

# The Alexandria Archives

## Julia Wheelock: teacher, sister, nurse, author

### FROM THE OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

Lyceum Hall (now the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum) hosted lectures, debates, concerts, and meetings while also serving as the city's subscription library in the two decades before the Civil War.

But during the war, Lyceum Hall became one of Alexandria's 30 military hospitals and held 80 of the city's 6,500 available hospital beds. Along with hospitals came surgeons, nurses, orderlies, cooks, ambulance drivers, relief workers, and volunteers to care for the wounded. Also coming to the city hospitals were worried family members like Michigan's Julia Wheelock.

On September 10, 1862, Julia was teaching "in the old red school-house" in Ionia, Michigan, when a student knocked on her door with bad news. She learned that her brother, Orville, a member of the Eighth Michigan Infantry, had been badly wounded at the battle of Chantilly and was in a hospital in Alexandria. Julia traveled the next day from Michigan to Washington, D.C. with Orville's wife Anna and Anna's sister Sarah Peck.

On the steamer down the Potomac from Washington to Alexandria, Julia noted that the sights would have made for a "delightful... pleasure excursion!" under different circumstances as they saw "scenes and scenery so entirely new!" They passed fortifications, "the beautiful residence of Robert E. Lee, his no longer – having been forfeited by treason," the Washington Navy Yard, the Arsenal, and St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

On arriving in wartime Alexandria, she wrote in her diary, "Soon the ancient city of Alexandria—ancient in

American history—heaves in sight. It presents a gloomy, dingy, dilapidated appearance."

Once in Alexandria, Julia, Anna, and Sarah passed the Marshall House Inn, where Colonel Elmer Ellsworth

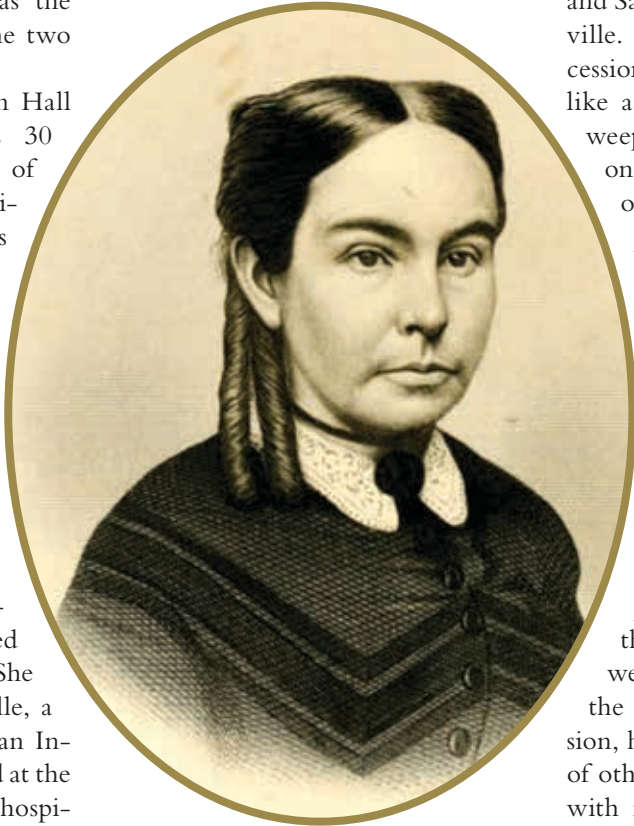


Photo: babel.hathitrust.org

**Julia Wheelock, from Julia S. Wheelock, *The Boys in White; The Experience of a Hospital Agent in and Around Washington, New York: Lange & Hillman, 1870.***

had been the first Union officer killed in the war. Julia wrote, "As we pass up King Street, we pause a moment to look at the building where the brave young Ellsworth fell, drop a tear to his memory, and hasten on."

The women started their search for Orville at a hospital located in the Southern Methodist Episcopal Church (now Washington Street Methodist Church), but Orville was not there. Anna lost hope and could

not bear to continue the search. She told them that Orville had come to her the night before in a dream, telling her, "My work is done. I'm weary and must rest."

Leaving Anna at the church, Julia and Sarah continued to search for Orville. They witnessed a funeral procession, with Julia noting, "How unlike a funeral at home! No train of weeping friends follow his bier, yet one of our country's heroes, one of the 'boys in white,' lies in that plain coffin. He is escorted to his final resting place by perhaps a dozen comrades, who go with unfixed bayonets, and arms reversed, keeping time with their slow tread to the solemn notes of the 'Dead March,' plaintively executed by some of their number."

When they reached the hospital at Lyceum Hall, the hospital director informed them that Orville had died there a week earlier. Julia noted that, like the soldier in the funeral procession, her brother "died like thousands of others, far from home and friends, with no loved kindred near." Years later she referred to it as a day of "blighted hopes, a day of mourning, of sadness and bereavement, a day that revealed to an anxious wife that she was a widow and her children fatherless; a day that said to my sad heart, 'Thy brother has fallen.'"

She also noted, however, that they spent time at Lyceum Hall with "an angel of mercy in human form...Miss [Clarissa] F. Jones, of Philadelphia." Miss Jones had "watched [Orville] day by day as he grew weaker, she stood beside him in his dying moments, held his icy hand in hers, wiped the death dew from his brow, received his last message for his wife and child, and, when life had fled, prepared him

as far as she could for his burial. Such are her daily duties." And such were the daily duties of thousands of women who served in hospitals throughout the Civil War.

Anna and Sarah returned to Michigan, heartbroken, but Julia stayed in Alexandria. She joined the Michigan Soldiers Relief Association, a group focused on caring for Michigan troops. Julia assisted nurses, fed soldiers, wrote letters home for soldiers, and provided general care and support for the wounded. She traveled to the front to care for the wounded immediately after battles. She met General Grant at the front and discussed the work she was doing.

During work breaks, Julia toured Mount Vernon and the White House. She saw Abraham Lincoln at the Capitol in 1863 while attending a speech by Andrew Johnson, and again, under very different circumstances, in 1865, noting "It was my sad privilege to see the remains of our lamented President twice while lying in state, once at the White House and again at the Capitol...He was stricken down in the midst of his usefulness, at a time when the nation greatly needed his wise counsels and righteous administration."

After the war, Julia worked for the Treasury Department in Washington D.C., returning to Michigan in 1873. In 1870, she published *Boys in White, Experiences of a Hospital Agent in and Around Washington*, drawing from her diaries to recount her wide-ranging wartime experiences. Julia Wheelock died on June 7, 1900.

*Historic Alexandria invites you to celebrate Women's History Month this March. For info on commemorations this month, please visit <https://alexandriava.gov/historic>.*