



When Walt Whitman arrived in Washington in December 1862, he decided that the most meaningful contribution he could make to the Union cause was "To sit by the wounded and soothe them/Or silently watch the dead." His visits to Washington's hospitals were well received by some and reviled by others. Portrait, c. 1865. Courtesy, National Archives.

Traveling with the Wounded

Walt Whitman and Washington's Civil War Hospitals

by Martin G. Murray

The news dreaded by every family with a son in uniform came to the Whitmans of Brooklyn during the second year of the Civil War: George Washington Whitman was listed in the *New York Herald* among those wounded in the battle fought at Fredericksburg, Virginia, on December 13, 1862. Fearing the worst, George's brother Walt, the famous 43-year-old poet of *Leaves of Grass*, lost no time in leaving his mother's home and hurrying to Washington where he expected to find George mortally wounded in one of the city's many make-shift hospitals.

Failing to find George after several days' searching, Whitman obtained a military pass to visit the Union Army camp at Falmouth, Virginia, opposite Fredericksburg. To his great relief, there Whitman found a healthy George who had miraculously walked away from the battlegrounds below Marye's Heights with only a minor wound: a jaw slightly scratched by an exploding shell.

Walt remained with his brother for two weeks, recording camp life in his journal

and visiting injured soldiers in the field hospitals. Leaving Falmouth on December 28, Whitman was asked to help convey the wounded to Washington's hospitals. In so doing, Walt Whitman began a Washington sojourn that would last throughout the Civil War.¹

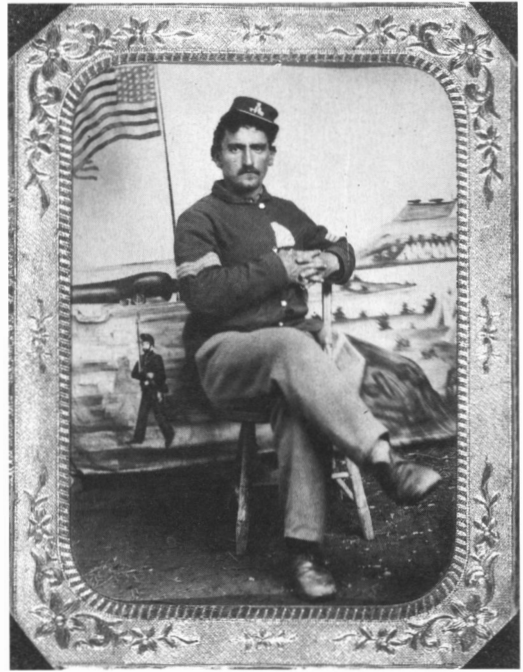
The journey from Falmouth to Washington was made in two parts: first by rail to Aquia Creek Landing, Virginia, and then by government steamer up the Potomac River to the landing at Seventh Street, S.W. While waiting at Aquia Creek, Whitman ministered to the injured, later recalling, "Several wanted word sent home to parents, brothers, wives, &c., which I did for them, (by mail the next day from Washington.) On the boat I had my hands full. One poor fellow died going up."²

Once in Washington, Whitman visited the patients he had accompanied from Virginia and met other injured soldiers. Before long he was visiting the hospitals daily. At the war's opening, Whitman, an anti-slavery and pro-Union journalist, was embittered at the failure of the republic's leaders to resolve the regional conflicts peacefully. Nonetheless, he decided to remain in Washington to serve the Union through ministry to its wounded and to

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chronicle its struggle from the unique perspective of the hospital bedside. Armed with pencil and paper, he jotted down particular desires of the soldiers—horehound candy for one, rice pudding for another. The hospital scenes provided inspiration for poetry and prose pieces, and Whitman jotted these ideas down as well. Certain that he could make something of this experience, he wrote to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "I desire and intend to write a little book out of this phase of America, her masculine young manhood, its conduct under most trying of and highest of all exigency, which she, as by lifting a corner in a curtain, has vouchsafed me to see America, already brought to Hospital in her fair youth—brought and deposited here in this great, whited sepulchre of Washington itself." Before long, his efforts bore fruit, with Whitman publishing articles in the *New York Times* and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* about his hospital experiences, and a book of war poems (*Drum-Taps*). His writings provide a compelling literary and historical record of Washington in wartime.³

Walt Whitman was a well-known writer by the time he arrived in Washington at the close of 1862. His *Leaves of Grass*—an unabashed love letter to America first published on its 79th birthday, July 4, 1855, then followed by second (1856) and third (1860) editions—celebrated the sacred everydayness of what Whitman called "the divine Average" American life. Butcher boys, opera divas, Manhattan firemen, Indians, God masquerading as a loving bedfellow, runaway slaves, mothers of sons and daughters, ship builders, prostitutes and preachers were just a few of the characters who inhabited Whitman's America. Loafing, sweating, gabbing, wrestling, singing, farming, fishing, healing, and copulating were some of their activities. Sexual love between a husband and wife, and passionate same-sex friendships (with or without sexual love) were the glues that bound



George Washington Whitman, the poet's younger brother, was wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. Walt Whitman rushed to his brother's side, thus beginning three years of tending the wounded. Courtesy, Duke University Library.

Whitman's Americans together.

