


# Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

## *“Brave and Bold as a Lion:” Dix Dix*

*By Meredith Mitchell*

### **Early Life and Career**

Dorothea Dix was born in 1802 in Maine, in an unstable family. She and her brothers were taken to live with her paternal grandmother at a young age. While living there she was introduced to Edward Bangs, her second cousin. He offered to help her reach her ambition of becoming a schoolteacher. Women were not allowed in public schools at that time, so Edward found twenty girls aged 6-8 for Dix to teach at a space he rented for her. She ran this school of sorts for three years, starting when she was 15.

Eventually Dix returned to her grandmother’s home in Boston and was surprised when her request to open a school in the mansion was granted. She taught two classes, one for poor girls and one for wealthy girls. She ran these two classes for 14 years until 1836 when she became very ill with tuberculosis. With no name for this condition and no treatment at the time, her doctor arranged for her to take a long vacation to Europe. After recovering and returning to the United States, she decided to volunteer to teach a Sunday School class to female inmates of a prison. Her experiences at the prison began her lifelong commitment to improving living conditions for the mentally ill. While at the prison, she observed prostitutes, criminals and the mentally ill all housed together in unheated, unfurnished and foul-smelling quarters. When she asked about the conditions of the jail, she was told “the insane do not feel heat or cold.” She spent the next twenty years fighting for improved conditions for the mentally ill in the United States and Europe.

### **Civil War**

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Dix went to



*Dorothea Dix, courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Washington and volunteered her services to the Union cause, as she later told a friend, “I think it is my duty.” She was assigned the post of Superintendent of Women Nurses. Her job was to select and assign women nurses to military hospitals, and to organize and inspect hospital wards. Concerned the reputation of her

nurses, she only allowed plain-looking, middle-aged women volunteer to be nurses. This was compounded by a fear that young women would join simply to find a husband. A press release she wrote said, “No woman under thirty need apply to serve in government hospitals. All nurses are required to be plain looking women. Their dresses must be brown or black, with no bows, no curls, no jewelry, and no hoop-skirts.” Still, she recruited around 3,000 nurses and improved hospital conditions during the war, often finding her own sources of medical supplies. Although Dix was in poor health herself throughout the war, she did not

### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

*Sarah Coster, Site Administrator*

*Helen Wirka, Site Specialist*

*Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant*



*The Mansion House Hotel as a hospital in Union-occupied Alexandria.*

miss a day of work and did not receive compensation for her role. Known to some as “Dragon Dix” for her dictatorial leadership style, she was a controversial and often unpopular figure.

As wounded soldiers began pouring into the hospitals in Washington, Dix was shocked by the lack of preparation by the War Department. Because of the shortage of ambulances, Dix purchased one with her own money and sent it to the battlefield to rescue the wounded soldiers still there. More hospitals were necessary, and the immediate solution was to commandeer private homes, including the Hallowell House on Washington St., the Tibbs House, the Fowle and Johnson homes on Prince St., the Grosvenor house on Washington, along with churches and a theological school. Dix made it a point to visit all of these locations. As the need for more nurses arose, Dix relaxed her restrictions on recruits in favor of taking women who were trained or just willing to help. Experiencing four long years of death and destruction, she wrote to a friend that “This war is breaking my heart” (296).

Women nurses were employed at the ratio of one to every two soldiers. They received forty cents a day, rations, living quarters, and transportation. The guidelines were altered later in the war, reducing the

wage and increasing the ratio to one nurse to every ten beds, a number later raised to thirty. Women nurses were restricted to serve in base hospitals unless they were needed for an emergency elsewhere.

Dix also traveled to military hospitals away from the east coast to help organize and conduct inspections. St. Louis hospitals were struggling severely, inciting Dix to raise \$700,000 for nurses and supplies for them by appealing to other Union states for financial help. Not everyone appreciated her efforts, however. Many surgeons and citizens alike resented her authority to inspect their hospitals. Although she eventually lost the authority to be the sole hiring agent, she continued volunteering 18 months after the war ended in 1865.

There are two revealing descriptions of her work during that time. Historian Benson John Lawson described her “like an angel of mercy she labored day and night for the relief of suffering soldiers. She went from battlefield to battlefield when the carnage was over, and from camp to camp, giving with her own hand comforts to the wounded and soothing the troubled spirits of the dying. The amount of happiness that resulted from the services of this woman can never be estimated.” Her friend Dr. Caroline Burchardt said:

“She was a very retiring, sensitive woman, yet brave and bold as a lion to do battle for the right and for justice. She was very unpopular in the war with surgeons, nurses, and any others, who failed to do their whole duty, and they disliked to see her appear, as she was sure to do if needed...She was one who found no time to make herself famous with pen and paper, but a hard, earnest worker, living in the most severely simple manner, often having to be reminded that she needed food...Every day recalls some of her noble acts of kindness and self-sacrifice to mind. She seemed to me to lead a dual life, one for the outside world, the other for her trusted, tried friends.”



### Mansion House Hospital

Anne Reading was a trained nurse who worked in various London hospitals and assisted Florence Nightingale in treating wounded British soldiers in the Crimean War in 1855. Reading traveled to the Union Army headquarters in Washington in 1862 to offer her services. She was hired by Dix and posted at Fort Monroe, eventually was sent to the Mansion House Hospital, formerly James Green's Mansion House Hotel, in Alexandria, Virginia. During her work as a Union nurse, she met and married Andrew Furry in October 1862. When Dix found out about the marriage, Reading resigned her post. In her diary, she recounts these events: "Some person I do not know who, has made it their business to inform Miss Dix that I am married and that lady appears to be greatly offended because I had not previously made her acquainted with my intentions...I do not think I should be comfortable here any longer. Having sent in my resignation to the proper authorities, I prepared to leave the Mansion House Hospital. Our poor men were all very sorry when we told them we were going to leave them." Dix later assisted Reading with receiving the wages for her time as a nurse that she was owed from the Union government.

Mary Phinney von Olnhausen, a New England widow, was hired by Dix and then taken to the Mansion House Hospital. "You may encounter difficulties," Dix said to her. "The surgeon in charge is determined to give me no foothold in his hospital.



Mary Phinney von Olnhausen

But I expect you to take no notice of any opposition they may give you." Opposition was obvious from the start of Von Olnhausen's time there. The hotel had become a warren of dirty wards where there were so many cots there was barely room to move. The smell of blood and pus was overwhelming in the August heat. Von

Olnhausen was given the task of changing soldiers' dressings with little instruction and sharp reprimand. She was given no place to sleep; only occasionally dragging a straw bed into another nurse's room to sleep on the floor. The chief surgeon was overheard saying "We will make it so hot for her that she will not stay long." Dix sympathized with Von Olnhausen, but told her, "You must bear it a while, my child. I have placed you here, and you must stay." Von Olnhausen did stay, enduring the persecution of the surgeon in charge, the confusion of inadequate equipment and an untrained staff. She wrote that, "I speak to nobody, get what food I can and buy the rest." Von Olnhausen was the only one of Dix's nurses placed there at the time, and partly because of her dedication, Dix was finally able to replace the inefficient nurses in the hospital with those of her choosing. Von Olnhausen went on to become a superintendent of a training school for nurses. (Wilson 290-291).



An Unknown Civil War Nurse.

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