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A Soldier and his Nurse: The Star-Crossed Tragedy of Frank and Arabella Barlow

Jeffrey L. Lauck
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

This is not a love story ready-made for Hollywood. Rather, it is one more suited for a Shakespearean tragedy. Two newlyweds, on the day after their marriage, were separated by the call for troops in Mr. Lincoln's War. As was true of so many Civil War couples, only one would survive the war. While you may be thinking to yourself that you've heard this story before (and perhaps many of you have), the tale of these two star-crossed lovers does not fit the typical narrative behind the vacant chair. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Civil War couples

Disciplines

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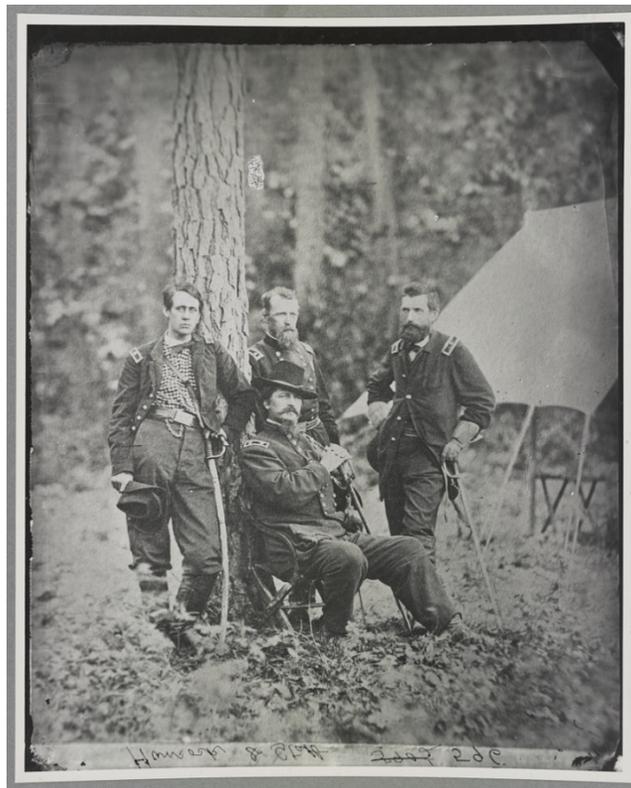
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Soldier and his Nurse: The Star-Crossed Tragedy of Frank and Arabella Barlow

February 8, 2016

By Jeff Lauck '18

This is not a love story ready-made for Hollywood. Rather, it is one more suited for a Shakespearean tragedy. Two newlyweds, on the day after their marriage, were separated by the call for troops in Mr. Lincoln's War. As was true of so many Civil War couples, only one would survive the war. While you may be thinking to yourself that you've heard this story before (and perhaps many of you have), the tale of these two star-crossed lovers does not fit the typical narrative behind the vacant chair.



Caption: General Francis Channing Barlow (left) with General Winfield Scott Hancock (seated) and his fellow II Corps division commanders. The photograph shows Barlow during the Overland Campaign in 1864, just after he returned to the service after recovering from his wounds at Gettysburg and just a few months before his wife died that summer. Photograph from the Library of Congress.

Francis Barlow and Arabella Griffith met in New York City shortly before the war. Francis, or Frank as his friends called him, graduated valedictorian of his class at Harvard before moving to New York to work as a lawyer and contributor for the *New York Tribune*. Arabella, nearly a decade older than Frank, moved to the city from rural New Jersey in 1846 to serve as a governess. She was not your average Victorian lady. Intelligent and bold, she soon affiliated herself with the high-class social circles of artists, politicians, and writers among New York elites. She even became good friends with George Templeton Strong, who described her as being “certainly the most brilliant, cultivated, easy, graceful, effective talker of womanhood.”

It is not entirely clear how the two lovers met. Richard Welch, Frank’s biographer, has suggested that the two met through up-and-coming artist Winslow Homer, a friend of Arabella’s and a distant cousin of Frank’s and brother of one of his Harvard classmates. Regardless, the two were married in St. Paul’s Chapel on April 20, 1861 – the day after Frank enlisted as a Private and the day before he would be shipped out to Fortress Monroe.

The following summer, Arabella followed her husband off to war by enlisting as a nurse in the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which her friend George Templeton Strong helped found. Arabella had hoped that this service would bring her closer to her soldier husband, but the nursing corps was typically kept far behind the army. That would change at Antietam, where the two were reunited under dire circumstances. Frank, a colonel by now, had led his brigade’s successful assault on the Sunken Road. He paid dearly, however, receiving an artillery shell fragment in the face and a grapeshot wound in the groin. Arabella found him in a military hospital and immediately took charge of his recovery.

Arabella nursed her beloved husband back to health, and Frank returned to the Army of the Potomac just in time for the Battle of Chancellorsville. At Gettysburg, the two were again reunited by way of the field hospital. On July 1st, Barlow was wounded and left for dead on a knoll that now bears his name. According to legend, Confederate General John B. Gordon found him and sent word through the lines to Arabella, who crossed into Confederate lines to once again treat her gravely wounded husband. Historians have long debated the accuracy of the Barlow-Gordon story, but the basic details are probably true. In an effort to keep her husband’s spirits up, Arabella took Frank on a tour of her aristocratic friends’ houses in the North, including that of Julia Ward Howe in Boston.

Despite the initial severity of Frank’s wounds, he returned to serve under Grant in the Overland Campaign. Arabella followed him to a post in Fredericksburg where she served under Clara Barton. She earned the nickname “The Raider” for her frequent missions through the Virginia countryside to obtain supplies for the hospital. She followed Frank and the Union Army south, serving at the Union supply depot at City Point while her husband served as a brevet major general in the Petersburg campaign. The two exchanged letters via couriers and ambulance drivers, but meetings were few and far between.

Not long after she arrived at City Point, Arabella contracted typhus. A concerned Frank sent her north to Washington to stay with friends and escape the hot, humid, petri dish of a Civil War hospital where she worked. At one point, she appeared to recover before relapsing into sickness once again. As he finished leading an assault at Deep Bottom on July 28, 1864, Frank received

word that his wife had died the previous day. He was given fifteen days leave to bury her in her hometown of Somerville, New Jersey, but the short furlough did little to calm his nerves. He was forced to take an extended leave of absence and even travelled abroad in an attempt to recover from his loss.

The irony was not lost on Frank that Arabella had saved him twice from almost certain death, yet it was she who eventually became the casualty of the war. Arabella's fate was not uncommon among Civil War nurses. No historian has offered a definitive number of female nurses who died in the service of their country; however, the hot, unsanitary cesspools of disease that were the pre-sterilization Civil War hospitals suggest a high mortality rate that could have exceeded well into the hundreds. As for Frank, he never forgot Arabella, even after marrying Ellen Shaw, the sister of the famed Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, in 1867. On his death bed, Frank was reported to have said: "The finest monument in this country would be built to commemorate the loyal women of the Civil War." Frank undoubtedly had his devoted first love in mind when he uttered those words. In 1915, Frank's wish was granted with the construction of the headquarters of the American Red Cross, which was dedicated as a memorial to those very women.

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