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The Alexandria Sisters of Charity

by William F. Carne¹

The memory of Mother Seton's Sisters of Charity, whose little black bonnets were familiar objects on the Alexandria streets in the decade from 1830 to 1840, is fading out; and it is a labor of love on the part of the God-child of one of them to tell the younger generation the story of their useful life here.

About 1830 the brick church facing Royal Street, by which Father Joseph Fairclough had replaced the frame chapel bought from the Methodist facing the alley, was completed, and the pastor had a small but comfortable home. Just then came Father John Smith, S.J., who with indomitable energy strove to expand Catholic activities. He

sought at once to establish Catholic schools and an orphan asylum under the shadow of the church.

Fortunately, real estate in the church neighborhood was then available for the purpose. A vacant lot on the northwest corner of Duke and Royal streets, now Lambert's garden, (1905) was bought as the site for the male school, and Bushby's house on the southwest corner of Fairfax and Duke Streets for the female school. This house, which still stands, [now razed] comes down from the period of the Revolution. It was built by William Bushby², who once owned all the ground on the north side of Duke, from Royal to Fairfax Streets. On his death his widow moved to

Washington, and in 1817 sold Bushsby's corner to Jonathan Roberts for \$1,800. It proved poor property for Roberts, and became scarcely more than a rookery when Rev. James Hickey, of Emmitsburg, Maryland bought it in 1832 for \$1,200. for the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph. The Sisters came to Alexandria on a popular tide. The liberals among non-Catholics gave them a warm reception. The Howard Association got up concerts for their benefit. The Masons of Alexandria-Washington Lodge tendered them free their lodge room³ to hold a fair, which was one of the events of the day, and for a week the lodge room was occupied by the Sisters and their helpers. The old building was remodeled and fitted for their purpose, and a frame school house built on Fairfax Street at the south end of their lot. The best people sent their daughters to be under their tuition and everything promised success. ["While operating their school in the 1830s, the Sisters of Charity enrolled a young girl named Mary Jenkins. She married John Surratt in 1835 and later operated a tavern and post office at Surrattsville, now Clinton, Maryland. Widowed, she moved to Washington, D.C. where she ran a boarding house used by John Wilkes Booth and his band of conspirators to plot the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and members of his cabinet. Upon Lincoln's murder on April 14, 1865, Mrs. Surratt, who was

probably totally innocent of the plot, was arrested and subsequently hanged on July 7, 1865, along with three others whose complicity was certain."⁴]

Meanwhile, in 1833, the Jesuits built the old St. John's Academy on the northwest corner of Duke and Royal Streets, and sent teachers there and both schools flourished for a while. But Catholic success awakened the fervid opposition of bigotry. A Protestant orphan asylum⁵ was established and means taken to cut off attendance at the Catholic Schools. The sisters, in turn, found opportunities for wider usefulness elsewhere and in 1840 left Alexandria. Dr. F.J. Murphy⁶ purchased their property and converted their convent into a dwelling, where he lived a few years before his death. It was long his hope to bring back the Sisters and establish a hospital there, but the hope was in vain.⁷ The male school went down, and in 1846 the school-house stood untenanted except by rats.⁸

Then Brother Richard L. Carne, now of Newport News Council, took over the work of renewing St. John's Academy, and made it one of the institutions of the city, but that too passed away in 1895.

Father Smith and the Sisters have been long beyond the grave. He

died of ship fever while ministering to the immigrants at New York. Sister Mary Agnes poured out her mortal life at the feet of her Master, aiding and consoling the dying of yellow fever at New Orleans. Graves far apart on earth shine to heaven with one radiance."



The Southwest corner of Fairfax and Duke Street; dwelling probably built by William Bushby; 1840s-- occupied by the Sister's of Charity; subsequently, Dr. Francis Murphy's House; and in 1873 the site of the Alexandria Hospital; razed around 1953.

"Aunt Lindy" –

A former Slave who settled in Alexandria after the Civil War

by T. Michael Miller

[The author is indebted to Mrs. Ann Donner of Fort Wayne, Indiana and Mrs. Myrtilla Donner of Basking Ridge, New Jersey who brought the narrative on "Aunt Lindy" to his attention.]

