

Angels of the Confederacy

DURING THE WAR FOR SOUTHERN INDEPENDENCE, that great conflagration that was waged from 1861 to 1865, there were in the Confederate Army a total of approximately 1,050,000 service members. Of these 1 million-plus individuals, there were roughly 3,000 who were commissioned officers. Of these officers, there was exactly one who was female. Her name was Sally Louisa Tompkins. Here is her remarkable story—and also the story of Ella King Newsom, another angel of the Confederacy.

BY BOB HURST

Sally Louisa Tompkins was born approximately Nov. 9-11, 1833 at Poplar Grove in Mathews County, Virginia to a family of wealth. Her father, Col. Christopher Tompkins, was a veteran of the American Revolutionary War who accumulated a large fortune. He died when Sally was only five years old and left great wealth to Sally and her mother.¹

The two moved to Richmond rather than continuing to live in the rural and isolated environment of Poplar Grove. There they were able to fit nicely into the society of Richmond and were familiar with many of the prominent people of the city.

The Tompkinses were still living in Richmond when war broke out between the North and the South at the Battle of First Manassas on July 21, 1861. Very few on either side thought the fighting would be as severe as it proved to be, and the hospitals in Richmond were totally unprepared for the large number of wounded that were brought into the city, primarily by rail. President Jefferson Davis made an appeal to the citizens of Richmond to absorb this multitude of injured by opening their homes to the soldiers and establishing private hospitals.

Sally Tompkins was a person of great kindness and



SALLY LOUISA TOMPKINS

wanted to help with the wounded. She also had some nurse's training. She approached Judge John Robertson, a prominent member of the Richmond community, and appealed to him to allow her to convert a large home that he owned in the downtown area into a private hospital. Sally was very persuasive and the large structure became Robertson Hospital.

The hospital opened on August 1, 1861 with Sally and a staff of six to care for the wounded. Some supplies for the hospital were supplied by the Confederate government but primary funding came from the inheritance that Sally had received from her father.

At first there was some opposition to Sally, her staff and the hospital since the Confederate armies discouraged women from serving as nurses. The prevailing attitude was that men did not want refined Southern ladies exposed to the horrors of war by having to treat the mutilated, sick and dying soldiers in military hospitals. This soon changed and many of the wounded began to request care from Sally, or "the little lady with the milk-white hands" as she came to be called.

After Following an assessment soon after the establishment of these private hospitals, the Confederate government decided that all hospitals treating wounded soldiers should be put under the control of the Confederate Medical



Department. The Confederate Congress passed legislation to this effect and President Davis issued an order making it official policy. This would result in the closing of the private hospitals.

Sally Tompkins went straight to Jefferson Davis to argue her case for leaving her hospital open while other private facilities were being closed down. To support her appeal, she supplied to President Davis numbers from her hospital showing the amazing rate of treatment successes for in her hospital compared to others.

Jefferson Davis realized the validity of her argument, but he was also aware that the new regulations required all military hospitals be run by military personnel. While discussing this with Sally, the president had to have a brief meeting with Confederate diplomat James Mason, who was about to leave for Europe.

As Mason left, Davis turned to Sally and said that Mason had given him an idea concerning how a way to solve the dilemma of the hospital. Jefferson Davis then appointed Sally Tompkins to the rank of captain of cavalry (unassigned), effective September 8, 1861.

In an effort to cope with the unprecedented numbers of sick or wounded soldiers, the Confederate States of America established a Medical Department. Surgeons were assisted by nurses, stewards, matrons and other personnel. Chloroform, ether and opium or opium derivatives and botanical substitutes were widely used during surgery or for pain relief. Above, a Confederate nurse—Phoebe Pember—tends to several wounded soldiers.

Sally could continue to run her hospital, as she was now official military personnel. She also became “Captain Sally,” the only woman to hold a commission in the Confederate Army. From that time forward until she died, townspeople and everyone else who came in contact with Sally addressed her as “Captain Sally.”

Robertson Hospital stayed in operation until June of 1865, after the war had ended in Virginia. During its existence the hospital treated a total of 1,333 wounded Confederate soldiers. Of these, only 73 died. This gave the hospital an astonishing 94.5% survival rate. Because of the good reputation of the hospital, the most severely injured

soldiers were assigned to Robertson Hospital making this feat all the more remarkable. In fact, a higher percentage of patients treated there returned to service than from any other Confederate medical facility or Union military hospital. Sally Tompkins's insistence on cleanliness was likely the key to this remarkable record, although little was known at that time about the cause of infections.

During the entire existence of the hospital, Sally Tompkins refused to accept a salary from the Confederate government for her work there.

After the war, Sally became one of the most beloved citizens of Richmond. She was active in work for the Episcopal Church and attended many functions of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and reunions of the United Confederate Veterans. She was even made an honorary member of Robert E. Lee Camp, UCV.

Sally also received many offers of marriage during this time. Many of these offers came from veterans who had received care from her at the hospital. None of these offers was ever accepted, as this would have interfered with her ability to work for and contribute to worthy causes. And contribute she did. Sally contributed so much to the church and to veterans causes that by 1905 she had completely expended her inheritance. She then moved into the Confederate Women's Home in Richmond, where she was allowed to live free of charge since she had given everything she had for the Cause.

Sally Tompkins died on July 26, 1916 and was buried with full military honors at Christ Church Kingston Parish Cemetery in Mathews County.

For many years Sally Louisa Tompkins was referred to as the "Angel of the Confederacy." There is a large stained-glass window at St. James Episcopal Church in Richmond honoring Sally. The beautiful window depicts an angel hovering above and behind a full-length image of Sally and features a Confederate battle flag in one corner.

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It is an appropriate and well-deserved honor for this Southern woman who was truly an angel.

