Cordelia Harvey, Civil War Heroine:

A Journey from Governor's Widow to "Wisconsin's Angel"

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Though she is little-known outside of Wisconsin, Cordelia Harvey is one of the most heroic women of the Civil War. Upon being appointed as Wisconsin’s state sanitary agent, she undertook the difficult task of taking care of the grievously wounded soldiers. Cordelia triumphed over her personal tragedies by serving her fellow Wisconsinites during this heartbreaking period in America’s history. She became known as “The Nightingale of Wisconsin” — a title given to her after she visited 1,500 men in a Tennessee hospital. Over a span of 18 years, Cordelia experienced the loss of her mother, daughter, and husband. Instead of letting this series of tragedies break her, she overcame her sorrow to serve others with genuine compassion. Upon hearing of her husband’s death, rather than withdrawing into herself with grief, she continued alone their mission of kindness toward wounded soldiers. By the end of her visits with President Lincoln, she was able to convince him to open a hospital in Wisconsin for wounded soldiers. Building a hospital may not be as “dramatic as shouldering a musket, [but] Cordelia’s role [in the Civil War] was every bit as important.”¹ The Harvey Hospital, named

¹ Anderson, More Than Petticoats: Remarkable Wisconsin Women, 28.
after Cordelia’s late husband, served Wisconsin soldiers until the end of the war, after which it became a home for soldiers’ orphans.

Cordelia Perrine was born in 1824 to John Perrine and Mary Hibbard. Her faith was an important part of her life, as she once said, “Next to love of God is love of country.”

When Cordelia was sixteen, the Perrine family moved from New York to Kenosha, Wisconsin. There she worked as a schoolteacher, teaching the younger students (ages 10 and under) at a school called Southport Academy. One of her students described her “as sometimes behaving like a teenager and at other times acting like a grown up: ‘At recess time she would … be just like one of the big girls; but when school called … she became at once the schoolmistress in full control.’”

This adaptable personality might have helped Cordelia cope with the many challenges she faced during her life.

The principal at Southport Academy was Louis Harvey. He was four years older than Cordelia and taught the older students. In 1844 Cordelia’s mother died. Being the oldest sibling in the family, Cordelia “took over her mother’s domestic responsibilities on the farm.” Louis fell in love with the young schoolteacher and the couple married in 1847. Following their wedding they moved to Clinton Junction, where Louis started his own general store. They had a daughter in 1848, whom they named Mary. Tragically, Mary died of scarlet fever when she was only four years old. There is no doubt that this had a lasting impact on Cordelia, particularly

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because of her love for all children. Louis and Cordelia entered the untold suffering of a parent who loses a child.

In the year 1851, Cordelia and Louis decided to move to the town of Shopiere, Wisconsin. The Harveys were then known to have rather serious personalities, although they became a positive influence in their community. Surely this more serious nature could be attributed to the loss of their beloved child. Louis read several newspapers a day, becoming increasingly interested in politics. Before moving to Shopiere, he “was elected to the second Constitutional Convention of the State… he was a highly influential member.” Although he was one of the youngest members there, Louis was a skilled speaker, winning the admiration of many— “From county delegate to state senator was but a step for a man as brilliant as Louis Harvey.” In 1852, he was elected a state senator and served until 1859. Upon Louis being elected as Wisconsin’s Secretary of State in 1859, he and Cordelia moved to the state capital of Madison. Louis was elected Wisconsin’s 7th governor in the year 1861 and took office in January 1862.

Louis’ new job as state governor was not easy. The United States was undergoing one of its greatest trials: The Civil War. The war had been going on already for about 9 months, and Wisconsin, like many other states, had major losses of soldiers. Young Governor Harvey was liked by most Wisconsin citizens, and “gained a reputation as being a friend of Wisconsin

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6 Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; Milwaukee Journal; Shopiere, WI; January 17, 1926; viewed online at https://www.wisconsinhistory.org on January 9, 2019.
soldiers. As the new governor, one of the first things he did was to ask the state legislature to provide more money for [soldiers’ pay] on the battlefield and for their families at home.”

