



HFCWRT Monthly Newsletter

Vol. 36 September 2016 No. 01

www.harpersferrycwrt.org

- DATE:** Wednesday, September 14th, 2016
- TIME:** Dinner 7:00 PM; Program 8:00
- PLACE:** Camp Hill Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, WV
- SPEAKER:** Dwight Sturtevant Hughes
- SUBJECT:** A Confederate Biography: *The Cruise of the CSS Shenandoah*

The Speaker:

Dwight Hughes graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1967 and served twenty years as a Navy surface warfare officer on many oceans in ships ranging from destroyer to aircraft carrier and with river forces in Vietnam (Bronze Star for Meritorious Service, Purple Heart). Building on a lifetime of study in naval history, he lives and writes in Nokesville, Virginia.

The Subject

“The cruise of a ship is a biography,” wrote the Confederacy’s foremost sailor, Raphael Semmes. A ship can be, therefore, a central character in a life story through which we view the momentous past more clearly. From October 1864 to November 1865, the CSS Shenandoah carried the Civil War around the globe to the ends of the earth through every extreme of sea and storm. Her officers represented a cross section of the Confederacy from Old Dominion first families through the Deep South aristocracy to a middle-class Missourian: a nephew of Robert E. Lee; a grandnephew of founder George Mason; a son-in-law to Raphael Semmes; grandsons of men who fought at George Washington’s side; an uncle of Theodore Roosevelt. They considered themselves Americans, Southerners, rebels, and warriors embarking on the voyage of their lives, defending their country as they understood it, and pursuing a difficult, dangerous mission in which they succeeded spectacularly after it no longer mattered.

The Meal

A family-style meal will be served at 7:00 PM prior to the program. The cost of the meal is \$15.00 per person. Reservations for the meal **must be made no later than Sunday, September 11th**, with Kevin Pawlak at 16kpawlak1829@gmail.com or 585-880-0425. The meal will consist of baked ziti, tossed salad, garlic bread, butter, iced tea, coffee, and dessert.

Louisa May Alcott Goes to War

For generations of Americans, Louisa May Alcott has been revered as the author of *Little Women* (1868), the semi-autobiographical novel about four sisters living in Concord, Massachusetts, while their father served in the Civil War. In *Little Women* and its equally popular sequels, Alcott was clearly the model for her heroine, Jo March, the rebellious tomboy who grows up to be a writer. It’s no surprise, therefore, that she is chiefly remembered today as the author of children’s books. The real Louisa May Alcott was a much more complex and interesting figure. To earn a living she penned—under a pseudonym—lurid and even racy stories with titles like “Pauline’s Peril and Punishment” for popular magazines. In addition, she wrote serious novels for adults. But she was also a lifelong advocate for social reform, championing abolitionism as well as women’s rights. Perhaps the least well-known aspect of her surprising career is that she volunteered to serve as a nurse in the Civil War. She nearly died from a disease she contracted during that period, and she later wrote one of the first memoirs to draw the public’s attention to conditions in the military hospitals and chronicle the suffering endured by wounded soldiers.

When the war broke out, the Alcotts, like many other New England families, regarded the sectional conflict as a glorious crusade to end slavery. Unlike the fictional Mr. March of *Little Women*, Louisa’s father Bronson Alcott, a philosopher, educational reformer and Trans-cendentalist who had long battled financial woes, was over 60 and too old to serve. But his second daughter—who was by then approaching 30 and already accustomed to thinking of herself as a spinster, destined to become the breadwinner of their family—burned with desire to help the Union cause. Given what we know about Louisa’s tomboy leanings, it seems only natural that she refused to be satisfied with

knitting socks and sewing bandages, choosing instead to volunteer for the Union's fledgling corps of female nurses.

At the war's outbreak there were no female nurses, and the medical departments of both the Union and Confederate armies were woefully unprepared for the torrent of casualties from wounds and disease that soon overwhelmed them. The only nursing care was provided by convalescent soldiers. Women began traveling to the battlefields and hospitals to try to aid their loved ones. Many of the conflict's most famous nurses began this way, including "Mother" Mary Ann Bicker--dyke, who was so revered by Union troops that she was invited by William T. Sherman to ride in the Grand Review in Washington at the war's end. Inspired by the example of England's Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War, women also pressed to serve formally. Despite resistance from the military medical establishment, by August 1861 women could be officially mustered as nurses, "to receive forty cents a day and one ration."

Still, it was not until the summer of 1862 that women began to serve in numbers, and Surgeon General William Hammond issued Circular No. 7, setting forth the conditions under which women would be accepted. That order became the template for Dorothea Dix, the first super-visor of Nurses. Only "matronly" women between 35 (quickly lowered to 30) and 50 who could furnish character references would be accepted, and they must agree to dress plainly in "brown, gray, or black...without ornaments of any sort." No formal training was required since none was available, only "a capacity to care for the sick."

Dix had once worked as an assistant in Bronson Alcott's Temple School in Boston, so it was not difficult for Louisa to secure an appointment. In early December 1862, just after the disastrous defeat of Union forces at Fredericksburg, she reported for duty at the ramshackle Union Hotel in Washington, which had been hastily converted into a hospital. Her plunge into the reality of war was swift, since casualties from the battle—which she referred to as "the Burnside blunder"—were streaming in. As she relates in her memoir, *Hospital Sketches*:

"There they were! 'our brave boys,' as the papers justly call them, for cowards could hardly have been so riddled with shot and shell, so torn and shattered, nor have borne suffering for which we have no name, with an uncomplaining fortitude....In they came, some on stretchers, some in men's arms, some feebly staggering along propped on rude crutches, and one lay stark and still with covered face, as a comrade gave his name to be recorded before they carried him away to the dead house."

One can only imagine how shocking this introduction to the brutal aftermath of combat was for Alcott. But she quickly settled into hospital routines—washing and feeding the wounded, and following the surgeons on their rounds to change dressings and administer what few medicines were available. Much of the nurses' time, of course, was devoted to providing whatever comfort they could to the soldiers, reading to them, writing letters, talking and listening to them, and holding their hands while the doctors probed their wounds—without benefit of anesthetics. (Excerpted from History.net as an article by Robert Sattelmeyer Who is Regents' Professor Emeritus at Georgia State University and the editor of *American History Through Literature*. Article originally appeared in April 2012 Civil War Times.)