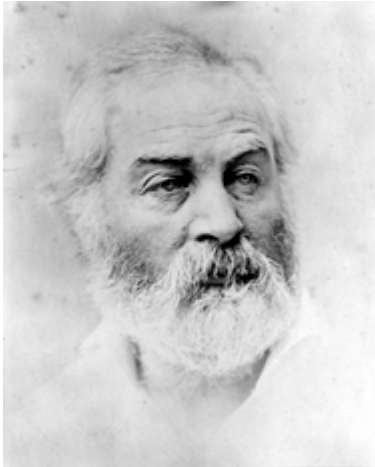


Heroes of History - Civilians in the Civil War



In our leadership class, "[The Many Faces of Leadership](#)," participants study some unconventional role models. One of my personal favorites is Walt Whitman, the "good grey poet," known around the world for his literature that broke traditional conventions of rhyme and meter, and shared his passion for the common man and America's democratic spirit.

In our class, however, we do not study Whitman's writings, but rather his personal acts of sacrifice as a nurse and volunteer in the military

hospitals. Here is his story.

In December 1862, Whitman read a newspaper story about the Battle of Fredericksburg (Virginia), which included a list of the wounded and dead. The name, First Lieutenant G.W. Whitmore, he feared, was his brother George, so Walt caught a train to Virginia within the hour. He found his brother at the battlefield site, alive, with only a superficial wound. Relieved, Walt explored the military hospital and the army camp, shocked at the conditions. He wrote in his ever-present notebook on December 23, 1863:

These are merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs or small leaves. No cots; seldom even a mattress. It is pretty cold. The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good, but I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop with him and sit near him for hours, if he wishes it.

Touched by their suffering and lack of care, Whitman traveled with the wounded to the army hospitals in Washington, DC.

At Aquia Creek landing were numbers of wounded going North. While I waited some three hours, I went around among them. Several wanted word sent home to parents, brothers, wives, etc., which I did for them (by mail the next day from Washington). On the boat I had my hands full. One poor fellow died going up.

In Washington, Whitman found lodging with friends and wrote his mother that he would stay on for a while and look for work. He felt a sense of obligation to the soldiers he had met in the camps in Virginia, and he began checking on these wounded in the hospitals. Eventually, however, Whitman saw the good his visits did for the men, and he began widening his rounds to other patients, and additional hospitals.

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*Behold I do not
give lectures or
a little charity.*

*When I give,
I give myself.*

-Walt Whitman

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To pay his rent and help underwrite his service in the hospitals, Whitman worked part-time as a copyist in the Army Paymaster's Office, later finding work at the Attorney General's office and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. But Whitman always considered his real work to be caring for "the Great Army of the Sick," as he called it in one newspaper account. He was deeply moved, even transformed, by these experiences. "People used to say to me, 'Walt, you are doing miracles for those fellows in the hospitals,'" he wrote a friend. "I wasn't. I was doing miracles for myself."

Whitman shared some of his experiences through his writing, and his words inspired strangers and friends to send donations for the soldiers.

In a letter to the mother of a soldier who died under Whitman's care, he wrote:

He is one of the thousands of our unknown American young men in the ranks about whom there is no record or fame, no fuss made about their dying so unknown, but I find in them the real precious and royal ones of this land, giving themselves up, aye even their young and precious lives, in their country's cause.

Whitman remained faithful to "his boys" to the end, regularly visiting Harewood, the last Civil War hospital in Washington, D.C., until it closed in April 1866.

Whitman's leadership was a different sort from the battlefield bravery we so often celebrate. He was a leader by example, doing what he felt was needed, not seeking position or compensation. He was a role model for the values he held.

Frederick Douglass, Clara Barton, Walt Whitman, Harriet Tubman, Matthew Fontaine Maury

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