

Hell's Angel: Eleanor Kinzie Gordon's Wartime Summer of 1898

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In August 1898, the *Chicago Times Herald* paid tribute to her: "When the story of the [Spanish-American] war is written Mrs. William W. Gordon [Eleanor "Nellie" Kinzie Gordon] will figure in its pages as one of its heroines." Newspapers from all over the country praised this "Heroine of War" and claimed that Nellie "was a Red Cross camp in herself."¹ Yet her contributions to the war effort at Camp Miami, Florida, have been hardly mentioned in the Spanish-American War histories. Usually she was inaccurately depicted as merely a woman who just "arranged for the purchase of mosquito netting." Before she was to meet her husband, William (Willie) Washington Gordon II, in Miami, Nellie began a journal that would reveal her tireless efforts in establishing and administering a convalescent hospital at Camp Miami. Willie's brigade suffered from malaria and typhoid fever because of the



Eleanor Kinzie Gordon. Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society.

camp's location and lack of facilities. To meet this situation, Nellie organized and, with the assistance of her daughter, Juliette Gordon Low (Daisy), operated a large convalescent hospital. In a matter of a few days, the hospital went from a circular tent with twenty-three patients to a dilapidated warehouse that cared for seventy to eighty sick men at a time. Nellie's journal entries, newspaper articles published in the summer of 1898, government documents, and letters from soldiers prove that she did more than run helpful errands for the soldiers stationed at the camp, a jerry-rigged facility housing seven thousand men. Her ingenuity and tenacity would warrant her the title of the "Good Angel to the Boys in Blue." If it had not been for Nellie's own written account, few people would have known of her behind-the-scenes work. It would take 104 years for historians to discover what contemporaries knew about her important yet long-forgotten contributions.²

Nellie first mentioned her plans for the "Convalescent Ward" in the July 13 entry of her journal. But, she had begun recording her war experience in May 1898 while anticipating news of her husband's official appointment as Brigadier General of the United States Army. She had always used journals to keep a meticulous record of her and her family's lives. On the first page, Nellie wrote: "What is the record—in a few words this." Her "record" would detail the many weeks she spent accompanying Willie and his brigade first to Mobile, Alabama, then to Camp Miami, Florida, and finally to Puerto Rico. Completely unaware of what would await her at Camp Miami, Nellie never suspected how useful this chronicle would be to historians in the future.³

In May 1898 Nellie Gordon was sixty-three years old. She and her husband had been married more than forty years and had five adult children: Eleanor Gordon Parker, Juliette (Daisy) Gordon Low, William Washington Gordon III, Mabel McLane Gordon, and George Arthur Gordon. Although her own parents had died decades earlier, Nellie still bore the imprint of their influence. She was born on June 18, 1835, to John Harris Kinzie and Juliette Magill Kinzie in Chicago, Illinois. The Kinzies were one of the first families to reside on the area's frontiers. Nellie's memoirs detail her mother's lessons of "cooking, sewing, housekeeping, nursing, gardening, clothes-making, shoe-making—in fact everything which might be required of a woman separated from the conveniences of civilization."⁴

Nellie's numerous experiences nursing family members, as well as experiences with illness and death, "hardened" her, and prepared her to

deal with sick and dying men. Her first memories were connected with the death of her six-year-old brother, Wolcott. Although she was only three years old at the time, his tragic death made a deep impression on her. Throughout her childhood she witnessed firsthand the need and importance for women to act as nurses. Nellie watched her mother care for her twenty-month-year-old brother, Frank, when he was severely burned. In the Kinzie's kitchen, he fell into a small green tub, filled with boiling hot, sudsy water. Instantly Juliette poured cold water on his head, she then lifted him out of the tub and used a knife to cut off his clothes. Nellie and her mother began applying "soft linen cloths dipped in lime-water and sweet oil every few minutes" until the doctor arrived. To the amazement of doctors, Frank lived, but it took two years for the burns to heal. Frank died six years later during Chicago's cholera epidemic of 1850-51. Four of the Kinzies were stricken and only one recovered: Frank and three servants died. Her parents spent part of every day nursing the sick at the hospital and made "a big cauldron of mutton broth" to take to them. Nellie neither contracted nor feared the disease even though she "went among the cholera patients freely."⁵

Juliette Kinzie was not satisfied with her Nellie's useful skills and "wished her daughter to finish her education with a polish, which, even if not essential to the frontier, would enable her to cultivate her mind, and enjoy her leisure moments." She made sure that Nellie's education included both practical skills and the benefits of an eastern boarding school. As a little girl, Nellie attended a public school, Kinzie School, named after her father. In her teenage years, Nellie enrolled in Madame Canda's school in New York where she became an expert pianist, an amateur artist, and a linguist who spoke French and Italian fluently.⁶

While attending Madame Canda's, Nellie met Eliza Gordon of Savannah, Georgia, and Ellen and Florence Sheffield of New Haven, Connecticut. Eliza Gordon's mother, Sarah, moved to New Haven because she wanted her sons, George and Willie, to receive their college education at Yale. During the Christmas holidays of 1853, Nellie spent her time with the Sheffields rather than traveling home to distant Chicago. She claimed that her visit sealed her "fate" in life when she was introduced to Eliza's "Brother Willie." On December 21, 1857, Nellie and Willie were married in a Chicago church and moved into the Gordon home in Savannah, Georgia.⁷

Early in her marriage, Nellie demonstrated her devotion to Willie and her stubborn refusal to be separated from him, traits that would play a role in her later accomplishments at Camp Miami. In the summer of 1858, while Nellie was expecting her first child, Savannah faced a yellow fever epidemic. Most of the Gordon family fled the city, but Nellie refused to leave Willie, who for business reasons, was obliged to remain there. At the onset of the Civil War, Nellie adamantly resisted her father's advice to go to Chicago where he believed she could be safe. She remained in Savannah to be near Willie, and she took many difficult trips to Virginia to visit him. With courage and determination, Nellie and her two young daughters by her side, followed Willie to Richmond where she stayed with friends, keeping in touch with him at his various posts while he was with James Ewell Brown Stuart's cavalry.⁸

