

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING: Women in the Civil War Navy

Would it surprise you to learn that the first women officially recognized as part of the U.S. military were African American Civil War nurses?

Step back to the early days of the Civil War--a time when everyone expected the war to end quickly with a few decisive battles. When that easy resolution did not occur, both sides faced a huge challenge in building their military infrastructure--uniforms, weapons, horses and mules to pull cannons, food for vast armies, transportation, and, sad to say, expanded medical services.

The male-dominated medical field did not welcome females anywhere near the battlefield or in hospitals. Anyone who has read the stories of Clara Barton, Dr. Mary Walker, or Dorothea Dix knows how hard these ladies had to push to be "allowed" to serve.

Yet the Civil War Navy opened up its services to women when it staffed the hospital ship, the USS *Red Rover*, on the Mississippi River. This Mississippi side-wheel steamer, captured from the Confederates, was refitted from fighting service to medical service by the Union Navy in December 1862 and would serve throughout the war.

Originally staffed with male doctors and nurses, it needed additional staffing, as the ship traveled up and down the river transporting supplies and moving the sick and wounded.

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25 YEARS TOGETHER

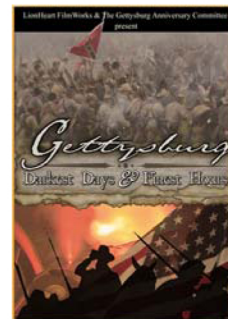


Congratulations to Jim Getty, who celebrates 25 years of working with Tigrett Corp. Our first workshop together was in March 1989, and Jim continues "wow-ing" students in his first-person presentation as Lincoln for all our "Lessons from Lincoln" programs. We have traveled with Jim to run programs in Minnesota, Michigan, Florida, and Virginia, as well as at home in Gettysburg. A toast to the best!

When Sister Angela of the Sisters of the Holy Cross offered the services of experienced nurses, the Navy gladly accepted her offer. Sister M. Veronica, Sister M. Adela, and Sister M. Callista were transferred to the *Red Rover* from an Army hospital at Mound City, Illinois.

Then in 1863, the ship gave shelter to several escaping slaves (called "contraband") who were put to work on the busy ship. Ann Stokes, Sarah Bohannon, Ellen Campbell, Betsy Young, Sara Nothing, and Georgina Harris soon were assigned to nursing duties and were paid by the Navy. Their names are recorded on the ship's muster rolls as active duty personnel (while the nuns were simply listed as "Sisters of Charity"). Also on the rosters are 13 escaped slave women serving as laundresses (a lower rate of pay than the nurses). Thus these ladies rate the distinction as the first women to serve officially on board a naval vessel!

When the war ended in 1865, the *Red Rover*, with a record of serving over 2,400 patients, was decommissioned and sold. The African American nurses and laundresses moved on, but one, Ann Bradford Stokes, applied for and received a military pension of \$12 a month from the Navy, which she collected until her death in 1903.



DVD Movie of the 150th Reenactment

If you missed this summer's biggest-ever reenactment, you have a chance to see it in this well-written movie, which tells the story of the battle and its leaders, with reenactment scenes bringing the story to life. To get your copy [click here.](#)

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