The poetic suitor's advances were welcomed by some Americans, spurned by others, and ignored by most. The literary establishment both welcomed and rejected Whitman, often in the same response, as in Henry David Thoreau's description of Whitman's poetry in a letter to a friend: "That Walt Whitman . . . is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his second edition (which he gave me), and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time." And yet, Thoreau contin-

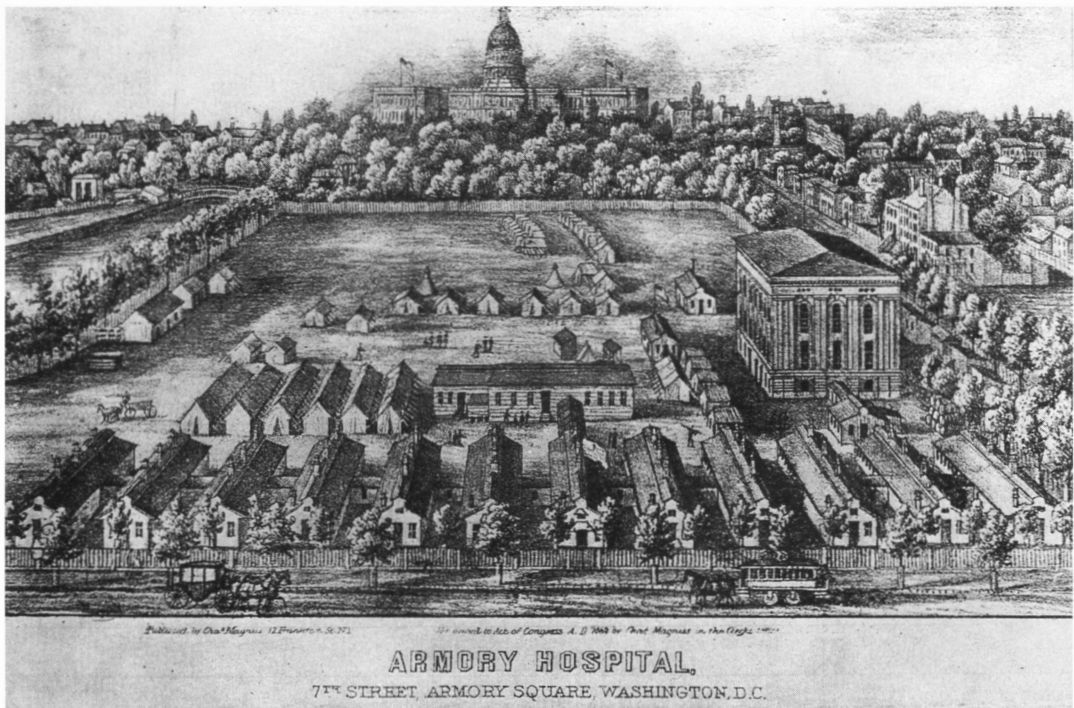
Located near the Seventh Street steamboat landing and the Washington and Alexandria Railroad station, Armory Square Hospital took the most severely injured—and suffered the highest death rate of any area facility. Lithograph by Charles Magnus, courtesy, National Library of Medicine.

ued, "There are two or three pieces in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least; simply sensual. He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke."⁴

This ambiguous attitude toward Whitman's poetry attached to the poet himself and followed him to Washington. Scorn by "Society" prevented Whitman from securing a good government berth to support himself and his wartime hospital ministry. Even a recommendation from Ralph Waldo Emerson elicited a chilly response from Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase, who dismissed the poet's *Leaves* as a "very bad book," and the poet himself as "a decidedly disreputable person."⁵ At the same time, Whitman had his champions, such as former publisher Charles Eldridge, who was working for Army Paymaster Lyman Hapgood at the time Whitman arrived. Eldridge helped Whitman burrow his way into the bureaucracy with a job copying reports and doing other minor clerical chores in the Paymaster's Office. Not only did this position help pay the

rent, it probably gave Whitman-the-visitor a certain cachet within the hospitals, particularly when Hapgood and Eldridge appeared to pay bedridden Army regulars. To supplement this small income, and promote his hospital work, Whitman also wrote free-lance news articles.

As a hospital visitor, Whitman quickly found that he was of greatest service when he performed the smallest of tasks—writing a letter home, feeding a sweet tooth, passing the time by playing a game of "Twenty Questions." Whitman found the soldiers, many very young, desperate for an affection he was grateful to supply, as the poet indicates in this letter written to his mother's friend, Abby Price, and her daughters: "Abby, you would all smile to see me among them—many of them like children, ceremony is mostly discarded—they suffer & get exhausted & so weary—lots of them have grown to expect as I leave at night that we should kiss each other, sometimes quite a number, I have to go round—poor boys, there is little petting in a soldier's life in the



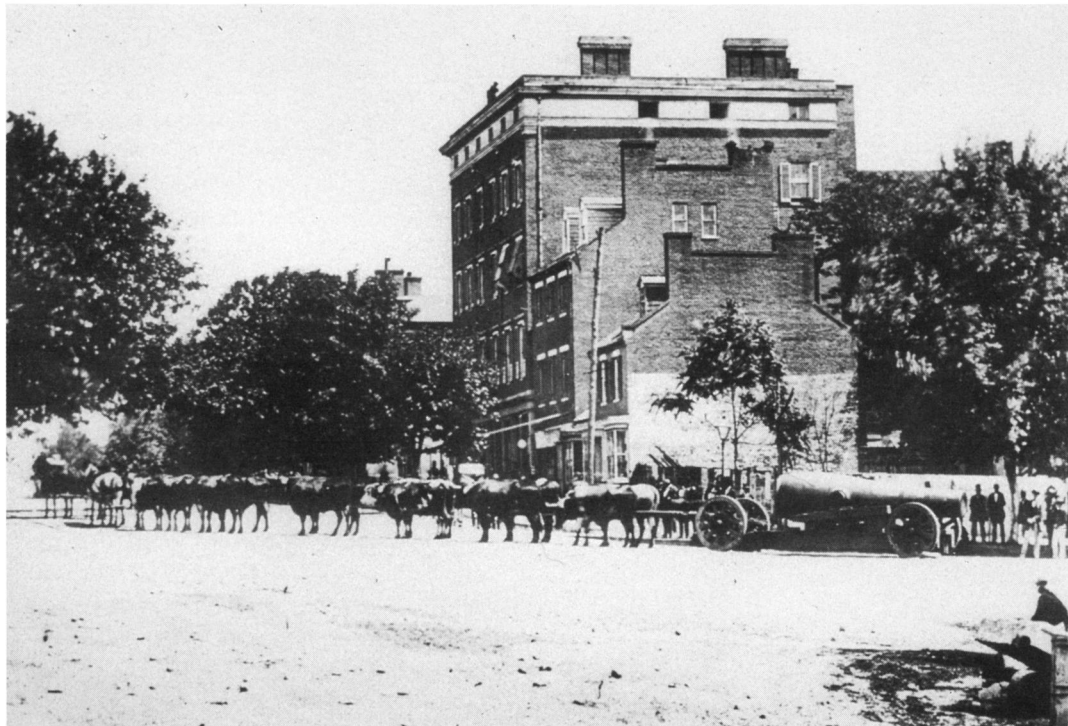
field, but, Abby, I know what is in their hearts, always waiting, though they may be unconscious of it themselves."⁶