More than thirty years later in 1898, her devotion to Willie remained strong. In May, with President William McKinley's second call for volunteers during the Spanish-American War, Willie was elevated to the rank of general. Nellie's euphoria over her husband's achievement was apparent in her description of the day's events: "Thus came mild whoops, & laughter, & dancing around the room, till the telegraph messenger thought he had got into a Lunatic Asylum!" Willie received orders to repair to Mobile, Alabama. He was to take command of the Second Brigade, First Division, Fourth Corps, which consisted of the Second Texas Regiment and the Second Louisiana Regiment. Several days later, when Willie boarded a train for this assignment, Nellie was by his side. A large group of Savannahians gathered at the station to say farewell to the new general. Amidst all the hoopla, it must have been difficult for them to remember that they were going to Mobile to prepare for war.

Willie's orders to Camp Miami came soon after the Gordons arrived in Mobile. In an entry dated June 19, 1898, she wrote about these and added: "I do hope they have good water and plenty of shade at this new Post." Camp Miami's contaminated water caused widespread troop sickness. Conditions were so horrible that the camp was referred to by soldiers then as as "Camp Hell".

On July 2, 1898, Nellie arrived at Miami's train station in the northern end of Camp Miami and was touched that her "poor General was waiting all the time in the depot" for her. Willie and Nellie rode in Henry M. Flagler's magnificent horse drawn carriage to the Royal Palm

Hotel, near the confluence of Biscayne Bay and the Miami River. The hostelry housed officers' wives during the war. Pleased with her accommodations, Nellie wrote that "the hotel is new, & big, & handsome, & well-kept in beautiful order." Willie secured Nellie a private resort-style corner room overlooking the grounds, landscaped with "tropical scenery & plants."⁹

Nellie however, was unimpressed with Camp Miami. She first inspected Willie's quarters the day she arrived. After "it stormed hard this A.M. for 2 hours then cleared," Nellie "went in a cab over to the 2nd Brig Hdqts" where she "saw Willie for a few moments." During this brief visit, Nellie saw the consequences of the camp's hurried construction. She noted her immediate concerns about the camp in her journal: "This spot is a pleasant spot—not too hot—but there's no depth in the soil. Tents blow down in high wind. The water is full of lime, disagrees with the men, & gives them dysentery. Stationing troops here looks like a 'job' for Mr. Flagler!"¹⁰

In the spring of 1898, Henry Morrison Flagler, whose Florida East Coast Railway opened Miami to development in 1896, saw the prospect of war as a means to enhance Miami's visibility and financial well being. In mid-May 1898, a United States inspection team, led by Brigadier General James Wade, toured Miami as a potential campsite. After their analysis was made, the officials refused Flagler's offer of Miami land for a military base. In June 1898, a second inspection team visited another proposed area in Miami, but they too hesitated to recommend it as a campsite because of concerns over the lack of facilities, of warehouses, and especially of a waterworks system. The inspectors realized that although Miami accommodated its population of twelve hundred adequately, adding an influx of soldiers would be a tremendous strain on the city.¹¹

Nearby camps in Lakeland and Tampa were not well prepared either, but there were other reasons for their inadequacies. Although Lakeland experienced problems with its food supply, Tampa suffered from overcrowding, and the water supplies of both cities were often contaminated, Lakeland and Tampa were firmly established cities with well-tuned infrastructures. And unlike Camp Miami, these camps had support from the surrounding community in difficult times, and citizens were not naïve to the potential problems for their city. Both cities, Lakeland and Tampa, possessed a communal identity, and they were not looking to use the camps as tools for city promotion. Finally, the situation at



Camp Miami was a collage of tents in the wooded area north of downtown Miami. HASF x-106-x.

Camp Miami differed from other camps because of Flagler, who, as noted, viewed Camp Miami as a great business opportunity—not merely a training facility. Nellie’s comment, “Stationing troops here looks like a ‘job’ to benefit Mr. Flagler,” demonstrated that she recognized Flagler’s intentions.¹²

In spite of the inspection teams’ position, Major General Nelson A. Miles, commander of the army, established Camp Miami. On the morning of June 24, the *Metropolis* reported that the first installment of troops had arrived and, by the first week of July, the entire division, redesignated the First Division, Seventh Corps, of seven thousand volunteers had settled in the camp. In their report, the inspectors had specified that “if military necessity requires it, a camp of 5,000” could be established in Miami. As inspectors feared, the additional two thousand troops compounded the camp’s disarray.¹³

Donna Thomas, in an article, “‘Camp Hell’: Miami During the Spanish-American War,” argued that all military camps at this time had problems, and that “Camp Miami’s record in terms of sickness was probably no worse than the records of most other camps of the Spanish-American War.” But Camp Miami differed from other posts because many of its problems could have been prevented. In a letter to *The Florida Times Union*, Willie expressed anger that the inspectors’ recommendations were not followed when preparing the camp. Since

Miamians were unaware of the camp's deficiencies, the *Miami Metropolis* and *The Florida Times Union* succeeded in portraying his brigade "as troublemakers and spreaders of rumors" because Willie made his feelings known publicly. Willie's purpose with this letter was "to protest against communications published" in the newspaper (*Miami Metropolis*) and "to state certain facts concerning Miami and the Encampment there." He stated that "the owners [Flagler] of the property had underestimated the necessities of a camp for over 7000 men, overestimated the resources of the place and the troops who suffered the consequences had just cause for complaint."¹⁴

