

# Elmina Spencer: Civil War Nurse

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## Mrs. R. H. Spencer.

“Of all the band of noble women who during the war gave their time and best labors with devotedness and singleness of purpose to the care of the suffering defenders of their country, few, perhaps, have been as efficient and useful in their chosen sphere as Mrs. Spencer.

That she left a home of quiet ease and comfort, and gave herself, with her whole soul, to the cause she loved, is not more than very many others have done, but she incited her husband to offer himself to his country, and gladly accompanied him, sharing all his privations, and creating for him, amid the rudest surroundings, home with all its comforts and enjoyments.

At the commencement of the war, Mrs. Spencer was living at Oswego, New York, which had been her residence for many years. Her husband, Captain R. H. Spencer, had been formerly commander of several of the finest vessels which sail from that port in the trade upon the upper lakes. But for some years he had remained on shore, and devoted himself to the occupation of teaching, in which he had a ver fine reputation. Mrs. Spencer was also a teacher, and both were connected with the public schools for which that city is celebrated.

Mr. Spencer was a member of that wing of the Democratic Party which opposed the war, and his age already exempted him from military duty. When, therefore, immediately after the battle of Antietam he announced to Mrs. Spencer that he had resolved to enlist in the Regiment then rapidly forming in that city, she knew well, as did all who knew him, that only an imperative sense of personal duty had led to the decision.

Oswego had to mourn the most irreparable losses in that battle. The flower of her young men had been cut down, and many homes made desolate. Mr. Spencer, like many others, felt impelled to add himself to the patriot ranks, and help to fit the gaps left by the fallen.

Mrs. Spencer, whose name and person had long been familiar to the sick and suffering at home, had often longed for the power of ministering to those who had taken their lives in their hands, and gone forth in the service of their country. And she now not only gave her husband the work, but resolved to aid him in it. She might not stand by his side, in the armed ranks, but there was, for her, service as arduous and important, for which she was peculiarly fitted, not only by the extreme kindness and benevolence of her nature, but by experience in the care of the sick.

When her husband had enlisted and was sworn into the service, she, too, took the oath to faithfully serve her country, and her place by his side.”

**Excerpt from *Woman's Work in the Civil War*, by Linus Pierpont Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan, 1867, pages 404-415.**

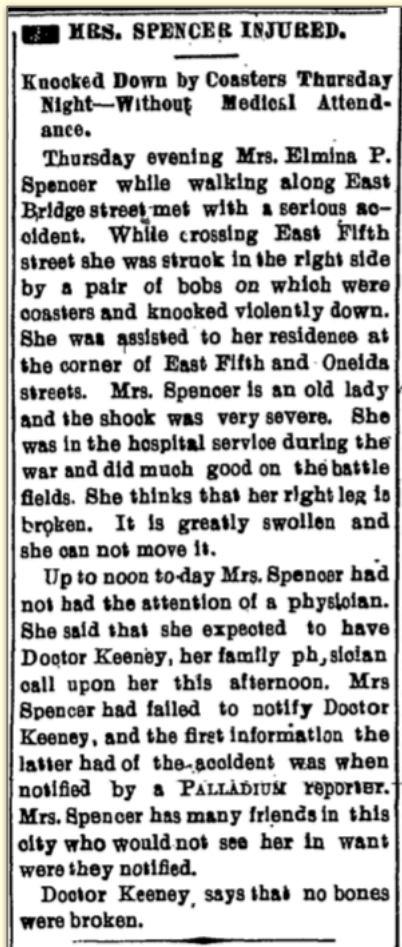


**Elmina Pheiades Keeler Spencer**

**Born: September 15, 1819**

**Died: December 29, 1912**

Photograph: Oswego County Historical Society.



The Oswego Daily  
Palladium, Saturday,  
January 12, 1895,  
page 8.

## MRS. SPENCER INJURED.

### Knocked Down by Coasters Thursday Night — Without Medical Attendance.

Thursday evening Mrs. Elmina P. Spencer while walking along East Bridge street met with a serious accident. While crossing East Fifth street she was struck in the right side by a pair of bobs on which were coasters and knocked violently down. She was assisted to her residence at the corner of East Fifth and Oneida streets. Mrs. Spencer is an old lady and the shock was very severe. She was in the hospital service during the war and did much good on the battle fields. She thinks that her right leg is broken. It is greatly swollen and she can not move it.

Up to noon to-day Mrs. Spencer had not had the attention of a physician. She said that she expected to have Doctor Keeney, her family physician call upon her this afternoon. Mrs. Spencer had failed to notify Doctor Keeney, and the first information the latter had of the accident was when notified by a PALLADIUM reporter. Mrs. Spencer has many friends in this city who would not see her in want were they notified.

Doctor Keeney says that no bones were broken.

Elmina Spencer, Image from *Woman's Work in the Civil War*, by Linus Pierpont Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan, 1867, pages 404-415.



# MRS. SPENCER IS DYING

**The Old Army Nurse Can Not  
Recover, It is Said.**

**Growing Weaker and is Liable to  
Die at Any Moment—Was Born  
in a Log House in Mexico More  
Than Ninety-three Years Ago—  
Her War Record.**

Dr. E. L. Hinman, who is attending Mrs. Elmina Keeler Spencer, the aged army nurse, whose leg was amputated yesterday in an attempt to save her life, said today that the old lady's condition is very low and that her death is expected at any moment.

