

EMMA LOUISE NAGLE

Mar. 11, 1849 - Nov. 26, 1946

Emma Nagle of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is memorable for having lived to become one of the last four women *known* to have nursed in the Civil War. However, she never actually enjoyed this distinction, for neither she nor those about her knew how many or few such nurses remained. Emma, at ninety-seven, knew only that it had been years since she could recall seeing another who had nursed in the Civil War. In fact, she hadn't seen a Civil War soldier for several years either. Of publicity, she sought little and got little.

Born in Philadelphia to Mary and Peter Becker, Emma lived all during the war with her folks at Winchester, Virginia, where she had many nursing experiences, both as a civilian and as a volunteer. A twelve-year-old in the spring of 1861, Emma devoted her early teens to saving lives. At fifteen she joined the Civilian Volunteer Nurses Corps. When peace finally came, Emma was still busily caring for the wounded and the homeless. Often in later years she told of her home, situated as it was, in Winchester, being frequently in the center of the fighting—an eventuality unforeseen by the Beckers when they had moved south. "One night the Union soldiers occupied our front yard and the next night the South's soldiers would be there. Then the Northern soldiers would return and then the South's forces . . ." Like Sarah Frances Pearce over in Richmond (*SLBG*, p. 490 & *OY&LCWN*, p. 97), Emma inevitably did a considerable stint of nursing for the "other side"—in this case, for the Confederates . . . or was the *other* side the Blue Coats?

A battlefield angel, she bore bandages, water, sponges, gave encouragements, supporting words, long hours. Bandaging, pacifying, praying, giving quinine, calomel and occasional milkpunches (brandied milk) upon a doctor's advice—Emma treated as the medicines of her day permitted. She fought successfully against countless gangrenous wounds by applying dressings soaked in weak solutions of bromine—a wonder drug remedy then newly discovered by Middleton Goldsmith, a surgeon in charge of Kentucky and Ohio Military hospitals.¹

In 1867, Emma Becker settled in Bethlehem with her folks. Here she married Frederick Nagle on Sept. 13, 1869. They lived on West Garrison Street which then had only a few houses west of Monocacy Creek. The Nagles became charter members of Grace Lutheran Church in 1872. Someday she would be its last surviving charter member. Frederick died just a few months after their joining.²

During her seventy-three-year widowhood, Emma worked primarily as a seamstress. She supported herself and her two children, Robert and Louise. As each war came along—the Spanish-American, World War I and II—Mrs. Nagle gave her time "to do something for the boys." She was a Red Cross worker. During World War II she and her son packed hundreds of kits for servicemen and into these went items of her own handiwork.³ These activities were a source of pride for her whose sight was dimming. She had spent thousands of hours in community affairs, with civic groups, and for her church, much the way Lavinia Mount Minton in nearby New Jersey was doing (See 1948 Unit, Vol. II). A lovely, signal honor had been bestowed upon her when the local D.U.V. named their unit the Emma Louise Nagle Tent No. 51 in tribute to her years of volunteer nursing. Remembering in detail everything back to her ninth birthday, Mrs. Nagle frequently spoke of her long-ago experiences. Never bedfast, she succumbed to a heart attack at her 148 East Broad Street home. With her was Mrs. Marie Orlando, her housekeeper. Mrs. Nagle was laid to rest in Nisky Hill Cemetery.

¹ Goldsmith's use of bromine reduced gangrene mortality from nearly 100% to 2.6%, effectually eliminating gangrene as a fatal disease. David B. Sabine, "Medicine in the War Between the States," *U.D.C. Magazine*, Jan. 1964, p. 33.

² *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1946, p. 25, *Bethlehem Globe Times*, Nov. 26, 1946, pp. 1-2.

³ *Globe Times*, 11/26/46.