Willie claimed that when he arrived it was clear that the city was not prepared to house the camp. More importantly, he believed that precautions were not taken to ensure the soldiers' health. In July and August 1898, the *Metropolis* reported that only a few soldiers in the area became ill, and the sickness was due to Miami's heat and humidity. Willie dismissed this explanation, contending that since "the hot sun had not produced these results in Mobile and elsewhere, it was necessary to seek some other cause," like contaminated water. When his brigade arrived, the water was "at first almost the color of milk on account of the quantity of lime in it and it gave everyone diarrhea, which in some cases ran into more serious complaints." After several more days and additional reports of illness, the Second Brigade discovered that their drinking water "was not from the water works tower, but from the railroad tank, which got its water from the two 24 feet wells, located between the two brigades, and into which was surface drainage from both brigades." After many failed attempts to supply clean water, such as using water from the Everglades, "orders were given that no water should be used for drinking or cooking unless it had been boiled at least an hour."¹⁵

With hundreds of men on sick call daily in both brigades, Willie and other officers struggled to find ways to care for the soldiers effectively. Willie tried to make life better for his men in Miami, by turning to his wife for help. On July 9, Willie mentioned his concerns to Nellie, and they concluded that the men were not receiving sufficient care at the military hospital. More importantly, Willie and Nellie believed that the men were sent back to work before they were fully recovered from their illnesses.¹⁶

After her conversation with Willie, Nellie wrote in her diary: "We intended going to Church, but Willy got hold of General [J. Warren]

Keifer & had so many important things to discuss with him about the sick in his brigade, etc., etc.” The couple concluded that the overcrowded division hospital was not equipped to handle the high number of patients since it consisted of many tents “crowded together on a lot covered with weeds in the middle of town.” Many men who inspected the site noticed that “sinks and garbage, emitting a most offensive odor, surrounded the place, which gets in consequence little pure air.” After Lieutenant-Colonel Curtis Guild, Jr., Inspector-General, Seventh Army Corps, toured Camp Miami, he observed that, “The men in quarters sick with measles and other diseases begged me in passing not to be sent to this place.” In his official report, Guild wrote: “I can not comprehend why such a filthy locality should ever be chosen for any camp, especially for a hospital.”¹⁷

These investigations of the division hospital led to additional inquiries that revealed the inattentiveness of hospital staff. Owing to the hospital’s overcrowding, hospital administrators had been forced to release those who were in a less critical state in order to make room for the seriously ill. As commander of the Second Brigade, Willie witnessed the hospital’s negligence firsthand when soldiers returned to duty before they had fully recovered. Though not medically trained, the Gordons were familiar with the care necessary for assisting Camp Miami’s ailing soldiers. During their previous summers in Savannah, Willie and Nellie experienced yellow fever epidemics, and watched over family and friends who succumbed to many of the same deadly illnesses that affected Camp Miami’s soldiers. If proper care was not made available to ill soldiers soon, they knew that the likely prognosis for these soldiers was death.¹⁸

Nellie decided that she would administer a convalescent ward to care for the men who were well enough to be released from the hospital, but not strong enough to return to duty. Soon after General Gordon had extended his influence, preparations for the convalescent hospital began. Although it would be in operation for just two weeks, Nellie’s efforts here brought relief to many ailing soldiers.¹⁹

On July 13, Nellie “had a talk with Major Appel about the sickness.” She “suggested having a ‘Convalescent tent’ in which the men could get suitable food for a few days after they were discharged from the Division Hospital.” Nellie wrote that Major Appel, “was delighted at the idea—said he would give me a big circular tent & have it floored; I

promised to look after the cooking dept. of it." Since the Army generally lacked supplies and spare soldiers, Appel, chief surgeon of the division, must have appreciated Nellie's initiative. He may have also been relieved that she would be willing to be responsible for this venture without much assistance from him or from his soldiers.²⁰

On the following day, July 14, Lieutenant-Colonel Louis M. Maus, Chief Surgeon Seventh Army Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel of Volunteers Oliver E. Wood, Chief Commissary of the Seventh Corps, and Lieutenant Colonel Curtis Guild, inspector general, "came down from Jacksonville on an inspection tour." After receiving complaints about the troops' health, Maus wanted to examine the camp's conditions for himself. After inspecting Flagler's wells, he remarked that the water possessed "a disagreeable taste, an offensive odor, and in my opinion, [the water] contains a large percentage of organic and vegetable matter," and concluded that the water could not be "wholesome in summer." He did not, however, condemn camp conditions, which disappointed many of the officers stationed in Miami. Indeed, in a letter to Maus after he left Miami, some of the First Division's surgeons informed him that they believed the water supplied by Flagler was "thoroughly contaminated, infected, and too dangerous to utilize for drinking purposes."²¹

During their tour, Nellie "got an opportunity to speak to Col. Maus & Col. Wood about a convalescent tent. They were heartily in favor of it. Likewise General Keifer." Despite Army supply shortages, these high-ranking officers helped Nellie to obtain the necessary supplies and the equipment to open her facility. First, she acquired a "large circular tent," but was soon forced to adjust her plan because of the rising number of potential patients in her husband's brigade.²²

Nellie quickly found a vacant makeshift building near the Royal Palm Hotel. "I got a big building 100 by 40 feet...The building was only slatted but had windows with glass, and a solid roof—I had shades of waterproof roofing paper hung to keep the sun and rain from coming through the slats." The *Metropolis* announced Nellie's plans: "Mrs. Gordon is hurrying forward the work of the building to be used as a convalescent camp rapidly. In a few days those who are discharged from the hospital will have a cosy [sic], pleasant place to spend a few days while they are recuperating." The *Metropolis'* promotion of Nellie's efforts sounded more like an advertisement for a Florida vacation spot than a description of an unconventional recovery area housed in an

abandoned warehouse. In her journal, Nellie itemized what needed to be done in order to open her “Ward”: “It needs a floor—as it really is a warehouse just built. We can get it ready with electric lights & water in it & an outside kitchen, in 2 days. The Red Cross will give us 100 lbs. of ice a day.”²³