Although Whitman's attention to the wounded was extraordinary—he estimated that over the course of the war, he had made "over 600 visits or tours, and went . . . among from 80,000 to 100,000 of the wounded and sick, as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need"—Whitman was hardly the only person in Washington who visited the wounded. A report in the *Daily Morning Chronicle* for November 6, 1862, for example, noted that 25 soldiers' relief associations had been formed recently in the city, of which 16 were sponsored by as many individual states. Julia S. Wheelock Freeman wrote of her experiences as a hospital agent for the Michigan Relief Association, recalling that she seldom went empty-handed, taking cooked tomatoes or stewed fruit, chicken broth, pickles, butter, cheese, jelly, hot tea, oranges, lemons, fruit, clothing, reading matter. National organizations, such as the

This Pension Office Building frieze by C. Buberl captures a scene familiar to Whitman, who often heard the "clump of crutches" ascending the five flights of stairs to the Army Paymaster's Office. Photograph by the author.

U.S. Sanitary Commission and the U.S. Christian Commission, sent delegates into the hospitals to dispense food, clothing, money, and religious materials. Whitman was officially sponsored by the latter organization, although he depended primarily upon his own resources and gifts from family, friends, and anonymous donors who supported his work after reading about it in his newspaper accounts.⁷

Many Washingtonians visited the hospitals regularly as members of fraternal organizations such as Odd Fellows and Freemasons, or religious congregations, or merely as private individuals. During holidays, citizens sponsored festive dinners at each of the hospitals and competed with one another to provide the most abundant spread. Some gave concerts for the sol-





diers; Vinnie Ream, a talented mezzo soprano who later gained fame as Lincoln's sculptor, performed at Lincoln Hospital in April 1864. Added to all these were the relatives of the sick and wounded soldiers who, like Whitman, traveled to Washington hoping to nurse their family members back to health. Visiting the hospital one day, Whitman observed two such visitors: "In one case, the wife sat by the side of her husband, his sickness, typhoid fever, pretty bad. In another, by the side of her son—a mother—she told me she had seven children, and this was the youngest." Whitman described her as "a fine, kind, healthy, gentle mother, good-looking, not very old, with a cap on her head, and dress'd like home—what a

charm it gave to the whole Ward." There were so many visitors coming and going, in fact, that the hospital staffs posted notices in the newspapers pleading with the well-meaning to heed visiting hours.⁸

There was no dearth of wounded for Whitman and his fellow visitors to attend. During the four years of the war, the Union suffered an estimated 6,000,000 cases of sickness and 400,000 more wounds and injuries. Union deaths totaled roughly 300,000, one-third from Confederate attacks and two-thirds from disease. The disproportionately large share of non-battle-related illness and death reflected the largely pre-antiseptic era in medicine. Poor sanitation, hygiene, and diet accounted for widespread chronic diarrhea and typhoid, while the inability of surgeons to cleanse gunshot wounds properly caused infections that were often cured by amputation. As medical historian George Adams has noted, "The septic sins of the time [were] responsible for this harvest of death and suffering."⁹

A Union mule team hauls artillery at Pennsylvania Avenue and 15th Street, N.W., past the tall Corcoran Building where Whitman worked for the Army Paymaster. After the war, the poet rented a room in the building to the left of the Corcoran. Today the Hotel Washington occupies this block. Courtesy, NA.

Located so close to the nearby campsites and battlegrounds in Virginia, Maryland, and the District, Washington's hospitals were continually full. Indeed, on December 29, 1862, Whitman's first day in the city, the *Daily Morning Chronicle* reported 13,267 sick and wounded soldiers in the hospitals of Washington, Georgetown, and Alexandria. By January 1, 1865, the newspapers reported that the majority of the more than 18,000 soldiers who had died in Washington's hospitals succumbed to gunshot wounds (3,421), typhoid fever (2,255), chronic diarrhea (1,370), and amputation (560).¹⁰

At least 56 separate facilities in Washington were used as hospitals at some time over the course of the war. Of these, 43 were in recent use as of Whitman's arrival in late December 1862, according to a list in the *Daily Morning Chronicle*. Orienting

himself in Washington by reference to the hospitals, Whitman dolefully observed:

Looking from any eminence and studying the topography in my rambles, I use [the hospitals] as landmarks. . . . That little town, as you might suppose it, off there on the brow of a hill, is indeed a town, but of wounds, sickness, and death. It is Finley Hospital, northeast of the city, on Kendall Green, as it used to be call'd. That other is Campbell Hospital. Both are large establishments. I have known these two alone to have from two thousand to twenty-five hundred inmates. Then there is Carver Hospital, larger still, a wall'd and military city regularly laid out, and guarded by squads of sentries. Again, off east, Lincoln Hospital, a still larger one; and half a mile further Emory Hospital. . . . Even all these are but a portion. The Harewood, Mount Pleasant, Armory Square, Judiciary Hospitals, are some of the rest, . . . and all of them large collections.¹¹

Washington's Civil War Hospitals

Capitol, in the Capitol

Northwest

360 and 364 C st.
Ascension, Ascension Church, H, 9th and 10th sts.
Camp Fry and Martindale, Washington Circle [G.W. Hospital]
Camp Ohio Hospital, Tenallytown
Campbell, Boundary, 5th and 6th sts.
Carver, Meridian Hill
City Hall, Indiana Ave.
City Infirmary, E, 4th and 5th sts.
Cliffburne Barracks, Meridian Hill
Columbian College, Meridian Hill
Cranch, Unitarian Church, 6th and D sts.
Desmarre and Ricord, Hill Mansion, 14th and Mass. Ave.
Douglas, New Jersey Ave. and I St.
Dumbarton Street, Methodist Episcopal Church
Eckington Mansion, Bladensburg Rd.
Epiphany, Epiphany Church, G, 13th and 14th sts.
Fifth Street School House, Judiciary Square
Finley, Bladensburg Rd. [Gallaudet University]
Georgetown College, O St.

