



# Accessible Archives

*WHITE PAPER SERIES*

June 2021

Volume IV, Issue 3

## Once a Household Name: Mary Ann “Mother” Bickerdyke

Written by  
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**Jill O'Neill** is the Director of Content for NISO. She has been an active member of the information community for thirty years, most recently managing the professional development programs for NFAIS (National Federation of Advanced Information Services) before joining NISO in 2015. Her publishing expertise was gained working for such prominent content providers as Elsevier, Thomson Scientific (now ThomsonReuters), and John Wiley & Sons. Jill continues to write for a diverse set of publications, including Information Today and the Scholarly Kitchen blog.

## Introduction

In Margaret Leach's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865*, the author mentions that Mother Bickerdyke was part of the Grand Review of the Armies in 1865, the celebratory parade marking the end of hostilities in the Civil War. Who was this heroine of the Union army whose honorary title made no reference to her marital status, something that would have been a particular anomaly in 19th century America? The most cursory Google search indicated monuments to her memory in Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Probing a bit more, I discovered that there had been multiple books written about her devotion to wounded soldiers, but many were written with such sentimentality that they

didn't seem particularly trustworthy as source material. Turning to Accessible Archives with its wealth of contemporary newspapers and other collections allowed me to get past the language of Gilded Age memoirs and discover the truth of Bickerdyke's remarkable gift for logistics in wartime.



Mary Ann Bickerdyke, 1898. Library of Congress.

Mother Bickerdyke is not perhaps as well known in the 21st century as some of her contemporaries. More immediately recognizable from discussions of nursing during the Civil War are Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, and Dorothea Dix, the Superintendent of Army Nurses for the Union Army. However, thousands of Confederate

and Union soldiers knew Mother Bickerdyke and for decades following the war, were deeply appreciative of her care for the wounded. Unlike others responsible for medical care in the military, Mrs. Bickerdyke took it upon herself to ensure

hygiene and good diet for recuperating patients and regularly flouted military discipline to ensure that supplies and practical logistics were made available to those in need. She maintained a unique relationship with General Ulysses S. Grant and most particularly with General William T. Sherman, both of whom regularly overruled protests from less effective military physicians regarding Mother Bickerdyke's activity and authority. Her highly effective approach earned enormous respect from those who worked side by side with her during the war, and that respect was documented in newspaper articles and memoirs written in the aftermath. She was denied a pension by Congress until decades passed, but the stories told in those memoirs fueled efforts by suffragists who touted her as a proven example of a woman doing work equivalent to that of men.

## Early Years

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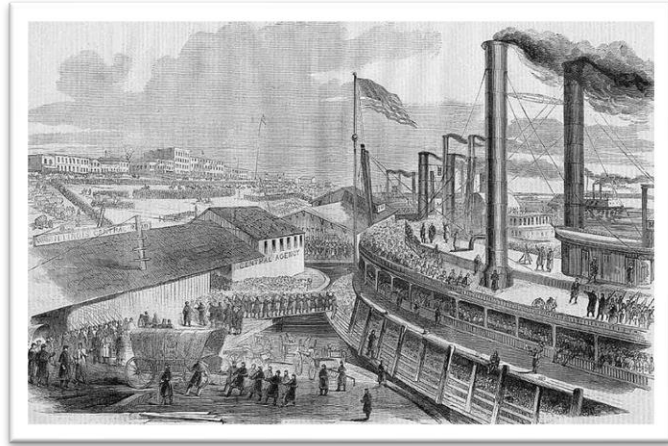
Born in Knox County, Ohio in 1817, Mary Ann Ball lacked some of the ladylike education and manners of her contemporaries in the East. She attended Oberlin College for a brief period, where she received limited nurses training from formally trained medical professionals. Circumstances prevented her from graduating from Oberlin, however, as the young woman felt an obligation to return home to nurse the grandparents who had raised her. At the age of 20, she found work as a housekeeper and visiting nurse before being married in 1847 to Dr. Robert Bickerdyke. She took care of his three sons by a prior marriage as well as giving birth and raising two of her own in Galesburg, Illinois. When left a widow in 1858, she supported her family by continuing to work as a visiting nurse. In the spring of 1861, she was asked by her church congregation to supervise transfer of medical supplies by train between Galesburg and the city of Cairo (also in Illinois) which served as a major supply depot for the Union army in the Western campaign.