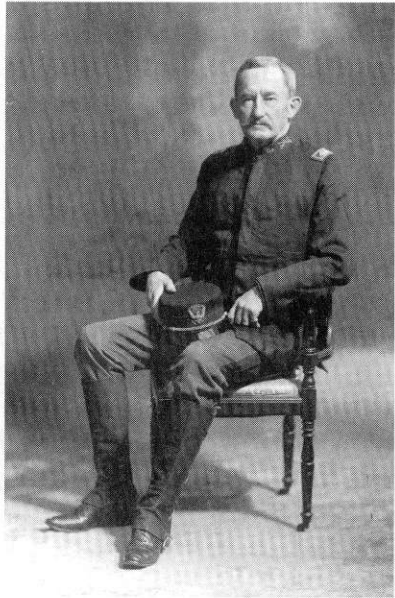
While she waited for the building to be ready, Nellie put her amateur nursing skills to use. She sent bottles of a homemade remedy to “Dr. [Major John J.] Archinaud [Brigade Surgeon of the Second Brigade, Seventh Army Corps] for his sick men-& had a little left over in a tumbler which I gave to Chaplain Watts, who is ill with typhoid fever.” This concoction was made with milk, which was always in short supply: “If I only could get the milk. But it seems impossible!” She ordered “packages of wine jelly” that were distributed to six ill soldiers. The wine’s alcohol content was thought to ease their symptoms of dysentery. Nellie wrote that Major John J. Archinaud of the Second Louisiana Volunteers, who was assigned temporary duty as Second Brigade’s surgeon, was caring for a man with dysentery “who was said to be dying yesterday,” but after a dose of the wine jelly, the doctor “reports him better to day [sic].” On the back inside cover of her journal, Nellie wrote another homemade remedy she frequently used, “1 teaspoon full of salt, 1 tablespoon full good vinegar to one tumbler of water, and a tablespoon of gin,” and she administered it hourly to the men.²⁴

As Nellie became more involved in caring for the sickly soldiers, she and Willie discovered that the cause for the division hospital’s poor conditions not only derived from its locale and supply shortage, but also from the hospital staff’s negligence. In a journal entry dated July 18, Nellie wrote: “In the afternoon Willy came over & had a very stormy interview with the Drs—Appel & Vilas—He and Archinaud & Col’s [Major J.M.] Mood[y], Cox, & Oppenheimer brought up plenty of proof of the neglect & outrages that exist in the Division Hospital... The Doctors are getting thoroughly scared at last. Col. Maus had said now the Hospital must be moved.” Willie confronted the doctors using specific examples of the “outrages” that another officer witnessed in the division hospital. “Major Hughes was in that hospital & saw a man lying there dying with the flies crawling all over his face & into his mouth & the attendants did not pretend to keep them brushed away.” General Gordon claimed Hughes had observed more abuse: “A very sick man asked for water & Major H—said to one of those Stewards—

Why don't you give that man some water? 'I'll give him a club!' was the brutal reply." In what must have been his attempt to downplay the episode, Appel tried to convince Willie that Hughes failed to see the obvious humor, and said, "Oh, the steward was just joking!!!" But Appel's response only further convinced Willie of the crisis at hand.²⁵

When Gordon placed the blame on Appel, the discussion heated as "Willie did not spare Appel." Nellie recalled: "He told him that he (Appel) was responsible for all those outrages—That if he attended to his duties properly the Hospital would not have been carried on in the shameful way it had been." Appel refuted Willie's accusations by faulting the federal government for only allowing two hundred beds. "Willie swore that if the Gov't & Medical Board did not give all the cots needed—or presumed to dictate how many sick men should be provided with cots & how many go without—he would rouse not only the Authorities at Washington—but all the United States. He would not submit to such outrage!" Willie later fulfilled his promise during the government's probe of Camp Miami. Appel only found the comments offensive, so Willie added: "I have stated facts—If they are insulting you can consider that they are said, not by your Superior Officer, but as man to man—and you can do as you like about it." Appel rejected this candor, and stormed out of the room.²⁶

By the end of the day, Willie and Nellie became more determined to help when they learned three more men died. They viewed the opening of the convalescent hospital not as a convenience for Camp Miami's sick soldiers, but as a must in order to save lives. Two days before Nellie's project was ready, she wrote that more water testing occurred which meant there was still concern over contamination: "The water sent to N.O.'s [New Orleans] has returned today—it was full of



General William Gordon. Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society.

typhoid germs & every other horror!" But she and Willie were distrustful of additional tests, and implied that a federal cover-up was possible: "Some [water] has been sent to the 'Smithsonian' also—I don't know what they will discover—Possibly they may be bought over & find nothing."²⁷

On July 19, Nellie wrote, "Our Convalescent building is nearly ready." Finding supplies to furnish the ward was difficult because necessities were scarce, and because requests took time to be processed, "Everything is so slow here," she complained. In order to open the facility quickly, at his own expense, Willie ordered "50 cots & 1 doz camp chairs" from a store in Jacksonville, Florida, and Nellie "went to a Furniture shop here & got 25 cots & 1 doz camp stools & sent them to the Ward." She also found in town "six wash-basins & a lot of toweling." These items were purchased by the Gordons at their own expense. Initially, the couple found enough materials to open the ward, but as more and more men checked-in, Nellie and Willie found themselves short-handed again.²⁸

Nellie's self-reliance served her well, but she knew that more help was necessary in order to give good care to the soldiers who came to her ward. Throughout the country, soldiers at other camps were also fighting the war on disease without enough experienced medical officers who had knowledge in military medical training and in preventative medicine. With only half the manpower needed to work as nurses, or stewards, the Army began pulling infantrymen from their units to serve in hospitals. These men lacked motivation and training, and most resented this assignment because they preferred combat. His options thus limited, Surgeon General George Miller Sternberg then looked at employing women as nurses. Requesting of the War Department the authorization to hire a large number of female nurses. After receiving permission, Sternberg, with the help of Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee, established the Nurse Corps Division. Since the Medical Corps' common attitude towards female nurses "was condemnation at best, contempt at worst," women were sent to serve in the Keys or Puerto Rico. Without adequate nursing care, infected soldiers in stateside camps rapidly lost the battle against diseases like malaria and typhoid because of the military's poor planning.²⁹

