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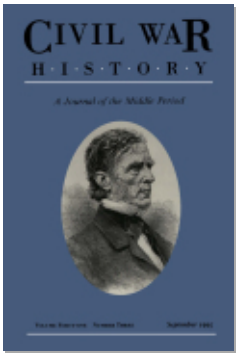

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CIVIL WAR NURSE, CIVIL WAR NURSING: REBECCA USHER OF MAINE

Elizabeth D. Leonard

ON MARCH 31, 1866, historian Frank Moore penned the following letter to Rebecca Usher of Hollis, Maine:

> [Mrs. Preble] of Portland . . . mentions your name as one of the ladies who went from Maine, and who were devoted and persistent in their labors for the soldiers.
>
> Two of the ladies . . . have favored me with an account in brief of what was done, and of the hospital scenes and incidents that fell under their observation. . . .
>
> . . . I should like very much to receive from you . . . such incidents as fell under your observation while out, as well as a brief statement of your own history, in that connexion, the time of going out, the hospitals where you were the most of the time engaged, and some account of your daily round of occupations. . . .
>
> No more prominence will be given to your name than you may indicate as desireable; my object being as much to give a view of the general labor of women in this great field, as to eulogize particular heroines.[1]

Moore's letter to Usher was one of many he sent out shortly after the Civil War to women whose responses he hoped would serve as the basis for his bulky commemorative, *Women of the War: Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice,* published late in 1866.

Rebecca Usher responded readily to Moore's request. On April 13, two weeks after his first letter, Moore dispatched a note thanking Usher for the "extracts" that he assured her would be of "great assistance in gathering the facts for my history of the noble women of Maine" in the war and promising to send her a copy of the completed book. *Women of the War* included a twelve-page chapter on Usher, who, Moore wrote, "was among the first to . . . devote

[1] Frank Moore to Rebecca Usher, Mar. 31, 1866, Rebecca Usher Papers, Collection 9, Maine Historical Society, Portland. Unless noted otherwise, all of Rebecca Usher's correspondence is found in these Papers. I hereby acknowledge with much gratitude the assistance I received from various librarians at the Maine Historical Society during my time of research there. I particularly would like to recognize Nicholas Noyes for his help.

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herself to the alleviation of the untold and unmeasured sufferings produced by the great war." He told of her months in Chester, Pennsylvania, as a nurse at the Union army's General Hospital. He told also of her time as a soldier-relief worker at the Maine State Agency in City Point, Virginia (near Petersburg). These activities, and the devotion to the Union soldier that they implied, had earned Usher an honored place in Moore's commemorative of Northern women's participation in the Civil War.[2]

Later in her life Usher considered composing her own memoir of her wartime experiences but did not pursue the project—hindered, undoubtedly, by her lack of a substantial personal journal from the period as a reference. "We were doing what we could to make history," Usher later recalled, "and had no time or inclination to write it."[3] Happily, Usher did leave a collection of her private papers (primarily from the war years) for future scholars to discover. If the material Usher left us is incomplete (she left little material from her childhood, for example, and nothing to indicate the direction her postwar life took), it is nonetheless rich in its relevance for the study of Northern women in the Civil War.

Rebecca Usher was born in 1821 to Hannah Lane and Ellis Baker Usher. Ellis Usher was a wealthy mill owner and lumberman who also served at different times as a delegate to Maine's state constitutional convention, as town clerk for Hollis, and as state senator for his district. Rebecca seems to have received a good basic education as a young girl, probably at a local girls' seminary. By sixteen she had left Hollis for an Ursuline Convent at Three Rivers in Canada, where she remained for four years studying and then teaching French. At age twenty she returned to Maine and her family, perhaps responding to her sister Martha's deep longing for her presence. "You must come home with Pa," wrote Martha, in December 1840. "We shan't consent to your remaining any longer, but shall indeed give up if you dont come home this month." We then lose sight of Usher's path again until the outbreak of the Civil War, although we do know that she did not marry during this time (or for the rest of her life, for that matter).[4] Instead, she most

[2] Frank Moore to Rebecca Usher, Apr. 13, 1866; Frank Moore, *Women of the War: Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* (Hartford, Conn.: S. S. Scranton and Co., 1866), 453–64. Linus Brockett and Mary Vaughan, authors of a second massive commemorative of Northern women in the Civil War, also included Usher in their work, although they did not devote an entire chapter to her. See Linus P. Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism, and Patience* (Philadelphia: Zeigler, McCurdy and Co., 1867), 456, 461–63.

[3] In handwriting that bespeaks mature years, Usher on at least one occasion drew up two separate lists of what appear to be chapter titles, one list for her time in Chester, the other for City Point. Usher Papers. Rebecca Usher to William Lochran, Feb. 16, 1894, Rebecca Usher Pension File, no.1132097, RG 15, National Archives. I am extremely grateful to Prof. Jane E. Schultz of Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis for sharing her photocopies of the material from Usher's pension file with me. This is material to which I otherwise would not have had access at the time this paper was being prepared. I am also grateful to Professor Schultz for her preliminary reading of this article in manuscript.

[4] Martha Usher [Osgood] to Rebecca Usher, Dec. 26, 1840. That she did not marry does not

likely supported herself as a teacher and continued to live at home or with relatives.

It was in the aftermath of Antietam, in the fall of 1862, that female nurse recruitment in the North got underway in a serious manner. In October Rebecca Usher received a letter from one A. F. Quinby indicating that a nursing position under the authority of the Union army's superintendent of women nurses, Dorothea Dix, was available. "No particular qualifications or specifications are required . . . a common experience in nursing, & plain, sensible clothing. Our travelling expenses are paid, & we are allowed [paid] 40 cts per day." Around the same time that Quinby was writing to Usher, Surgeon General William Hammond was in the process of appointing Adaline Tyler of Boston matron of the Union army's General Hospital at Chester. Independent of Dix's authority by virtue of her appointment directly by the surgeon general, Tyler called for volunteer, unpaid nurses to work with her. It was her call rather than Dix's that caught Usher's attention. "[Eight] ladies responded," Usher later recalled. "Mrs Duquindre of Michigan, Miss Ellis of Mass, Bishop Southgate's daughter of New York, Miss Sarah Tucker, Miss Dupee, Miss Louise Titcomb and myself, from Portland Maine and vicinity."[5]

