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First Step Toward Freedom: Women in Contraband Camps In and Around the District of Columbia During the Civil War

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Abstract

A white Quaker abolitionist woman from Rochester, New York was not a likely sight in occupied Alexandria, Virginia during the Civil War where violence, suffering, death and racial inequality were rampant just south of the nation's capital. Julia Wilbur was used to a comfortable home, her loving family, an enjoyable profession as a teacher, and the familiar comfort of many, often like-minded, friends. However instead of continuing that "easy" life, Julia embarked on a great adventure as a missionary to work with "contrabands-of-war". More commonly known as fugitive slaves, these refugees needed shelter, medicine, food, clothes, and many other necessities of life as they continued toward true freedom. Julia became an ally who dedicated her life to providing donated necessities, advocacy, schooling and hope for a brighter future. Through personal, intimate diaries and correspondence with close friends and fellow volunteers spanning over fifty years, the story of Julia Wilbur; her faith, family, fortitude, and overall feistiness in the face of danger, moral inequality and established institutions, is woven together in a unique, inspiring, unpublished story.

Keywords

Alexandria, Virginia, contraband, contraband of war, freedom, Julia Wilbur, Civil War, fugitive slave, slavery, Washington DC, District of Columbia, Washington City, emancipation, freed slave, African American

Disciplines

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Comments

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Abstract

A white Quaker abolitionist woman from Rochester, New York was not a likely sight in occupied Alexandria, Virginia during the Civil War where violence, suffering, death and racial inequality were rampant just south of the nation's capital. Julia Wilbur was used to a comfortable home, her loving family, an enjoyable profession as a teacher, and the familiar comfort of many, often-likeminded, friends. However instead of continuing that "easy" life, Julia embarked on a great adventure as a missionary to work with "contrabands-of-war". More commonly known as fugitive slaves, these refugees needed shelter, medicine, food, clothes, and many other necessities of life as they continued toward true freedom. Julia became an ally who dedicated her life to providing donated necessities, advocacy, schooling and hope for a brighter future. Through personal, intimate diaries and correspondence with close friends and fellow volunteers spanning over fifty years, the story of Julia Wilbur; her faith, family, fortitude, and overall feistiness in the face of danger, moral inequality and established institutions, is woven together in a unique, inspiring, unpublished story.

Keywords: Alexandria, Virginia, contrabands, Julia Wilbur

Julia Wilbur resolved to her diary on New Year's Day of 1862 that she needed a change from her home in Rush, New York. She needed change to her life as a middle-aged teacher, living with her unappreciative family, and remaining hundreds of miles away from where she felt her help was desperately needed. She longed to escape the emotional pain that overshadowed her each and every day with the loss of her beloved, estranged niece. "I cannot go on so," she said, "I must do something different." Julia was an enthusiastic teacher in Rochester, New York and a Friend who believed in the abolitionist cause before and during the American Civil War. She had sewn and written for the cause, but she felt she could, she must, do more. Julia had attended political rallies, written letters, heard speeches, joined anti-slavery societies and women's rights groups. She was an activist in her own right. Julia had devoted so much of her time, energy and devotion to the war effort and the abolitionist cause, but now was her chance to do even more.¹

Once before, fellow members of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society had requested that she leave home and, as a missionary, travel south to aid freedmen. In September of 1862, Anna Barnes, an avid abolitionist and Society member, had written encouraging her to "go to Port Royal," but Julia did not leave. Anxious to continue working feverishly to aid perfect strangers Julia finally had her chance to make a profound difference. But Julia didn't respond to Ms. Barnes' letter immediately. She hesitated, cautious of what she could potentially be agreeing to undertake. Did she really want to travel hundreds of miles away from her home and family to the National Capital and war stricken south where she had never before set foot? Perhaps this was not what she had initially imagined as her perfect opportunity to help those who so desperately needed the assistance. Perhaps she was even having second thoughts on this challenging adventure she had so eagerly imagined. Whatever her reason, she let the opportunity pass her by. As a woman of faith, she believed another opportunity would present itself if God wanted it to be so.²