What made matters worse for the sick soldiers at Camp Miami was not just a lack of nurses, but that the newly chartered city still resembled a frontier community in 1898. The city offered no institutionalized

health care and no professionalized medicine. It was not until 1908 that a hospital was organized in Miami. For the relief of mild aches and pains, most citizens purchased over-the-counter medicine at the Brickell trading post. Otherwise, women of the community acted as the primary caretakers of the sick in Miami. If the women's remedies did not work, actively ill people were taken by boat to Key West where many highly trained physicians had set up their practices.³⁰

Nellie asked "Dr. McGuire of 1st Brigade to take charge," and he would act as the men's primary physician. Aware of the need for additional help, she wrote: "If Watts had a really good nurse he would do much better—His wife is in the way here." When assistance was available, Nellie was selective: "Mrs. Cosens writes offering her services—must write & decline. We need good men-nurses." Although the military did not assign nurses to Miami, Nellie probably could have found the additional help she needed from what must have been a well-known network of women caregivers in the city. By discrediting other women's capabilities, Nellie saw herself as an exception to the negative stereotype of female nurses, and she wanted others to do the same. Not only did Nellie believe that she was up to the task, but she also wanted others to hold that impression.³¹

Nellie's self-confidence, and her apparent comfort in a man's world, sometimes caused her to see other women's efforts as less noteworthy: "Some fool woman trotted herself up to my room to day (sic) to talk to me about the Red Cross, & the W. C. T. U. Society—was much surprised to find I knew nothing about either!—I could hardly get rid of her!" Although she finally acquired some help from a few male-nurses, none of them were satisfactory to her, and they often caused her a great deal of frustration.³²

On July 20, Nellie opened the newly converted warehouse, and "23 men came in & were very comfortable there. The men are of present fed & from the Div. Hospital." The next evening, Daisy arrived and "is perfectly delighted with the place & thinks it is the coolest climate she has felt since leaving England." Intending for Daisy to stay near her, Nellie reserved connecting rooms at the Royal Palm Hotel before she left Mobile. Almost immediately, Nellie took Daisy "to look in on the Ward," where she discovered 14 more men. They "found one man weak from fever—and all wanting fans." That evening, Nellie wrote about the day's activities, "Daisy bought a dozen (for \$3.00) of fancy

fans,” and gave them to the men in the ward. After giving them the fans, they “made a campaign for 1 tumbler of fresh milk, then whiskey, then ice, and finally got a milk punch” to help relieve the man with the fever. Milk was considered the best nutritional food for the sick, but if soured, the milk could be the most hazardous food causing diarrhea and dehydration. Most of the milk supply came from Flagler’s dairy in St. Augustine, Florida. He sold eighty quarts per day to the military for hospital use. Disgusted with what she considered the exorbitant price Flagler charged, Nellie complained, “He charges us 80 cents a gallon—and milk sells everywhere else for 20 cents. There’s a Shylock for you!” To keep the milk cool and fresh Nellie bought a small ice box with the twenty dollars the chaplain gave her.³³

General Gordon’s brigade had about 350 men, or approximately 10 percent, on sick call daily, whereas, the First Brigade usually had about 250 soldiers on sick call. The rampant illness caused City of Miami officials to worry. Coinciding with Maus and Wood’s inspection of the camp, the *Metropolis* attacked the camp’s critics, attempting to dissuade its readership from the opinions of military officials regarding the healthfulness of Miami. “Miami was never in better condition in the



A rare photograph of soldiers at Camp Miami. HASF 1981-45-3.

matter of health than it is at present," argued the *Metropolis*. When the *Metropolis* specifically mentioned the situation at Camp Miami, it maintained that newspapers outside of Florida purposely exaggerated stories concerning the camp. The *Metropolis* claimed "...all such twaddle—though furnishing sensational news for the saffron-hued journals," would not harm Miami's reputation "as the general good health of our State is too well known to be hurt by unscrupulous attacks." "From our sources of information," the *Journal* added, "we are satisfied that there is no cause for apprehension as to the health of the troops encamped at Miami; and we are confident that all Floridians feel assured that Mr. Flagler will do all in his power to remedy any evils—should they exist..."³⁴

Without the help of Flagler, military officials took their own precautions to slow the rising numbers of men on sick call. Believing food outside the camp could be made with contaminated ingredients, "Colonel Stevens issued an order forbidding vendors of ice cream, pies and similar items from entering the camp." The *Metropolis* maintained, somewhat disingenuously, that this order was necessary because "physicians have reported that many of the men now ill in the First Brigade are sick from the overindulgence in food of this kind," while dismissing charges that the city's negligence was to blame. The newspaper did not identify these physicians and implied that all physicians, civilian as well as military, agreed with this diagnosis.³⁵

In another article, the *Metropolis* described instances where soldiers demonstrated disregard for their health: "Yesterday we noticed walking through the streets, soldiers...totally unmindful of the torrents of rain that was falling. This means an increased sick list." Throughout the report, the newspaper admonished the soldiers for the lack of common sense in rainy weather, and, with a patronizing tone, added: "The utmost care should be observed by the soldiers in keeping their feet and clothing dry, and under no circumstances go out in the rain if it can be avoided." The *Metropolis* shifted the blame away from Flagler and Miami, while focusing it on the soldiers "who brought sickness onto themselves." Perhaps, the *Metropolis'* denial of the city's responsibilities was meant to defend Flagler and his interests against possible charges of negligence by the federal government.³⁶

Nellie did not write in her journal again until July 26. Her silence coincided with the escalation of her duties at the convalescent ward. She wrote: "No time for journaling—my time has all been taken up

with the Convalescent Ward—men keep coming in, & more, & more, & more cots & [mosquito] nets & camp stools and fans, & dishes & knives & forks had to be bought.” In addition to this pause, the writing style and the voice of her journal dramatically change at this time. Her writing now appeared erratic. Instead of communicating in an upbeat tone with thoughtful, long, descriptive sentences filled with witty commentary, she now wrote short incomplete sentences that ended with dashes rather than periods or other standard punctuation.

