch break) giving the feverish men ice baths, applying dressings to wounds, preparing and feeding soldiers nutritious foods, administering medicines, and keeping the wards as clean as possible.

On July 3, 1898, North Carolinian and Johns Hopkins' graduate, Lucy Ashby Sharp, RN began her assignment as Chief Nurse aboard a US Navy hospital ship named the *Relief*. Sharp and five other nurses constituted the entire nursing staff on the ship. Forty-five more medical personnel also worked aboard the *Relief*, all of whom were male. The *Relief* was equipped to care for hundreds of wounded and ill soldiers. The *Relief* would anchor close to shore, but far enough away to not be damaged by enemy fire. Small boats attached to the ship were dispatched to pick up the wounded and dead from the scene of battle and returned to the *Relief*. Injured troops promptly received medical and surgical care they needed to in order to recover.

All nurses aboard the *Relief* were identified by a Personal Data Card that simply notated height, weight, good health, and age; basically a different version of a Dog Tag that had begun to be implemented during this war. The Card System was simply an early personal record keeping system that the American Red Cross utilized. According to Lucy's Personal Data Card, she was 36 years old, single, five feet six inches tall, and weighed 124 pounds. She was also noted to be in good shape, strong, and healthy. Surgeon Major General George H. Torney, a future U.S. Surgeon General oversaw all medical work on board the *Relief*. Major Torney initially opposed having women nurses on the *Relief*, but changed his mind after working with them. According to officers, Sharp was "... a reliable nurse, devoted to her duty, untiring in energy in doing her work and self-sacrificing on all occasions. She was a woman of excellent character and was most satisfactory as a chief nurse on the *Relief*."^[2] *The American Journal of Nursing* also notes from Lucy's obituary that "Soon after the declaration of war with Spain, she offered her services as a nurse to the country she loved and waited impatiently for an assignment to duty ... She entered into her new work with unbounded enthusiasm."^[3] Unfortunately, within weeks after boarding the *Relief*, she developed a severe case of dysentery. This was probably caused by the poor sanitation available on a floating hospital ship as well as a lack of effective medicines to treat gastrointestinal ailments. Lucy was sent home to recover.

After she regained her health, Lucy returned to nursing, first as the Matron at the nearby Danville Memorial Hospital in Danville, VA, and later at the Church Home and Infirmary in Baltimore, Maryland. In the spring of 1910 there were rumors that the United States might go to war against Mexico and Lucy offered her services to the new US Army Nurse Corps. Her name was placed on a reserve list of former Army nurses, but the war never occurred. After leaving Church Home and Infirmary, she moved as a superintendent to New York Nursery and Child's Hospital, the old New York Infant Asylum. Lucy's final job was as the Matron and Director of the Nurses Training School in New Rochelle, New York. After a brief illness she died on March 4, 1912.^[4] Her death was mourned by many family members, fellow nurses and veterans.

The contributions of Lucy Ashby Sharp and hundreds of other professionally educated nurses during the Spanish-American War led to the establishment of the Army Nurse Corps on 2 February 1901. The Navy Nurse Corps soon followed in 1908. The Spanish-American War nurses set a high bar for quality of care, compassion, and skill for future nurses to follow. The accomplishments and services rendered by nurses in all branches of the military services have been tremendous. Without the work of nurses like Lucy Ashby Sharp, triumphs of women in nursing would not have occurred, and like so, the history of the care for injured soldiers in the time of war would be forgotten.

A partial list of North Carolina Nurses Who Served in the Spanish-American War^[5]

Name	Hometown	Nursing School
Margaret Berry	Salisbury	Maryland General Hospital, Baltimore, MD
Molly Courts	Reidsville	Retreat hospital, Richmond, VA
Anne Ferguson	Concord	Watts Hospital, Durham, NC
Ferabee Guion	Charlotte	unknown
Della Hall	Salisbury	Philadelphia General Hospital
Lydia Holman	Philadelphia	Philadelphia General Hospital
Anna Schultze	Shelby	Philadelphia General Hospital
Lucy Ashby Sharp	Eden	Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, MD
Ella Tuttle	Lenoir	St. John's Riverside Hospital, Yonkers, New York

The records of Spanish-American War Nurses are housed at the American Red Cross Archives in Washington DC, and are NOT available online. This list was compiled by Mary Lewis Wyche, RN for her book *The History of Nursing in North Carolina* published in 1938 from personal correspondence and acquaintances of most of the early nurses to practice in NC.^[6] This list

notates the importance of primary source research, without documentation and research by Mary Lewis Wyche, RN, this list would not be available.

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Lucy A. Sharp Student Portrait Photograph. 1892. http://www.flickr.com/photos/medical_archives/5331227828/.

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^[1] The Great Train Raid. “Captain Thomas R. Sharp C.S.A.” May 29, 2011. http://www.greattrainraid.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&...

^[2] Mercedes Graff, *A Very Few Good Nurses: Prologue*. Fall 2010. <http://www.scribd.com/NAprologue/d/41752871-A-Very-Few-Good-Nurses-Prologue-Fall-2010>.

^[3] “Nursing News and Announcements: Deaths,” *The American Journal of Nursing* Vol. 12 No. 7 (April 1912): 614. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3404973>.

^[4] “Nursing News and Announcements.”

^[5] North Carolina Nursing History Appalachian State University, “North Carolina Nurses Who Served in the Military: Spanish American War,” <http://nursinghistory.appstate.edu/nc-military-nurses>.

^[6] Mary Lewis Wyche, *The History of Nursing in North Carolina*, (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1938).