## The Civil War, 1861-1865

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**Frank Leslie's Weekly** in May of 1861 noted the strategic importance of Cairo to Union forces, "*Geography has made Cairo a strategic position of the very utmost consequence. It is the key to the upper, as New Orleans and the Lake and the Balize are the key to the lower Mississippi. It can blockade St. Louis on the one hand and Louisville on the other; while, if in possession of a considerable force, possessing heavy ordnance, and commanding the railroad leading south of that point, it would menace the city of Memphis and open the way for an invading army to make that an advanced post of occupation.*" [1]

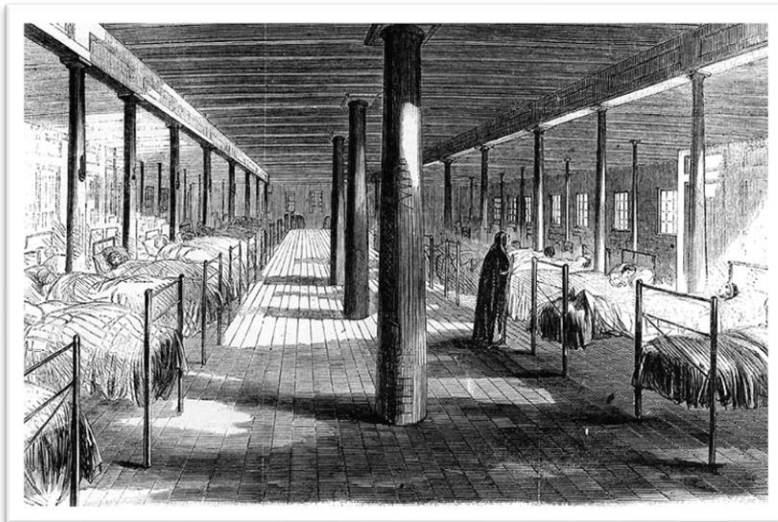
As her contemporary and fellow nurse, Mary Livermore, would later note in *My Story of the War*, “Hardly had the troops reached Cairo, when, from the sudden change in their habits, their own imprudence, and the ignorance of their commanders on all sanitary points, sickness broke out among them.” Conditions in the Cairo field hospital tents were horrific. Troops were suffering from diarrhea, measles, and typhoid fever. Livermore continues, “There was at that time little order, system, or discipline anywhere. In company with Mary Safford, then living in Cairo, she [Bickerdyke] commenced an immediate systematic work in the camp and regimental hospitals at Cairo and Bird’s Point.” [2]



Embarkation of Union Troops from Cairo on January 10, 1862. Sketch by Alexander Simplot. Public Domain.

It was in this context that Mother Bickerdyke first came into conflict with the medical authority. Technically, she had no status in the hospital and a public upbraiding of a slothful physician in front of patients and other staff caused her to be nicknamed the “Cyclone in Calico”, bringing her to the attention of General Benjamin Prentiss. Prentiss listened to the physician who’d been called out and to Mother Bickerdyke; his solution was to quietly assign her responsibility for the kitchens at the existing field hospitals. It was due to her insistence that the enlisted men be given priority in care and supplies be used to benefit those patients that she subsequently came into contact with General Ulysses S. Grant in late 1861. He promoted her to the role of “matron-in-charge” in Cairo and her reputation for responsible patient care and efficient organizations became even more well known. Again, Mary Livermore wrote, “*The rank and file learned that she was in an especial sense their friend, and dishonest and brutal surgeons and officials, of whom there were not a few, in the early months of the war, understood, in advance, that she could neither be bought nor frightened. Throughout the war, the prestige of her hospital life in Cairo clung to her. After the battle of Donelson, Mother Bickerdyke went from Cairo in the first hospital boat and assisted in the removal of the wounded to Cairo, St. Louis, and Louisville, and in nursing those too badly wounded to be moved. The Sanitary*

Commission had established a depot of stores at Cairo, and on these she was allowed to make drafts *ad libitum* for she was as famous for her economical use of sanitary stores as she had been before the war for her notable housewifery. The hospital boats at that time were poorly equipped for the sad work of transporting the wounded. But this thoughtful woman, who made five of the terrible trips from the battle-field of Donelson to the hospital, put on board the