The Civil War ⁹

No other decade had such a profound effect on Alexandria's social, political, and economic fabric than did the 1860s. In 1860, Alexandria was a vibrant southern city boasting a population of 12,652 and 96 firms which produced everything from tanning bark to tinware. During the U.S. Presidential campaign in the fall of 1860, business-minded Alexandrians were decidedly pro-Union and cast a majority of their ballots for John Bell, the Constitutional Unionist candidate who opposed secession. The Alexandria Gazette of September 28, 1860, remarked that

the Union men of Alexandria made the most imposing demonstration...last night, which had ever taken place in this city. If there had ever been a doubt of the intense enthusiasm which the Union cause and its candidates have erected in their good old town, that doubt must have been dissipated by the outpouring of popular sentiment

last night.

In an effort to keep Virginia in the Union, Alexandrians elected George Brent, an opponent of secession, as a delegate to the February 1861 meeting in Richmond. However, when South Carolina fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, and President Lincoln subsequently called for 75,000 troops to crush the rebellion, the mood of Alexandrians shifted dramatically from accommodation to war. To celebrate Virginia's vote for secession, Charles H. Taylor, a local Alexandrian, raised funds through public subscription to have a commemorative flag made. On April 17, 1861, Taylor and James W. Jackson, the proprietor of the Marshall House Hotel, raised a Confederate flag over the hotel to the cheers of an assembled crowd.

Soon war fever swept the city, and militia units composed of the town's youth drilled at the old Catalpa Lot on the west side of the 600 and 700 block of North Washington Street. On May 23, 1861, Alexandrians went to the polls and voiced their approval for the articles of secession by an overwhelming vote of 958 in favor and 106 against.

Because of Alexandria's strategic importance as a vibrant river port and railroad hub, U.S. Federal troops under the command of General Charles Sanford of the New York State militia lost no time in invading the town by land and sea on the morning of May 24, 1861. The same day, a regiment of New York Fire Zouaves, led by Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, landed at the

foot of Cameron Street. With a few recruits, Ellsworth proceeded up King Street to the telegraph office where he saw a Confederate flag floating over the Marshall House Hotel. Quickly, the Colonel and his retinue entered the hotel, climbed to the roof, and seized the prized banner. Descending the hotel staircase, Ellsworth was shot in the chest by James W. Jackson, the hotel proprietor. In turn, Union Corporal Brownell shot and bayoneted Jackson. Thus, both Jackson and Ellsworth were mortally wounded and each immediately became a martyr to his respective cause...

The invasion of Alexandria would forever change the social, cultural and economic fabric of the old seaport town. For four years the city was occupied by Union forces; indeed, the city endured the longest military occupation by Federal troops of any town during the Civil War. Although little fighting took place near Alexandria, the large influx of soldiers meant residents would no longer enjoy the quietude so characteristic of the antebellum period. Upon taking office as Military Governor of Virginia in 1862, Union General John Slough instituted a curfew and placed a ban on sales of alcohol to soldiers, noting that there had been for days previous, "a reign of terror in Alexandria. The streets were crowded with intoxicated soldiery; murder was of almost hourly occurrence, and disturbances, robbery and riot were constant. The sidewalks and docks were covered with drunken men, women and children and quiet citizens were afraid to venture into the streets and life and property were at

the mercy of the maddened throng—a condition of things perhaps never in the history of this country to be found in any other city."

Following the restoration of order, Alexandrians virtually walked their streets as strangers. Most had fled South, and those who remained could not go out at night. In addition, citizens' mail was intercepted, and passes were required to travel to Washington and outlying environs. Those townsmen who failed to swear obedience to the United States Government were suspected of treason and arrested on the slightest pretext.

During the war Alexandria was transformed into a huge logistical supply center for U.S. armies fighting in Virginia. Private houses, churches, and local public buildings were commandeered for use as military barracks, hospitals and prisons. A string of 68 forts surrounded the capital region, including Alexandria. Indeed, by 1863, Washington, D.C. was the most fortified city in the world.

The U.S. Quartermaster Department constructed substantial warehouses along the bustling waterfront. In addition, they built bakeries, sawmills, train sheds, stables and all other manner of support facilities throughout the city. Stockades were erected across the major east-west streets to thwart threatened sorties by Confederate cavalry against the huge U.S. Military Railroad headquarters and train yard complex on upper Duke Street. A correspondent of the Philadelphia

Inquirer wrote on August 8, 1863:

This ancient city has now become a center of commercial importance, being the great warehouse, as it might be termed, for supplies to the Army of the Potomac. Miniature mountains of hay and pyramids of oat bags, high up in air, meet the gaze as one approaches the city from the river. Spacious and antiquated storehouses along the wharves are filled to repletion with all kinds of stores for the use of our brave army, while hundreds of contraband are busily at work unloading vessels and transferring their cargoes to depositories in and around the city front. Alexandria, for the past two years, can boast of more shipping at its wharves than any other city of its size in the Union.

