

Carroll Yesteryears  
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## Taneytown's Sister Matilda an Unsung Hero of Civil War By Mary Ann Ashcraft

The grave of John E. Buffington in Taneytown's Trinity Lutheran Cemetery reveals he, a Taneytown native, was one of the Civil War's heroes—a Medal of Honor winner. No one glancing at the simple headstone of Sister Matilda Coskery in St. Joseph's Cemetery in nearby Emmitsburg would ever guess her heroic role in the same war. She, too, called Taneytown home.

Anastasia Coskery joined the Catholic religious order eventually known as the Daughters of Charity in 1829 when nearly 30 years old and assumed the name Sister Matilda. She was one of four Coskery children who devoted their lives to public service as doctors or members of religious communities. An important part of the Daughters of Charity's mission was providing nursing care and spiritual guidance to the sick, poor, and needy. Sister Matilda spent her next forty years fulfilling that mission. By the 1850s she was recognized around the country for her work with the mentally ill. She helped found Mt. Hope Retreat, a hospital for mental patients that opened in Baltimore in 1840 and closed in 1972. In addition, she authored a nursing textbook called *Advices Concerning the Sick* that was never published but gained respect throughout the medical community.

Sister Matilda was in her early sixties when the Civil War broke out. Her expertise until then had not been in the care of wounded patients, but she had had considerable experience training nurses and running nursing facilities. She and other members of her religious order responded to a call in June 1861 to care for Confederate soldiers stationed at Harper's Ferry, WV. She described her hair-raising trip to reach the Confederate encampment that included crossing the Potomac on a bridge loaded with kegs of gunpowder so it could be blown up if Federal troops approached.

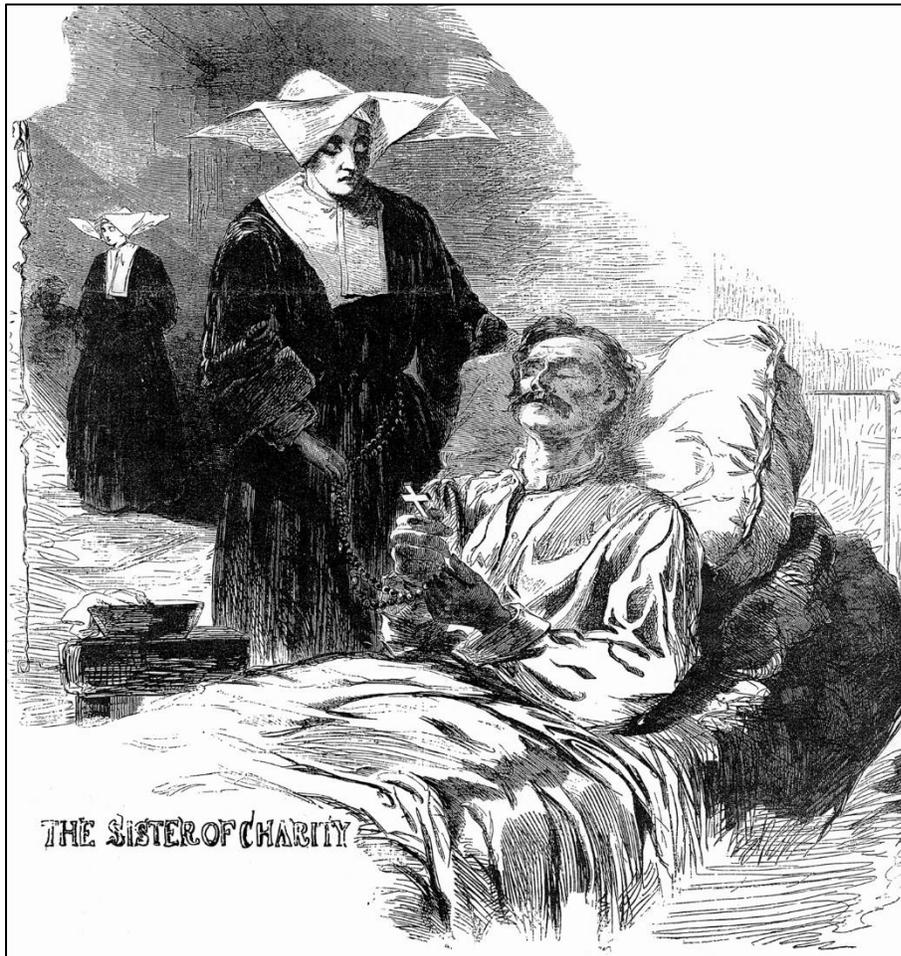
A year after nursing Confederate patients, Sister Matilda and other nuns began working with Union doctors at General Hospital No. 1 in downtown Frederick, MD. The initial prejudice that the military personnel showed toward the nuns gradually turned into respect. Soldiers, on the other hand, always regarded their nurses as the "angels of the battlefield." In September 1862, the nuns got a first-hand look at the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam when they spent six days caring for the wounded still lying on the battlefield in makeshift tents or crammed in nearby barns and farmhouses.

Emmitsburg, the American headquarters for the Daughters of Charity order, was located between two major battlegrounds of the war—Antietam and Gettysburg. A large contingent of nuns rushed to Gettysburg immediately after that battle, just as they had responded to a call after Antietam. Sister Matilda was always one of the first to arrive on the scene.

She spent her final years at the convent in Emmitsburg and died there in 1870. An admirer paid her the following tribute: "She was an eye to the blind, a staff to the lame, a precious balm to the

wounded heart. She wept with those who wept and rejoiced with those who rejoiced.” Those words may speak as loudly as a Medal of Honor.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*



*Photo credit: Harper's Weekly, Sept. 6, 1862.*

*Photo caption: The habit worn by the Daughters of Charity (also known as Sisters of Charity) with its distinctive white cornette was captured by Winslow Homer in this engraving for Harper's Weekly. An 1862 issue of the magazine featured the roles of women during the Civil War.*