Later, after returning from extended family travels, Julia called on Ms. Barnes with regard to her letter. Julia did not record the specifics of her meeting in her diary, but Ms. Barnes must have been quite persuasive in convincing Julia of her destiny to work on behalf of their Anti-Slavery Society in the South because Julia suddenly adopted a new outlook on the continuing war and her own potential. "Perhaps I shall go to Washington to look after contrabands. Great news. We shall beat the rebels!" Suddenly not only did she want to leave home to aid freed people, but she found a fresh view on the whole war effort. Ms. Barnes had inspired Julia and piqued her interest. Julia was convinced of her overwhelming potential to do great things for a race of people who at that point could not help themselves.³

A few weeks later, Julia's enthusiasm had waned. She was "uncertain what I shall do, or where I shall go; but I keep getting ready to go somewhere." Her motivation had not lessened, but reality seemed to be standing in her way. Where would her able hands and warm heart be needed most? It was not until mid-October of 1862, some nine-and-a-half months after her first plans of missionary life took shape, that Julia had an expected departure date to begin the greatest adventure of her life. "I expect to start for Washington next Tuesday," she wrote with conviction. "I saw Mrs. Barnes, Sec. of Ladies' A.S. Society, & made the final arrangements to go & see what can be done for the contrabands in Washington." There was still a hint of skepticism in her words, but the decision had been made. She began frantically making lists to "get ready to leave home for an indefinite time," and was accepting the fact that she would not see her nieces and nephews for a long while. However, she "shall forego this [hardship] for what seems to be the call of duty." As a practiced Quaker, she would do what God was asking and what she required of herself. "I have always felt that if opportunity was ever offered me, I wd. do something for the negro. And it seems all the while as if the Lord would guide my steps & bless my efforts." Her future had been decided; Julia was going to Washington to help the contrabands.⁴

"The Rochester Ladies' Anti Slavery Society' want me to go to W[ashington] right away," so Julia made all haste to get her affairs in order and pack her belongings. She wanted to say goodbye to all her family and, despite her personal frustrations with them, ensure their comfort and ease in her absence. Six days later, on October 22, 1862, Julia left her home for Washington. Her father accompanied her on the first leg of the journey, and as they approached the depot in Rochester, "a beautiful Rainbow spanned the Western horizon!" She "accepted the omen... [as] a 'bow of promise' for me... & went hopefully on." The symbol of hope was the guidance she needed to remove all doubt from her mind that she was making the right decision. She had the confidence she needed to keep going. This day marked the "beginning of my life in Washington, D.C."⁵

Her journey was less than pleasant at times and involved trains, buggies, strange people and unknown places. Julia had traveled many times before but often with family or to go see family in other states. This convoluted voyage was her first adventure entirely alone:

Ticket to Baltimore \$9. Changed car for poorer one at Elmira, soldiers here.... Night came down on Magnificent Scenery. Changed cars for still poorer ones at Williamsport. Only the one ladies car had fire in it, & all want to go into it. But only men with ladies were allowed to stay. Frank Phelps, a Showman, called himself my protector & he kept his seat. He was going to W[ashington] to open a Theater – was a Democrat – pro Slavery, but good natured & sociable. We represented the extremes of thought & opinions. Waited at York [PA].⁶

The next train ride would take her across the Mason Dixon line for the first time in Julia's life. She had never experienced war or slavery first hand and was now riding directly toward its danger. When she crossed the state line into Maryland, a slave state still loyal to the Union, Julia experienced a world far different than her own. She met slaveholders, Union soldiers, abolitionists, politicians, Confederate soldiers, and many others on her journey to the capital. "First negro I saw was selling Pies, our delays caused by wrecked trains. Every thing was new to me now – in a Slave State (Md.) Reached Baltimore at 10, too late for train to W[ashington]." Having traveled for more than twelve hours that day and being thoroughly exhausted, Julia "Went in Omnibus with Mrs. Cameron to Barnum's Hotel. She proved a pleasant lady.... She had lived in Toronto & helped fugitive slaves, & wished me success in my mission." Not all passengers she met were as welcoming or understanding of her views.⁷

With all the new people Julia was meeting throughout the day, she mentioned little of her surroundings until she arrived in Washington City. The weary woman who stepped off the omnibus looked around in a state of exhaustion and smiled. She had arrived at long last. "Pa. Ave. was a brilliant scene. Well I was in a strange City & at a strange house. But it did not hinder my sleep for I was very, very tired." Her closing remark that first day in DC was probably the most memorable of all her new experiences: "today for the first time I was waited on by slaves."⁸