Floating hospital on the Mississippi, 1862. Library of Congress.

boat with which she was connected, before it started from Cairo, an abundance of necessaries. There was hardly a want expressed for which she could not furnish some sort of relief." [3]

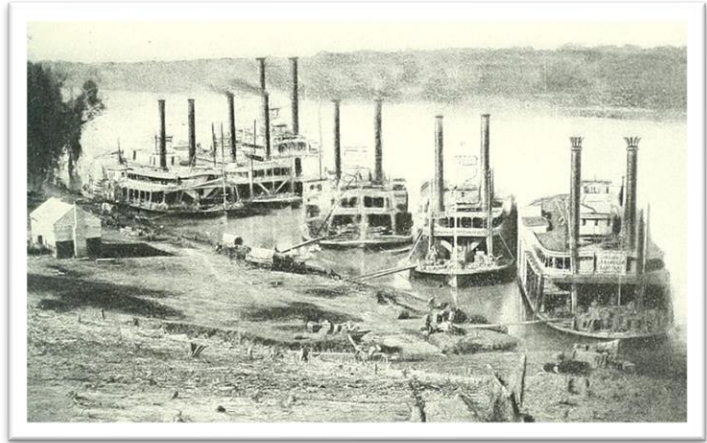
An account from one of her fellow workers reads "Fort Donelson was the first battle-field that Mrs. Bickerdyke saw, and it was one of the most terrible.

There were no available places to be used as hospitals and many of the men lay suffering with their clothes unremoved and their wounds undressed until they perished....she saw men with mangled limbs lying upon bare floors, protected only but their soiled and tattered uniforms and in the direct want." [4]

A report in the **National Anti-Slavery Standard** documents Mother Bickerdyke's further engagement in military campaigns and recounts one of the stories for which she became most famous. "She seems to have gone into the South with Grant, for she was at the capture of Fort Donelson and the battle of Shiloh. Afterward, under Sherman, she had charge of the celebrated Gayoso hospital at Memphis...It was while here that she procured the discharge of a surgeon who had neglected his patients, badly wounded, while he was on a drunken spree; and when he went to Gen. Sherman, afterward, to get reinstated, was asked who got him discharged. After some hesitation, the fellow said, "Why, I suppose it was that woman, that Mrs. Bickerdyke." "Oh, well," said Sherman, "if it was Mother Bickerdyke, I can do nothing for you; she ranks me!" [5]

Livermore again gives a vivid picture of Bickerdyke's activity during the battle of Shiloh: *"There had been little provision made for the terrible needs of the battle-field in advance of the conflict.*

*The battle occurred unexpectedly, and was a surprise to our men, – who nearly suffered defeat,— and again there was utter destitution and incredible suffering. Three days after the battle, the boats of the Sanitary Commission arrived at the Landing, laden with every species of relief, - condensed food, stimulants, clothing, bedding, medicines, chloroform,*



On the slopes of Shiloh Field...of the six steamers, the name of the Tycoon, which brought hospital supplies from the Cincinnati branch of the Sanitary Commission, is visible. From *The Photographic History of the Civil War*, 1911.

*surgical instruments, and carefully selected volunteer nurses and surgeons...Here Mother Bickerdyke was found, carrying system, order, and relief wherever she went. One of the surgeons went to the rear with a wounded man and found her wrapped in the 'gray overcoat of a rebel officer, for she had disposed of her blanket shawl to some poor fellow who needed it. She was wearing a soft slouch hat, having lost her inevitable Shaker bonnet. Her kettles had been set up, the fire kindled underneath, and she was dispensing hot soup, tea, crackers, panado, whiskey and water, and other refreshments, to the shivering, fainting, wounded In CI1. "Where did you get these articles?" he inquired; " and under whose authority are you at work?" She paid no heed to his interrogatories, and, indeed, did not hear them, so completely absorbed was she in her work of compassion. Watching her with admiration for her skill, administrative ability, and intelligence, — for she not only fed the wounded men, but temporarily dressed their wounds in some cases, – he approached her again: —"Madam, you seem to combine in yourself a sick diet kitchen and a medical staff. May I inquire under whose authority you are working?" Without pausing in her work, she answered him, "I have received my authority from the Lord God Almighty; have you anything that ranks higher than that?" The truth was, she held no position whatever at that time. She was only a "volunteer nurse," having received no appointment, and being attached to no corps of relief. After she became an agent of the Sanitary Commission, we endeavored to keep her supplied with what she needed. But emergencies were constantly arising which she could not*

foresee, and for which the Commission could not provide, which would throw her on her own resources; and these never failed her. Sometimes, when opportunities for purchasing hospital supplies came in her way, she would buy largely, and send the bills to the Commission with her endorsement. Again, at other times of great need, she would borrow money, expend it for the boys in her charge, and, sending to Mrs. Hoge and myself vouchers and notes, would leave the affair with us to settle." [6]