Harewood, Corcoran Farm, 7th St.
Judiciary Square, Rear of City Hall, Indiana Ave.
Kalorama, Kalorama Heights, 21st St.
Mount Pleasant, Meridian Hill
Patent Office, 7th St.
Presbyterian Church, Bridge [M] and Washington [30th] sts.
Reynolds Barracks, White House Grounds
Riggs House, 24th and K sts.
Rush Barracks, White House Grounds
St. Aloysius, North Capitol and K sts.
Sedgwick and Williams barracks, 18th, 19th, M and N sts.
Seminary, Rear of Union Hotel, Gay [N] and Washington [30th] sts.
Stanton, 2nd and I sts.
Stone Mansion, Meridian Hill
Trinity, Trinity Church, 3rd and C sts.
Trinity, Trinity Church, Fayette [35th] and Gay [N] sts.
Union Chapel, 20th St.
Union Hotel, Bridge [M] and Washington [30th] sts.
Water's Warehouse, High [Wisconsin] and Water [K] sts.
Wisewell Barracks, 7th and O sts.

Northeast

Camp Barry, Corcoran's Farm, H St.
Emory, E. Capitol St.
Lincoln Barracks, E. Capitol St. and Mass. Ave.
Lincoln, E. Capitol St. and Mass. Ave.

Southwest

Armory Square, 7th and B sts.
Giesboro and Camp Stoneman, Giesboro Point [Bolling A.F.B.]
Island Hall, 6th and Virginia Ave.
Ryland, Ryland Chapel, 10th and D sts.
Washington Arsenal, U.S. Arsenal grounds [Ft. McNair]

Southeast

Capitol Barracks, 2nd, E. Capitol and A sts.
Caspari's, Caspari's House, 11 A St.
Ebenezer, Ebenezer Church, D, 4th and 5th sts.
Engineer Brigade Hospital, I St.
Eruptive Fever, First, B, and C sts.
Odd Fellows' Hall, 8th St.
Russell and Sherburne barracks, 1st and E sts.
St. Elizabeths, Anacostia
U.S. barracks, 8th St.

Source: *Souvenir, 36th Annual Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, Washington, 1902.*

The hospitals encompassed all manner of public and private accommodations. The very first military hospital in Washington—located in two separate buildings on C Street between 3rd and 4 1/2 streets—was opened in February 1861 for Army Regulars. After the war's outbreak in April, Georgetown's Union Hotel and the City Infirmary on E Street were commandeered for the military's medical needs. Schools used as infirmaries included the Columbian and Georgetown Colleges, the Fifth Street Schoolhouse, and Miss Lydia English's Female Seminary, which still stands on the northeast corner of 30th and N streets, N.W. Mansion hospitals appeared on the country estates of former Washington Mayor Joseph Gales, Jr., at Eckington off North Capitol Street, and of Dr. William J. Stone, on Meridian Hill near 14th Street.¹²

Ironically, Douglas Hospital was formed in January 1862 by joining together the former homes of Senator Stephen A. Douglas and Vice President John C. Breckinridge. These two failed presidential candidates had split the Democratic Party into northern and southern factions in 1860, thus assuring Lincoln's election and the war's commencement. The Roman Catholic Sisters of Mercy served as nurses there, as they would also at Stanton Hospital when it was constructed alongside Douglas and occupied in December 1862. While sitting at Douglas Hospital one evening by the bedside of Jonathan Wallace, a Confederate soldier, Whitman marked the approach of a Sister, "dress'd in black, with a broad white linen bandage around her head and under her chin, and a black crape over all and flowing down from her head in long wide pieces. . . . She bow'd low and solemn to me." Whitman remained entranced by her quiet presence, as "for some time she moved around there noiseless as a ghost, doing little things for the dying man."¹³

Space for the wounded was made in City Hall, as well as in federal facilities from the Capitol to the Patent Office. Churches were

pressed into use as hospitals as early as spring 1862 to accommodate the casualties of the Union's Peninsular Campaign, and additional church hospitals were opened through that summer and autumn for those wounded in the Confederates' Maryland Campaign. By the time Whitman arrived in December 1862, however, the churches were being returned to their congregations as the government built more fitting medical facilities.

The hospitals that Whitman knew best as a visitor were the "barracks" and "model" hospitals available from 1862 onward. Carver, Cliffburne, Finley, Emory, and Campbell were built as Army barracks but were converted by the government to hospitals after their regiments departed for the battlefield. The model hospitals, by contrast, were especially built for that purpose by the military authorities and included Judiciary Square, Mount Pleasant, Armory Square, Stanton, Harewood, and Lincoln.¹⁴

Whitman was first exposed to Washington's wounded at Campbell Hospital, located on Boundary Street (Florida Avenue, N.W.), between Fifth and Sixth streets. Soon after arriving in the city, the poet visited two wounded members of George Whitman's 51st New York Volunteers: John Lowery, recovering from the amputation of his left forearm, and Amos Vliet, whose feet had been frozen. At the war's close, Campbell housed Freedmen's Hospital, the predecessor to today's Howard University Hospital. One of Whitman's last hospital visits, made in February 1866, was to Harewood on the grounds of William Wilson Corcoran's country estate near Soldier's Home off Seventh Street, N.W. Whitman sat by the side of Thomas King, a former soldier in the 2nd District Colored Regiment, as a Catholic priest administered the last rites to the dying consumptive.¹⁵