On April 9, 1865, the killing came to an end when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Federal General U.S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. Alexandria had suffered extensively and its canal and harbor lay in ruin. Correspondent George Alfred Townsend described the situation as follows: "Many hamlets and towns have been destroyed during the war.

But of all that in some form survive, Alexandria has most suffered...Its streets, its docks, its warehouses, its dwellings and its suburbs have been absorbed to the thousand uses of war. Alexandria is filled with ruined people..."¹⁰

Among the many Union soldiers who were stationed in Alexandria during the war was Willard Purdy Graves, a young private from the 11th Wisconsin Regiment. "In 1861, on the first day that President Lincoln called for volunteers, Mr. Graves enlisted in the Union Army and served in the western campaigns. Discharged because of illness, Graves subsequently followed his regiment to Alexandria, Virginia where it occupied Battery Rodgers, a huge Federal fort situated on the Potomac River between Jefferson and Greene Streets. It was here that Graves worked as a sutler and grocer selling a large stock of groceries, meats, crockery, notions and liquor to his former comrades in blue.

While in Alexandria young Graves met his future wife, Miss Lucy Libby of Jay, Maine, a former Union nurse, whom he married on December 19, 1864. The newlyweds initially resided on the northwest corner of South Fairfax and Franklin Streets before purchasing in 1871, a spacious wooden dwelling located at 623 South Fairfax Street. The house was described as "running half way through the square, double with a

hall running through the centre, two stories with 7 chambers in the main building and 3 in the back."¹¹

By 1874, Willard Graves had demolished his old frame store and erected a handsome brick one in its place. The store was built in a most substantial manner and had every convenience, including an elevator.

A very generous man, Mr. Graves operated a soup kitchen and donated foodstuffs to many of the destitute African American inhabitants of the neighborhood.

All did not always augur well for Mr. Graves or his business enterprises. On July 7, 1879, after attempts had been made to rob his store, Willard and a friend sequestered themselves in the business all night when:

at one o'clock a back window was cautiously opened and a Negro man entering, proceeded to rifle the cash drawer. The two watches were quickly on their feet, and with a shot gun persuaded the robber to accompany them to the Station House....¹²

Willard P. and Lucy Graves were the proud parents of six children of whom Miss Myrtle Graves [born: 1868; died: December 7, 1939] was their eldest daughter. It was Myrtle Graves who had the foresight to record her reminiscences

of daily life in Alexandria, including the exploits of former slaves who worked for the Graves family.

During the Civil War Alexandria became a mecca for African Americans who sought freedom within the Federal lines. Known as "Contraband," these immigrants flocked to Alexandria, by the hundreds where they settled in shanty neighborhoods. A reporter from the *Washington Chronicle* wrote in August 1864 that "these houses, huddled together, with no conveniences for drainage, swarm with a mass of men, women and children. We have no means of knowing what are their numbers. We have "Petersburg," "Richmond," "Contraband Valley," "Pump Town," "Cross Canal," "Grantsville," "Sumnerville," and "Hayti." It is said that the inhabitants of these new and strange villages are generally orderly and give no occasion for the interference of the civil or military police. ...Those of our citizens who lived here before the war would hardly know the place, if they could return here, so overgrown by the Negro shanties have been the commons and vacant lots."¹³

But what about the slaves or contraband? In 1939, Myrtle Graves wrote a vivid description of two former slaves: "Aunt Mary Hurley" and "Aunt Lindy":

"I was very young at the close of the Civil War and there were many old colored people around us, some of whom worked for us. A number of these had recently been slaves. I, child-like, loved to hear stories. One of these old people, Aunt Mary Hurley, had a little house surrounded by a garden and we were sure to receive the choicest and best of her flowers. When I started a child's garden she brought me the first of my lily-of-the-valley roots and the bright red peonies which are still blooming in our garden. The lilies have increased to thousands, and ever since have given us an abundance of bloom.

When I would go down to see her, she would always hail me with 'Why here comes my child.'

Another one of our old slaves was named Aunt Lindy." Destitute and searching for employment, she appeared one evening at the back door of the Graves' house on South Fairfax Street. Myrtle Graves wrote:

"I want to tell some of her history, as she told it to me."

