



Nurses and wounded soldiers at a U.S. Army Hospital in Paris during World War I. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

In Love and War: The Esther Denison Haswell Story

By Aaron Noble, Senior Historian

“...That’s a good place for it. It’s better off at the museum, the only time it was out of the attic in the 50 years I’ve been in Syracuse, I think, was in 1976, when one of my granddaughters, who’s a teacher, put it on for a Bicentennial program...” – Esther D. Haswell, December 17, 1980 to the Syracuse Herald-Journal

On September 24, 1979, Esther Denison Haswell, an 85-year-old veteran of the World War I Army Nurses Corps, donated her uniform to the New York State Museum. The acquisition of the uniform was significant for it was the first of its kind acquired by the State Museum of a woman’s military uniform of the First World War – the first conflict in the nation’s history in which women were legally permitted to join the United States Army. Today, as we commemorate the centennial anniversary of that war, Mrs. Haswell’s donation enables the museum to explore and interpret this highly significant era of U.S. history through the eyes of a New Yorker.



Passport photograph of Esther Denison, ca. 1917.
New York State Museum Collection, H-1979.95.11



New York State Museum
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Albany, New York 12020
<http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/research-collections/state-history>

Artifact Feature

From the Collections of the New York State Museum

Recruiting Nurses

With entry into World War I, the U.S. Army coordinated with the American Red Cross to bolster its Nursing Corps and bring it to wartime strength under the newly formed Department of Military Relief.



“Five Thousand by June”

Artist: C. Rakeman
Printer: Rand McNally & Co.,
New York, New York
Publisher: American Red Cross
Technique: Lithograph
Dimensions: 69 ½ x 49 ½ cm
New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special
Collections



A parade of Army Nurses, including Esther Denison, featured in the July 14, 1918 New York Times. New York State Museum Collection, H-1979.95.16 A

Nurses in the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.)

The First World War marked the first American conflict in which women were permitted to don the uniform of the United States Army. In previous conflicts, women had been employed as nurses by the Army, but had never been allowed to enlist. All that changed in 1901 with the establishment of a permanent Nurses Corps within the Army Medical Department.

In April 1917, the U.S. Army Nurses Corps included 403 nurses. In cooperation with the American Red Cross, the Army was prepared to call 8,000 reservists into military service. By the time the A.E.F. sailed for Europe, the Army had 33 base hospitals nearly ready for service. Six sailed for France within a month.

By June, 1,176 nurses were on active duty. By the summer of 1918, more than 12,000 were serving at more than 198 stations.

Each base hospital was staffed with a full complement of medical personnel, including 65 nurses. This number would prove inadequate and be increased to 100 within six months. By December 1918, 21,480 nurses had enlisted and

more than 10,000 were in service overseas. This number was wholly inadequate to tend to the wounded, but nurses were given a lower priority by military planners over combat troops on the limited shipping available for the A.E.F.

During the war, over 200 nurses were killed. Of that 200, forty – or 20 percent – hailed from New York State. Most of these succumbed to the influenza epidemic of 1918 and other diseases contracted as they sought to care and comfort the men in their charge.

The contributions made by women as nurses, as well as in factories, on farms, and across the war effort greatly contributed to changes in public opinion in favor of Woman’s Suffrage, both in New York State (1917) and nationwide (1919).



New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections



A Wartime Wedding

U.S. Army Nurses Corps Uniform of Esther Denison



The admittance of women into the U.S. military required the creation of new uniforms for women. While patterned after male service uniforms, this Army Nurses Corps uniform features a skirt in lieu of trousers and is tailored to fit a female physique. New York State Museum Collection, H-1979.95.2-.5, H-1972.61.3B (necktie)

Like many of her fellow service members, Esther Denison placed her life on hold to answer the nation's call.

"Mr. Haswell and I were married the day after I was discharged."



Esther Allen Denison was born on November 27, 1895 in Newtonville, Albany County. Denison grew up in the Albany area and attended the Northfield Seminary School in Northfield, Massachusetts. Upon completion of her studies there, she enrolled in the nursing school at Albany Hospital, graduating in early 1918.

By the time she left nursing school, the United States was fully engaged in the war in Europe. During a visit to Wheeling, West Virginia, Esther Denison joined the U.S. Army Nurses Corps and was commissioned as a lieutenant. She joined 100 other nurses for training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and was eventually assigned to a unit being organized in Virginia in preparation for overseas service.

As a nurse, Denison earned \$30

month (male soldiers were paid from \$30 to \$95 per month depending on rank).

At the time of her enlistment, Esther Denison was engaged to Walter T. Haswell of Colonie, Albany County. Haswell was employed by the New York Central Railroad (N.Y.C.R.R.). When the United States entered the First World War, the railroads were placed under the control of the federal government following the establishment of the U.S. Railroad Administration.

