“War leaves permanent scars on everything it touches. For nursing, those scars have been mixed.”

- Historian P. N. Palmer
In 1898, the U.S. went to war against Spain after the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor. Cuba was a Spanish colony, and the U.S. government blamed Spain for the disaster. During the war, battles were fought in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

More than 2,000 American soldiers died during this war, but fewer than 400 died in combat.

Many of the soldiers who died never saw combat or even left the United States. Diseases, including typhoid, malaria, and yellow fever, caused most of the American casualties in the Spanish-American War.

The U.S. Army needed to improve sanitary conditions for soldiers, most of whom lived in overcrowded makeshift camps. The Army also needed nurses.

Examine the role of nurses during the Spanish-American War, and learn how those nurses expanded opportunities for women, through historic photographs and written accounts.

- 2,000+ soldier deaths
- <400 combat deaths

How do you win a war against disease?
A Brief History of Nursing

For most of human history, women have acted as nurses for family, friends, and neighbors. Nursing was often unpaid and done in people’s homes after illness, injury, or old age.

Some women acquired more knowledge or skills than others. They may have had a relative who was a good nurse, or they may have just had strong stomachs, a good constitution, and a talent of caring for others. They might have become known in their community for their knowledge and nursing skills.

In the 1850s and 1860s, the Crimean War and the U.S. Civil War changed nursing. Technological advancements produced modern firearms that inflicted more casualties. Nursing on a large scale became more necessary, and organization and experience proved important. Women volunteered as nurses during wartime, and some, like Clara Barton (pictured left, Civil War) and Florence Nightingale (Crimean War), became famous for their nursing and organizational work.

Nightingale established nurse education programs around specific principles, which influenced many American nursing programs established after the Civil War.

Meanwhile, hospitals became more numerous and developed nurse training programs for women. By 1900, there were between 400 and 800 nursing schools in the United States.

Training Programs

Nursing students typically trained for two to three years. They lived in “nurses’ homes” on hospital grounds and were not allowed to marry. While they were students, nurses worked without pay. Some schools used this free labor to assign nurses duties such as cleaning and doing laundry. Some nurses spent more time doing these chores than learning in classrooms and laboratories.

There were no standardized nursing uniforms, so working nurses wore caps specific to their nursing school after graduating. With every graduate acting as an advertisement for the quality of the nursing school, schools began to compete and to improve their curricula.
In April 1898, the United States declared war on Spain and the U.S. Army grew from 28,000 regulars to 300,000 regulars and volunteers. In the lead-up to war, the Army realized that it would need more nurses. Though some Army officers thought that untrained infantry corpsmen could meet nursing demands, few men volunteered for this position. The Army thus decided to hire women as contract nurses, who would serve temporarily.

During the Spanish-American War, the sudden influx of soldiers strained Army resources. Most soldiers lived in overcrowded, undersupplied makeshift camps. The Army built most of these camps in southern states to prepare men for the tropical climates in which they would serve. Problems with sanitation and overcrowding in hastily built camps led to widespread illness from diseases like yellow fever, malaria, and typhoid.

The Spanish-American War marked the first time that professionally-trained nurses served in the U.S. Army. Congress authorized funding for 1,000 female nurses, but more than 1,500 women eventually served as contract nurses during the war and immediately afterward. Nuns from religious orders were also valued as nurses, as they often had the best medical training; more than 250 served during the Spanish-American War.

“When you first arrived we did not know what to do with a contingent of women in the camp, now we are wondering what we should have done without you.”

- Colonel John Van Rensseler Hoff, chief field surgeon at Camp Thomas, Georgia to nurse Anna Maxwell

1. Goldenberg, *Nurses of a Different Stripe*
ATTITUDES TOWARD FEMALE NURSES

“I believe, as a rule, that the female nurse should never be employed in military hospitals, except under conditions, such as existed during the Spanish-American War, when an enormous army was placed in the field, and overwhelmed with sickness, there being at the time scarcely sufficient trained hospital corps men in service to attend to the needs of one army corps.”

- Major L. M. Maus, surgeon in charge of the U.S. Hospital at Fort Hamilton, New York, in a letter to Surgeon General George Miller Sternberg (June 3, 1899)²

“I am sorry to trouble you again. Your nurses arrived and are hard at work. Owing to the large percentage of sickness among the nurses I felt obliged to keep all six that arrived here. Unless some are able to return to duty I shall be obliged to telegraph on Sunday morning for six or perhaps 10 more.... These nurses are very zealous—they over-work themselves from the highest and best motives and many of them take it awfully to heart when they are stopped and to be invalided is very bitter to them.”

