

HARRIET REIFSNYDER SHARPLESS A CIVIL WAR NURSE FROM BLOOMSBURG

By George A. Turner

Bloomsburg's newspaper, the *Morning Press*, on December 7, 1906, reported the death of Miss Harriet Reifsnyder Sharpless on the front page in large bold letters, referring to her as "one of Bloomsburg's best known women and a nurse of the Civil War." She died of cancer at the home of her brother Lloyd T. Sharpless at the age of sixty-nine. Born in Catawissa on February 23, 1837, she was the oldest of nine children of Joseph and Mary Sharpless, who moved to Bloomsburg in 1849 when her father bought a foundry business on Center Street. Except for the time she served as a Civil War nurse, she lived the rest of her life in Bloomsburg.

The southern and northern states quickly realized that the Civil War that began with the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, would not be a brief conflict. In the North, Congress adopted legislation on June 18, 1861, creating the United States Sanitary Commission, a private relief organization to solicit public support, supplies, volunteers, and money to minister to the needs of sick and wounded soldiers. When the Commission sent an appeal to Bloomsburg asking for support, twenty women, including Harriet Sharpless and her friend Isabella Robison, met at the Presbyterian Church on December 2, 1861, and established the Bloomsburg Ladies' Army Aid Society. A year later, their humanitarianism and patriotic spirit undoubtedly motivated Sharpless, Robison, and two other women, Harriet S. Reifsnyder, a cousin to Sharpless, and Rose Billing, to become volunteer army nurses under the auspice of the Sanitary Commission.

Their sense of mission and dedication led these young women to forgo security, comfort, and family to accept the risks inherent in a battlefield environment to administer to the wounded and dying that surrounded them. This quartet of nurses began their work on July 4, 1862, at Fredericksburg, Virginia, nursing, preparing meals, and performing the duties of a matron. Sharpless and Robison moved to different areas as needed, such as Warrenton and Falls Church Hospital in Virginia, and at or near Sharpsburg, Maryland after the battle of Antietam, and then to Falmouth, Virginia in early 1863.

At the battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, the combined estimated Union and Confederate casualties came to 4,800 dead and 18,500 wounded, 3,000 of which later died. Harriet's brother, Joseph, and other volunteers from Columbia County served in Co. A, 6th Regiment Pennsylvania Reserves, known as the Iron Guards, and fought here. He was wounded, but fortunately the bullet hit his belt and accoutrements, preventing it from penetrating his body. It is unknown whether brother and sister saw each other here.

About Antietam, Civil War historian James M. McPherson wrote: "night fell on the battlefield . . . [the] horrors defied description" and said that in this human slaughter of Confederate and Union troops, "twice as many Americans were killed or mortally wounded

in combat in a single day at Antietam as in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American war combined.” This clash of armies created the highest number of casualties to make it the bloodiest single day of the Civil War.

Harriet received word that her father was ill in 1863, and this prompted her to return home to help take care of him, but when he regained his health, she sought an opportunity to return to wartime nursing again. The commitment to help the sick and wounded soldiers remained strong. Having experience in hospital work, she accepted a position as Chief Nurse on the United States Steamship *Connecticut* on May 10, 1864. The ship was part of the hospital transport service managed by the Sanitary Commission to bring military patients from field hospitals around City Point, Virginia, and later along the shores of Maryland and Delaware to the Washington and Baltimore areas. Some of these men often went to convalescent camps, others continued their recovery in hospitals, and those who were well enough, returned to their homes. During her sixteen months of service on the *Connecticut*, it transported thirty-three thousand patients to facilities in the north. Nurse Sharpless was highly admired as a dedicated person with admirable attributes: “Constant and gentle in the discharge of her duties, with a kind and if possible a cheering word for each poor sufferer, and skillful and assiduous in providing for them every needed comfort so far as lay in her power, she proved herself a true Christian heroine in the extent and spirit of her labors, and sent joy to the heart of many who were on the verge of despair.”

Miss Sharpless, a Presbyterian, was a devout Christian: “Her religious influence upon the men was remarkable. Never obtrusive or professional in her treatment of religious subjects, she exhibited rare tact and ability in bringing those who were in the possession of their reason and consciousness to converse on their spiritual condition, and in pointing them affectionately to the atoning Sacrifice for sin.”

With the war over, she returned to her home in Bloomsburg in September 1865 and lived in the community until her death in 1906. We can learn more about Harriet from a large special volume entitled *Personal War Sketches* presented in 1894 to the Colonel Ent Grand Army of the Republic, Post No. 250, Bloomsburg, Department of Pennsylvania, at the Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society. Charles S. Fornwald, a Civil War veteran who served in the Iron Guards, was the local G.A.R. post historian and wrote about Miss Sharpless: In her Civil War nursing experience, she provided care and comfort to untold numbers of soldiers and became known to countless veterans throughout the nation. Consequently, there were “numerous inquiries from people in all ranks from Maine to California as to whether she still lived and wanting to be kindly remembered for kindness shown and tender nursing given during the ‘time that tried men’s souls.’” Fornwald wrote that he knew her well and “for over 40 years never knew her to speak the first disparaging word about anyone and old and young alike all spoke of her in the highest regard terms of praise.”

The respect for Miss Sharpless, particularly from the soldiers, was widespread and sincere. "She was so devoted to the cause she loved so well and the soldiers so devoted to her." Members of the G.A.R. decided to set aside the rules of the organization, highly unusual, and elected her as an honorary member. In addition to this honor, she received honorary membership in the Society of Survivors of the 6th Regiment of Pennsylvania Reserve Volunteers Association and the Columbia County Veterans Association.

The day after her death, the *Morning Press* published two short accounts about her. One reported, "Many times, said a veteran last night in speaking of her 'have I seen her at the front with the shells bursting on all sides of her, tenderly ministering to the wounded and dying.' She was under fire times without number and not until the close of the war did she cease her labor of love and then refused all pay for her services although the government offered it to her as her right." The second commented about her personality: "So sunny was her temperament, always bringing cheer to the soldiers, that she gained the name of 'Happy Days' which clung to her throughout her life."

On the day of her funeral, December 10, 1906, G.A.R. members attended as single group. There was a private and brief service at the home of her brother, Lloyd. T. Sharpless. From there a procession formed "with the G.A.R. acting as guard of honor to the casket while other members of that organization led the procession to the Presbyterian Church, the veterans forming a line through which the casket was borne into the church." An American flag covered the casket, and when it was opened, a silk American flag was on a side of her body.

In a solemn observance at the Sharpless family burial site, located on the west side of Rosemont Cemetery, the bugler notes playing taps broke the silence as the casket descended to a final resting place. Fornwald wrote, "All that was mortal of our warm friend and advocate was hidden from sight."