By the end of November 1862, Usher was in Chester. In letters written over the next few weeks to sisters Martha and Ellen, she described her situation. She wrote of her companions at the hospital:

> Our lady nurses are very pleasant[:] Miss Tucker[,] sister of Mrs John Nichols I have taken the greatest fancy to. She has a thousand little winning ways to make one like her. Is very pretty, with a plump face & a dimple in chin & cheek. Mrs Duquindre is a very pretty refined lady like woman from Boston about 25, Miss Lang is also from

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necessarily indicate that she had no suitors. Indeed, among the letters she received at the convent was one from a George Woodman (Mar. 27, 1841), which addressed her as "Dear Friend" and bore evidence of considerable affection for her. And there are other suggestive references to George Woodman in Usher's correspondence with "Mattie." See Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, undated letter. That Usher did not marry later in her life is also made clear by the fact that when she applied to the United States government for a nurse's pension in the 1890s, she (and others writing for her) used her maiden name. See Usher Pension File.

[5] The Union army had named well-known reformer Dorothea L. Dix its "Superintendent of Women Nurses" in June 1861, her commission delegating to her the responsibility "to select and assign women nurses to general or permanent military hospitals, they not to be employed in such hospitals without her sanction and approval, except in cases of urgent need." Helen Marshall, *Dorothea Dix: Forgotten Samaritan* (1937; reprint, Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967), 202. Dix's appointment does not seem to have been followed by either a rapid dissemination of material informing prospective female nurses about the opportunity for service under her direction or an enthusiastic embrace by male medical personnel of the idea of women serving in a nursing capacity in Civil War hospitals. I have written about these issues elsewhere: see my *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), chap. 1. Only the growing knowledge of the war's inevitable (if unanticipated) bloodshed drew large numbers of women into the nursing service and compelled their acceptance. A. F. Quinby to Rebecca Usher, Oct. 17, 1862, Usher Papers. Rebecca Usher to William Lochran, Feb. 16, 1894, Usher Pension File. This list differs somewhat from the list given in a letter Usher wrote early in her stay at Chester, indicating either a lapse of memory by 1894 or, more likely, some turnover in the female nursing staff at the hospital.

> Boston, & about the same age—she has become quite a bell[e]— . . . has very good literary [abilities] & converses very well, but has little depth of character. . . . These . . . together with Miss Newhall, Louise & myself, Mrs Brown the superintendent [*sic*] of the Laundry & a lady from northern New York (who is here visiting her husband who has been ill,) constitutes our mess.[6]

In letters, too, she described at length the hospital itself, providing a wonderful visual image of the place she would spend the next several months. "The main building of the Hospital . . . is . . . immense," Usher wrote to Ellen, "with large airy halls & high [ceilinged] bed rooms, heated by furnace and lighted by gas." To Martha she continued,

> The main building of the Hospital was built for a normal school & is four stories high, the lower story used for kitchens, commissary stores &c. The second comprises the Dispensary, the surgeons parlors & offices, & mess room, & Mrs Tyler's reception room, & our [the nurses'] dining room; & the two upper stories are sleeping rooms one half occupied by the officers, clerks, & their servants; & the other by the ladies & occasionally a sick soldier who is too ill, to remain in the wards. In front of this building is a large court. Standing on the steps of the Hospital, fronting the court, you see on your right, a two story building, the soldiers kitchen. . . . On the left side of the court, is another two story building[,] the Laundry. In front on the opposite side of the court is a long dining room which holds 3 or four hundred men & opening out of the lower side of that dining room, are the 5 wards.

And to Ellen she gave further detail:

> There are five wards, each ward containing three divisions, each division capable of holding 60 men. The wards are long one-story buildings plastered outside & inside lighted by gas & heated by coal stoves. Miss [Louise] Titcomb's ward[,] the only one I have been through as yet, presents a very cheerful appearance. The beds are arranged on either side [of] the room heads to the wall, & the gas fixtures running through the center are ornamented with large wreaths of evergreen & artificial flowers & small United States flags.

To Martha, she added, "Behind the main building are the guard house . . . the dead house (where the dead are laid to await burial,) & the stable. It is one of the most lovely spots I have ever seen, surrounded by fields & groves, a beautiful creek, bordered by trees . . . & in the distance, Chester Village and Delaware river with its many steam-boats & its shadowy sails."[7]

Glad to be in Chester, Usher nevertheless expressed frustration to both sisters that she had not yet been assigned a ward of her own. "I feel quite impatient to have my ward assigned to me, & begin my work," she wrote. In the meantime,

[6] Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862.

[7] Like most Civil War hospitals, at least early in the war, Chester General was not built originally as a hospital but rather as a school, and the Union army then took over the school and turned it into a hospital when the need arose. Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Nov. 23, 1862; and Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862.

she occupied herself with helping Louise Titcomb serve meals and with mending socks, doing sewing, evaluating the hospital supply situation, attending hospital entertainment programs, and getting to know the soldiers. "The men are very cheerful & kind to each other," she noted happily, "doing all they can to entertain each other."[8]

By the end of the first week in December—about two weeks after her arrival—Usher was in charge of her own ward. "I am in ward E no 2," she wrote excitedly to Martha. "Louise is in the same ward no 1, so that my room opens out of hers. I shall now soon get acquainted with my men & will write you about them." The assignment to a ward had come just in the nick of time, from Usher's perspective, as matron Tyler was also considering giving Usher the position of superintendent of the laundry. "She said she thought Louise or I could fill the place," Usher wrote, noting that Tyler was not satisfied with the woman currently engaged to do so. "But I should not be willing to take it & I could not recommend it to any one. The superintendent [*sic*] is not expected to wash any of the clothes," she confessed, "but she has about 20 women under her, & is obliged to be there in the steam all the time to arrange the work & see that it goes on well. They [the washerwomen] wash & iron there every day but Sunday." Better to be tending to the soldiers, Usher believed firmly, than doing even supervisory duty over such grueling, menial labor (although she did admit to helping the "chamber woman" on occasion "in cleaning the [soldiers'] stockings" when her regular activities permitted).[9]

