



Former slaves found refuge in overcrowded "contraband" camps that grew up around Union encampments and forts. Classes were sometimes taught in the camps. Many of the men worked as army laborers, or, starting in 1863, enlisted in the U.S. Colored Troops. Women washed, cooked, and helped in army hospitals. A hundred such camps existed in the war years.

## A glorious work to teach them

Lucinda Humphrey in Memphis



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*Lucinda Humphrey (left) was 28 when she arrived at an army hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, her second assignment from the Chicago Sanitary Commission. In later months she found her real passion, establishing schools and hospitals for black refugees and freedmen, under the auspices of the American Missionary Association, which recruited teachers for contraband schools. These excerpts are from her manuscript, reports, and letters to her family in Iowa.*

—The Editor

[October 1862, Memphis] Be not surprised. This is a world of change. Little did I dream of ever coming south again when I bid you good bye at home; but I was sent for by Mrs. Porter who is here in Memphis, and who has had more to do than any other woman in the west towards getting nurses for the hospitals. . . . I want you to know that this is no romantic move of my own which is "just like me," but that I am walking in the path which seems marked out for me. . . .

In the Overton Hospital, to which I expect soon to be removed, there are 700 sick, some I understand are here from the Iowa 3rd.

[November 19, 1862] How I wish I could this morning paint the scenery around me. . . . Our building is situated on the banks of the Mississippi. . . . A green slope with here and there a cedar and honey locust marks our

path to the steep bank where we stand enraptured gazing on the graceful bend of the river embracing islands in its course. Not far away there is something rising above the water which you might mistake for a whale—but it is the rebel boat Beauregard, the grave of 150 rebels. . . . Below, the scenery becomes more romantic, the deep ravines, the precipice, the magazines in the side of the bank, the numerous piles of cannon balls scattered along the winding pathway under the bluffs, leading around to the contraband village. . . . Now turn away entirely from this communing with nature and our eyes fall upon the various paraphernalia of war. . . . Here we are with tents, ambulances, wagons, horses, mules, and men, protected on one side by the little black gun-boats in the river. . . .

. . . There seemed to be no call for me in the hospitals, so I turned to teaching. I have a select school about a mile from here of 300 pupils. . . . There are nearly two thousand slaves who have escaped the yoke of bondage, and who now live in their own little houses built of new slabs. Very few of them know how to read but I find it a glorious work to teach them. . . . The Captain of the Engineer Department calls almost every day to see if our wants are all supplied. He has charge of the contrabands employed by the Government and looks upon the school as a very important thing.

[Date?] 12,000 soldiers are here sick and wounded in the hospitals and probably as many more in camp. About six thousand contrabands are here. . . . [For two days it



snowed] and there was no place for the poor creatures but the old cotton shed under which they all gathered. They were barefoot, many of them almost starving; but the Chaplains and some of the Sanitary commission of Chicago turned out their stores of codfish, dried fruit, etc., which saved their lives until other arrangements were made for them. Mr. Eaton has since brought in 2000 more and for the present we have them stowed away in rebel houses which are to be torn down because [they are in] the way of the cannon in the forts. Hundreds of them are sheltered only by tents. I am now one of the prominent workers.

[Undated report] I opened a school Nov. 1st, 1862, at [Camp] Shiloh, a contraband village of two thousand inhabitants. . . . I had one hundred regular pupils whose ages varied from seven to sixty-five years. Of this number fifty learned to read quite intelligibly in two months. I adopted the "word method" of teaching, relied much on oral instruction and used every means in my power to awaken thought, while my sole object was to educate humanity and not simply the *intellect* of human beings. They were very anxious to learn, desired to support their school and in fact made a beginning to this end. I find them tractable, intuitive and imitative but not usually reflective.

[July 4, 1863] I am now moved into camp Fisk where I am at the head of a school of three hundred pupils. . . . How I wish you could see me in my little room ten feet square. It is papered with the Independent, and is fitted up so as to look decidedly nice and literary. I have . . . quite a library, pictures, maps, book case, globe, clock, carpet, the *chair of state*, and a cot with clean white pillow cases and sheets. . . . Vines have crept in and hang around the logs over-head, helping to beautify my little home.

[July 1863] I have never fully recovered from my sickness, and weakness now compels me to lie on my cot most of my time. But I have contrived a plan so that I can write as well as if I could sit up. . . . I am at work on my book "The Freedmen." . . . Everybody is kind, everybody helps me to carry out any plan I undertake. I have reason to feel thankful—we are looking for a great victory at Vicksburg.

[From Humphrey's unpublished manuscript, "The Freedmen"] In the fall of 1862 a rich widow was ordered to give up this building for the sick of the oppressed race. . . . A few weeks afterward I visited it and found the sick and dying lying around—some on the floor and some on bunks with nothing under them but the hard boards. . . . With thousands coming in it became necessary to establish another hospital. . . . [One morning] . . . one of our detailed soldiers [was] riding around trying to get women to go and clean up the new hospital. . . . Feeling it to be [their] duty to help take care of the sick of their own color, we did not hesitate to compel them to go. . . .

My workers began to be more reconciled to their task, but they begged me not to take them where they would be exposed to small-pox. I told them that we were going to an empty house [but] we found the house full. . . . Three rods from the building were two or three tents filled with cases of small-pox. There were over one hundred sick attended by a Hospital Steward who only got one hour's time to devote to them through the day.

[Late 1863] I shall return to Memphis in about two weeks [to marry] Captain H. S. Hay. . . . I never before found a will as strong as my own. . . . If I am unhappy it will be my own fault. He would give up his life for me. ❖

*In late December 1864, Lucinda Humphrey Hay died at the home of a sister in Tipton, Iowa, from complications of childbirth weeks earlier. Although the school she established at Camp Shiloh in Memphis was destroyed in race riots in 1866 when federal troops were withdrawn, it was rebuilt the next year. LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis traces its roots to her school.*

These excerpts are from "Lucinda Humphrey Hay," by her sister Emma Humphrey Haddock and published in *Iowa Historical Record* (April 1894).

## Elizabeth Fairfax, Army Nurse

Elizabeth Fairfax (right) wears an honorary badge from Nathaniel Baker Grand Army of the Republic Post 88 (Clinton, Iowa), circa 1885. She worked for the 26th Iowa Infantry from its early years until it was mustered out. On the reverse side of this photo are these words: "As an army nurse [she] took care of sick and wounded soldiers in camps where stationed. Since the war an old resident of Clinton, Iowa, and is well known. For 24 years she kept a laundry, and wove rag carpets for a living. By industry and economy she purchased and is now the owner of a little homestead. She has raised two children. Now advanced in years and feeble in health, she is no longer able to maintain herself by her former occupation. To secure a living she now peddles for grocery store, and sells her pictures. She served her country faithfully and is deserving of support."



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