Aunt Lindy recounted "When Miss Frances, my master's daughter, was married he [the master] took me away from my mammie and gave me to Miss Frances, as her husband had no servants. My master had been well-to-do, but Miss Frances married a no-count man, who did

nothing but drink whiskey. She had no place for me to sleep except on a sheepskin before the fire on the kitchen floor, covered by another sheepskin. I was awful cold and could not help wetting the bed and floor, and when Miss Frances came in with a candle in the morning and saw the wet floor, she would start to hunt for the bundle of switches. I had only one cotton frock and no shoes through the winter. I had to milk six cows and go out in the morning and hunt them up. I would wade the run when it was covered with ice and cracked the ice with my bare feet."

"Mr. Waller, her husband, (I never called him master) had to have whiskey, and would send me on snowy days to the store for a jug of whiskey. Miss Fanny would say 'She can't go to the store in this ice with no shoes.' Waller would pull off his high-top boots and let me pull them on, and I could feel the warmth from the shoes up to my waist. It was not strange he did not get shoes and clothes for us, as he did not get much better for his own children. My frock was in tatters and when I went to the store, I would have to hold the skirt together in front to cover my nakedness, and keep the men and boys in the store from laughing, and when I went out I held the skirt together in the back."

"Aunt Lindy was with us until we

were grown. She related how Mr. Waller got into debt and [how] Lindy was taken to Fauquier Court House [in Warrenton, Virginia] to be sold to cover [these encumbrances]. Lindy was so frightened that she ran out into the woods and hid under a wood pile. She was found, dragged out and taken to town where the sale was to be held. The colored people around the court house said: 'Po little child, where is yr mammie?' Lindy was lodged in the court house and cried all night. The next morning her mistress came with her father's will, which specified that Lindy belonged to her [the young mistress] and could not be sold to cover Mr. Waller's debts.

My mother knew Aunt Lindy's son Moses in the country, and kept in touch with him. Aunt Lindy became senile; she lived in a little cabin back of our orchard on Franklin Street with Ben, her companion. She began to wonder away at night, and my mother, being afraid she would get hurt or die of exposure, wrote to Moses and asked him to come get his mother, who would be pensioned and he could be paid for taking care of her. When he came to get Aunt Lindy she thought she was being sold and cried saying: 'Oh, Miss Graves, what has I done; who ever have thought you would sell me: What has I done?' This nearly broke my mother's heart, and she said: 'No indeed, Lindy, I'm not selling you. You know that farm

where your son lives. I just want you to go up there and take care of the farm for me.' And to the end of her life she still thought she was working for mother.

Her son reported every two weeks, and told us when she died; and found her quite contented. The thing she loved better than anything else was to rock in the yard, holding a baby, and sing Negro melodies. One of them was 'Up , my chillen, you is free: yes, you're free indeed. Ride dat horse, for you is free; yes, you're free indeed.'"

Reflections on the Old Presbyterian Meeting House by Miss Myrtle M. Graves

"My mother [Lucy Libby] who lived in the North until her marriage belonged to the Methodist Church, and my father had been brought up in the Presbyterian Church, and my mother determined, when she was married, that she would go with her husband. When they came to Alexandria to live there were two Presbyterian Churches--the Second Church, which had been separated from the first church by the [Civil] War and the First Church, the congregation which at that time was largely of Northern people.

Mother found them congenial and not violently partisan, although

Mr. Louis McKenzie, one of the leading members, who was Scotch, declared they would never have a preacher who smoked cigars or one who would not pray for the President of the United States. They were obliged to have help all the time from the Northern Presbytery, so it was difficult to keep a preacher.

I remember, when I was about three years of age, going with some neighbor children, to Sunday School, and I remember the lovely hoop skirts of bright colors going up the steps into the church, and the pretty-looking children. I was very young, but this picture remains with me.

...At first we had only oil lamps, but later gas lamps were inside and in front of the church. Lamps were also put on all the street corners and taken care of by a lamp lighter.

Shortly after father and mother came to Alexandria they went to Washington to hear Lincoln's Second Inaugural address, and I have heard them repeat some of the words of that address so often that I think they became a creed to them; surely no creed could have had more meaning than those words meant to him. Think of the words, children: 'With malice toward none; with charity for all.' My father said Lincoln looked straight to the South

when he said it; the South never had a truer friend than Lincoln. My father had a very kindly outlook on the South and its people, though he had been a Union soldier, and I think Lincoln's words 'with charity for all' came to have as much meaning for him as if they had come from the Bible.

