

BRADLEY, AMY MORRIS
(1823-1904)

Union army nurse

Amy Morris Bradley was like other successful relief workers in her organizational genius and understanding of how to cut red tape without breaching military etiquette—a code of conduct she referred to as her “peace method.” When she left the service in 1865, she had worked as a transport nurse, brought order to Alexandria’s Convalescent Camp “Misery,” helped hundreds of soldiers obtain discharges and back pay, and won praise from surgeons, hospital administrators, and soldiers as a woman “possessed of superior executive ability.”

With a history of respiratory illnesses and weighing just over a hundred pounds, this native of East Vassalboro, Maine, was an unlikely candidate for war service when she arrived at Camp Franklin, Virginia, in September 1861. As a young child, Bradley lost her mother and was raised by her married sisters. At sixteen, she went to work teaching, a career she parlayed into administrative positions in the 1840s. By 1850 she was suffering from acute bronchitis and resigned her job in the hope of recovering in a brother’s Charleston home. When Bradley returned to New England in 1851 and fell ill again, doctors advised her to relocate permanently. In 1853 she jumped at an opportunity to work in Central America as a governess. She moved to San Jose in November, and in a matter of months, had opened Costa Rica’s first international school. Its principal until 1857, the thirty-eight-year-old spinster, now fluent in Spanish, accepted a job translating documents for a glass company in East Cambridge, Massachusetts.

From East Cambridge, she wrote to the 3d Maine Volunteers in 1861, asking for a position as a nurse. Regimental surgeons G. S. Palmer and George E. Brickert attempted to dissuade her, but Bradley insisted that she was equal to the rigors of camp life and started as matron on 1 September. With hard physical labor, Bradley’s health actually improved; she would always prefer work in the field to that in poorly ventilated general hospitals. So adept was she in bringing order to the regimental hospital that by late fall, General Henry Slocum gave her charge of medical arrangements for his brigade. Near Camp Franklin she fitted out the Powell and Octagon houses to accommodate sick and wounded men. After the brigade

left for Centreville in the spring, the hospitals were closed. After several weeks of transience Bradley went to Washington to seek employment with the Sanitary Commission, which was then equipping hospital boats in anticipation of McClellan’s spring campaigns.

In retrospect, Bradley’s move from the Army of the Potomac to the Sanitary Commission was not fortunate. Although commissioners like Frederick Knapp enthusiastically enlisted her aid, Bradley was snubbed by elite transport workers, who believed—erroneously—that she drew a salary. After conducting 1,000 wounded from Fortress Monroe to New York on the *Ocean Queen*, Bradley was left to manage the cleanup, a formidable task of flushing the decks of mud and effluvia and laundering bloody uniforms left behind. From the battle of Fair Oaks in May 1862, until McClellan’s forces vacated the Peninsula at the end of the summer, Bradley served as custodial supervisor on seven ships, while “the Aristocracy of the Commission”—New York blue bloods like Katharine Wormeley, Georgeanna Woolsey, and Ellie (Mrs. George Templeton) Strong—managed to secure more desirable assignments. On board the *Knickerbocker* in June, Bradley met Michigan’s Annie Etheridge, whose sterling work ethic and lack of pretense were more to Bradley’s liking.

No sooner had Bradley helped evacuate men from the Peninsula to Aquia Creek than she was summoned to Washington to revive the Soldiers’ Home on North Capitol, a facility that offered soldiers a free bed and food when they made the transition from the hospital to their regiments. After putting the home in order—accomplished chiefly through hiring three women to do the cooking, laundry, and chamber work—Bradley began to seek other venues for her organizational zeal. By December 1862 she began to clean up the dismal Convalescent Camp in Alexandria by establishing a hospital, bath house, cook house, and regular laundry service. Bradley also put into place procedures to help soldiers obtain back pay and discharge papers and to rescind desertion charges if they had been hospitalized. In a year’s time, nearly 112,000 men went through the camp, hundreds of whom Bradley personally escorted through the military bureaucracy.

Early in 1864 the government sent inmates of the camp to area hospitals and reorganized it as Camp Distribution (later *Rendezvous of Distribution*). So grateful to Bradley were the convalescents, that a delegation honored her with a gold watch. Without its sick and wounded, Camp Distribution now served as a way station for soldiers awaiting assignment to new regiments. In the interest of disseminating information about furloughs, medical discharges, and sanitary procedures, Bradley created the *Soldiers’ Journal* in February 1864, which ultimately boasted 20,000 subscribers, including President Lincoln and General Grant. For eighteen months, the journal was published weekly at five cents per copy; its profits of over \$2,000 went to an orphanage after the war. On her last day of service in August 1865, Bradley was nearly killed when a driver lost control of her carriage and left her to fend for herself from the back seat. The irony of spending four years exposed to bullets and disease only to be killed by a runaway horse was not lost on Bradley, who managed to stop the animal before it vaulted over a cliff.

Bradley traveled to Wilmington, North Carolina, in late summer, where she turned her attention back to school administration. Under the auspices of the Soldiers’ Memorial Association, she opened a free school, which became the seed for Wilmington’s public schools later in the century. Bradley maintained her roles as teacher and administrator until her retirement in 1891. She died thirteen years later at the age of eighty.

—Jane E. Schulz