Following the recommendations of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the buildings that encompassed the model and, to a less-

er extent, barracks hospitals, were organized on the pavilion principle, featuring a central administration building for offices, dispensary, storerooms and staff quarters, and connecting "pavilion" wards on both sides of a long corridor off the main building. Pavilions allowed for the segregation of patients by disease and for better ventilation. At the time, ventilation was thought to inhibit concentrations of vaguely-defined "poisons" that were mistakenly thought to cause disease. Consequently, the structures were raised off the ground on cedar posts, and the wards were generously fitted with windows. The kitchen and laundry were kept in a separate area off the main building, and the guardhouse, dead-house, and stables were in detached buildings. Frequently regulation hospital tents were pitched nearby to handle periodic overflow. The capacities of these larger hospitals ranged from 420 beds at Stanton, to 2,575 beds at Lincoln.¹⁶

The personnel needs of each hospital matched its size; a 1,000-bed facility might require up to 200 employees. Every hospital had a surgeon in charge and a staff of physicians, stewards, medical cadets, nurses, a chaplain, clerks, cooks, laundry-workers, gardeners, grave diggers, janitors, and guards. Ideally, there was one ward physician to every 75 patients, and under him a ward-master, nurses, and attendants. During the Civil War, nursing was not the profession of today. With no available formal training, nurses then learned by doing and mainly dispensed medicines, fed patients, kept wards clean and in good order, and provided solace and companionship. Although most Civil War nurses were male (typically convalescent soldiers), the tremendous need combined with the spirited insistence on the part of women to assist the Union cause resulted in large numbers of women nurses as well.¹⁷ Whitman himself has often been described as a Civil War nurse, although his actual role was that of a very attentive visitor.



Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, the poet's mother, was his constant correspondent. Whitman kept promising her that his next letter about the hospitals wouldn't be as gloomy as the last—"But I see so much." Courtesy, Library of Congress.

Whitman generally spoke highly of the medical staff in the Washington hospitals. He was struck with how tenaciously the doctors and nurses fought to keep their charges alive with "everything bent to save a life from the very grip of the destroyer." Equally, Whitman respected the medical staff for stepping back when death's "grip is once firmly fix'd," and allowing the patient to die with quiet dignity. "Not a bit of sentimentalism or whining have I seen about a single

Originally a cavalry barracks, these buildings at Florida Avenue and Sixth Street were converted into Campbell Hospital in response to the steady stream of wounded. After the war, they housed Freedmen's Hospital, forerunner to Howard University Hospital. Courtesy, NLM.

death-bed in hospital or on the field," he noted approvingly.¹⁸

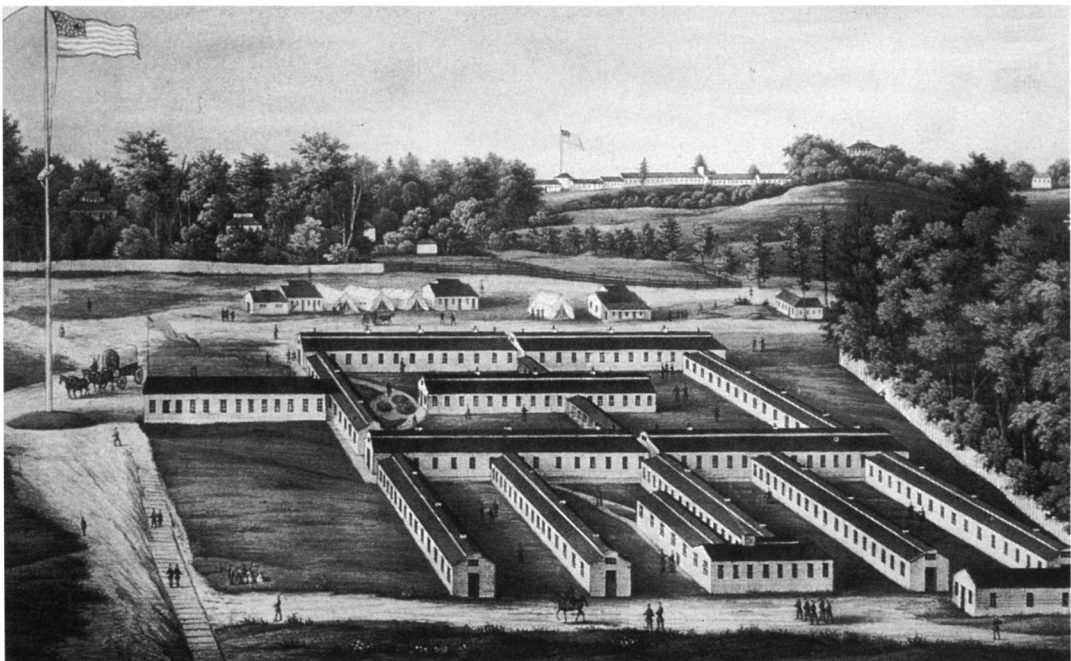
Of Washington's many hospitals, Whitman visited Armory Square most often, as he explained in a letter to his mother. "I devote myself much to Armory Square Hospital because it contains by far the worst cases, most repulsive wounds, has the most suffering & most need of consolation—I go every day without fail, & often at night—sometimes stay very late—no one interferes with me, guards, doctors, nurses, nor any one—I am let to take my own course."¹⁹

One of six model hospitals constructed in 1862, Armory Square took its name from the Old Armory on the Mall, around which the hospital was built. Its location (the current site of the National Air and Space Museum) placed it nearest the steamboat landing at the foot of Seventh Street, S.W., and near the tracks of the Washington and Alexandria Railroad, which ran along Maryland Avenue. As a result, Armory Square received the most serious casualties from the Virginia battlefields, those too ill to travel any farther. From August 1861

to January 1865, Armory Square recorded the largest number of deaths of any Washington military hospital, 1,339 out of 18,291 deaths.²⁰

Armory Square Hospital was a special favorite of President Lincoln. Amanda Akin, an Armory Square nurse who published a memoir of her experiences in 1909, recalled a presidential visit. "It was pathetic to see him pass from bed to bed and give each occupant the warm, honest grasp for which he is noted." She continued, "I hear that he is especially interested in this hospital, and has suggested having flower beds made between the wards with plants from the Government gardens."²¹