It was such honesty, determination, and resourcefulness that endeared the



General William T. Sherman, U.S.A.,  
1865. Library of Congress.

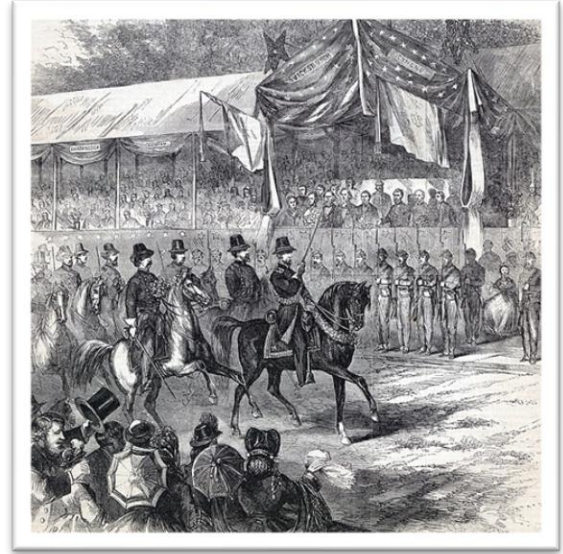
woman to the military high command. Quoting again from the **National Anti-Slavery Standard**, "Gen. Sherman, on his side, fully appreciates Mother Bickerdyke, and when he was curt and repellent to all agents and nurses, and employees of the Sanitary and Christian and State commissions, she had the entree to his headquarters, and the granting of any favors she chose to ask. There is something in her character akin to his own—both are restless, impetuous, fiery, hardworking, and indomitable. After the fall of Vicksburg, he asked that Mother Bickerdyke might become an especial attaché of his corps—the Fifteenth. Ever after, during the war, she considered herself, in an especial

sense, under Sherman's direction; and the soldiers of the Fifteenth corps always, and to this day, claim exclusive ownership of her." [7]

An obituary from **The Woman's Tribune** recounts further details of Mother Bickerdyke's wartime efforts, "Through the battles of Vicksburg, Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge and many others, she nursed friend and foe alike. She started with Sherman in his famous march to the sea, and when he cut his base of supplies she went North and collected sanitary stores for his soldiers. When he entered Savannah, she went to look after the liberated Union prisoners at Wilmington, N.C., and wherever there was a group of soldier boys who needed care there she was, ordering around the officers, cutting all the red tape, fearless, strong and gentle." [8]

## Post War Work

The transition to peacetime, once hostilities had ended, was not particularly easy for Mother Bickerdyke. As a heroine, she was celebrated, riding in the 1865 Grand Review parade in Washington, D.C., she wore her well-worn calico dress and sunbonnet, which were subsequently sold off at auction to raise funds for war veterans. However, as a widow and without any pay from the government to sustain her, Mother Bickerdyke still had to earn a livelihood. Initially, she had plans to return to some form of her pre-war livelihood. As Susan B.



General W. T. Sherman leading his army at the Grand Review, Washington D.C., May 24, 1865.

Anthony reported in her newspaper, *The Revolution*, “Mrs. Bickerdyke, who followed Sherman through his entire campaign, taking care of sick soldiers, has built a large hotel at Salina, Kansas, which she intends to manage entirely herself. If women are to have a place in this world they must get right out of the old grooves and do new and grand things. We have looked through the eye of a needle long enough. It is time for “*THE REVOLUTION.*” [9] As it happens, that boarding house would ultimately fail, despite patronage by both Generals Grant and Sherman.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote scathingly in the feminist publication **The Revolution** in 1869, “If ever there was a woman whom this nation should remember and honor it is Mother Bickerdyke, who, in honesty, to-day, earns her bread by the sweat of her brow. For her no pension from the government, no token that the nation remembers her services. Honor, office, emoluments and monuments for man; poverty and forgetfulness for woman, with the privilege of begging money to write his deeds in marble while he writes hers in sand.” [10]

