

Below are excerpts from *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* by John Fialka

"On a balmy May evening in 1862, a heavy rain beat a tattoo on the roof of the Hammond General Hospital in Beaufort, North Carolina, as nine women, all dressed in black, arrived in a small boat. Stark figures silhouetted against the muddy sky, they walked single file down a long wharf to the hospital, a rambling, three-story structure built on pilings over the Atlantic.

"Just three months earlier it had been the Atlantic Hotel, a swank, new summer resort catering to the families of rich Southern planters. Now, as the women neared the beach, they saw signs of its current distress. Debris from what had been a grand piano, bits of shattered chandeliers, pieces of broken furniture and shards of what had been the hotel's elegant dinnerware lay underneath the dock, rolling lazily back and forth in the surf.

"It had been one helluva party. A few weeks previously, the hotel was sacked in a midnight raid by the Union Army. A few days after the wine cellar had been drunk and the furniture had been thrown from the rooms and the tiers of porches that hung over the sea, the boats began to arrive with their sad cargo. Two hundred men in blood-soaked uniforms—Union casualties from multiple battles raging on the nearby Virginia peninsula—were carried in to mark the final stage of the transformation from a pleasure palace to a ruin filled with pain.

"Until the women arrived, it had been one of the Civil War's many horrible medical innovations—a do-it-yourself hospital with no nurses, no soap, no candles, no lamps and a few sticks of furniture. Placed in charge of all this was a "steward," a suspicious, illiterate, barefoot man, a woodcutter from Maine named "Kit" Condon. He tended to rule the place from his perch on a wheelbarrow near the kitchen door.

"Who were these women? some of the soldiers wondered. Widows, others concluded, more wives from the north seeking the remains of their husbands. The medical consequences of the war were now reaching a level of butchery that had not been seen in land warfare outside the Orient. By the time the shooting stopped, there would be 1,094,453 casualties, including 634,026 dead. At the outset of the war the carnage from mechanized weapons and more accurate artillery completely overwhelmed the slender medical capabilities of both the Union and the Confederacy.

"The army had renamed the Atlantic Hotel after Dr. George A. Hammond, a hardworking, innovative Baltimore doctor who was Lincoln's new surgeon general. He was struggling to reorganize the Army's medical bureau. This was the day that Kit and his scruffy crew—who were busy making bread on the dirty marble top of a broken billiard table they had dragged into the kitchen—discovered that their daily drill was about to change. One of Dr. Hammond's prescriptions was the introduction of Catholic nuns as nurses.

"These were no widows. They were Sister of Mercy from New York City, Irish women led by Mother Augustine MacKenna, who was educated in a hedge school and had run an infirmary and a home for homeless girls. An unusually tall, handsome woman, she would explain to people, "I am the daughter of an Irish giant." After surveying the filth in the hospital, she told Kit she was taking over and presented the Army with her list of demand, which included brooms, tubs, kitchen utensils, castile soap, cologne, dressing gowns, towels, sponges, starch, lamps, kerosene and better food.

"Neither Mr. Kit nor the Army liked the idea of being ordered around by these strange women, but an order from Washington soon followed, putting the sisters in charge of everything but the medical department. Then a steamer arrived from New York laden with the goods they demanded. Clearly, the Atlantic Hotel had now been taken in a surprise raid by the Sisters of Mercy.

"This was a novelty to the soldiers, who had been nursing each other, sort of. Some were Harvard men, members of the 45th Massachusetts Volunteers. They had made a dashing entrance with their crisp new blue uniforms, landing accompanied by one of the best bands in the Army. Then the Confederate artillery had dashed them into the mud. One of the hospital's patients, a sixteen-year-old private named Hiram Hubbard, was found screaming because his wool shirt had become encrusted into a festering back wound. His mates were trying to scrub it free using a rough towel soaked in cold water. Suddenly he felt a gentle hand take over, applying warm water and soap with a soft sponge. The shirt came off the wound. Private Hubbard stopped screaming, but his face was still pressed hard into the pillow of his bed.

"'Who is doing that?' came his muffled voice.

"'A Sister of Mercy,' she said as she dressed his back in soft, old linen.

"'What are you!' exclaimed the boy, turning, astonished to see a woman dressed in black with her face framed by a stiff white collar. She was Sister Mary Gertrude Ledwith. She had seen her fill of frightened, shattered young men while serving as a nurse in the Crimean War, but she patiently explained to him that a Mercy's job was to help those who suffer. The opposite poles of the emerging America stared at each other: the Harvard man, the immigrant Irish nun. Private Hubbard finally settled back on his bed, his pain eased. 'I don't care what you are,' he sighed, 'you are a mother to me.'

"More supplies appeared. Accumulating layers of filth were scrubbed from the walls and floors. A new doctor arrived. The food improved and meals were served on time. The Hammond had a number of black women, freed slaves, who had come to work at the hospital. To them this was an amazing phenomenon: women in strange uniforms ordering around the conquering Union soldiers! At night, when everyone else was asleep, the blacks held impromptu skits in the kitchen, mimicking the authority and the Irish accents of the Hammond's new masters as they issued cryptic commands to imaginary officers. They called them the North Ladies.

"Dr. Hammond sustained some political wounds from his bold effort to recruit more nuns for the hospitals. Army surgeons, who had often worked with them in hospitals before the war, seemed to prefer sisters. They were disciplined, organized and would calmly volunteer for the dirtiest, most difficult tasks.