For the first time in the journal, Nellie expressed insecurity and panic, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed by the size of her task. Her endeavor was becoming much more than a place to provide a restful atmosphere and suitable food for a few sick men. Within one week, the number of patients in Nellie’s ward climbed from twenty-three to seventy. Nellie wrote that “The number of deaths from typhoid has increased. The number of sick from various causes—malaria, dysentery, measles, etc.—greatly increased. All the men are demoralized, and the officers are discouraged.” Nellie, too, was disheartened as she became disillusioned with her “Bright Idea.”³⁷

Nellie nevertheless, continued to carry out her duties. She grew attached to Willie’s men and enjoyed helping the soldiers, as well as her husband. Health conditions in Camp Miami remained poor because the drinking water remained contaminated. Nellie complained, “Bringing troops here, where they had bad water, is what has been a really criminal piece of jobbery to fill Mr. Flagler’s pockets.” She “tried to get distilled water for them to drink—but the machinery of the factory got out of order.” Military officials ordered that all water had to be boiled to prevent more sickness, but the soldiers did not follow orders because it was considered inconvenient. “It is almost impossible to make them do so,” she complained, and noted that “Willy has got down casks and kettles from Jacksonville for their use.” The medical situation continued to deteriorate: “There are 400 men sick in the 2nd Texas—I have 70 in the C. W.—20 of them too ill to eat solid food—Daisy has spent all her time making beef tea—jelly, etc for them.” Nellie made a milk punch for the men, which she admitted, was “not much.”³⁸

The *Metropolis* continued to downplay illness in the camp, claiming in one article, that “The character of sickness now prevailing is a mild type.” Misleading information was a constant problem in the newspaper. Reports like, “There was a large number of patients discharged yesterday

morning," led readers to believe that the soldiers were on the mend. The editors failed to mention that the patients were still sick, and they had been sent to Nellie's ward because of hospital overcrowding. "In fact some of them were very sick."³⁹

While the *Metropolis'* articles downplayed the camp's predicament, Nellie's journal entries, instead documented the camp's "horrible state of things." Since her ward opened, she spent every day "ransacking these wretched stores for things—the most simple things—and can't find them." When she did find supplies, Nellie locked them up in a storage closet inside the ward. She tried to control the unhealthy environment of the ward on her own by using whatever means she could to ensure that her patients did not contract more disease: "I have got it arranged so that all [water] we use is boiled. I have a man detailed to see to it, & keep two large casks filled—I insist on ice water for them day and night." Contradicting the *Metropolis'* reports, Nellie explained in a letter to her uncle that the sickness was worse. "There are 75 cases of typhoid fever and 12 more have died from it. Any number have dysentery & measles & mumps. The two latter we don't mind much—They are easily managed. It is the typhoid that worries us."⁴⁰

As the number of sick increased daily, inspections carried out by high-ranking military officials from Washington continued. Army surgeons surveyed the camp and made recommendations to stop the spread of typhoid fever, but all of their suggestions were ignored. Washington officials received conflicting reports from soldiers, reporters, and even Henry Flagler concerning the camp. Accordingly, some of them believed the medical situation was exaggerated. Flagler wrote to Secretary of War R. A. Alger to explain the "very unfavorable reports" that were sent to him "regarding the sanitary conditions, as well as discomforts of the camp at Miami, Florida." Flagler claimed that the reports "if not wholly untrue they are grossly exaggerated," and he asked, "as a personal favor that you suspend judgment until Secretary Bliss returned to Washington, whom I saw yesterday, and who is thoroughly posted." Flagler's letter only caused more inquiries, and judgment continued. It was suggested that an officer be sent to Miami "for the purpose of investigating and reporting upon the sanitary conditions of the camp." Implying Flagler's influence over the situation, "this officer should be dispatched promptly and quietly, in order to avoid all advice and suggestions from the agents of those who have financial interests at stake."⁴¹

Nellie was aware of all the potential here for a “whitewash”. After she learned that Major-General Fitzhugh Lee, Commander of the Seventh Army Corps, was expected to examine Camp Miami again, Nellie wrote: “Genl Lee is expected to come here—I trust the wicked & corrupt officials who are trying to fool Keifer (and is he fooled, or only indifferent or wicked?) won’t be able to fool Genl Lee.” It seems that conditions did not improve as a result of the inspections, which infuriated Nellie: “Oh, this is such a damnable hole for a camp—I hope everyone who had a pull at sending troops here will go to Hell!” Whether it was because of supply problems or the administration’s mistakes, the division hospital’s conditions worsened, and “the men won’t go there if they can help it.” As Nellie observed, “The Army regulations provide Hospital accommodations of [with] 200 beds to each Division. There are now here only two-thirds of a Division and we have a thousand men sick! Think of it!” The nurses assigned to the hospital were “only men the Surgeons pick up from among the soldiers.” As nursing duty was given to “the privates in the regiment” or as a form of punishment, the soldiers assigned to the division hospital were “the most worthless and troublesome men in the company.” They often resented being placed in a hospital instead of on the battlefield, which may have made them more abusive and unsympathetic.⁴²