Others saw her having a greater role in Reconstruction efforts. Mother Bickerdyke’s management skills and organizational capabilities were solicited for the education of freedmen. The **National Anti-Slavery Standard** reported one particular plan:

“These objects were, to establish industrial schools at the South, where the men are to be taught to cultivate the land, and learn various mechanical trades,



*while the women and children should be taught to cultivate gardens, to cut and mend their own clothing, to do all kinds of woman's work efficiently, and at the same time to be instructed in habits of personal cleanliness. It was also intended to blend manual labor with intellectual culture, and thus raise up a class of reliable and self-respecting landowners and citizens who would be a blessing to the world. In the particular estate in view, the land was naturally fertile and needed only proper culture to produce largely. The school proposed to devote two or three hours a day to study, and the remainder to manual labor. The object was to make the people self-supporting, and then induce them to aid in educating others in new fields.*

*The manager and directress was to be Mrs., or as she is familiarly known, Mother Bickerdyke, whose energy, practical good sense, and warm-heartedness, no less than the large experience she had had in similar enterprises, qualified her in every way for the arduous task, and ensured success. Mr. Morton narrated several instances of Mrs. Bickerdyke's talent for organization, and the power she possessed of conciliating all classes, and of infusing into others her own energetic and self-helping will. Mrs. Bickerdyke went with no hope of reward and expected no pay. She meant to devote the rest of her life to the work, in which she would be cheered and aided by her son. It was proposed to do everything to enable the people to help themselves."*

The recommendation of her abilities to the audience was entirely confident:

*Mother Bickerdyke is admirably fitted by nature and experience for leadership in such a movement. She knows how to work, and how to teach others to work; and she has an enthusiasm for labor which she knew how to infuse into others during her wonderful army life. Quick to see what is to be done, with almost limitless capacity for labor, and with marvelous fertility of resource and invention, she exercises a personal magnetism over the uncultivated and rude working classes that I have never seen surpassed. I had ample opportunities to observe this during the war, when we were co-workers in the field of operations marked out by the Sanitary Commission—and since then in our Chicago "Home of the Friendless," (of which I was one of the Board of Managers and she the housekeeper), in a nondescript family of one hundred women and children, changing one-half every month. [11]*

Mother Bickerdyke largely dropped out of sight until the mid-1880's when notices in newspapers began to surface inquiring after her health and well-being. An exchange between editor and correspondent in **The Woman's Tribune** brought

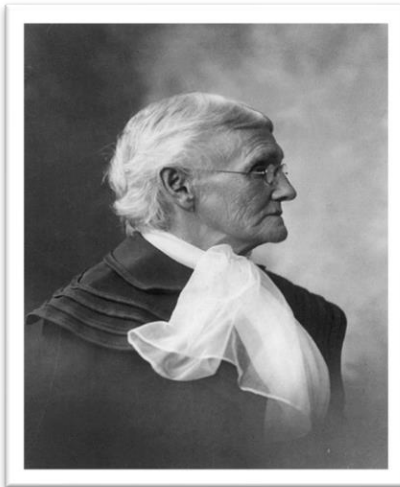
awareness of efforts to interest Congress in properly recognizing her work by award of a pension:

*"...the following note, just received from Prof. Allen, suggests the possibility of making our columns still further a source of practical help to this loyal veteran, friend and co-worker of Abraham Lincoln.*

*My dear Mr. Jones:— Through the happy accident of a paragraph in UNITY a few months ago I have been able to find Mrs. Bickerdyke here at 2244 Mission street. Have had an hour or two of delightful talk with her about her old friends (you being one) and am going this afternoon with my wife to dine at her modest table. Now you probably know something of the warrant to get her a pension which will be settled in the coming Congress; and if you will write to the Hon. Horace Davis, 1011, Bush street, San Francisco, telling him who has charge of it in Congress and putting him upon the track of any facts that should be known, you may do her a real service. Yours very truly,*

JOS. H. ALLEN.