What *were* Usher's, and the other women nurses', "regular activities"? According to Frank Moore, the daily work of the women nurses at Chester did *not* include the "immediate and constant nursing" of the soldiers, which was instead performed by convalescent "soldiers detailed for the purpose." Linus Brockett and Mary Vaughan, like Moore, commemorators of Northern women's work in the Civil War, agreed that the basic duties of the female nurses at Chester consisted not so much of medical assistance but rather, as they described it, of the "dispensing of the extra and low diet [specially prepared foods for the most ill] to the patients; the charge of their clothing; watching with, and attending personally to the wants of those patients whose condition was most critical; writing for and reading to such of the sick or wounded as needed or desired these services, and attending to innumerable details for their cheer and comfort." Indeed, Usher's letters from her months at Chester do not indicate any involvement (or any desire for involvement) in gritty medical procedures performed on the often severely wounded or desperately ill soldiers, or even in activities such as wound dressing or bathing or the dispensing of

[8] Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Nov. 23, 1862; and Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862.

[9] Usher actually reported her long-awaited assignment to her own ward, and discussed her relief at avoiding assignment to the laundry, in the same long letter to Martha in which she had complained of not yet having been assigned. The letter was dated December 5, 1862, but seems to have been written over the course of two or three days.

medicines. Rather, Usher's days were fully taken up with the more broadly defined "caretaking" of the soldiers in her ward, which included seeing to their meals (although rarely cooking for them). In a letter to Martha, Usher described the process by which meals were generally served. The bulk of the soldiers ate in the central dining rooms, not attended by the female nurses; only those too ill to leave the wards had their food—prepared in Matron Tyler's special kitchen—brought to them. Although Usher spoke of "serving" the men in her ward, in fact female nurses acted more as supervisors of the serving process at mealtimes. She explained,

> There are three rooms in each ward & a soldier detailed from each room to serve those who are too ill to go out to table & live on army rations. These fifteen men come down to Mrs Tyler's kitchen for food for all the sick in the wards. Each man brings a book every morning wherein the surgeon of each ward has written the diet for the day. Mrs Tyler copies the list from each man's book & serves him accordingly. From fifty to 60 sick men are served with breakfast from her kitchen. The daily bill of fare includes chicken, beef steak, mutton, oysters, eggs, toast, tea & coffee, farina, corn starch, apple sauce, pickles, vegitables [*sic*], cheese, puddings, beef tea, & chicken tea, & all kinds of soups & broths. The fifteen men arrange themselves on one side of the kitchen & come in order as they are called to her table, with waiters full of empty dishes which she [Tyler] fills according to her list from the surgeon.[10]

In addition to supervising soldiers' meals, nurses expended considerable energy distributing to them precious stores from the homefront, including clothing. On more than one occasion Usher wrote home with gratitude for receiving a box of supplies. She wrote to Ellen,

> You can hardly imagine what an exquisite pleasure it is to open a box at a hospital. No miser ever counted his gold with half the zest, with which we handle & count the nice warm clothing & delicate comforts sent to the soldiers. Tears of gratitude rise to all our eyes, & exclamations of delight burst from our lips, as we bring up from the depth of the box, the many things which we scarcely dared hope for, in this our country's time of need. . . . Two of the flannel shirts I gave to Louise & two I kept to dispense myself; one of these I gave to my dyptheria patient, whom they had stripped as soon as he arrived here & sent all his clothes to the wash-house; & replaced his two shirts with only a cotton one.

Elsewhere she noted, "we are bending all our efforts towards giving [the soldiers] a change of stockings once a fortnight[.] We do not like to have our men wear their shirts a month, & their stockings three weeks without washing, but we know that in other places there are many that have neither stockings nor shirts to wear, & so we make the best of it."[11]

[10] Moore, *Women of the War*, 454; Brockett and Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War*, 462; Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862.

[11] Rebecca Usher to "Ellie" (Ellen [Usher] Bacon), undated letter (Jan. 1863?); Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Dec. 16, 1862.

And then there was tobacco, a highly prized treat among the sick and wounded soldiers at Chester, as no doubt elsewhere. Usher's letters home repeatedly request and give thanks for donations of tobacco for the soldiers' use. The following letter to Ellen in December 1862 is typical:

> I was very glad to receive your letter containing $5.00 for tobacco[;] I have it still on hand, as I had a present of quite a large package of tobacco last week, & I am very economical with it & try to make it last as long as possible, giving it out in small parcels to the men. I am indebted to Mr. Newhall of Germantown Penn for it. He is a cousin of Susan [Newhall, another nurse at Chester] & came to call upon her, when without intending to beg I mentioned our need of tobacco . . . & the next week he came again bringing his wife & baby & Mr Barclay of Philadelphia & a large package of tobacco to be devided [*sic*] between Miss Newhall Louise & myself.

Usher's kindly concern for the soldiers' tobacco supply contrasted sharply with her own personal opinion of tobacco, revealed in a diary entry toward the end of the war: "This tobacco chewing is a great national misfortune & disgrace. Our public buildings are made filthy by it & even at the President's Levee [which she had attended some weeks before], the officer who stood at the entrance of the Green-room every now & then turned & expectorated on the carpet."[12]

What seems to have given Usher the greatest pleasure in her work, and occupied the bulk of her time, was simply becoming acquainted with and providing sisterly (or maternal) companionship to the men who surrounded her; chatting with the soldiers; listening to their stories; keeping them company; easing their homesickness, war-weariness, and despair; writing letters for them; and otherwise helping to maintain their connections with loved ones on the homefront. "[We nurses] care little for our rooms," she wrote, "our whole interest is with the soldiers." In her letters home she described various individuals and their particular circumstances. "We have a Rebel Lieut[enant] from North Carolina," she wrote on one occasion. "He was shot through the right shoulder and his right arm is lashed to his side. He is very feeble and the Surgeon thought he should be obliged to amputate his arm; but his wound is doing better. . . . He is a young man about 22 or 3— is very patient & we all feel a good deal of sympathy for him. We do not see in him a Rebel, but only a wounded soldier." Elsewhere she wrote, "Last Saturday a . . . soldier in Miss Newhall's ward died from amputation. He was so low that he did not recover from the effects of the ether. . . . He told [Miss Newhall] that he did not think he should live through the operation. He said he should be willing to die if he was sure he was prepared: that he had never spoken but one profane word, & then he got angry with a boy at school, & it had always haunted him;— that he had always endeavored to do his duty through life, but he was afraid he was not a christian." Usher took special note of those soldiers whose ethnic origins were

