

Capt. Sally Tompkins: Confederate Cavalry Officer, Unassigned

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Capt. Sally Louisa Tompkins (1833-1916), shown in Figure 1, is well known among Confederate postal historians. She is said to be the only woman to receive a commission from the Confederate Army and is presumed by many to be America's first female army officer, although both assertions are subject to debate.

The former claim does not count women who served while masquerading as men, which happened more than you might imagine.

So, is this the story of a woman galloping along with the men, sword raised, at the front of a cavalry charge? No, it is not. So why was this tiny woman (five feet tall) commissioned a cavalry officer?

Capt. Sally was the Southern counterpart to the North's Clara Barton, the pioneering Civil War nurse who later founded the American Red Cross. Sally's story is widely known across the South, especially in Richmond, where she opened a hospital to tend to wounded Confederate soldiers. She was variously called the "Angel of the Confederacy" and "the Little Lady with the Milk-White Hands."

On September 9, 1861, President Jefferson Davis signed a commission giving Sally Louisa Tompkins the rank of captain. The original commission, written on Confederate War Department letterhead, is in the American Civil War Museum in Richmond. It is signed by L.P. (Leroy Pope) Walker, the first Confederate Secretary of War and states:

Sir (printed):

You are duly informed that the President has appointed you Captain.

The printed commission form bore the salutation of "Sir" and, indeed, Sally was sometimes addressed as "Sir" by her patients. Some also observed that she rarely smiled.

At the bottom of the commission was later written and signed:

I accepted the above commission as Captain in the C.S.A., when it was issued. But I would not allow my name to be placed upon the pay roll of the camp.
Sally L. Tompkins



Figure 1: A Sally Louisa Tompkins photograph from the Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia.

The conferred military commission was used to circumvent regulations that required hospitals to be run by military personnel only, and that hospital directors must hold a rank of captain or higher. Earlier that month, President Davis had ordered that private hospitals be closed.

When that directive was enacted, Sally immediately sought an audience with President Davis to present her case for keeping her hospital open. When President Davis declared that he would give her a military commission, it is said that she evoked a rare smile.

After being commissioned, Capt. Sally was able to run her hospital with the cooperation of the military.

Although the hospital was mostly funded by her sizeable inheritance, she also accepted donations from patriotic and philanthropic sources such as churches, as evidenced by her thanks in various editions of the *Richmond Dispatch*.

Sally's hospital reportedly had the lowest death rate of any Civil War hospital, North or South. Quoted statistics are that of more than 1,330 patients (numbers vary only slightly according to the source used), there were only 73 deaths throughout the war. That translates to a success rate of nearly 95 percent. This feat is more remarkable in that it is said they sent her the most difficult cases.

The hospital was officially named Robertson Hospital, as shown in Figure 2, although it was more commonly referred to as Capt. Sally's Hospital.

The facility in Figure 3, from the Library of Congress, is identified as Richmond City Hospital, another major Confederate hospital from the Civil War period.

Judge John Robertson was a good friend of Sally's late father. Robertson and his family chose to leave Richmond and seek refuge on a remote farm for the duration of the war. Because his home was vacant; he agreed to let 27-year old Sally use it as a hospital during the family's absence. Thus, it became Robertson Hospital, located at Third and Main Streets in Richmond, Virginia, as shown on the commemorating plaque situated high on a wall of the building now occupying that corner (Figure 4). The inscription erroneously states the dates of operation as 1862-65; it should be 1861-65.

The government provided several doctors to help her, including Dr. Alexander Yelverton Peyron Garnett (1820-1888), her head surgeon, as well as furnishing needed food and supplies. Garnett also served Gen. Robert E. Lee and his family during the war, as well as the families of other Confederate generals and members of the Confederate Congress and cabinet.

Garnett and Tompkins did not get along, as Garnett was unwilling to yield to her rank and authority. Other doctors also made things difficult, resisting her management. But the soldiers adored her. The patients had clean clothes and good food, as well as competent and compassionate care.

Virginia Commonwealth University and the American Civil War Museum developed a database from the carefully-kept Robertson Hospital Register, an 84-page handwritten logbook of patients admitted between August 3, 1861, and April 2, 1865. There are 1,329 entries in the register, each assigned a case number. Each entry contained the following information on the patient: case number, rank, name,



Figure 2: A drawing of Robertson Hospital done for the Civil War Centennial in the 1960s and based on conjecture.