Cordelia encouraged her husband in these generous efforts. Some soldiers named themselves after the governor, calling themselves the “Harvey Zouaves.” Cordelia herself “presented a bible and testament to each private of the Harvey Zouaves.” In April of 1862, Governor Harvey received news that four Wisconsin regiments had suffered terrible losses in the Battle of Shiloh. He left to go visit the Wisconsin soldiers on April 10th, 1862. On April 17th, he arrived in Tennessee and wrote Cordelia a letter, saying, “Thank God for the impulse which brought me here. I am doing a good work.” He recalled that the Wisconsin soldiers “appeared cheerful amid their sufferings, grateful for care and kindness shown them, and much cheered by… the encouraging words we could give them.” Mr. Bundy, a fellow Wisconsinite who accompanied Governor Harvey on the visit, said Louis “had been sleeplessly untiring in his labors.” By encouraging the men and “carrying life to others, [Louis fell] … a victim to death, himself.” On April 19, 1862, Governor Harvey was boarding a boat in the rain and slipped, falling into the Tennessee River, where he drowned. He was only 41 years old. Upon his death, Colonel John Hancock, brother of the famous General Winfield Scott Hancock, stated: “In this bereavement, we feel, individually, that we have suffered a loss of no ordinary magnitude.”

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7 Kann, Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel, 13-14.
8 Kann, Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel, 15.
9 Quiner, Quiner Scrapbooks: Correspondence of the Wisconsin Volunteers, 37.
10 Kann, Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel, 18.
11 News from the Battle—Letter from Governor Harvey, 5.
12 Particulars Relative to the Death of Governor Harvey, 8.
13 Governor Harvey’s Visit to Our Soldiers, 9.
Cordelia must have sensed her husband’s fate—before “anyone could tell her the news, she had read it on the faces surrounding her: Louis, her husband, was dead.”15 Louis’ good friend, Augustus Gaylord and Cordelia’s brother-in-law, Nathaniel Sawyer, went to tell her the news. As soon as she saw them, Cordelia demanded, “Tell me if he is dead!’ Before [they could answer], Cordelia fainted. When she awoke, she was taken home.”16

They held a large funeral for Governor Harvey in Madison. Wisconsin’s governor “died in the service of his country, and having been universally mourned by his people.”17 Wisconsin’s Chief Justice and Secretary of State, as well as many brokenhearted Wisconsinites, attended his funeral.18 Afterward, Cordelia returned to her home in Shopiere. At the end of the summer, she was asked by the new Governor Salomon to be Wisconsin’s new sanitary agent during the War. Cordelia agreed, and was assigned to making sure that the wounded soldiers were treated well.

Cordelia invested herself whole-heartedly in her new assignment. She traveled down the Mississippi River, visiting field hospitals in “St. Louis, Cape Girardeau, Ironton, and Cairo.”19 While she was there, she noticed how horrible the conditions were for the ill and wounded soldiers. The rooms were “illy-ventilated, hot, unclean, infected… [and] wretched.”20 Their illnesses included “[i]ntermittent fever, debility, rheumatism… [and] typhoid.”21 She worked

16 Kann, Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel, 21.
17 Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; Wisconsin State Journal; Madison, WI; April 4, 1862; viewed online at https://www.wisconsinhistory.org on January 9, 2019.
18 In Memory of Governor Louis P. Harvey, 3.
19 Kann, Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel, 29.
20 Harvey, A Wisconsin Woman’s Picture of President Lincoln, 3.
21 Wisconsin Historical Society, Cordelia Harvey, List of Sick and Wounded Soldiers.
herself so hard that she quickly “became ill and was forced to go north in order to recover.”

After her illness, she determined that she was cured due to the wonderful northern air. Her successful recovery became her inspiration for building a hospital in Wisconsin for the soldiers.

Cordelia soon discovered that the only way to get her hospital was to go to the president directly. With her typical humility and determination, she describes how she “entered the White House, not with fear and trembling, but strong and self-possessed, fully conscious of the righteousness of [her] mission. [She] was received without delay.” Her desired response would not come as quickly.

President Lincoln was not convinced that northern hospitals were necessary. He thought that if Wisconsin soldiers were sent north to recover, they would desert — a reasonable argument. Cordelia believed the president was misjudging the soldiers’ loyalty. Her argument was simple: “Dead men cannot fight… and they may not desert.” When Cordelia entered his office one morning, she asked him if he had made his decision yet. He answered: “No, but I believe this idea of northern hospitals is a great humbug, and I am tired of hearing about it.”

Seeing how irritated the president was, Cordelia swiftly stated her request: “I come to plead for the lives of those who were the first to hasten to the support of this government, who helped to place you where you are, because they trusted you. Men who have done all they could… they expect to sacrifice their lives for their country.”