Whitman's personal correspondence and published prose are filled with anecdotes about Armory Square's patients and medical staff. Some patients stayed for long stretches, and Whitman got to know them quite well. A particular favorite was Lewis Kirk Brown, a young private from Elkton, Maryland, who suffered a gunshot wound in his left leg at the Second Battle of Bull Run, August 21, 1862. Admitted to Armory Square soon after, Brown was still there the following February when Whit-



man passed through. The poet noted in his journal, "Lewis K. Brown, in Ward E, a most affectionate fellow very fond of having me come and sit by him." Eleven months later, Whitman was again by "Lewy's" side, providing moral support as the surgeons sawed off the leg that refused to heal. Whitman's hospital notebook records: "Jan 5th 64 to-day, after dinner, Lewy Brown had his left leg amputated five inches below the knee. . . . I was present at the operation, most of the time in the door. . . . I remained all night, slept on the adjoining cot. (The same the next night.)" Brown was discharged in August 1864, but he obtained a government clerkship in Washington after the war and was able to continue his friendship with Whitman for many years. Married and widowed three times, this former private, who had frequently railed against "shoulder straps" in letters to Whitman, raised a son who became a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps.²²

Whitman also befriended a Wisconsin soldier, William Hugh McFarland. A native of England, McFarland was orphaned and raised by his uncle and namesake, who also gave his name to a town in Wisconsin that he settled. McFarland was wounded at the Second Battle of Fredericksburg on May 3, 1863, and suffered amputation of his left leg by enemy surgeons. He was admitted to Armory Square on June 13, and sent home July 28. Despite McFarland's brief hospital stay, he and Whitman formed a close bond as indicated in a single surviving letter from McFarland to Whitman written several months after the soldier arrived home. Apologizing for the long delay in writing, McFarland tells Whitman, "I suppose you thought I had quit forgotten you, but I can assure you my Dear friend such is not the case. I have thought of you verily often." McFarland then describes in minute detail his journey home, noting the many places he passed through, the train's schedule, how he spent his time en route.²³ One can almost picture Whitman beforehand, in the capacity of "crisis counselor," patiently sitting

Whitman spent many hours sitting at the bedsides of soldiers in wards like this one at Armory Square Hospital. Courtesy, NLM.

with McFarland and "role-playing" with him the traveler's sojourn back to Wisconsin until the young man felt that the trip could be safely undertaken.

Many soldiers Whitman befriended never went home. Such was the case for Oscar Cunningham, a young farmer from Delaware, Ohio, who was wounded on May 3, 1863, in the Battle of Chancellorsville. Upon seeing him at Armory Square in June, Whitman was immediately struck by the beauty of the tall and fair soldier: "Oscar H Cunningham bed 20 Ward K, Ohio boy, large, (told me he had usually weighed 200 lb) fracture of leg, above knee, rather bad—(a fine, magnificent specimen of western manliness)." Almost a full year after Oscar's arrival at Armory Square, Whitman noted that Oscar's "leg is in a horrible condition, all livid & swollen out of shape—the chances are against him poor fellow." On May 1, 1864, the doctors amputated Cunningham's right leg, and Whitman wrote on Oscar's behalf to his family, expressing new hope for Cunningham's recovery and telling them that it was unnecessary to make the long trip East. By June 3, however, Whitman told his own mother that the soldier he had visited for so long was near death:

I have just left Oscar Cunningham, the Ohio boy—he is in a dying condition—there is no hope for him—it would draw tears from the hardest heart to look at him—his is all wasted away to a skeleton, & looks like some one fifty years old—you remember I told you a year ago, when he was first brought in, I thought him the noblest specimen of a young western man I had seen, a real giant in size, & always with a smile on his face—O what a change, he has long been very irritable, to every one but me, & his frame is all wasted away.²⁴

Cunningham died on June 4, 1864, and was one of the first soldiers to be buried in the new Arlington National Cemetery. After



Oscar's death, his sister Helen corresponded with Whitman. Although grateful to Oscar's hospital friend for his devoted service, Helen couldn't help reproaching Whitman for discounting the seriousness of Oscar's final illness and dissuading her from visiting. "I recd yours of the 2nd telling us of Oscars condition last Wednesday," she wrote. "I was going to start right of to see him I would have come long ago but he thought not, so did you. this time I intended to go whether anyone thought best or not but the same eve Liut Perry came bringing us the sad news of his death."²⁵

Whitman gave expression to the family's grief, and perhaps his own remorse, in the *Drum-Taps* poem "Come Up From the Fields Father." Set on an Ohio farm during the war, the poem describes a family's reaction to the receipt of a letter written in a stranger's hand telling them of their son's hospitalization. Despite the correspondent's assurance that the boy will recover, the mother in the poem intuitively knows

that her son is dead. The poem ends with this image of the grief-stricken parent:

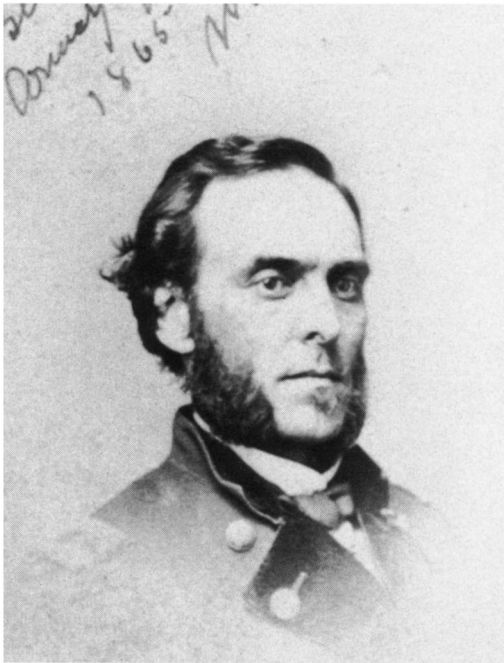
By day her meals untouch'd, then at
night fitfully sleeping, often waking,