[12] Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Dec. 16, 1862; journal entry, Jan. 18, 1865, Rebecca Usher Diary, Usher Papers.

distinct from her own, specifically the Irish. She wrote to Ellen, "I am very much interested in my ward. I have several Irishmen in it. Pretty rough looking men some of them, but they are gentle as lambs to me." And in another letter she wrote, "[An] Irishman about 70 years old who had taken a little too much whiskey came to me one evening & insisted on shaking hands with me. I was afraid he might do or say some absurd thing & tried to withdraw, but I could not get rid of him; he shook me by the hand & then patted me on the shoulder, telling me not to be afraid of him much to the amusement of the other men. So you see I've got on the right side of the Paddies as usual." Overall, Usher admitted in a letter to a niece, "I get so much interested in many of my men that I feel sorry to part with them when they are discharged or sent to their regiments."[13]

Yet all Usher's intense interest in "her men" remained purely in the realm of the platonic, although she frequently hinted at the possible romantic overtones of her close contact with so many soldiers. Indeed, early on in her tenure at Chester it seems to have been somewhat difficult for this forty-ish single woman to get used to being around so many men at once. "I rose this morning at quarter before seven & went down to Mrs Tyler's kitchen," she wrote to Martha. "I usually go down through the courts in the morning, as the men in the wards are not always ready to receive visitors so early in the morning, & when they are, it is some what embarrassing, to march down alone through a quarter of a mile of men." "But," she added, "one soon becomes accustomed to it, so that it is rather pleasant than otherwise, & you soon find yourself talking with one another as you pass along."[14]

In relation to her very male surroundings, however, Usher developed a level of comfort in her first weeks at Chester that remained with her throughout her wartime service, perhaps contributing to the ease and humor with which she handled questions from home about the precise nature of her intimacy with the men. To her third sister, Jeannie—who seems to have been the most concerned about Rebecca's chances of acquiring a battle-front beau—she wrote in January 1863 suggesting that the whole idea of her becoming romantically involved with one of "her men" had long since become a standing joke among the hospital's female nurses, herself included. "I am so good natured," she explained to Jeannie,

> that the ladies make a target of me and seem to enjoy the practice very much. The other evening we went to call upon the Rebel Lieut. when Miss [Susan] Newhall told him Miss Usher's game was up now;—that a lady had come to see her [Usher's] Diptheria [*sic*] patient with a white feather and a red rose in her bonnet. . . . The Lieut. said that no lady could cut out Miss Usher, that Banning [the dyphtheria patient] told him that he loved her [Usher] almost like his mother. Miss Newhall remarked that that

[13] Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862; Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Dec. 16 and Nov. 23, 1862. Rebecca Usher, undated letter fragment. Internal evidence suggests that the letter was addressed to a niece or nephew and was written while at Chester. Rebecca Usher to [unnamed] "Niece," Feb. 2, 1863.

[14] Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862.

was not exactly the kind of love she was looking for. [T]he Lieut. said "he didn't know about that, that if he could find a woman he loved as he did *his* Mother, he should give her his heart, or at least offer it to her."—which of course brought down the house and I came off with flying colors.[15]

It is perhaps tempting to feel sorry for Usher in reading these words, or even these, written to Jeannie several weeks later: "I am really sorry to disappoint you, Jenny, but I haven't had an offer since I came to the hospital! I cannot say so much for Louise however, as I have more than once gone into her little ward-room & found a young man pressing his suit." And yet various factors combine to diminish one's pity for Usher's hypothetical loneliness and yearning, not the least of which is her own lack of self-pity and the general attitude of joy that she displayed repeatedly in her letters and that seems to have steadily characterized her time at the Chester hospital. Undoubtedly the soldiers' thankfulness for the nurses' presence contributed significantly to Usher's pleasure. "I have never seen anything like the gratitude of the soldiers for the smallest favor & the most common attention," Usher wrote in February 1863. Her attitude was also influenced by the soldiers' own fortitude, described vividly in a letter written by Usher's colleague at Chester, Louise Titcomb. "You may think it strange," Titcomb wrote to her correspondent, "that our contact with suffering, does not impress us differently. It does give us anxious hours, but the men themselves are so indifferent to pain, they joke so about their amputations, and their crippled condition, the idea of death impresses them so lightly, that one's sympathies are not kept alive, as they would be under any other circumstances." Furthermore, the generally smooth interrelations among the nurses, between the nurses and the matron, and between the nurses and the male medical staff can only have made life at Chester more felicitous. Of matron Tyler, Usher wrote, "I certainly never saw a woman so well adapted to her position as matron of a Hospital or one I would like so well to work under." Of her closest male colleague in the hospital she wrote, "I have a nice little ward master. To be sure he is n't a 'six footer,' not more than five feet four, but he's a handsome gentlemanly fellow & I like him very much." Usher described her ward surgeon as a "good Surgeon & very kind & attentive to his men," and the hospital's surgeons as a whole she claimed would "compare favorably with the same number anywhere." Of the convalescent male soldiers detailed to her ward she wrote, "Three of my four nurses are everything I could wish, so I am very fortunate . . . & we all move on most harmoniously." The other female nurses she described as "very pleasant" and happy with their work. "I think Louise was never so well contented in her life," Usher wrote to Jeannie.[16]

[15] Rebecca Usher to Jeannie [Usher], Jan. 9, 1863.

[16] Rebecca Usher to Jeannie [Usher], Mar. 24, 1863; Rebecca Usher to [unnamed] "Niece," Feb. 2, 1863; Louise Titcomb to Emily [White?], Jan. 4, 1863; Rebecca Usher to Nathan [?], Mar. 11, 1863; Rebecca Usher to "Ellie" (probably Ellen [Usher] Bacon), undated letter (January 1863?); Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Mar. 19, 1863. Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862. Brockett and Vaughan editorialized after the war that Dr. Le Comte, Chester's surgeon in charge, "and the assistant Surgeons of the wards, were very kind, considerate and courteous to these ladies, and showed by their conduct how highly they appreciated their services." Brockett and Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War*, 462.

