

The background of the book cover features a close-up photograph of a desk. On the right side, there is a round, silver-colored pocket watch with Roman numerals on its face. In the lower-left foreground, a dark metal key with a rectangular head is lying on a light-colored, textured surface. In the upper-left corner, a portion of a pink flower is visible. The overall lighting is soft and natural, creating a historical and personal atmosphere.

Letters of a Civil War Nurse

INFORMATIONAL TEXT

Cornelia Hancock

1863

Introduction

At 23 years old, Cornelia Hancock (1840–1927) was denied permission to be a nurse by the Union’s superintendent, who required her military employees to be plain or homely and “by no means liberally endowed with personal attractions.” But Hancock snuck into Gettysburg anyway and would become known as the Florence Nightingale of America, opening a school for African Americans and serving as president of the National Association of Army Nurses of the Civil War. Her letters were published in 1937 and give eloquent account of the horrific aftermath of battle.

“I shall not come home, unless I get sick, while this hospital lasts.”

3rd Division—2nd Army Corps Hospital—
Gettysburg, Pa. July 26th—Sunday.

My Dear Mother

Today is Sunday but there is no semblance of it here. It is now about five o'clock in the morning. Our hospital has been moved and our stores have given out. There is nothing to cook with, **hence** I have nothing to do, and, therefore, have time to write. Such days will come here that we have to see our wounded men fed with dry bread and poor coffee; and I can tell you it is hard to witness some cursing for food, some praying for it. It seems to be no one's fault but will happen. All the luxuries that the men get come through the Christian Commission, Sanitary, Ladies Aid, etc. I would give anything to have a barrel of butter, and some dried rusk that I have seen in our parlor. I wish you would get up something of the kind and have Mrs. Jones requested to forward to me. I should think it would be as satisfactory for *me* to have them as for them to be sown broadcast¹ on the land. I could make a report of everything I received and write to the Society.

2 I received a silver medal from the soldiers which cost twenty dollars. I know what thee will say—that the money could have been *better* laid out. It was very **complimentary** though. One of the soldiers has a sword that he found on the battlefield, which he is going to give to me before I come home. If they were only where they could buy I should be so loaded with baggage, I should never be able to get home. I shall not come home, unless I get



Surgeons and nurses with the United States Sanitary Commission at their tent in Camp Letterman at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in August 1863

sick, while this hospital lasts. I have two men detailed to wait on me, which suits of course. They are now fixing up nice little tables and all such things

1. **broadcast:** scattered, in the sense of seeds on a patch of ground



around the tent. I have eight wall tents full of amputated men. The tents of the wounded I look right out on—it is a **melancholy** sight, but you have no idea how soon one gets used to it. Their screams of **agony** do not make as much impression on me now as the reading of this letter will on you. The most painful task we have to perform here is entertaining the friends who come from home and see their friends all mangled up. I do hate to see them. Soldiers take everything as it comes, but citizens are not inured. You will think it is a short time for me to get used to things, but it seems to me as if all my past life was a myth, and as if I had been away from home seventeen years. What I do here one would think would kill at home, but I am well and comfortable. When we get up early in the morning, our clothes are so wet that we could wring them. On they go, and by noon they are dry.

From thy affectionate daughter—
C. Hancock

Excerpted from *Letters of a Civil War Nurse: Cornelia Hancock, 1863–1865*, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

 WRITE

PERSONAL NARRATIVE: Write a letter in the quiet, composed style of Nurse Hancock, in which you explain your need for something, such as supplies or information. First, think about the message you want to send. Next, decide on your audience, or the letter's recipient. Use language appropriate to the task.