

Civil War changed the face of nursing for women

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Pamela D. Toler, author of "Heroines of Mercy Street, The Real Nurses of the Civil War," talks to Racine nurse Susan Chiapete at the Civil War Museum Saturday. Toler talked about her book Saturday as part of the Civil War Medical Weekend.

The Civil War came to life Saturday as re-enactors of the 17th Corps Field Hospital shared information on Civil War-era medicine, nursing and dentistry at the Civil War Museum, part of the annual Civil War Medical Weekend.

But if one area had one of the biggest impacts on the war, it was the addition of women willing to act as nurses, said speaker Pamela D. Toler, author of "Heroines of Mercy Street, The Real Nurses of the Civil War," the companion book to the 2016 PBS TV series.

During the Civil War, "Nursing was not yet a profession," said Toler, of Chicago, author of two other books on history and children's history books.

"In a hospital, it was not considered a job for a respectable woman. The Civil War really was a pivotal experience for women."

Before then, Toler said, most nursing was done at home. In the 19th century, hospitals were considered places only for the poor and desperate.

“Women who were arrested for (drunkenness and) disorderly conduct were sentenced to work at (New York’s) Bellevue Hospital for 30 days,” Toler said. “It was really a job for women who had few options left.”

Nightingale’s influence

The Civil War changed all that, as did the work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War.

With the publication of Nightingale’s “Notes on Nursing” in 1859, “thousands of American women read that book and were inspired by her to do nursing as a vocation,” Toler said.

With casualties mounting, rising to more than 620,000 by the Civil War’s end in 1865, the former Army hospital system of convalescent men caring for patients was no longer sufficient.

Activist Dorothea Dix, who had reported on and spearheaded reforms on mental asylums, was one of those who volunteered. In April 1861, she was appointed the first superintendent for Army nurses. Among them was Louisa May Alcott.

Dix became the first woman to serve in a federally appointed role, but that doesn’t mean nurses were any more welcome by Army doctors and surgeons.

“One surgeon said, ‘A lady ceases to be a lady when she becomes a nurse,’” Toler said.

But things changed. The number of nursing schools grew from zero before the Civil War to 16 in the 1880s and to 432 by 1900. Three years after the war’s end, the American Medical Association recommended implementing nursing training.

After the war

What Toler found inspiring was that while some women went home and “stepped back into their old roles, others played a far more important role after the war. They really helped change the world.

“They were reforming prisons, starting hospitals. They became active in the labor movement. Some founded national organizations. It (the war) shaped their lives in important ways.

Women who survived the first few months learned to stand up for themselves and they stood up for their education.”

Susan Chiapete, a nurse from Racine, said she remembered reading about pioneers like Nightingale and reading Nightingale’s book, but was glad to hear even more.

“I learned about their nursing theories, but learning their story this way was very interesting,” she said.

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