Of course, Usher's awareness of her personal contribution to the Union's cause only heightened her delight in the labor she had taken up. "[N]othing can dishearten me," she informed Jeannie in January 1863. "I am sure of our cause. The sacrafice [*sic*] of human life, of most noble and precious human lives, is fearful: But I know there is compensation in the future, and that our country and the human race will move more rapidly and more securely in the pathway of true greatness. . . . I only wish I was worth half a million [dollars], that I might in the meantime succor the suffering soldiers, and send help to their destitute families." Overall, Usher found her work at Chester rewarding, exciting, fulfilling. "I am perfectly well & enjoy my work," she wrote to Ellen. "We enjoy our work here very much," she wrote to Jeannie. To Martha she commented reassuringly, "the Hospital has its sunny side." Far more graphically she added, "I am delighted with hospital life[,] feel like a bird in the air or a fish in the sea, as if I had found my native element."[17]

All the more reason, then, for Usher to fret when it appeared, toward the end of January 1863, that the Chester hospital was about to be shut down. "There was a rumor here a day or two since," Usher wrote to a correspondent named Nathan, "that our Hospital was soon to be closed. I told Mrs Tyler that if it *was* closed, I had a proposition to make to her. It was that she should ask the Surgeon Gen. with whom she is well acquainted to send us all to Alexandria [Virginia], & allow us to take a house in the vicinity of the Convalescent Hospital. I had been thinking of that place all day. . . . She said well she was ready to go as soon as she was not longer needed here." As it turns out, the Chester hospital remained operative until some time in April, at which point, according to Brockett and Vaughan, "the remaining patients had become convalescent, and the war had made such progress Southward that the post was too far from the field to be maintained as a general hospital." When Chester finally closed down, Adaline Tyler transferred to an army hospital in Annapolis, Maryland, taking Louise Titcomb and some of the other nurses with her. Usher—for reasons unexplained, but probably having to do with a combination of family demands and a need for rest—returned home to Maine.[18]

Although Usher's Civil War narrative picks up again in 1864, when she headed back to the front to serve as an agent of the Maine State Agency at City Point, Virginia—combining relief work with some nursing—limitations of space require that the remaining pages be used in consideration of some of the many significant issues raised by her experiences at Chester. For example, on the basis of her racial and socioeconomic status, was Usher a "typical" candidate for work as a Civil War nurse in the North? The answer is yes, but this is a more complicated answer than one might initially expect. What makes the

[17] Rebecca Usher to Jeannie [Usher], Jan. 9, 1863; Rebecca Usher to Ellen [Usher] Bacon, Mar. 19, 1863; Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Dec. 5, 1862; Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, undated letter (but addressed from the General Hospital, Chester, Pennsylvania).

[18] Rebecca Usher to Nathan [?], Jan. 20, 1863; Brockett and Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War*, 461; Rebecca Usher to William Lochran, Feb. 16, 1894, Usher Pension File.

answer complex is this: according to Jane Schultz, "virtually all of the 5,600 women listed in the Union hospital . . . records as 'nurse' were white and middle class." However, a total of not 5,600, but approximately 20,000 women worked in Union military hospitals during the Civil War, and among this number, approximately two-thirds were working-class black and white women (including many former slaves), about whose personal experience of Civil War hospital work we have only the most limited evidence. In other words, female Civil War hospital workers fell into several categories: matrons, nurses, cooks, and laundresses, with each classification carrying its own race and class implications. Significantly, the classification of "nurse" (Usher's classification) "carried with it the ethos of Christian duty and feminine self-sacrifice, whereas "cook" and "laundress" were classifications devoid of sacred cultural associations. . . . Hospital administrators and their female deputies made explicit the link between social status and the perceived value of work by assigning black and working-class women to jobs that required contact with the bodily functions of strangers."[19]

Usher's regular daily work of caring for the soldiers shielded her from such contact. Even if she had been assigned superintendent to the laundry, as early on she feared she might be, by her own admission she would not have been "expected to wash any of the clothes" but rather would have had "about 20 [washer]women [presumably black and white working-class women] under her" for whom she would have only to "arrange the work & see that it goes on well." But Usher made it clear that this was not the kind of work she had come to do; she had not come to the war to stand "in the steam [of a laundry room] all the time," nor had she come to be a chambermaid (although she might assist that woman on occasion). She had come as a female "nurse," with all that title implied about her class status, her subsequent status among female hospital employees, and her particular responsibilities toward the soldiers. In short, Usher's socio-economic background did indeed make her a typical nurse candidate, but not a typical candidate for female hospital work of just any sort. Civil War hospitals were as stratified in terms of class and race as was the society within which they functioned.[20]

[19] Jane E. Schultz, "Seldom Thanked, Never Praised, and Scarcely Recognized: Black and White Women in Civil War Relief Work," unpublished paper delivered at the 1993 Berkshire Conference at Vassar College, 4; Jane E. Schultz, "Race, Gender, and Bureaucracy: Civil War Army Nurses and the Pension Bureau," *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Summer 1994): 48.

[20] As it turned out, especially under conditions of duress and staff shortages, many white, middle-class nurses found themselves doing more grueling work among the sick and wounded than they may initially have anticipated doing. Sophronia Bucklin, who spent three years at the front under Dorothea Dix's authority, found herself at Hammond General Hospital in Maryland with the task of dressing wounds—a grisly test of her endurance. As she wrote, "Beds were to be made, hands and faces stripped of the hideous mask of blood and grime, matted hair to be combed out over the bronzed brows, and gaping wounds to be sponged with soft water, till cleansed of the gore and filth preparatory to the dressing. I busied myself with everything save touching the dreadful wounds till I could evade it no longer. Then with all my resolution I nerved myself to the task and bound up the aching limbs." Sophronia Bucklin, *In Hospital and Camp* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Co., 1869), 88. Usher's ability to avoid such work may have been in part, too, a result of the several male convalescent soldiers detailed to her supervision. For a much more sophisticated and extended examination of this issue, see Schultz, "Race, Gender, and Bureaucracy" and "Seldom Thanked, Never Praised, and Scarcely Recognized."