*We have taken steps to secure for Mr. Davis something of the information desired, but we will be obliged to any of our readers for any information or*



*Mother Mary Ann Ball Bickerdyke, 1898, Library of Congress*

*remembrances concerning Mrs. Bickerdyke's service in the hospitals. Any references to available accounts of her work or biographical matter from any source will be thankfully, received, and we will try to use the same in the interest of the good-will and the gospel of helpfulness which Mrs. Bickerdyke conspicuously exemplified in "the days that tried men's souls.— Unity." [12]*

*From the same publication, dated October 1, 1885: "The relief given to Mrs. Bickerdyke was timely, but the great desire is to secure the pension to which she is so richly entitled by reason of her long and important service in the hospital and on the battle-*

*field."*

She was invited to speak at suffrage events and her simple voice clearly communicates how she viewed the Temperance movement as well as the effort to grant women the vote.

*"In the late rebellion women did about half the work. They sent their husbands and sons to the front; they filled the sanitary boxes; they nursed the wounded: they visited the hospitals' and fields of battle. Let a pure chaste woman go into camp and it makes a mark right off...Women run the laundries and the diet kitchens. They say women can't fight but they did fight and were not very scrupulous about it; the scalawags had to get out of the road. Gen. Sherman would tell you women did more to clear the scalawags away than the military did. And we have had some fighting to do since the war. We have been fighting in temperance. Here in Kansas, you have law in one hand, and you want Justice in the other. Don't be too indulgent to the drug stores. It is a shame to let the drug stores sell liquor to a man who will sign his name to the application. The men who want liquor would just as soon sign their name as not if the men can't do any better than that they ought to get out of the way and let the women do it. I rather like the men if I do say this. As I am a mother to 300,000 men I certainly ought to like you and I am proud of you. I did not see a drunken man, although I visited all the headquarters. I got my cripples into a carriage and I could not smell their breath. Some of the soldiers enfeebled by wounds and sickness have got into the habit of drinking, but they do not compare with the number of those that drink who lay back in the rear and made big fortunes...I have graduated in the Tombs of New York where I was in the missions for seven years and I know that the majority of people who drink are of the higher classes. Now here you have got the tiger by the heels, hold him down."* [13]

Again, in that issue, the editor spoke:

*...the editor of the WOMAN'S TRIBUNE can report that this good woman whom 300,000 war-scarred veterans call MOTHER is living in San Francisco, in good health, although somewhat crippled with rheumatism, not asking for charity nor grumbling because she has never received a pension for her services, not alone, not uncomfortable, but living a useful life surrounded by friends, dispensing liberally to others of her small means, yet not with that injudicious lavishness with which she has been credited, (shams and frauds would never stand any chance with Mrs. Bickerdyke ,) looking at her past with a sweet simplicity that refuses to consider that her services have been unusual, or entitle her to special praise. "I but did my duty, and no more than any of the boys who went to the front," she is fond of saying. She never depreciates the services of others even of the indispensable home-workers, and nothing annoys her more than to have any person exaggerate his work and its merit, without it is for persons to represent her as living in poverty and neglect. The truth is that Mrs. Bickerdyke has affectionate and successful sons who will never see her want, but this does not alter the fact that; she is entitled to a pension and it should immediately be granted her by Congress, with the most abject apologies for having been so long about it."*

Mother Bickerdyke was ultimately granted a pension in 1886; a final paragraph appears in *A History Of Kansas*, Noble L. Prentis. Published By Caroline E. Prentis, 1904, pp. 297-306

*Among the men and women who have brought honor to the State is Mary A. Bickerdyke, better known as "Mother" Bickerdyke, who died at Bunker Hill, Kansas, November 8, 1901. In the beginning of the great rebellion, she was one of the first to comprehend that "war means sickness." For four years, first without orders, and later under commission, she cared for thousands of the brave boys in blue. After the war, Mother Bickerdyke helped to settle Kansas with ex-soldiers of the Union Army and their families. At the age of 70 Congress grudgingly awarded her a pension of \$25 per month. [14]*