- Surgeon E.C. Carter of Camp Thomas, Georgia, from a letter to Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee³

“The corps of Army surgeons in charge were men of ability, and it is only fair to say that they worked hard, and gave their skill and attention as far as they were able. But the physicians themselves have said that without the nurses, the record would have contained many more fatalities, and the mortality might have reached as high as 30 or 40 per cent. This seems almost incredible, but it is true…. Everywhere the nurses gave evidence of a womanly sympathy in connection with their professional skill, and possibly the effect of these restoratives, if they can be called such, assisted in the ultimate recovery of many cases considered hopeless.”

- Report on the employment of nurses, Ft Monroe, Virginia

“In my opinion this would be very unwise legislation. Trained female nurses are out of place as regular attendants of sick and wounded soldiers in the ward of a general hospital. They may be very useful for certain cases and especially in preparation and serving of special diet, etc. It is my intention to employ trained female nurses to such an extent as may be necessary and desirable, but the passage of this bill greatly embarrass [sic] me in the administration of our general hospitals.”

- George Miller Sternberg, Army Hospitals Surgeon General

UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Not all women were able to benefit when the nursing profession opened to women. Regardless of their actions during the Civil War, black women were barred from earning formal nursing credentials after the war. In 1879, Mary Mahoney graduated from nursing school as the first African American woman in the United States to study and train as a professional nurse. When nursing schools were established, they remained segregated until the mid-1900s. Hospitals were also racially segregated.

Although Mahoney did not serve as a nurse during the Spanish-American War, she was a strong advocate for the equal treatment and professionalism of African American nurses.

The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which handled the recruitment of nurses during the Spanish-American War, would not accept black volunteers. However, some black nurses did serve during the war. At the time, many people believed the false notion that African Americans were naturally immune to tropical diseases. The Surgeon General asked Namahyoke Curtis, a prominent minority nurse in Washington, D.C., to recruit black nurses. The 32 women Curtis recruited did not necessarily have prior nursing credentials. Two of them died of typhoid fever during the war. Additional black women served as nurses by contracting directly with the Army. In total, as many as 80 African American women may have served as nurses during the Spanish-American War.

Camp/Hospital Conditions

“Our beds were filled with typhoid cases, and all desperately sick. Carrying ice and nourishment up and down the hillside. Rain failed to dampen our ardor if it did our uniforms and frequently left us soaked all day. How grateful the boys were for these services. It made no difference to us that we were 40 to 50 in a shack when off duty, just room enough to stand between the cots. One lantern banging in the middle of the building for light.”

- Barbara U. Austin, who served at Sternberg Field Hospital, Fort Thomas, Georgia

“Miss Dunrise... arrived this A.M. much to our delight & I am much obliged for sending her so promptly. We are in terrible distress for nurses and can’t understand the delay in sending them—there ought to be 50 good nurses in Washington willing & glad to come here. We have now in the hospital 150 cases of typhoid fever & and six trained nurses to take care of these & and there are 100 more cases waiting to come. We need 30 trained nurses & cannot do with less. I understand from the Surgeon General that the matter has been turned over to you & I trust you will at once relieve our distress.”

- Major J. W. Bayne, M.D., in a letter to Dr. McGee thanking her for sending a nurse and describing the conditions at Camp Thomas, Georgia 7

"[After being assigned to the Army hospital at Montauk Point, Long Island, New York] we had to hustle to . . . get into uniform then we returned to the Colonel’s tent and were ordered to line up outside and a group of doctors were told to choose the nurse each wanted. It was positively funny and yet humiliating to stand there and wonder who would choose you. I don’t know how they sized us up...We worked from 5 o’clock until about 8 o’clock without food of any kind, and when we went to breakfast we would get black coffee and some kind of mush, Indian meal or oat meal, then back to work [until 8 p.m.]. I remember one dinner I went to where there was nothing but boiled cabbage and black coffee."

- Nurse Rose M. Heavren, from a speech about her experiences at a reunion of Spanish-American War nurses, March 28, 1950 8

7. Gessner, "Heroines of Health"
“We had no disinfectant whatsoever to use. There was not even one wash basin in these wards for the nurses to wash their hands. At one time when there was a shortage of water for several days, we were requested “not wash at all.” The three toilets which were supposed to be adequate for the needs of the 200 nurses, were over 500 feet away from their sleeping quarters. Every one of the nurses had contracted dysentery and under these fearfully unsanitary conditions, consider how inevitable it was, that the majority of the nurses left Sternberg Hospital Service with an intestinal condition which soon became chronic and which we shall suffer from the effects of, until the end of our life.”

- Nurses Helen B. Schuler and Florence M. Kelly on the conditions at Sternberg Field Hospital, Fort Thomas, Georgia

In addition to her skills as a doctor, Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee was a gifted organizer. She created a committee of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) to screen and select nurses for contract service during the war. She later founded the Society of Spanish-American War Nurses and continued to advocate on behalf of veteran nurses.