When the division hospital was grossly overcrowded, sick soldiers were sent to Nellie’s ward, which now acted more as an intensive care unit than a place for convalescence. On July 27, she and Daisy were caring for eighty-six men, and they “had to buy & buy & buy to keep with the increase of men.” Nellie received two hundred dollars from the Colonial Dames of Georgia, which she helped establish in 1894. With these funds, she could provide each patient with “a mosquito net and a nice cot.” Since the converted warehouse “only holds 90 men,” Nellie was granted “permission to use the new Episcopal church which has never been consecrated—and we will overflow into that if necessary.” Every morning for two weeks, Nellie went to her ward “right after breakfast.” “I got everything going there; fed several people who had not had enough, [and] made a list of supplies.” Relieved to have her daughter’s help each day, Nellie wrote: “Daisy spent two hours making & distributing cups of chocolate which the men greatly enjoyed.” Although much of the treatment was improvised, the medical care the soldiers received from the Gordon women must have been effective. On

July 28, Nellie sent thirteen men back to duty—"well." She wrote: "It is quite flattering I declare, to meet so many who tell me what a God-send the C. W. is—& 'bless me'—and say how the men love me—etc., etc—I shall be quite spoiled!" Nellie was proud that she and Daisy helped the soldiers recover: "The change in their looks since they came there, is wonderful. Such a hopeless, sad, indifferent, weak lot as they were! Now they are alert, cheerful, hungry, satisfied, and interested in the books & papers on supply to them."⁴³

Years later, in her "Reminiscences," Nellie explained why she never became infected: "In fact I am not afraid of disease, and never catch anything. I went through a violent epidemic of cholera in Chicago in 1852 and of Yellow-fever in Savannah in 1858 [and in 1876] and was never ill a moment, so I consider myself 'immune.'" By late July 1898, newspapers from all over the country praised her efforts. In a letter to Nellie, her close friend, Lizzie Nicholas, wrote, "You are every bit as great as Miss Nightingale & everybody has heard of [the] Miami tent convalescent hospital! It has been mentioned in New Haven papers & ever so many others." Proud of her mother's work, Arthur wrote, "I hear all sorts of good reports about you and your invaluable help to Papa."⁴⁴

In the last days of July, Willie's brigade was ordered to Camp Fairfield in Jacksonville, Florida. As Nellie concluded her July 28 entry, she wrote: "The great news I kept for the last item! We are to move!" Although Willie and Nellie couldn't wait to leave, they emphatically told Keifer, "we could not leave our sick men here, & if they do not go, we would stay here with them." Keifer agreed to send the men by hospital cars to wherever the Gordons requested. Nellie wrote of her and Willie's decision: "All the Convalescents will be sent by Hospital train. The very ill will be left here in charge of competent physicians—and the sick who can safely be moved, will go on a Hospital train." Demonstrating her sincere dedication to her patients, Nellie was willing to go "a day or so in advance to secure accommodations for the Convalescent Ward" without Willie.⁴⁵

The military arranged for Nellie and Daisy's transportation to Jacksonville. She filled her journal with details of her trip, but her main concern was still the convalescent hospital: "I hope the Ward is doing well. Dr. Maus has rented a good sized hotel at Pablo Beach, on the ocean—an hour from here by train where all the convalescents are to go—It will be fine." A soldier's wife wrote to Nellie pleading to have

her sick husband moved with his regiment soon from that “Pest-hole Miami.” The worried wife believed Nellie could help her. “Seeing by the papers you and your noble work of seeing to the sick soldiers. I hope you will pardon me for addressing you.” She begged Nellie “to please let me know what kind of care he [was] left in or if he should be able to be moved to Jacksonville.” If Nellie could do her this favor, “I will be under lasting obligations to you to see how he is & if he has all that is needed for a speedy recovery.”⁴⁶

Except for entries consisting of two or three short sentences, there was another break in Nellie’s journal because of her work. For a little over two weeks, Nellie spent most of the day overseeing the sick soldiers’ transfer to the convalescent hospital at Pablo Beach, which meant one-hour train rides each way. Unlike her experiences in Miami, Nellie appeared to be assured that the new convalescent facility was adequate. On August 5, she made her first visit to Pablo Beach with Daisy “where we found every thing delightfully & conveniently arranged for the Convalescent Ward.” This time Nellie also had capable help in establishing the ward, and full support with its maintenance. A committee of the medical officials’ wives, which included Nellie, was elected by Maus’ wife to inspect the daily operations of the brigade’s hospital. The committee also went with Nellie to oversee the daily operation of the ward. Despite her appreciation for their assistance, Nellie still wanted to be the heroine of her ward: “A Mrs. Guest from Cincinnati has been here on this Ward from some Relief Society. She has a son—a private in the 2 La. [Second Louisiana]. When she told him she was coming out to inspect the Brigade Hospital, he told her she needn’t trouble herself with that; Mrs. Genl Gordon was taking care of them, & no one could do anymore for them than she did!”⁴⁷

Nellie remained in Jacksonville with Willie until he received orders for Puerto Rico. For months after the men left the ward, the Gordons looked after the soldiers by telling all who would listen about the “outrages” at Camp Miami. In late August, newspaper reporters told Nellie’s story in published articles that helped to bring more inquiry into Camp Miami’s medical history. She also sent letters to several people in Washington, including the president, explaining the trying conditions that soldiers endured at the camp. Willie published an editorial, “The Truth About Miami. General Gordon’s Conservative Review of the Conditions There,” that appeared in newspapers across the country.

Earlier, during their heated argument, Willie had warned Appel, chief surgeon of Willie's division in Miami, if the camp's situation was not improved, he would "rouse not only the Authorities at Washington-but all of the United States." Together the Gordons were committed to fulfilling his promise.⁴⁸

Before Nellie left Jacksonville for her home in Savannah on August 22, she finished one last journal entry. "This page ends my Army life for the present..." This last reflection did not mention any of the pride she must have felt for what she did for the soldiers in Miami or the attention she was receiving at the time. Instead, she wrote about Willie without a remark about herself: "The papers are full of complimentary notices of him across the country. Bless him!" Nellie's loving words revealed that "my General" was still foremost in her life. Nellie may have been remembering the end of the last war, and Willie's dire sense of loss as she wrote: "The Recognition has come at last & in such complimentary form!" Perhaps it was important to Nellie that the last page of her "record" paid tribute to her "General." In the afternoon of August 22, General Gordon accompanied his wife to the train station, and "bid me goodbye." On August 24, believing that only peaceful times lay ahead, Nellie began a new journal.⁴⁹

Years later, Nellie's son, Arthur, averred that the best words to describe his mother's traits were "Like a flash." In his memoirs, he added: "With her, action followed thought at once, and inevitably. Obstacles and difficulties merely stimulated her." At Camp Miami, Nellie just did what had to be done "like a flash."