## Notes

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- [1] "Cairo, Illinois", *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, May 25, 1861, Frank Leslie's' Weekly Collection, Accessible Archives.
- [2] Livermore, M. Ashton Rice, *My Story Of The War: A Woman's Narrative Of Four Years Personal Experience As Nurse In The Union Army, And In Relief Work At Home, In Hospitals, Camps, And At The Front, During The War Of The Rebellion*. Hartford, Conn.: A.D. Worthington and Co.,1890.
- [3] Livermore, M. Ashton Rice, pages 507-509.
- [4] Burton, Margaret D., *The Woman Who Battled for the Boys in Blue*, A. T. Dewey, 1886, page 43.
- [5] "Mother Bickerdyke", *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 6, 1869, National Anti-Slavery Standard Collection, Accessible Archives.
- [6] Livermore, M. Ashton Rice, page 513.
- [7] "Mother Bickerdyke", *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 6, 1869, National Anti-Slavery Standard Collection, Accessible Archives.
- [8] "Mother Bickerdyke", *The Woman's Tribune*, November 16, 1901, The Woman's Tribune Collection. Accessible Archives.
- [9] "The Revolution", *The Revolution*, February 5, 1868, Part III: *The Revolution*, Women's Suffrage Collection. Accessible Archives.
- [10] "The Washington Monument", *The Revolution*, April 15, 1869, Part III: *The Revolution*, Women's Suffrage Collection. Accessible Archives.
- [11] "Our Boston Correspondence, October 31, 1869", *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 6, 1869, National Anti-Slavery Standard Collection. Accessible Archives.
- [12] "Mother Bickerdyke. Some of our readers...", *The Woman's Tribune*, August 1, 1885. The Woman's Tribune Collection. Accessible Archives.
- [13] "The Woman's Tribune, Clara Bewick Colby, Editor", *The Woman's Tribune*, November 1, 1885, The Woman's Tribune Collection. Accessible Archives.

[14] "Chapter XLII: Later Events", *A History of Kansas*, Caroline E. Prentis, Topeka, Kan., 1904, *Quarantine and Infectious Disease Control Series: Books, 1823-1928*. Accessible Archives

### Accessible Archives Collections Used in Preparing this White Paper

Accessible Archives provides diverse primary source materials reflecting broad views across American history and culture have been assembled into comprehensive databases. The following collections were utilized in composing this white paper.

#### ***Frank Leslie's Weekly, 1855-1922:***

Full run of issues and includes articles on: slavery and abolition; politics, elections, and political parties; the Civil War; industrialization and technology development; business, commerce, and commodities; society and culture; women's rights and suffrage; African American society and economics; immigration; the world in conflict; labor and radicalism; religion; and featured columns on music, the stage, fashion, fine arts, sports, and literature.

#### ***National Anti-Slavery Standard, 1840-1870***

Comprises the full run of issues that were published and featured writings from influential abolitionists fighting for suffrage, equality and most of all, emancipation. It contained essays, debates, personal accounts, speeches, events, reports, and anything else deemed newsworthy in relation to the question of slavery in the United States and other parts of the world.

#### ***The Woman's Tribune, 1883-1909***

Comprising the full run of issues, it included articles and news on women's suffrage and political rights, suffrage leaders, rural women of the Midwest and West, political and international issues, local, regional, & national politics, labor laws, Women's Leagues, Woman's Political Party, national political parties, anti-suffrage, marriage and divorce, property laws, reproductive rights, African Americans, tradeswomen, international suffrage movement, crime, national women's suffrage organizations, law enforcement, Spanish-American War, Native American women, health and medical practice, education, National Federation of Women's Clubs, women's patriotic organizations, and others.

## Women's Suffrage Collection

The 19th Century women's rights movement built upon the principles and experiences of other efforts to promote social justice and to improve the human condition particularly the Abolitionist Movement. After the Civil War, many abolitionist activists joined the Temperance and Women's Suffrage movements. This collection covers much of the eighty years from the Seneca Conference to the ratification of the 19th Amendment. It includes newspapers that had some overlap between the temperance and women's rights movements, as well as an anti-suffrage paper -- **The Lily**, 1849-1856; **National Citizen and Ballot Box**, 1878-1881; **The Revolution**, 1868-1872; **The New Citizen**, 1909-1912; **The Western Woman Voter**, 1911-1913; **The Remonstrance**, 1890-1913; **The National Standard: A Women's Suffrage and Temperance Journal**, 1870-1872; **The 19th Amendment Victory: A Newspaper History, 1762-1922**; and, **The 19th Amendment Victory: Books, 1812-1923**.

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