What of her marital status? It seems clear that a sizable proportion of the women who traveled to the front as nurses for the Union army were unmarried, sometimes widows but often never-married women such as Usher. Certainly it was easier for an independent woman with limited (if any) immediate family responsibilities to commit to Civil War service away from home. Interestingly, however, the combination of youth and singlehood tended to pose particular obstacles for middle-class women who struggled to find nursing positions in the first place. Quite simply, their "virtue" was, in the eyes of many, more "at risk" than the "virtue" of married women who followed their enlisted husbands into the military as regimental nurses, for example, or of older widows and "spinsters" whose maturity (and presumed sexlessness) guarded them against accusations of impropriety. Many questioned whether young, single women would be able to resist the advances of lonely men far from home and the social constraints of community. And after all, military hospitals were teeming with young men, as Usher's description of her solitary walk "through a quarter of a mile of men" indicated. Hospitals also generally afforded women little privacy, sometimes providing "only the length of an unpainted board for the partition walls between wards, halls, nurses' quarters, and all other officers." Thus one finds that young, single female nurses frequently wrote home to assure family and friends that their "virtue" was safe. "No soldier," wrote Cornelia Hancock of Pennsylvania in 1864, "would be allowed to come into my house without knocking even in the daytime, and at night they could not get in without sawing out the logs."[21]

When the middle-aged, unmarried reformer Dorothea Dix, named superintendent of women nurses for the Union army in June 1861, compiled her list of regulations for nurse candidates, she did not insist that they be married but did specify that they fall between the ages of thirty-five and fifty and that they be of strong health and "matronly" appearance. In an environment of popular opinion that was dubious about the idea of middle-class women at the front in the first place, Dix clearly was hoping to build a team of nurses whose "virtue" was beyond reproach. That Rebecca Usher met Dix's requirements no doubt explains both her ready welcome into the service by Dix (recall that her first offer of a position came from a woman who was informing her of a position under Dix's authority) and the level of comfort that she quickly established in the highly masculinized context of the military hospital.[22] Indeed, one assumes that it accounts, as well, for the jocular attitude she took in discussing with family

[21] Bucklin, *In Hospital and Camp*, 48–49; Henrietta Stratton Jaquette, ed., *South after Gettysburg: Letters of Cornelia Hancock from the Army of the Potomac, 1863–1865* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Philadelphia Press, 1937), 80.

[22] Surgeon General's Office Circular No. 8, July 14, 1862, Sophronia E. Bucklin Pension File, RG 15; also quoted in Bucklin, *In Hospital and Camp*, 38–39. Usher's pension file contains two letters to her from Dorothea Dix, and in her own papers Usher refers at least once to a letter from Dix, received while she was at City Point, "asking me to look personally after the 9th [Maine] Corps." Rebecca Usher to Martha [Usher] Osgood, Feb. 2, 1865. Clearly Dix was aware of Usher's presence as a nurse/relief agent at the front; presumably she had met her and found her acceptable within the boundaries of her stated qualifications.

members her romantic possibilities (or lack thereof) at Chester. Being single was not unusual for Civil War nurses. But in combination with being young, and especially being perceived as attractive, it instantly raised to new heights the specter of rampant immorality in a dangerously sexualized hospital setting.[23]

Usher's first information about a nursing position referred her to a position under the authority of Dorothea Dix, for which "No particular qualifications or specifications" were required. "Travelling expenses are paid," A. F. Quinby had informed Usher, "& we are allowed 40 cts per day." As it turned out, however, when Usher headed to Chester, it was not as an appointee of Dorothea Dix but as a recruit of Adaline Tyler, who had been looking for volunteer nurses to assist her. What, if anything, is so significant about this distinction?

A quick review of the somewhat cloudy history of Chester General Hospital and Adaline Tyler's appointment as matron there provides some insight. Usher herself wrote two letters that discussed these matters. The shorter description is found in a letter to her sister Ellen from November 1862:

> When the Hospital was first established it was under the direction of the Ladies of Chester. But they gave the sick soldiers so many cakes & jellies, that the Surgeons said they were killing them with kindness & set about establishing a new order of things; suddenly the Ladies found themselves relieved from all command, & Mrs Tyler appointed to take charge. This produced a great deal of ill will towards the incoming government which was far from pleasant. Yesterday, however, a lady came with a proposition from the people of Chester, to give a Thanksgiving dinner to the soldiers, & this we hope will heal the feud.

This letter suggests that Tyler's appointment had to do with nothing more than the surgeons' concern about hospital order and the proper management of the soldiers' food supply during convalesence. Frank Moore, however, described her appointment somewhat differently. The hospital, he wrote, had been initially "supplied with nurses by the ladies from the village" of Chester—note, he does not say that the "ladies" *themselves* served as the hospital's nurses. Subsequently, the hospital had experienced some unnamed "differences" between the "ladies" and the surgeon in charge, leading, as Moore described it, to the surgeon in charge hiring Tyler to become the hospital's "lady superintendent" and to his request also that she "call to her aid a suitable corps of skillful and permanent assistants." In response to this request, Moore explained, Tyler had set herself the task of finding volunteers who were "more intelligent, more refined, and more devoted to the welfare of the soldier than those whose labor

[23] In fact, as the war progressed and male medical personnel in Civil War hospitals became more and more accustomed to the contributions women were making to the soldiers' health in the hospital setting, a call seems to have gone up widely for more younger and prettier, less "matronly," nurses, women who might presumably, by their youth and good looks, do more to provide the young soldiers with more "sunshine" and recollections of what awaited them on the homefront, thus, thereby speed the healing process. See the discussion of this in Leonard, *Yankee Women*, chap. 1.

was salaried." (The "ladies of Chester," Moore implied, had apparently paid some women—presumably working-class women of presumably limited moral capabilities—to work as "nurses.") Ultimately, Usher and the (middle-class) women who arrived with Tyler were supplied by the government "with a daily ration costing fifteen cents, and a free pass on the cars," which was all, Moore insisted, that they "sought or desired, as remuneration, beyond the consciousness of doing good, and a conviction that their labors directly promoted the final success of the Union arms."[24]