In the midnight waking, weeping, long-
ing with one deep longing,

O that she might withdraw unnoticed,
silent from life escape and withdraw,

To follow, to seek, to be with her dear
dead son.²⁶

With a few notable exceptions, Whitman praised the work of individual surgeons and nurses he knew at the Armory Square Hospital, and many of them returned the compliment. Whitman singled out D. Willard Bliss, the chief surgeon of Armory Square, as "one of the best surgeons in the army." In 1887 Bliss obliged friends of the poet with testimony before Congress favoring a pension for Whitman based on his hospital service. Although Whitman did not secure a pension, he did receive this commendation from Bliss: "From my personal knowledge



Whitman praised D. Willard Bliss, superintendent of Armory Square Hospital, as "One of the best surgeons in the army." Bliss, in turn, said that no other person had done more good for the soldiers in Washington's hospitals than Whitman. Courtesy, NLM.

of Mr. Whitman's labors in Armory Square and other hospitals, I am of [the] opinion that no one person who assisted in the hospitals during the war accomplished so much good to the soldier and for the Government as Mr. Whitman." Similarly, Whitman and Hiram J. Ramsdell, Bliss's chief clerk, formed a close friendship that continued long after their hospital service together. A prominent journalist in post-war Washington, Ramsdell led a fruitless effort to have Whitman appointed to a post in the Treasury Department in November 1875, two years after the poet had left government service for health reasons.²⁷

Helen Wright, who served at Armory Square and Alexandria's Mansion House Hospital, was one of the poet's favorite nurses. Reflecting his belief in the power of magnetic attraction as a healing force, Whitman concluded that strong emotional

and physical bonds between patient and nurse were essential for the success of any medical program. Wright embodied the qualities of Whitman's ideal nurse: "The presence of a good middle-aged or elderly woman, the magnetic touch of hands, the expressive features of the mother, the silent soothing of her presence, her words, her knowledge and privileges arrived at only through having had children, are precious and final qualifications."²⁸

Wright provided no testimonial concerning Whitman, but two of her fellow nurses at Armory Square did, and their animosity toward Whitman is quite startling. Harriet Foote Hawley, the wife of Brigadier General Joseph Roswell Hawley of Connecticut, positively fumed when Whitman approached. "There comes that odious Walt Whitman to talk evil and unbelief to my boys," she wrote in a letter to her husband. "I think I would rather see the evil one himself—at least if he had horns and hoofs—in my ward. I shall get him out as soon as possible."²⁹

Amanda Akin, of a prominent New York family, also resented Whitman. On one occasion, Lewy Brown asked Akin to read aloud in her ward a letter from a vacationing Whitman to the soldiers. Intended to distract the soldiers from their pain and boredom, the very long letter described Whitman's visit home including meals, local election results, and even the New York Academy of Music's performance of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*. The letter also sent Whitman's particular love to no fewer than 20 soldiers across ten wards. Akin obligingly read the letter, but later commented to her sister, "Read a very ludicrous and characteristic letter from Walt Whitman to his 'fellow comrades,' as he called the soldiers. As they failed to understand the

Whitman befriended Wisconsin Volunteers William Hugh McFarland (seated, center) and Stephen M. Dyer (standing, right), seen here posing with other soldiers for this medical record of "Amputees at Armory Square Hospital." Courtesy, NLM.

jumbled sentences written on foolscap, they brought it to me. He was spending a vacation with his mother in Brooklyn, and his love for them was repeated in many incoherent sentences. I could only imagine it was written very late at night and he had taken 'a drop too much.'"³⁰

Akin tolerated Whitman in person, but just barely. "Walt Whitman visits our hospital almost daily," she wrote on another occasion. "He took a fancy to my fever boy, and would watch with him sometimes half the night. He is a poet, and I believe has written some very queer books about 'Free Love,' etc." Describing Whitman's personal appearance, Akin wrote, "He is an odd-looking genius, with a heavy frame, tall, with a turned-down Byronic collar, high head with straggling hair, and very *pink* rims to his eyes. When he stalks down the ward I feel the 'prickings of my thumbs,'

and never speak to him, if not obliged to do so, though I hear some of the other ladies offer him a cup of tea, which he enjoys with the relish of a little talk with them. With all his peculiar interest in our soldier boys he does not appeal to me."³¹

It is impossible to say definitively what prompted such animus from these nurses, although a few possibilities suggest themselves. Certainly, some hostility came from their stereotyping Whitman as the notorious poet of that "very bad book," as Secretary Chase had described it. Perhaps these nurses simply resented Whitman's constant presence in the hospital. As noted earlier, the hospitals were often inundated with visitors and the ubiquitous Whitman was probably more hindrance than help at times, particularly if the nurses felt compelled to enforce the visiting hours against this insistent caller.





Nurse Amanda Akin recorded that she could detect Whitman's approach by the "prickings of her thumbs." She disapproved of the poet's "peculiar interest in our soldier boys." Courtesy, George Washington University.