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23 Harvey, *A Wisconsin Woman’s Picture of President Lincoln*, 9.
24 Ibid., 11.
25 Ibid., 16.
26 Ibid., 16.
simply said, “You assume to know more than I do.” Cordelia almost cried, thinking she might have lost her argument. She replied that she meant no disrespect, that she came to him only with the knowledge of the quality of the southern hospitals. Cordelia said, “if you will grant my petition you will be glad as long as you live.” Abraham looked up at her with such a sorrowful look, one she said she would never forget, and said, “I never shall be glad anymore.” There is no doubt that Lincoln had his own personal tragedies, plus the weight of the Civil War, on his shoulders. He ended their meeting, asking her to return the next morning.

When Cordelia came back the next day, she was left waiting. After a long time, Lincoln came out, saying, “My dear Madam, I am very sorry to have kept you waiting ... I only wish to tell you that an order...granting a hospital in your state has been issued.” These words made Cordelia weep for joy. There would be a new military hospital in Wisconsin! Lincoln wrote to Edwin Stanton, his Secretary of War, saying “Mrs. Harvey wishes the Hospital to be named for her late husband...” Cordelia was issued a list of supplies, with “dried apples, crackers, corn starch, pillow cases” and much more. All her persistence had finally paid off.

The Harvey United States Army General Hospital was unlike any other war hospital at that time. Most Civil War doctors were not properly trained, resulting in horrible sanitary conditions. Due to the “sheer magnitude of patients...[surgeons were not] able to wash their hands or instruments until the end of the day.” Designed to hold 400 men, Harvey Hospital

27 Harvey, A Wisconsin Woman’s Picture of President Lincoln, 17.
28 Ibid., 19.
29 Ibid., 19.
30 Ibid., 20.
31 Lincoln, Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 437.
32 Wisconsin Historical Society, Unknown, List of Cordelia Harvey Supplies, Image #75359.
33 Stika, When Lincoln Met Wisconsin’s Nightingale, 7.
became “a convalescence hospital for the wounded men who could withstand the journey to a northern hospital.”\textsuperscript{34} It was reported that in both “the Camp Dennison and Harvey hospitals the fatality of…diseases was less than in any of the other hospitals in the Central region.”\textsuperscript{35} Cordelia ensured that the wounded soldiers came home to a level of care that exceeded the southern hospitals.

When the Civil War had ended, Harvey Hospital continued on a different mission. It “became the Soldier’s Orphans Home with Mrs. Harvey its first superintendent. More than 80 orphans were taken care of.”\textsuperscript{36} It was opened in “January 1866, and the state took charge six months later, with eighty-four children in residence.”\textsuperscript{37} Once she knew the orphans were in good hands, Cordelia retired as superintendent. Her health was failing, most likely as a result of overwork. She moved to Buffalo, New York, where she eventually married Albert Chester. When Albert died in 1892, Cordelia “returned to Wisconsin to live with her sister…She died at [her sister’s] home on February 27, 1895, at the age of seventy-two.”\textsuperscript{38} Wisconsin’s Angel had returned to her heavenly home.

Cordelia was admired by many a Wisconsinite, earning the title of “The Nightingale of Wisconsin.”\textsuperscript{39} She was a gritty, determined pioneer woman who endured immense heartbreak. She used this experience of working through her own personal tragedies and triumphed by

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{35} United States Surgeon-General's Office, \textit{The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion}, 16.
\textsuperscript{36} Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; Wisconsin State Journal; Madison, WI; May 25, 1924; viewed online at https://www.wisconsinhistory.org on January 9, 2019.
\textsuperscript{37} Larson, \textit{Wisconsin and the Civil War}, 140.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{39} Kann, \textit{Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel}, 42.
helping to alleviate the suffering of those who were experiencing similar loss in their own lives, such as wounded soldiers and orphans. Though she accomplished many great things in her lifetime, she remained humble, stating that she was “simply doing [her] duty.”\(^{40}\) Being a woman of faith, Cordelia once said, “[s]urely my Lord and Father has watchful care over me.”\(^{41}\) Her virtues of “openness and honesty … [were surely] her strong suits…Her goal was to show that a choice was in the best interest of everyone concerned. She used neither coercion nor force to persuade, but gentle kindness.”\(^{42}\) Cordelia Harvey proved that a person can triumph over tragedy by clinging to genuine humility, compassion and faith.

\(^{40}\) Kann, *Cordelia Harvey: Civil War Angel*, 2.
\(^{41}\) Wisconsin Historical Society, Cordelia Harvey, *Cordelia Harvey Letter to Governor Salomon*. Image #75360.
\(^{42}\) Stika, *When Lincoln Met Wisconsin’s Nightingale*, 36.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

*Governor Harvey’s Visit to Our Soldiers.* Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; *Wisconsin State Journal*; Madison, WI; 1862; viewed online at [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA1176](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA1176). This article contained a quote about Governor Harvey that may bring tears to the reader’s eyes.