It is interesting that Usher herself, even in her longer description of the hospital's early problems, did not explicitly raise as an issue the distinction between paid and volunteer labor. Rather, she presented evidence of a pure power struggle for control over the hospital's administration, based on divergent notions of proper care for the soldiers between the "Ladies of Chester" and the surgeon in charge. She wrote:

> In the early part of the war, the Ladies of Chester had formed a Soldiers' Aid Society; & when the wounded men arrived here, they were installed as nurses & things went on in a chaotic way without much system, as the President of the society, although a very ambitious woman; was very ill suited to the position of directress of a Hospital. Some of the ladies soon became dissatisfied with her administration of affairs, & there grew up a rival party, & a rival candidate for the highest office. The ladies showered luxuries of all kinds upon the soldiers, & the surgeons found that the men were in many instances being killed with kindness, & when they tried to regulate the diet of the patients, the ladies turned against the Drs, reported all through the County that they were drunkards and profligates. In this state of affairs Mrs Tyler was sent for by the Surgeon to come & take charge.[25]

Usher's silence on the matter of paid versus unpaid labor might lead one to wonder if a dispute on the subject is perhaps a gloss on the history of Chester General Hospital that Moore himself imposed. In truth, however, whether or not Usher herself was terribly concerned with the relative merits of paid versus unpaid labor for middle-class women in Civil War hospitals, what is important is that Moore, his audience, and in fact many women nurses believed that there was—for better or worse—a very sharp difference between middle-class women nurses working for free and working for pay, and the issue was a contested one throughout the war and beyond.

Some people, of course, thought it made perfect sense for middle-class women nurses to receive pay for their labor. Sophronia Bucklin, who served under Dix for three years during the Civil War, throughout the war earned Dix's

[24] Rebecca Usher to Ellen Usher [Bacon], Nov. 23, 1862; Moore, *Women of the War,* 453–55. Brockett and Vaughan reiterated this version of the early history of the hospital. They wrote: "When in the early autumn of 1862, Mrs. Adaline Tyler . . . took charge as Lady Superintendent of the Hospital at Chester, Pennsylvania, which had previously been in the care of a Committee of ladies of the village, she sought for volunteer assistants in her work, who would give themselves wholly to it." Brockett and Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War,* 461.

[25] Rebecca Usher to Nathan [?], Jan. 20, 1863.

stipulated pay of forty cents per day, or twelve dollars per month. (Just by way of comparison, white private soldiers in the Union army earned thirteen dollars per month, just one dollar more than the nurses.) In her memoir, *In Hospital and Camp* (1869), Bucklin—an unmarried, independent seamstress from Auburn, New York—displayed no compunction about taking wages for her labor. The unidentified (but probably male) author of the memoir's introduction, however, took the question on in such a way as to make it clear that he knew popular opinion on the issue was sharply divided. *"Pay and rations!"* he wrote, establishing a clear comparison between female nurses and male soldiers: "Who says, because they were *paid,* the sacrifice which [the soldiers] laid on their country's smoking altar was not a voluntary blood offering?"[26]

Indeed, some like Dorothea Dix (though she took no wages herself) believed that the only way successfully to continue to recruit female nurses over the war's long haul was to offer them more than the satisfaction of a grateful soldier's smile—it was, in fact, to pay them. After all, even women of the middle class—single and widowed women especially—needed to survive financially somehow. In the case of married women, especially women whose husbands had gone off to war, any form of additional income might be crucial to keep the family afloat, or simply to keep it from slipping into poverty.

But many, including many women nurses, believed that to pay individual middle-class women for such work was to degrade their patriotism in response to the sectional crisis and was as well to act in crude defiance of what it meant to *be* a middle-class woman in Victorian America. Mary Newcomb, herself a middle-class nurse for the Union, claimed proudly in her memoir that she had never been "after money," as she put it, but had only desired to "be where the men were, and where I could do the most good."[27]

Apparently, Newcomb believed it improper for a decent woman of her status to take money for work that was rightfully and morally hers to perform, and indeed she never directly drew wages herself. However, it is worth noting that in her later life even Newcomb gladly accepted a government pension on the basis of having been a Civil War nurse. Moreover, her pension file indicates that after the early-1862 death of her husband, Hiram A. W. Newcomb, a sergeant with the 11th Illinois, she began to draw his $8.00-per-month pension, which certainly helped to subsidize her "voluntary" services as a nurse.[28]

As for Rebecca Usher, she chose a position as a volunteer nurse, no doubt to some extent because her own and her family's financial stability meant that she

[26] Bucklin, *In Hospital and Camp,* 23.

[27] Mary A. Newcomb, *Four Years of Personal Reminiscences of the War* (Chicago: H. S. Mills and Company, 1893), 18. Newcomb further laid out her views in her discussion of a confrontation with Dorothea Dix in Helena, Arkansas, to which town she and a "Miss Mertz" had traveled with the 11th Illinois Regiment. Newcomb wrote, "One day there walked in on us an elderly lady with quite an orderly appearance. She said: 'Are you appointed to this work?' Miss Mertz said: 'I am not.' She then looked at me and asked the same question. I said: 'No, I volunteer my services. I did not come for pay, and I will accept no commission from any one' " (ibid., 57–58).

[28] Mary A. Newcomb Pension File, RG 15.

could choose such a position. Usher did not openly dwell on the respective merits of paid versus unpaid labor. Nevertheless the issue was a burning one for observers of (and participants in) middle-class women's Civil War nursing. It was a burning issue because, like the issue of precisely the sort of work middle-class women should be expected to perform in the context of the Civil War hospital, it was an issue profoundly wrapped up in prevailing notions of Victorian womanhood.

Recall Frank Moore's letter to Usher requesting accounts of her wartime service and promising her that "No more prominence will be given to your name than you may indicate as desireable; my object being as much to give a view of the general labor of women in this great field, as to eulogize particular heroines." Moore's framing to Usher of the purpose and style of his commemorative highlights the fact that the Civil War, for women and for men, erupted in *Victorian* America—America at a time in which middle- and upper-class gender ideology was dominated by Victorian notions of men's and women's "proper" behavior, those notions frequently (and perhaps too conveniently by historians) encapsulated in the phrase "separate spheres."