After a good night's sleep and some time to reflect on her two-day journey, Julia did not take in the famous sights of the city, nor gaze at the half-finished dome of the Capitol. Instead immediately after breakfast she "started out to

find Geo[rge] E. Baker, Treas[urer] of Freedmens Relief Asso[ciation],” who would hopefully direct her to a new job and a permanent place to live. That same morning Julia saw the first of the people she was destined to help. She met contrabands in the meager housing the government had hastily provided to them in old slave pens and abandoned or confiscated buildings. Any warning she received from her hostess or Mr. Baker of the Freedmen’s condition would not have prepared her for the sights she would witness, so very different than anything she had seen before.

They are caring for the Contrabands, 2000 or 3000 here. Have been removed from Duff Green’s Row to McClellan Barracks, a little out of City. I found the place & I never saw before such destitution & misery. Many were in old tents on the ground – sick – rags for Covering, oh, dear! They have this poor shelter & rations & a Military Guard. But they will have better shelter before winter. The Asso[ciation] pays 2 Matrons, & Superintendents. Oh such suffering!⁹

After witnessing the makeshift contraband camp, Treasurer Baker suggested she “had better go to Alex[andria], Va. 500 Contrabands there, worse off than those in W[ashington].” At the Patent Office, Julia saw the secretary of the association for which she would be working. “When I told him what I had come for, he said ‘Miss W. it seems as if God had sent you here.’” As a faithful woman of God, Julia would have taken great pride in hearing this after all the filth and suffering she had seen. She had made the right decision and would make a difference to many freed slaves. Her humble attitude should not be mistaken for weakness in the eyes of adversity or disagreement. People around her offhandedly shared their opinions of the war and “niggers” who started it, but Julia kept the sensibility to keep her opinions quiet.¹⁰

Over a year after her arrival, Julia was still living in Alexandria, Virginia, despite allusions of returning home to her family. She was still working tirelessly to help the growing number of contrabands by providing them with food, clothes, shelter, medicine, education, and most importantly, a friend. Julia had worked long hours, lived as minimally as she could, and endured unending exhaustion while surrounded by unending suffering for what must have felt like a lifetime. On a bitterly cold, raw day in January 1864, Julia was making her rounds to all the hospitals and barracks around the city that housed contrabands. It was in one black hospital that she received news that three people had died there since her last visit just a day before: two “noble [black] men” and a fourteen-year-old boy. Without allowing for much time to grieve, their bodies were carried out of the hospital ward in front of many scared patients. Their limp forms were carelessly placed into primitive pine coffins most likely made by the Quartermaster’s office, then pushed onto the back of an ambulance wagon. Julia decided to accompany the coffins to the burying ground. She hoisted herself up into the front of the ambulance and seated herself beside the driver. Having met and worked with so many freed slaves during her sixteen-month tenure, Julia cared deeply for the people she tried to help. She grieved their deaths as both strong advocate and friend, a thought lost on many people both North and South.¹¹

Before departing from the hospital, the driver’s dog jumped up into the back of the wagon and rode beside the coffins. As the wagon passed down the main street of Alexandria on that cold day, it is likely no one would have noticed the funeral procession or grieved the deaths of the people who passed. The wagon stopped on the southern end of town at the burying ground, which had once been a forgotten plot of land beside a Rebel’s townhouse. This day, Julia saw the ground covered with hundreds of mounds where contrabands had been buried before as the “most heathenish looking place I ever saw.” Without a real cemetery for contrabands, nearly 1,200 people, mostly children, had been buried in small, available plots like where Julia stood. In the middle of “Potter’s field” would have stood several weary, half-frozen black men employed to dig the holes; holes that were far too small to be considered graves. Without ceremony, the coffins were pulled from the bed of the wagon, dumped in the ground, and barely covered. “The poor slave,” Julia thought, “Virginia does not afford earth enough to cover his remains!!” Less than ten years later, these graves would be totally forgotten and (with permission from the Secretary of War, William W. Belknap,) they were “filled up, and sodded, and trees planted, if the owners of the land do not object.”¹²

This depressing scene became weary reality for Julia the longer she lived in Alexandria and the longer the war progressed. Julia changed in many ways to cope with the constant hardship around her. Her faith became a more personal, internal journey than a simple daily obligation. She broke out of the traditional female sphere to perform any tasks required for the contrabands by working at all hours of the day or night. Like her fellow male advocates she demanded meetings with Generals and politicians to stubbornly advocate for freed slaves. She became hardened to death and suffering. While she never agreed with it, she even began to develop immunity to violence. Sadness did not affect her as it once had back in Rush, New York. In her diary, she acted as if she simply did not have for sorrow or grief because there was no use in lethargy when people needed her help.

