

Dorothea Lynde Dix

“No Bows, No Curls, No Jewelry”

GRADE 8
GRADE 11



Dorothea Dix, Superintendent of Union Army Nurses during the war. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-9797

Today, right or wrong, nursing tends to be seen as a woman's occupation. Can you imagine a time when there were no female nurses? During the Civil War, nurses were usually men. There were concerns about women being around “rough” soldiers, possibly flirting and searching for husbands. Some people even doubted that women could perform the work – after all, don't they faint at the sight of blood? Wouldn't they cry to see so much suffering?

In April 1861, Dorothea knew that there would be a great need for nurses. She planned to start a female Army Nursing Corps consisting of volunteers who would serve without pay. The Surgeon General refused her for two reasons. First of all, everyone knew that the U.S. Army only used male nurses. Secondly, the war would only last ninety days (or less), so extra nurses really wouldn't be needed (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 194). (At the outbreak of the war, very few people, North or South, thought the war would last longer than three months.)

Miss Dix didn't give up. Instead of returning to her home in New Jersey, she rented a home in Washington and turned it into a receiving station for hospital supplies (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 195). Fortunately, she was independently wealthy and could afford to do this!

She put notices in Massachusetts newspapers, asking for supplies. The Surgeon General asked Dorothea to collect specific supplies as well, and soon, her house was overflowing with shirts, sheets, canned foods, bandages, lint (to pack deep wounds), jelly, milk, eggs, chickens, and more (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 195)!

Meanwhile, Secretary of War Simon Cameron was very seriously considering Dorothea's idea regarding women nurses. On April 23, he informed her that she could start her own women's nursing corps, and he appointed her the Superintendent (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 196).

At first, each regiment had its own hospital of three tents, a surgeon, and two assistants. Dorothea was certain that there would be a need for more hospitals (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 196). She used her authority to convert properties in Washington, such as the Union Hotel, into hospitals. Next, she placed ads for volunteers.

While Dorothea Dix was a champion of women's nursing, she was very conscious about how women nurses were viewed. Dorothea was all business. Nurses had to meet very strict conditions – some of which might be viewed as strange, by today's standards: *No women under thirty need apply to serve in the government hospitals. All nurses are required to be plain looking women. Their dresses must be brown or black, with no bows, no curls, no jewelry, and no hoop-skirts* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 196). She interviewed EVERY volunteer to make sure that *No young ladies [would] be sent at all, but some who can give their services and time and meet part of their expenses or the whole, who will be ready for duty at any hour of day or night—those who are sober,*

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

How many of these stereotypes still exist today?

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

In your own words, what kind of woman was allowed to be a volunteer nurse? What did she look like? Act like? What was her financial situation? Why did Dorothea insist on all these qualifications?

GRADE 8

GRADE 11

earnest, self-sacrificing, and self-sustained; who can bear the presence of suffering and never lose self control; who can be calm, gentle, quiet, active, and steadfast in duty (Amazing Women of the Civil War, 197).

After the battle of Manassas (or Bull Run), there were so many wounded and sick in Washington that her hospitals couldn't hold them all. Quickly, she converted more buildings into hospitals. She found that the Union troops didn't have enough ambulances, so she bought one and sent it to Manassas (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 198).

Union General John C. Fremont asked Dorothea to go west to start hospitals in St. Louis. As you know, part of Missouri supported the Confederacy and part supported the Union. St. Louis was itself divided in its loyalties. She couldn't count on help from the people of St. Louis, so she raised funds among her friends in the East. Soon she had organized supply depots and hospitals.

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

The average unskilled laborer earned about a dollar a day.

However – there was a big problem. While male nurses were paid \$20.50 a month and received rations, clothing, and housing, Dorothea's nurses were unpaid volunteers. They needed extra help to be able to continue to work, or she would lose her nursing staff! The battle was a hard one, but the first victory was when the government gave nurses food, transportation, and housing. Next, the nurses received 40 cents per day for their work. Because of the government's help, her nursing staff grew (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 199-200).

Dorothea's iron will earned her many successes: getting a female nursing corps and making sure it was well cared for was quite a feat. However, many surgeons and staff treated her poorly. They complained bitterly about her nurses. The complaints reported that these women ignored military rules and were only concerned about pleasing Dorothea, the *dictator in a petticoat* (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 200). Even the U.S. Sanitary Commission had problems with her! She earned the nickname "Dragon Dix."

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

What would have happened if Simon Cameron hadn't taken Dorothea Dix's plan seriously? When do you think the Union army would have used women nurses?

What would have happened if Miss Dix gave up every time she was refused?

Do you think Miss Dix's financial position gave her an advantage? How?

In October 1863, General Orders No. 351 was passed. After this date, all nurses would report directly to the highest-ranking hospital officer – not Dorothea. And, after December, no female, unless an exception was made, would be *borne upon the Muster and Pay Rolls* without authorization by a War Department official (*Amazing Women of the Civil War*, 200).

Despite these problems, after the war in January of 1867, she received a package in the mail. The letter in the box read, *In token and acknowledgment of the inestimable services rendered by Miss Dorothea L. Dix for the care, succor, and relief of the sick and wounded soldiers of the United States on the battlefield, in camps, and hospitals during the recent war, and of her benevolent and diligent labors and devoted efforts to whatever might contribute to their comfort and welfare, it is ordered that a stand of arms of the United States colors [a national flag, complete with all accouterments] be presented to Miss Dix. Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War (Amazing Women of the Civil War, 201).* "Dragon Dix" was very obviously moved by this gift, and told her friends that *no possession will be so prized while I am alive to love and serve my country (Amazing Women of the Civil War, 201).*

Her Civil War work was just the tip of the iceberg. Dorothea is even better known for her reforms in taking care of the mentally ill, who were treated extremely poorly in America. Often, they were locked in jails, attics, or cellars. Because of her efforts, the first insane asylums were created in America with the hope that the mentally ill could be treated with compassion.