If you observed carefully at the beginning of this article, you noticed that I used the plural "angels" rather than the singular "angel" in the title. This is because I have chosen to include in this piece another Southern woman who I believe deserves the recognition of being an angel to the Confederate cause.

DON'T FORGET ELLA KING NEWSOM

Ella King Newsom was born in Brandon, Mississippi in 1838. In 1854 she married a wealthy physician and planter who died a short time after the marriage. A wealthy man, he left a fortune to Ella.

When the war began in 1861, this wealthy young woman, who was wise beyond her years, decided to use her money to provide medical care for Confederate soldiers. She first trained in Memphis as a nurse and then took

over a hospital in Kentucky as the administrator. Ella's organizational skills were outstanding, and she soon put them to good use by recruiting and training nurses, directing the movement of hospitalized troops and routing supplies to locations where they were most needed.

Her skills were recognized and appreciated by Confederate officials, and in subsequent years of the War she established and administrated military

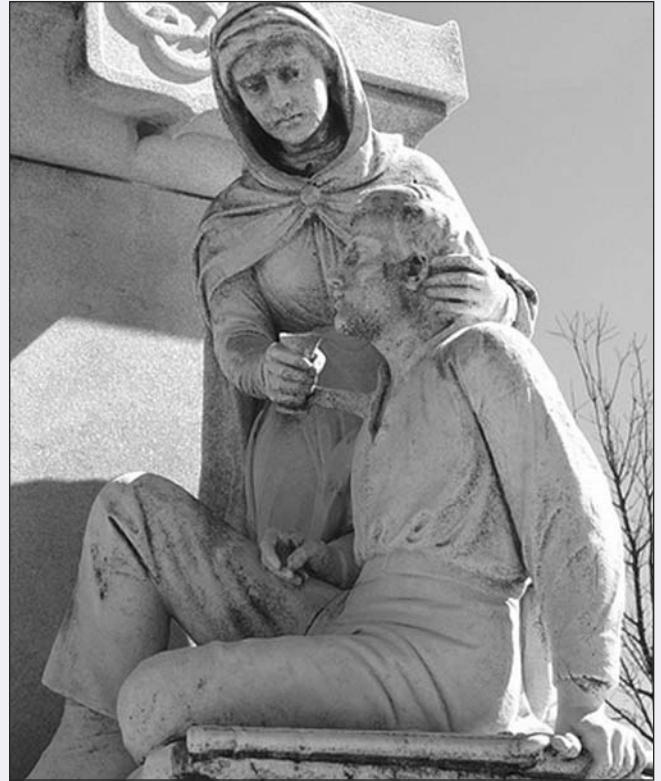
hospitals in Nashville, Chattanooga, Atlanta and Corinth, Mississippi. Because of her remarkable administrative abilities and her willingness to help wounded Confederate soldiers, Ella Newsom was called the "Florence Nightingale of the Southern Army."

After the war she wrote a book titled *Reminiscences of War Time*, which chronicled her experiences. By 1885, Ella's fortune was all but gone so she had to take employment. Being the administrator that she was, she moved to Washington, D.C. and worked for more than 30 years in administrative capacities with the federal government.

Ella King Newsom died on January 20, 1919.

Sally Tompkins and Ella King Newsom were two wealthy Southern women who refused to stay on the sidelines during the War for Southern Independence. Instead, they used their fortunes and their wealth of ability to make outstanding contributions to the Confederate cause of freedom. By their actions and dedication they earned the admi-

Honoring the Women of the Confederacy



In Macon, Georgia is this elegant monument to the women of the South, donated by the United Confederate Veterans. It takes the form of a tall obelisk with groups of statues all around it. Right figure group: A nurse gives a soldier a drink while holding up his head. The pious ministrations of angels such as this “soothed the last hours of those who died far from home,” says an inscription written by President Jefferson Davis. Their “smiles inspired hope; their tender hands soothed the pangs of pain; their prayers encouraged faith in God.” Their “zealous faith in our cause shone a guiding star undimmed by the darkest clouds of war. And when the dragon of war closed its fangs of poison and death, they, like guardian angels, entwined their hands in their brothers’ arms, encouraged them to overcome the losses of war and to conquer the evils in its wake, adopting as their motto: ‘Lest we forget.’” Left: A mother comforts her girl child with a hand on her head. Behind the mother the initials “CSA” are visible. Keeping the home fires going was important also. The patriotism of mothers like this “will teach their children to emulate the deeds of our revolutionary sires.”

ration and remembrance of the Southern people and states’-righters everywhere.

Sally Tompkins and Ella King Newsom were truly “Angels of the Confederacy,” but there were so many other Southern women who played critical roles during this time of war and turmoil.

A quote from *Confederate Veteran* magazine, Vol. 16 (1908) sums up nicely the character, dedication and contributions of the remarkable women of the South: “It has well been said that if we seek a lofty ideal and a noble model on which to shape a well-rounded and perfect womanhood, combining the pure patriotism, the rugged virtues, the win-

ning modesty, and the tender graces of Spartan mother, Roman dame and Carthaginian maid, we have but to take a retrospective glance down the corridors of memory for about four decades to find it in that historic sisterhood of martyrs and patriots, the women of the Confederacy.” ♦

ENDNOTE:

¹ Her family had boasted a proud military tradition since the Revolutionary War, when Sally’s grandfather, Col. John Patterson, was commissioned by Gen. George Washington after the Battle of Monmouth. That young Sally Tompkins was keenly aware of this tradition is certain. When one of her brothers left to serve in Texas during the Mexican-American War, Sally, then 13 years old, wrote: “I hope you will be able to distinguish yourself in the battle and be a second George Washington and come home to receive congratulations from all your friends.”—Ed.