Because of the critical need for efficient operation of the railroads to ensure transport of men and materiel to American ports, Haswell and other men of the N.Y.C.R.R. were deemed essential to the war effort and were exempted from the draft and prohibited from enlisting in the military.

Once in France, Esther was assigned to Base Hospital #41 just outside of Paris. She served at the hospital for the duration of the war.

On February 2, 1919, Denison and

the other nurses of Base Hospital #41 departed St. Denis to La Boule. On February 17, they boarded the transport *Cartigo*, arriving at New York Harbor on March 13. After reporting to "headquarters at the Hotel Albert," the nurses were discharged from Service on March 16, 1919.

The following day Esther Denison married Walter Haswell in a New York City wedding. She wore her service uniform as her wedding dress, having stayed up the night before washing the white chiffon cuffs and collar in her hotel room sink.

Esther Denison never returned to nursing. The couple eventually moved to Syracuse and raised two sons. Esther worked at the Onondaga Pottery Company, Stickley Manufacturing Company, and Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation in Syracuse.

She never joined the American Legion or other veterans' groups in deference to her husband, who remained sensitive about the fact that she had served in the war while he had not.



U.S. Army Nurses in France, 1918. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

U.S. Army Base Hospital #41

Base Hospital #41 was organized at the University of Virginia by Dr. William H. Goodwin, Associate Professor of Surgery at the University Hospital. Its doctors and medical staff recruited from the hospital and the University's alumni.

On March 5, 1918, the unit was sent to Camp Sevier, South Carolina for training.

"The first few weeks were very dramatic – we could hear the firing and battlefield casualties were coming in day and night."

- Esther D. Haswell



The Mess Hall at Base Hospital #41, St. Denis France 1918. Courtesy of the National Institute of Health



By May 8, the hospital was declared ready for duty and on June 18, departed Sevier for Camp Mills, Long Island. On July 5, 1918, Base Hospital #41 embarked for France.

Once in France, the unit was assigned to *L'Ecole de la Legion d'Honneur*, a monastery connected to the Cathedral of St. Denis (five miles outside of Paris). The unit immediately set about converting the building for use as a hospital.

The hospital's equipment issued in the United States was lost in transit and the unit was forced to locate equipment elsewhere.

Nurses for Base Hospital #41 were recruited separately. They were mobilized into the Army Nurses Corps at New York City on July 18, 1914 and arrived at St. Denis on August 11. Among the nurses to arrive at the hospital was Lt. Esther Denison of Albany.

By the middle of August, the hospital was open and ready to receive patients. The grim realities of the war soon set in as 136 patients arrived in the very first convoy.

Base Hospital #41 was equipped to accommodate a maximum of 2,900 patients. As the Allied offensives of the Summer and Fall 1918 began, battle casualties started to pour into the hospital's wards.

Despite the volume of patients, the number of personnel assigned to the hospital was never increased. At the height of operations, the ration of patients to nurses reached 28:1 (for reference, the proposed "Safe Staffing Act" currently in the New York State Legislature calls for no more than a 5:1 ratio).

During the peak of the final offensives, the hospital received nearly 700 patients between 4:00 PM on October 19 and 10:00 AM on October 22, as convoys arrived day and night.

The fall of 1918 also witnessed the arrival of the Influenza Pandemic to Base Hospital #41. 100 of the unit's enlisted personnel, 88 officers, and 80 nurses were eventually stricken by the illness with three fatalities.

With the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, hospital operations began to end. By November 18, two of the five wards had closed, though it would take an additional two months for the hospital to fully cease operation.

On January 28, 1919, Base Hospital #41 was officially closed and its personnel ordered to Nantes to await return to the United States



Interior view of Base Hospital #41, St. Denis. Courtesy of the National Institute of Health



This nurse's uniform is similar to the type issued to Esther Denison while at Base Hospital #41 in France. Garments such as these were worn by Army nurses in their daily work with patients while the service uniform was reserved for official occasions. Denison's own uniform dresses were used throughout the 1920s as a house dresses until disposed of for poor condition. New York State Museum Collection, H-1985.56.4-.6 & .12 A-B

A note on sources: Most the information in this feature was gleaned from the Vital Information File for the Esther Denison Haswell Donation (H-1979.85) in the files of the New York State Museum. Additional information utilized "Military Nurses of World War I," by the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc. (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/rr/s01/cw/students/leeann/historyandcollections/history/Irmnrewwinurses.html>, accessed May 19, 2016); Mary C. Gillett's *The Army Medical Department 1917-1941* (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center for Military History, 2009); and New York State Historian A.C. Flick's *History of the State of New York* (Port Washington, NY: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1962). Information regarding fashion and textiles of the period was found in *The Great War: Women and Fashion in a World at War, 1912-1922* (Kent State University Museum, 2014-2015).