Dr. McGee believed that it was important for contract nurses to be professionals: to receive training at a hospital. In selecting nurses, she and her team also looked carefully at each nurse’s experience and character. Applicants needed to demonstrate their character by providing a letter of recommendation, usually from the superintendent of a nursing school.

“I will only point out that there were 1,700 women ... who served as nurses in the Spanish War period. Of that number, only 184 are drawing pension.... Hundreds of nurses are not eligible because they served only in the greatest emergency: hence less than 90 days. Of course, many have died. The Spanish War nurses are veterans in every sense of the word.... They fought the enemy of disease, which was the real enemy in the Spanish-American War, and they took the medicine of death and illness, just as the soldiers did. Thirteen of my nurses died in the service.”

- Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee, 1926, in testimony to Congress about the need for additional support for Spanish American War nurse veterans. Legislation passed in 1922 required nurses to have served for a minimum of 90 days in order to collect benefits. This requirement excluded many nurses from receiving benefits.

10. Gessner, “Heroines of Health”
WOULD YOU WANT THIS JOB?

Responsibilities:
• 14-hour shifts
• 20-minute lunch break
• Provide your own uniform
• Give ice baths and dress wounds
• Prepare food
• Feed soldiers
• Administer medicine
• Keep wards clean

Benefits:
• $30 a month
• Lodging (sometimes)
• Meals

Typical letter of reply to nursing volunteer application:

Dear Madam:

Your application of recent date has been received. All applications from women for hospital positions, whether addressed to the Surgeon-General or to the director of the DAR hospital corps, are placed on file in this office. The reserve list is composed, however, only of those who have had hospital training and who answer satisfactorily to the inclosed [sic] questions. Nurses who receive appointment in the army must be between 30 and 50 years of age. They will be paid railroad fare to the place of duty and $30 a month with board. If practicable, lodging will be given, but other expenses must be met by the nurse. Women may later be appointed to shore duty in the Navy, but no provision has yet been made therefor. Indorsements as to good character and general ability should accompany the application, and it is requested that, if possible, such indorsements [sic] should include one from some Daughter of the American Revolution.

Anita Newcomb McGee, M.D.,
Vice-president General,
D.A.R. Hospital Corps

The Civil War created an immediate need for large numbers of nurses. At this time, most nurses had no formal training. Nursing education programs were created after the war, and grew significantly during the 1870s. Many nurse certification programs followed the “Nightingale Principles” of professional standards established by Florence Nightingale.

When the United States went to war against Spain in 1898, the Army realized that it would need more nurses. Rather than allow female nurses to join the Army, women were hired on short-term contracts. This was the first time that professionally-trained female nurses had worked for the U.S. military. While not serving in the military, they served as a quasi-military unit. Despite some opposition to women serving close to the frontlines, more than 1,500 women ultimately served as contract nurses during the Spanish-American War.

In 1901, the Army Nurse Corps was created, with much of the legislation drafted by Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee.

During U.S. participation in World War I (1917-1918), thousands of American women supported the war effort and more than 16,000 served overseas in some capacity. Most of these women worked as nurses. The demand for nurses further increased, both at home and abroad, during the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-1919. More than 260 Army nurses died during World War I, most from influenza.
World War I was also a turning point in women’s rights. While women in some states were already able to vote, the visibly different role of women in the war tipped the scales for universal suffrage in the United States. In 1919, Congress passed the 19th amendment, which granted universal suffrage to women.

While women were making great strides towards equality, there were still many areas for improvement. In 1922, Congress granted pensions to women who had served as nurses in the Spanish-American War. To qualify, however, nurses were required to have served for at least 90 days. Due to the short duration of the war, most nurses did not qualify. Some would wait decades for official recognition from the U.S. government, and others would not receive such recognition during their lifetimes.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts worked with Army leaders to establish the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC, later the Women’s Army Corps, or WAC).

As a volunteer during World War I, Rogers had seen how the military treated women unequally. Women had worked for the military, but were responsible for procuring their own food and quarters, lacked legal protections, and received no disability benefits or pensions after the war.

While women were still not treated equally in the military, the WAC was a step forward. During World War II, 140,000 women served in the Army while 11,000 served in the Navy WAVES, 10,000 women volunteered for the Coast Guard SPARS, and 20,000 served in the Marines. African American women were allowed to serve in segregated units, but their numbers were initially limited by quotas. Over time, some of these quotas and other restrictions were lifted.

