

The United States Christian Commission and The United States Sanitary Commission

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The U. S. Christian Commission and the U. S. Sanitary Commission were established at the onset of the Civil War. Of the two organizations, the U.S. Sanitary Commission was the better known. On June 13, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln officially approved its existence with some fear that it would be a “fifth wheel to the coach.” The Commission coordinated the volunteer efforts of women who wanted to contribute to the efforts of the Union by systematically inventorying the collection and distribution of donated supplies and monies to where it was needed and by improving the daily life of the soldiers through the new “science” of sanitation. Measures focused on improving campsite drainage, the construction of latrines, bathing, cooking facilities and detailed routines for discipline, diet, dress and personal hygiene for soldiers in camp and on campaign. Despite resistance on all levels from Washington down to regimental and company commanders in the field, when it disbanded in 1866, the U.S. Sanitary Commission had received close to \$5,000,000 in funds and \$15,000,000 in supplies in addition to the services members provided as nurses, running kitchens in the camps, administrating hospital ships, making uniforms and organizing Sanitary Fairs to raise funds.

The other organization that did good work among the Northern troops was the U. S. Christian Commission organized by the Young Men’s Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.). Its mission was to improve the morals of the soldiers and their physical condition. On December 12, 1861, George Stuart submitted for President Lincoln’s approval a plan for religious work adopted by committee at a convention of the Y.M.C.A. to promote the spiritual and temporal welfare of the soldiers, sailors and marines. President Lincoln responded in this manner,

“Your letter of the 11th inst. and accompanying plan both of which are as a convenient mode of connecting this with them, have just been received. Your Christian and benevolent undertaking for the benefit of the soldiers, is too obviously proper, and praise-worthy, to admit any different of opinion. I sincerely hope your plan may be as successful in execution, as it is just and generous in conception.”¹

Your Obt. Servt. A. Lincoln

¹ Roy P. Basler, Marion D. Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlop, Editors, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Vol. V, pg. 67

With approximately 5,000 “delegates,” thousands of Bibles and millions of religious books, newspapers and tracts were distributed. In addition, it brought many copies of the better class of magazines and sent them to the soldiers. In permanent camps, free reading rooms were established, which had a number of state newspapers on file to keep the soldiers in touch with events in their home states. Writing materials and postage were provided free as the men were urged to write home and to send a considerable amount of their pay. The Commission setup a number of coffee-wagons to compete with sutlers, who sold liquor, and established “special diet” kitchens for the sick and convalescent. When it disbanded the U.S. Christian Commission estimated that it had expended in both money and supplies more than \$6,250,000.

For those of you who remember the scene from the movie, “Gettysburg,” Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is heading into the battle riding abreast with his brother, Tom and another rider, when suddenly a solid shot passes close to them. Chamberlain calls out, “Boys, I don’t like this. Another such shot might make it hard on mother.” He orders Tom to the rear to close up ranks and the other rider to “pass up ahead and look out a place for our wounded.” This rider was Chamberlain’s younger brother, John, a delegate with the U.S. Christian Commission, who caught up with his two brothers on June 22nd as the Union Army trailed Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia as it headed north.

In the spring of 2006 I visited the Jennie Wade Birthplace on Baltimore Street in Gettysburg, PA, where the John Wega Family presented to the public this aspect of the Civil War. The U.S. Christian Commission was unknown to me, but I came so intrigued that I have read, educated myself to the history of the organization and consulted with the Wegas for advice on presenting this story. During Company F, 14th CVI living history events, I portray a delegate of the commission and present its history and contributions during the Civil War. Any contributions received goes to Campus Crusade towards its military ministries program of sending Bibles and religious tracts to our soldiers overseas. For those interested in learning more about the U.S. Christian Commission in Gettysburg, its webpage is www.usccgettysburg.org