This book is a written copy of a lecture Cordelia did at the end of the Civil War. The manuscript describes her visits with President Lincoln in detail. It is perhaps one of the most helpful resources I used, as it is all written in Cordelia’s own words.

*In Memory of Governor Louis P. Harvey.* Madison, WI; 1862; viewed online at [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA1098](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA1098) on 26 March 2019.

This was the funeral pamphlet which they handed out at Governor Harvey’s funeral. It listed some of the more distinguished guests who attended.

Letter from Lt. Col. Hancock of the 14th regiment relative to the discovery of the remains of Gov. Harvey. Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; *Wisconsin State Journal*; Madison, WI; 1862; viewed online at [www.wisconsinhistory.org](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org) on 26 October 2018.

Colonel Hancock’s letter spoke of the great loss the military felt at the death of Governor Harvey. Reading this letter was beneficial in learning how commanders in the army felt about Governor Harvey.


President Lincoln wrote a card to his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, regarding the naming of Cordelia’s hospital.


This newspaper article contained a letter written by Governor Harvey himself while he was on the battlefields.

*Particulars Relative to the Death of Governor Harvey.* Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles, Wisconsin State Journal, 1862; viewed online at [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA1175](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA1175) on 26 March 2019.

This article contained the testament of man who accompanied Governor Harvey on his visit to the battlefields.
This is a first-hand record of the war written by the newspaperman, Edwin Quiner, who briefly mentioned Cordelia handing out Bibles to the privates.

This is book from the US Government Printing Office, which contained some information about the Harvey Hospital.

This letter contained one of my favorite quotes from Cordelia—the one about her being sure that her Heavenly Father was taking care of her.

This manuscript was beneficial to see Cordelia herself list the soldiers and their ailments.

This list included all the basic necessities issued to Cordelia for her hospital.

Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; *Wisconsin State Journal*; Madison, WI; April 4, 1862; viewed online at www.wisconsinhistory.org on January 9, 2019.
This article was called “Incidents in the Early Life of Governor Harvey.” In it, the author discussed why Louis was such a respected man.

**Secondary Sources**

This article was extremely valuable in the search for more details about Cordelia’s life. The author also included some interesting photos, such as one of Governor Harvey and Civil War soldiers outside of a hospital.

This book included quite a few Wisconsin heroines, including a chapter on Cordelia. It is certainly a valuable source—though the chapter is short, it included many important facts about
Cordelia. *More Than Petticoats* also had one of my favorite quotes about Cordelia: “Though not as dramatic as shouldering a musket, Cordelia’s role [in the War] was every bit as important” (Page 28).


This chapter book was intended for younger readers, yet it was one of my more helpful sources. It was the first book I read about Cordelia, and convinced me that her life would be a perfect topic for a historical research paper. The author did a wonderful job telling about Cordelia’s life story in a simple way that is easy for anyone to understand.


This book had some helpful information about the Harvey hospital, the Orphan’s Home, and Cordelia’s life after the war.

**Love, William De Loss. *Wisconsin in The War of The Rebellion; A History Of All Regiments And Batteries The State Has Sent To The Field, And Deeds Of Her Citizens, Governors And Other Military Officers, And State And National Legislators To Suppress The Rebellion.* Chicago, IL: Church and Goodman, 1866; viewed online at archive.org/details/cu31924095623637/page/432 on 26 March 2019.**

William De Loss wrote this book in 1866. I used it to find a quote about Governor Harvey and his amazing speaking skills.


Published in 2017, this is a newer book, but contained a worthy quote describing Cordelia’s noble personality.

**Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; *Milwaukee Journal;* Shopiere, WI; January 17, 1926; viewed online at www.wisconsinhistory.org on January 9, 2019.**

This newspaper article, titled “Harvey Home is Landmark” was interesting—in it, they talked about Mr. and Mrs. Harvey’s first years together and their home at Shopiere.

**Wisconsin Historical Society. Wisconsin Local History & Biography Articles; *Wisconsin State Journal;* Madison, WI; May 25, 1924; viewed online at www.wisconsinhistory.org on January 9, 2019.**

This article is called “Widow of Governor Harvey, Drowned on Relief Journey, Founded First Orphanage.” It was rather short, but helpful because it discussed the history of the Harvey hospital/orphanage.