In writing his memoir, Moore set out to commemorate on the one hand that which was clearly deemed remarkable, noteworthy, and even "heroic"—not that which was thought to be cliché—in the actions of certain women during the Civil War. Which is to say that he believed (and presumably his audience would believe) that the women included in his account—women such as Rebecca Usher—in going off to war or in serving the soldiers actively on the homefront had done work worthy of special attention, had somehow stepped outside conventional bounds (outside the bounds of their "sphere," perhaps?), albeit in a way that permitted them to be labeled "heroines," not "heretics." In the eyes of Moore and his readers, middle-class women such as Usher had left behind their "natural" context, the home, for a most "unnatural" context, the battlefront, where they had responded with unanticipated courage and strength to the carnage that the war had produced. Such was their heroism, such were the unwonted actions that drew them into the spotlight of favorable, grateful attention.

But what of the other half of the subtitle, the "self-sacrifice" of the women of the war? Did Moore randomly pair the two concepts of Civil War women's heroism and self-sacrifice? Absolutely not. For what was, in his imagery, perhaps supremely heroic about Victorian women of the war—and women nurses perhaps above all—was the quiet, unassuming, and utterly gender-appropriate selflessness with which they (supposedly, at least) carried out their self-appointed Civil War duties, unfamiliar duties that nevertheless revolved around traditional expectations for their gender and class. It is in this light that we must understand Moore's focus on the voluntary, unpaid service to the Union given by Civil War nurses such as Usher; it is the same light that helps us understand why Usher's hospital responsibilities were so different from those that occupied the working-class black and white women who surrounded her at Chester. Usher was a Victorian woman. Although there was a place for such

women, as "heroes" in the war context, it was a temporary place whose legitimate boundaries were sharply defined by gender and class conventions.

Which brings us to a final issue—the issue of what the war, and the work of Civil War nursing, meant to women such as Rebecca Usher. What long-term impact did it have on their lives, their goals, their social status in American culture? The Civil War was in many ways a watershed for middle-class American women because it provided them with opportunities for work in the public sphere that took them out of their homes, required them to demonstrate skills they did not even know they possessed, in many cases remunerated them in the form of wages and titles and so gave them a new sense of their own (potential) professionalism. Moreover, according to some scholars, middle-class American women's Civil War work provided them for the first time with a sense of their own citizenship in a national polity, undoubtedly raising their hopes for such manifestations of their new stature as suffrage.[29]

To argue, as a late-twentieth-century historian, that the Civil War was a significant milestone for middle-class American women in their journey toward social equality is not to assert, however, that postwar historians perceived these women's Civil War service in the same way. Indeed, one could argue that Frank Moore and others—precisely because they recognized the possibility of a change in these women's lives, goals, and social status as a result of their contributions to the Civil War effort—fought such a possibility with every form of ammunition in their arsenal. One recalls Moore's promise to Usher that she would receive "no more prominence" in his account than she might desire. Might this not be interpreted as an indication to Usher that the door back into the private sphere, from which she might have strayed, remained open?

In any case, the Civil War did not leave middle-class women entirely unchanged, nor did it leave them untouched by questions of long-term meaning and significance for their gender. Louise Titcomb, Usher's friend and colleague at Chester General Hospital, wrote to her later in the war in words that beautifully capture the sentiment of many women who participated actively in the war and who knew that their lives—and their futures—had been fundamentally altered by the experience. "It will surely take years," Titcomb wrote, "to talk over our experience. What a life . . . to ripen and darken one[']s years, and yet such light dawns on every revolution of the wheel, blood-stained as it is, that one feels a kind of growth of the spirit that defies age or care."[30] One wonders whether Usher felt such a sense of deep transformation as a result of the experience of being a Civil War nurse. Sadly, this question cannot be answered with certainty, if only because Usher's papers do not include any indication of the direction her life took after the war. There are no postwar letters reflecting on the meaning of the war for her life; there is no memoir; there are no political

[29] See Leonard, *Yankee Women;* and Rejean Attie, " 'A Swindling Concern': The United States Sanitary Commission and the Northern Female Public, 1861–1865" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1987).

[30] Louise Titcomb to Rebecca Usher, Apr. 20, 1864.

treatises, no explicit, recorded postwar demands for a permanently larger sphere of action. We cannot make much of her continued singlehood, as she was by Victorian standards quite past her marrying prime even before she went to war, and in any case a decision not to marry might have been based on any number of factors.

But there is a tidbit of evidence on which one can speculate about how Usher may have responded to what could be called the "postwar reordering of Victorian gender arrangements" as a result of women's active participation in the war, their proven abilities, and their increased demands. This evidence takes us back to Usher's days at the Ursuline Convent in Three Rivers, where as a young woman of sixteen she wrote at least one essay that merits our attention.

In the essay, entitled "Ought Women to be allowed Political Rights," written more than a decade before the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, Usher articulates a vision of "woman" that strongly suggests that for her, and for a variety of reasons, Civil War work in the public sphere would have a powerful personal and political impact. It is true, she noted in her 1837 essay, that women have traditionally been considered unfit for political activity by virtue of their mental and physical weakness. But, she continued, these weaknesses are "circumstantial, and not natural." Both are a consequence of social conditioning. "Vanity and false ideas of beauty," she wrote,

> have done much, and her habits of life more[,] to make woman weak and sickly, confined a great part of the time to her needle, and her mind not fixed on any particular object, and not sufficiently cultivated to possess a mine of treasures within itself. . . . [Y]ou [men] say you are better able to exercise our rights for us than we for ourselves. . . . [But] are you not an interested party, and therefore not an impartial judge? This remains yet to be proved, and can only be done by giving woman a fair trial of her powers.[31]

Certainly Usher and thousands of women like her saw in the adventure of Civil War nursing an opportunity for middle-class women to receive a "fair trial of their powers," both physically and mentally. Even if their work was not of the most grueling sort, it was work different than, and in significantly different context, than they had ever known—work, therefore, that proved to them a great deal about their own strengths and endurance in highly unfamiliar and often physically hazardous circumstances. If Usher saw the Civil War as an opportunity for a "fair trial of her powers," can we believe that she would have expected anything less than a just verdict from those who constituted the popular jury determining Victorian women's political and social fate?

[31] Rebecca Usher, "Ought Woman to be allowed Political Rights?" (1837), Usher Papers.