

Elvira J. Powers
(1827-1871)

Elvira J. Powers, a volunteer for the U.S. Christian Commission, came to Nashville in 1864 as a hospital visitor and nurse in the Union Army's military hospitals. Little is known of her early life, but it is believed that she was born in 1827 and was a widow with no children by the time the Civil War began. While in Nashville, she kept a diary in which she described her interactions with the patients, the military personnel, and other volunteers. She provided intimate descriptions of the suffering of the wounded soldiers as well as her frustrations with the male-dominated bureaucracy of the hospitals. After visiting several hospitals in Nashville, Powers was assigned to work at the Small Pox Hospital, a mile outside the city. She also taught former slaves at the Refugee Farm and at a local school housed in an African-American church. When Annie Wittenmyer, a U.S. Sanitary Commission worker, began creating special dietary kitchens in army hospitals, Powers worked in the diet kitchen of Hospital # 1, located in Nashville's old gun factory.

Powers left Nashville in the late fall 1864 for a new position at the Jefferson Hospital in Indiana. There she saw the soldiers who were being transferred to Nashville in early December 1864 in anticipation of a major battle. After the Battle of Nashville, she then treated the wounded from the battle and criticized the doctors' decision to move critically wounded Union soldiers from Nashville hospitals to Indiana in order to make room in Nashville for "Rebel prisoners." She believed that many of these men could have survived had they been allowed to convalesce in Nashville. Powers remained at the Jefferson Hospital until the war ended. The following year, she published *Hospital Pencillings*, the journal she had kept while serving as a hospital visitor and nurse in Nashville. After the war, Powers enrolled at the Canton Theological School of New York but left after six months due to poor health. She died in 1871 of consumption and was buried in the Hope Cemetery in Worcester, Massachusetts. The following year, she was listed in the obituaries of the *Universalist Register* as a woman minister.

Carole Bucy

Suggested Reading:

Durham, Walter. *Reluctant Partners: A History of Nashville and the Union, July 1, 1863 to June 30, 1865*. Nashville, Tennessee Historical Society, 1987.

Powers, Elvira J. *Hospital Pencillings: Being a Diary while in Jeffersonville, Ind. and others at Nashville, Tennessee, as Matron and Visitor*. Boston, Edward L. Mitchel, 1866.

Universalist Register, "Biographical Sketches of Deceased Clergy and Lay People," 1872.