Eleanor and William Gordon on their "Golden Anniversary," Ca.1907. Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society.

Notes

- ¹ "Heroine of War, Mrs. W.W. Gordon," *Massachusetts Times Union & Citizen* (Boston, Massachusetts), 26 July 1898.
- ² Donna Thomas, "'Camp Hell': Miami During the Spanish-American War," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (1978), 150; "Good Angel to the Boys in Blue," *Chicago Times Herald*, 25 August 1898.
- ³ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, May 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Box 12: Folder 126, Item 2844, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.
- ⁴ Nellie Kinzie Gordon, "Reminiscences" (unpaginated manuscript notes), Gordon Family Papers, Box 13: Folder 131, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Juliette Magill Kinzie to Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 12 April 1858, Gordon Family Papers, Box 1: Folder 3, Item 101, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia; Mary D. Robertson, ed., "Northern Rebel: The Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, Savannah, 1862," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 60 (1986), 481; Mrs. Clarence Gordon Anderson, "Eleanor Ke(i)nzie Gordon," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 42 (1958), 166.
- ⁹ The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 3 July 1898.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ The Flagler Museum [online] (Palm Beach, Florida, accessed on 26 December 2001); available from <http://www.flagler.org/biography.html>; Internet; Paul S. George, "Miami and the Spanish-American War: The story of the Magic City during a Splendid Little War," Historical Museum of South Florida [online]; available from <http://www.historical-museum.org/history/war/campmiami.htm>; Internet; accessed on 11 April 2001; *Miami Metropolis*, 17 June 1898; Donna Thomas, "'Camp Hell': Miami During the Spanish-American War," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (1978), 143-144.
- ¹² Hal Hubener, "Army Life in Lakeland, Florida, During the Spanish-American War," *Tampa Bay History* 20 (1998), 43; The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 3 July 1898.
- ¹³ *Miami Metropolis*, 24 June 1898; United States Senate, Document 221, 56th Congress, 1st sess., *Report of the Commission Appointed By*

the President to Investigate the Conduct of the War Department in the War with Spain, 8 vols. (Washington, 1990), VII, 3364.

¹⁴ Thomas, "Camp Hell," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57, 152; William Washington Gordon II to George W. Wilson, 15 August 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Series I, Subseries 1.5, Folder 143, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 9 July 1898.

¹⁷ The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 9 July 1898; Senate Document 221, VIII, 82.

¹⁸ The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 9 July 1898.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 13 July 1898.

²¹ The Spanish-American War Journal of Nellie Kinzie Gordon, 13 July 1898; Senate Document 221, VIII, 78-79; Wright, "Medicine in the Florida Camps During the Spanish-American War," 21-23.

²² The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 14 July 1898.

²³ Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to David Hunter, 28 July 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Series 1, Subseries 1.5, Folder 142, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; *Miami Metropolis*, 16 July 1898; The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 17 July 1898.

²⁴ Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to David Hunter, 28 July 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Series 1, Subseries 1.5, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, no date.

²⁵ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 18 July 1898; *Ibid.*, 19 July 1898.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Mary T. Sarnecky, "Nursing in the American Army from the Revolution to the Spanish-American War," *Nursing History Review* 5 (1997), 52-59; Lieutenant Colonel Connie L. Reeves, United States Army (Retired), "Nurses Spell Relief," *Naval History* 12 (1998), 40.

³⁰ Christine Ardalan, "Professional Nurses in Early Miami, 1896-1925," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 57 (1997), 53-54.

- ³¹ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 19 July 1898.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 21 July 1898; Lucy Ridgely Seymer, compiled by, *Selected Writings of Florence Nightingale* (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1954), 169; Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to David Hunter, 28 July 1898. A “Shylock” is a relentless, revengeful moneylender in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*.
- ³⁴ *Miami Metropolis*, “Healthfulness of Miami,” 16 July 1898.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 July 1898.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, “Soldiers Beware,” 15 July 1898.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Miami Metropolis*, “At the Division Hospital,” no date; Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to David Hunter, 28 July 1898.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Senate Document 221, VII, 92; *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁴² The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 26 July 1898; Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to David Hunter, 28 July 1898; Senate Document 221, VII, 92-93.
- ⁴³ Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to David Hunter, 28 July 1898.
- ⁴⁴ Gordon, “Reminiscences;” Elizabeth Byrd Nicholas to Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 10 August 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Box 4: Folder 50, Item 1201, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia; George Arthur Gordon to Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 11 September 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Series 1, Subseries 1.5, Folder 144, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North, Carolina.
- ⁴⁵ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 28 July 1898.
- ⁴⁶ Eleanor Kinzie Gordon to George Arthur Gordon, August 2, 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Series 1, Subseries 1.5, Folder 143, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Mrs. M. S. Bledsoe to Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 2 August 1898, Gordon Family Papers, Box 4: Folder 51, Item 1200, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.
- ⁴⁷ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 5 August 1898; *Ibid.*, 11 August 1898.
- ⁴⁸ Senate Document 221, VIII, 92-93; William Washington Gordon II,

"The Truth About Miami. General Gordon's Conservative Review of the Conditions There," *New Orleans Picayune*, 27 August 1898; The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 19 July 1898.

⁴⁹ The Spanish-American War Journal of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon, 22 August 1898.