Julia only stopped working if she was sick which was often due to her long hours and tireless work. One day in particular, however, she *did* stop to grieve. Along with the majority of the United States, on Saturday, April 15, 1865, Julia stopped for a short time in sheer disbelief and agony when she learned that the “President was shot last night at the Theater and died at 7.22 this morning!” Julia remembered the overwhelming sadness from everyone. “Every colored face is sad. ‘Uncle Sam’ is dead and they seem to know they have lost a friend.” She vividly described the capital city where every building was hastily draped in any type of black cloth to mourn. “It was a touching sight,” Julia admitted in her diary. When the President’s body was lying in state in the East Room of the White House, Julia “fell into line” to say goodbye. “The President looks very white but natural,” Julia remembered, as thousands of mourning Americans looked on his body. The funeral cortege which started retracing the steps Lincoln first took when coming to Washington was “a sad and mournful multitude. Probably 2/3 of the spectators were colored and they also occupied a place in the procession. The scenes of today I shall never forget.... [because] there lies the remains of a truly great man.”¹³

After the Civil War’s end, Julia never returned to her home in Rush, New York but rather stayed in Washington D.C. and continued the work she started years before. For the last thirty years of her life, Julia resided just a few blocks from the U.S. Patent Office where she was employed. She continued working with freedmen and the black community. She renewed her passion for woman’s suffrage by petitioning for the right to vote in 1869 and worked with Susan B. Anthony and many others. Her work during the war helped hundreds of contrabands through their own first step toward freedom, but Julia, too, until her dying day was on a journey, sent by God to seek freedom and justice for those who could not.¹⁴

References

¹ Julia Wilbur, January 1, 1862, Magill Library Special Collections Division, Haverford College, Haverford, PA.

² Ibid, September 5, 1862.

³ Ibid, September 18, 1862.

⁴ Ibid, September 27, 1862; Ibid, October 17, 1862.

⁵ Ibid, October 16, 1862; Ibid, October 22, 1862.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid; Ibid, Oct 23, 1862.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, October 24, 1862.

¹⁰ Ibid, October 25, 1862.

¹¹ Ibid, January 21, 1864; JGC Lee to Ferree, Superintendent of Contrabands, July 15, 1865, Entry 3853 Unregistered Letters Received Mar. 1863-Apr. 1866, Record Group 105 Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Records of the Alexandria, Virginia Field Office, NARA.

¹² Julia Wilbur, January 21, 1864, Haverford College; Wesley E. Pippenger, *Alexandria, Virginia Death Records, 1863-1868 (The Gladwin Record) and 1969-1896* (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books); G.W. Harbison, Superintendent Alexandria National Cemetery, to William Myers, Brevet Brigadier General and Depot Quartermaster, August 18, 1873, Entry 576 General Correspondence and Reports Relating to National and Post Cemeteries, Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NARA.

¹³ Julia Wilbur, April 15, 1865, Haverford College; Ibid, April 16, 1865; Ibid, April 18, 1865; Noah Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln’s Time* (New York: The Century Co., 1895), 266; David Brainerd Williamson, *Illustrated life, services, martyrdom, and funeral of Abraham Lincoln* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson & Brothers, 1865); Julia Wilbur, April 19, 1865, Haverford College; Ibid, April 20, 1865.

¹⁴ “Woman Suffrage in the District – Sable Sisters Demanding the Elective Franchise,” *New York Herald*, April 23, 1869; Ida Husted Harper, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony: including public addresses, her own letters and many from her contemporaries during fifty years* (The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1899); Obituary of Julia A. Wilbur, *Newark Daily Advocate*, July 14, 1895; Julia Wilbur Diary, Haverford College.