The remarkable vitality of Mrs. Spencer has for years been a wonder to her friends and physicians who attended her. September 15th last Mrs. Spencer celebrated her ninety-third birthday, and now in her ninety-fourth year of her life to have one of her limbs amputated and then to come out of the operation as well as she did is another remarkable evidence of vitality. However, had the operation been delayed, or had it not been performed, Dr. Hinman is authority for the statement that she would have bled to death. The only chance of prolonging her life, therefore, was in the operation.

Oswego Palladium,  
November 14, 1912,  
page 8.

Mrs. Spencer was born in the town of Mexico September 15th, 1819. She first saw the light of day in a log cabin built from logs hewn in the virgin forest by her father, Darius Dunham Keeler, and a little party of French Canadians who had accompanied him into that region. Her mother was Arethia Powers, a native of Vermont. In this log cabin home, with its primitive surroundings, Mrs. Spencer spent the first six years of her life, and then with her parents moved to this city and settled near the mouth of the river where it empties into the lake and where were the homes of ship carpenters, fishermen and fur traders. Salmon fishing was at its height then, and while the forests furnished abundance of game, the river and lake yielded up the finest of fish.

From the age of six until ten, Mrs. Spencer attended the little public school in VanBuren street, where the First Presbyterian Church Society held its first meetings. Afterwards when the society built its first church in the West park, she was one of those who attended its Sunday school. After a time the elder Keeler went up the river, where Minetto now stands, and operated a sawmill, the family going with him and making their home near that place.

They kept in touch with the early life of this city and Mrs. Spencer frequently visited here. From the schools of her time, and from her mother, who had received an admirable training in her home among the White mountains, Mrs. Spencer received her education. At the age of twenty-one she married Robert Hamilton Spencer, whom she had known for several years and who was the son of an army officer stationed here, her husband being engaged in teaching school. Shortly after their marriage, Mr. Spencer and his bride moved to Fulton, where they were engaged teaching school, remaining there three years and then coming back to this city.

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At the age of forty-two Mrs. Spencer's husband enlisted in the 147th New York Volunteers. The late Dr. A. S. Coe was regimental surgeon and Mrs. Spencer went out in the regiment as a regularly appointed Army nurse. During the long years of the Civil War Mrs. Spencer nursed many a fever-racked and wounded boy who went to the front to help preserve the Union. She was stationed at the general hospitals at Arlington Heights and in Washington when not with the regiment in the field. At Fredericksburg she did a noble work in the field, going among the dying and the wounded, attending to their most pressing needs and they whispered confidences and messages for loved ones at home, whom they would never see again in this life. The same service was hers at the battle of the Wilderness, White House Landing and Gettysburg, in all of which the Union's loss was heavy.

In a little white church at Gettysburg, or a short distance from the scene of battle, along the old Baltimore turnpike, on the second day of the fight, where Mrs. Spencer had opened a field hospital, there were 600 wounded from both sides to look after, but many died before they received attention. Thus she worked until the close of the war, being complimented by General U. S. Grant and others for her heroic work.

Some years ago, when it was decided

to place on the main staircase of the Capitol in Albany the head and bust of a typical Army nurse, Mrs. Spencer was asked and consented to be the subject of the sketch, which many thousand visitors have seen. A member of Post O'Brien, G. A. R., Mrs. Spencer has been prominent in years past at gatherings and meetings. The injury to her leg, which developed into gangrene, was caused by being struck with canister shot while on the field of battle. During her long illness she has been cared for by the Woman's Relief Corps of the Post. There are no immediate members of her family living.

Oswego Palladium, November 14, 1912, page 8.

White House Landing, Pamunkey River, Virginia, c. 1863, glass negative; Library of Congress ppmsca.33269; This work is in the public domain in the United States because it was published or registered with the US Copyright Office before January 1, 1923.



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**Mexico  
Independent,  
June 15,  
1898, page 4.**

—The Albany Evening Journal of June 6th contains the portrait of Mrs. Elmina P. Spencer of Oswego and an article recounting the services she rendered her country as an army nurse during the civil war. The State department of public works has decided to confer upon her the distinction of having her portrait, carved in stone, adorn the western staircase in the capitol at Albany.

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C. N. A.

**Geneva Daily Times,  
May 23, 1899, page 1.**

**An Army Nurse Honored.**  
ALBANY, May 23.—State Superintendent of Public Buildings Bender awarded the contract for carving the head of Mrs. Elmina B. Spencer, the army nurse of Oswego, who served in the war of the rebellion with a New York state regiment, of which State Excise Commissioner Henry H. Lyman was adjutant, who was wounded in battle, and who has been honored on several occasions by the G. A. R. Her head will be carved between those of Molly Pitcher of Revolutionary fame, and Clara Barton, the head of the Red Cross movement, by Manly M. Horton of this city.

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**The Daily Palladium, May 24, 1899, page 3.**

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### **For Further Research and Discussion:**

1. How many women became nurses during the Civil War?
2. Describe the sanitary conditions for medical procedures during the Civil War?
3. How did food and other supplies get to the soldiers?
4. Locate letters or journal entries from soldiers that describe their appreciation for Mrs. Spencer's attention to their needs. What do they have in common?
5. Who were some of the other nurses during the Civil War?