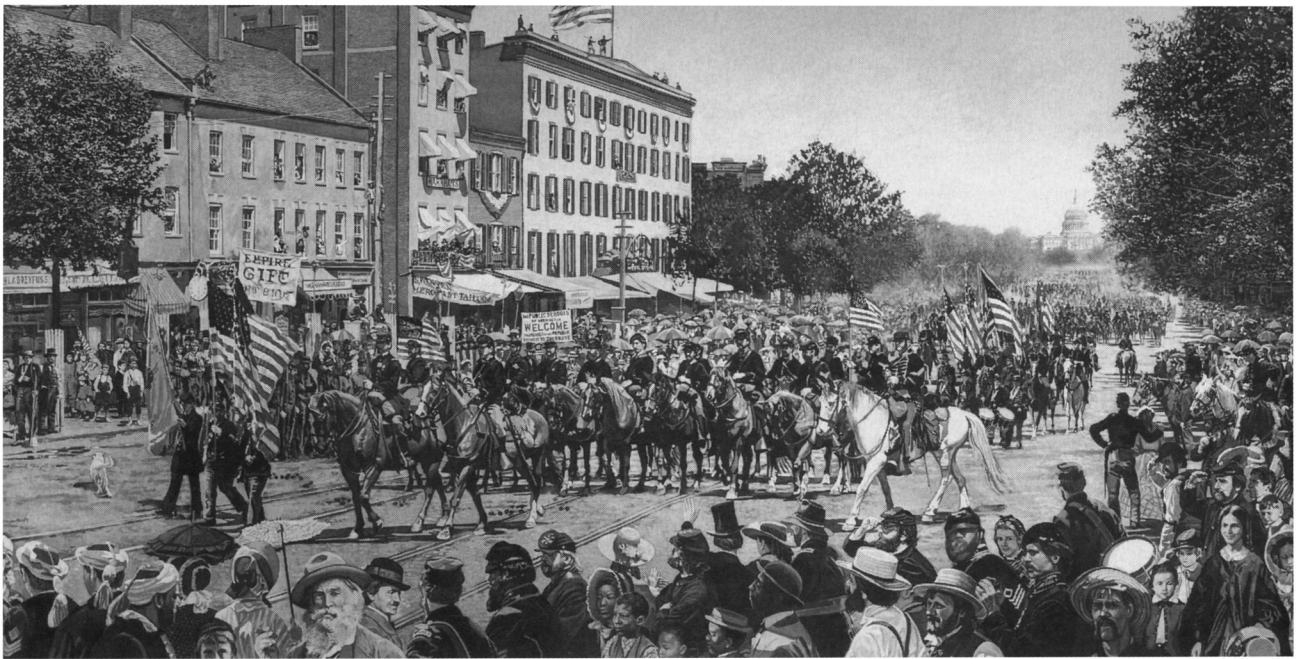
Whitman's approach to ministry depended on a "magnetic touch," as mentioned above, that may have offended both the propriety of these well-bred women and the hygienic requirements of the hospital staff. For his part, Whitman was disdainful of the "genteel" ladies who "under the irresistible conventions of society," were unable to respond to the soldiers in precisely the physical way that he (and nurses like Wright) did. Finally, one cannot overlook the possibility of what we would today call a homophobic reaction to the tender-hearted Whitman, whom many modern scholars believe to have been "gay."³² This seems particularly present in the language employed by Akin in describing Whitman as effeminate, from his "pink" eye rims and

In this 1991 oil painting, Washington artist Frank Wright re-creates "The Grand Review of May 23, 1865" on Pennsylvania Avenue, as seen through Whitman's eyes. Whitman appears facing the viewer. His close friend streetcar conductor Peter Doyle is to his right. Courtesy, Frank Wright. Painting on loan to Gelman Library, George Washington University. Photograph by Mark Gulezian.

his gossiping with the women nurses to his "peculiar interest" in the soldiers and his "fancy" for her fever boy.

As for the "fever boy" to whom both Whitman and Akin developed an attachment, his name was Erastus Haskell. A carpenter from Elmira, New York, Haskell played the fife for the 141st New York Infantry band. Not long after he was mustered into the Volunteers on September 11, 1862, Haskell took ill and spent several months in field and general hospitals before his admission to Armory Square on July 11, 1863, with typhoid fever. Whitman took a special interest in Haskell. Believing that the young man was far more ill than the medical staff appreciated, Whitman pestered the physicians to take Haskell's case more seriously. By the time the doctors accepted Whitman's assessment, Haskell was too ill to be saved. He died on August 2, 1863. Unmarried, the 21-year-old Haskell left behind his parents, Rosalinda and Samuel, and a deaf sister, Abigail, all of whom were financially dependent on the soldier after a stroke had left the father unable to work. After Haskell's death, Whitman fulfilled a promise to write to the soldier's parents. Whitman relayed Erastus' love to them, and also described their son's last days. Whitman poured out his heart in a final aside directed to the dead Erastus, which serves as a fitting summation of his hospital ministry:

Poor dear son, though you were not my son, I felt to love you as a son, what short time I saw you sick & dying here—it is as well as it is, perhaps better—for who knows whether he is not better off, that patient & sweet young soul, to go, than we are to stay? So farewell, dear boy—it was




my opportunity to be with you in your last rapid days of death—no chance as I have said to do anything particular, for nothing could be done—only you did not lay here & die among strangers without having one at hand who loved you dearly, & to whom you gave your dying kiss—³³

Almost four years to the day after the Confederate attack on “the *Flag* at Fort Sumter,” as Whitman incredulously recalled it, the war ended. Lincoln savored the victory briefly and then became the Union’s last, great sacrifice. George Whitman had lived through many more battles and even survived imprisonment in the “Prison-Pens” of the South. When George’s 51st New York Volunteers passed down Pennsylvania Avenue in the Grand Review of Union troops in May 1865, Walt Whitman joined them. He had certainly earned the right. For all of the suffering it brought, the war had accomplished an essential objective, in Whitman’s view: “The volcanic upheaval of the nation, after that firing on the flag at Charleston, proved for certain something which had been previously in great doubt, and at once substantially settled the question of Disunion.”³⁴

Remaining in Washington after the war, Whitman worked successively for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Attorney General’s Office. Now a small part of the

political establishment in the capital he once derided to Emerson as a “whited sepulchre,” Whitman gradually came to appreciate Washington and the work of its inhabitants. In fact, Whitman’s transformed view is now etched in granite on Pennsylvania Avenue’s Freedom Plaza: “I went to Washington as everybody goes there, prepared to see everything done with some furtive intention, but I was disappointed—pleasantly disappointed.”

In 1873 Whitman suffered a stroke that forced him to leave Washington for his brother George’s home in Camden, where the great hospital visitor played the unaccustomed role of patient. He never recovered sufficiently to return to Washington but continued his poems and prose through the death-bed editions of 1892.

Whitman died in Camden on March 26, 1892, and is buried in that city’s Harleigh Cemetery. Here in Washington, however, his spirit lives on in the volunteers of the city’s own Whitman-Walker Clinic, named in honor of the Civil War ministers of mercy: pioneering female physician Mary Walker and Walt Whitman.³⁵ 

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