Abraham Lincoln was my father's hero, and we, his children, have the same love and admiration for the President, who came from so lowly surroundings and had so wonderful a character.

Father and mother also attended one of President Lincoln's New Year's receptions, and mother told how the President took her hand, and bending down said 'And how are you, little woman?'

I have heard my mother tell how shortly after this he [Willard] came in and dropped down with his face buried in his arms and told of Lincoln's assassination. 'Oh,' he said, 'he was a grand man and I loved him as a brother, and the South has killed their best friend.'"

Editor: T. Michael Miller

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Endnotes --

1. A prolific writer and newspaper reporter, William F. Carne (b. 1840; d. 1908) was Alexandria's most notable 19th century historian. Among Carne's many writings, he compiled the first systematic history of Alexandria which he serialized in the Alexandria Gazette newspaper in the 1870s. Carne's article on the "Sisters of Charity" is freely adapted from a story he published on the nuns in the Alexandria Gazette of September 6, 1905.

2. William Bushby was a prominent Alexandria merchant and landholder.

3. The Alexandria-Washington Lodge occupied the third floor of the old Market House in 1832.

4. The extent of Mrs. Surratt's involvement in the conspiracy and her guilt or innocence continues to be a subject of debate among present day historians and scholars. [Source: William Francis Smith & T. Michael Miller, A Seaport Saga--Portrait of Old Alexandria, Virginia (Norfolk, Virginia: Donning Press, 1999), 108.]

5. The Alexandria Female Orphans Asylum was established around 1840 at the southeast corner of Duke and South Pitt Street. It remained in operation for many years.

6. Dr. F.J. Murphy, [born: 1812; died: 1877] was a prominent Alexandria physician who practiced medicine until his retirement in 1874. He spent his last years being cared for by Mrs. Melisa Wood at her home, the Shadows, at 617 South Washington Street. Upon his death on May 24, 1877, he was buried at St. Mary's Cemetery. [Source: William Francis Smith & T. Michael Miller, A Seaport Saga -- Portrait of Old Alexandria, Virginia (Norfolk, Va.: Donning Publishing Company, 1999), 108]

7. Dr. Murphy's aspirations were not entirely in vain for in March 1873, Miss Julia Johns, daughter of Professor John Johns of the Protestant Episcopal Seminary, established a hospital in Alexandria in the house formerly occupied by Dr. Murphy. "...The original construction of the building...was such as to make it easily divisible into two separate and distinct with reference to the accommodation of male and female patients. Each division contains several rooms of different size and though all are furnished neatly and comfortably, and supplied with all the necessary conveniences of a sick chamber, those for pay patients presented problems of a more elaborate appearance, and those who occupy them can be attended by any physician who services they desire..." [Alexandria Gazette: March 6, 1873.]

8. See Allan W. Robbin's "History of St. John's Academy" in Alexandria History, (1983), Vol. 5, 25-31.

In 1873, the male Catholic school situated on the northwest corner of Duke and Royal Street was described as follows: "...the frame building has just been pulled down. [It] was erected on the lot now occupied by the new residence of William H. Lambert, Esq. and Prof. H.C. McLaughlin, now of Rock Hill College...The house was fitted up in the best style then in vogue, though in a manner very far inferior to what is now the fashion of school houses. It was a high, one story frame, about 40 by 30, with a neat cupola, containing a small bell, the whole being painted white, and surrounded by a high fence, with a white paling in front. Between the street neat and with gravel walks and containing choice flowers, and such was the discipline of the school that though a hand rail, alone, separated it from the walk, no one ever saw a boy in it without permission.

Two paper-leaf trees and four locusts shaded the south side of the yard, and beneath their foliage was a pretty little bowling green, the only sort of place for physical exercises except hall alleys then used in schools, etc., etc., [Source: The Academy Journal 5 March 1873, p.1]

9. The Civil War section of this inquiry is taken from an article the author wrote for the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology publication entitled "Discovering the Decades--The 1860s," (October, 1997), Vol. XV, No. 10.

10. William Francis Smith & T. Michael Miller, A Seaport Saga, op. cit., 86.

11. Alexandria Gazette: January 2, 1866, p. 4.;

12. Alexandria Gazette: July 7, 1879, p. 3.; (13.) Alexandria Gazette: August 25, 1864.



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