With the integration of the military in 1948, women, regardless of race, were able to serve in a variety of positions.
As warfare modernized during the late 19th century, governments mobilized female nurses to ensure that wounded or ill servicemen received proper care during wartime. The Army first used professionally trained nurses during the Spanish-American War. With the creation of the Army Nurse Corps in 1901 (and similar organizations in the other military branches), thousands of others soon followed. Section 21 of Arlington National Cemetery, commonly known as the “Nurses Section,” is the final resting place for 653 nurses who served in the U.S. armed forces during the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. These women helped professionalize the nursing field and integrate it into the military. Monuments dedicated to these women can also be found in Section 21.
Overlooking the “Nurses Section” is a white statue made from Tennessee marble. The figure, often called “The Spirit of Nursing,” is surrounded by evergreens and appears to gesture towards the rows of deceased nurses that lie before her. The figure is dressed simply with her hair pinned up, a practical style many nurses adopted while working.

Frances Rich, who served as a Navy WAVE (the women’s branch of the U.S. Naval Reserve) during World War II, sculpted the statue in 1938 initially to honor the nurses who died during their service in the Army or Navy in World War I. However, the monument’s meaning has since expanded to include all nurses who served in the Armed Forces.

The dedication ceremony occurred in 1938. On July 13, 1970, Capt. Delores Cornelius, deputy director of the Navy Nurse Corps, requested authority to install a bronze plaque which reads:

_This Monument Was Erected in 1938 and Rededicated in 1971 To Commemorate Devoted Service To Country and Humanity By Army, Navy, and Air Force Nurses_
The Spanish-American War of 1898 was the first war in which women could serve as contract nurses in the U.S. Army. More than 1,500 women served as nurses during the war. Although no nurses were killed in combat, 140 died of typhoid and 13 from other diseases.

The Society of Spanish-American War Nurses dedicated a monument to the memory of those brave women volunteers who nursed the wounded and sick during the war. Many nurses who served and lost their lives are buried near the monument in Section 21 of Arlington National Cemetery. The monument features a large granite stone with a Maltese cross, the insignia of the Society of Spanish-American War Nurses. Its inscription states that monument is dedicated “to our comrades.”

Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee, as president of the Society of Spanish-American Nurses, is credited with directing the efforts to erect the Spanish-American War Nurses monument. Her daughter Klotho unveiled the monument and, above, is pictured beside it on the day of its dedication, May 2, 1905.
INDIVIDUAL NURSES

ANNA CAROLINE MAXWELL
1851-1929
Spanish-American War
Maxwell became a nurse in 1880. She served as the superintendent of nurses at hospitals in Montreal, Boston and New York. She created a new training school for nurses at Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, which became the Columbia University School of Nursing. During the Spanish-American War, she petitioned the Surgeon General to allow her and her nurses to station themselves in U.S. military hospitals and implement sanitation reforms.

DR. ANITA NEWCOMB MCGEE
1864-1940
Spanish-American War
Born into a well-educated Washington, D.C. family, McGee attended medical school and became a doctor. During the Spanish-American War, she advocated for the use of professionally trained female nurses in the Army. She organized volunteer nurses through the Daughters of the American Revolution, a non-governmental agency. Later, she served as acting assistant surgeon of the U.S. Army and helped to create the Army Nurse Corps.

NAMAHYOKO “NAMAH” CURTIS
1861-1935
Spanish-American War
Curtis had more education than many other minority women of her time, though she did not complete formal nurse training. During the Spanish-American War, the Surgeon General assigned Curtis to recruit African American women for nursing positions. She was married to a prominent African American physician in Washington, D.C.

ANNA “ANITA” H. CAMPOS
1859-1899
Spanish-American War
Campos was the first Spanish-American War nurse buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Born to farmers in New Jersey, she married a Cuban man, Charles V. Campos, and lived in Cuba for a time. Campos enlisted as a nurse during the Spanish-American War and died from malaria in Cuba in 1899.

Like many people during this time period, especially women, minorities, and the working class, limited details about the lives of Curtis and Campos are known. Many of these details come from government records which often provide minimal detail.
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Page 3: Staff of Providence Hospital. Photograph, ca. 1895.  
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Page 5: Spanish-American War nurses. Photograph, 1898.  

Page 5: Sternberg General Hospital, Manila, P.I: Ward tent. Photograph, ca. 1898.  

Page 6: Photograph. 1898.  

Page 7: Mary Eliza Mahoney. Photograph, ca. late 1800s.  
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_Eliza_Mahoney.jpg

Page 8: Sternberg General Hospital, Camp Thomas, Chickamauga, GA. Photograph, undated.  
IMAGES, continued


Page 16: Nurses. Photograph, undated. ANC Archives.


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Page 19: Lenah H. Sutcliffe Higbee, (NC) USN. Photograph, ca. 1917-1919. 

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Army_nurses_rescued_from_Santo_Tomas_1945e.jpg