Figure 3: Richmond City Hospital during the Civil War. (Library of Congress)

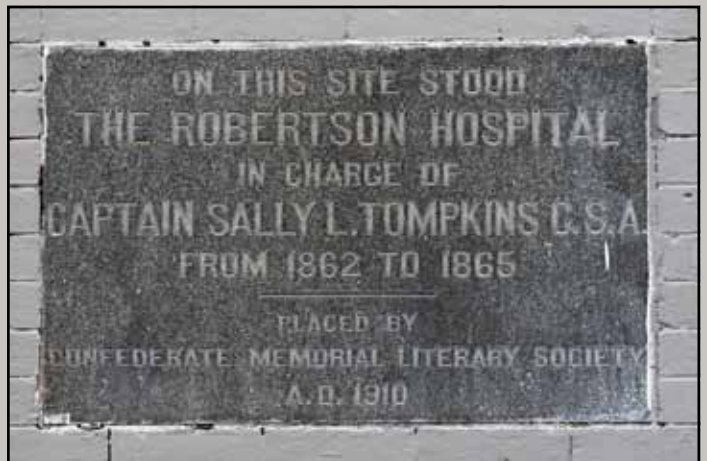


Figure 4: The plaque commemorating Robertson Hospital at the corner of Third and Main Streets, Richmond. It incorrectly dates the hospital to 1862 (correctly 1861).

company, regiment, captain's name, residence, date admitted, disease, and date discharged. Not every entry includes data for every category. All fields are indexed and searchable. The register is housed at the American Civil War Museum. The name at the top of the first page of the register is Captain Sally's, written in her distinctive hand.

In 2016, in Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Sale 1125, was offered lot 985, purported to be the only

cover in private hands addressed to Sally Tompkins using her rank of captain (Figure 5). It sold for \$1,900 plus a buyer premium of 15 percent. Since it referred to Sally by her military rank on the address panel, the hammer price was predictably much higher than for an ordinary cover.

I owned the cover in Figure 6 twice, once as a collector in the late 1960s and again as a dealer about 10 years ago. A common Confederate Type II engraved stamp franks the cover, but the value is all in the address to “Miss Sallie Tompkins, Care Dr. A.Y.P. Garnett, Robertson Hospital, Richmond Va.”

Note that despite Capt. Sally establishing and being in charge of Robertson Hospital, she was still addressed in care of her nemesis, who was presumed to be in command. The cover is used with a manuscript postmark of Kittrell’s Springs, North Carolina.

Kittrell’s Springs was a health resort and recreational center in the 19th century and site of the state’s first Confederate General Hospital. The conversion of the resort to General Hospital Number One was first announced in the *Raleigh Daily Confederate* on June 18, 1864:

This popular place of summer resort is now open for the reception of our sick and wounded soldiers—as we have turned it over to the government for their benefit.

New Sally Tompkins Find

Fast forward to summer 2019; a vest-pocket dealer offered me an unusual lot he had been saving for me. It mostly consists of antebellum and postbellum covers addressed to either Sally Tompkins or her sister, Maria Mason Tompkins.

One cover, franked with a three-cent 1851 stamp tied by a Hot Springs (Bath County), Virginia, postmark was addressed to “Miss Maria M. Tompkins or Miss Sally Tompkins, White Sulphur Springs (now West Virginia).” The towns are about 37 miles apart.

Inside the cover was an undated letter addressed to “My dearest Wily” and signed Sally. The dealer thought it was written by Sally Tompkins (and thus valuable), but it made no sense to me that it could be addressed both to and by Sally Tompkins. I deduced it was a different Sally writing to one of the Tompkins sisters. I doubt this cover and letter belong together, as the handwriting does not appear to be a match to me, although I am not a handwriting expert. In the letter Sally, the signer, also says, “...kiss Sally for me.” There were obviously two different women named Sally.

But the cover gave me pause in another way. I attempted to find a sample of Sally’s handwriting online or in the books on Civil War autographs that I have in my library. It was not easy. I found absolutely none for



Figure 5: Purported to be the only cover in private hands addressed to Sally Tompkins using her proper rank of captain.



Figure 6: A CSA 10-cent engraved Type II tied by a manuscript cancel of ‘Kittrells, NC,’ on a tiny homemade cover to ‘Miss Sallie Tompkins, Care Dr. A.Y.P. Garnett, Robertson Hospital, Richmond, Virginia.’

sale, nor any track record of past sales, indicating that her signature must be challenging to acquire.

The best example I could find was the signed note in her hand on the bottom of her military commission. It was a good comparison.

On the back flaps of the tiny cover and inside the envelope are doodles of S.L.T. (top inside) and M.M.T. in the small cramped hand of Sally Louisa Tompkins, where she repetitively wrote the initials of both sisters. The front and back of the cover are shown as Figures 7a, 7b, and 7c; the letter as Figure 7d.

An email exchange and a phone conversation with old friend John Reznikoff of University Archives confirmed my instincts. He agreed that the letter was not from “our” Sally, but he felt the doodles on the back flap and inside of the cover were in Sally Tompkin’s hand.

John Reznikoff is a well-known authority for his work as a document examiner and an expert witness in autograph and manuscript authentication, arguably the most heralded of any autograph expert alive today, following in the footsteps of the late Charles Hamilton.



Figure 7a: An antebellum cover franked with a three-cent 1851 issue tied by a Hot Springs, Va., CDS, addressed to sisters Maria M. Tompkins and Sally Tompkins.



Figure 7b: The top back flap notation in the hand of Sally Tompkins.

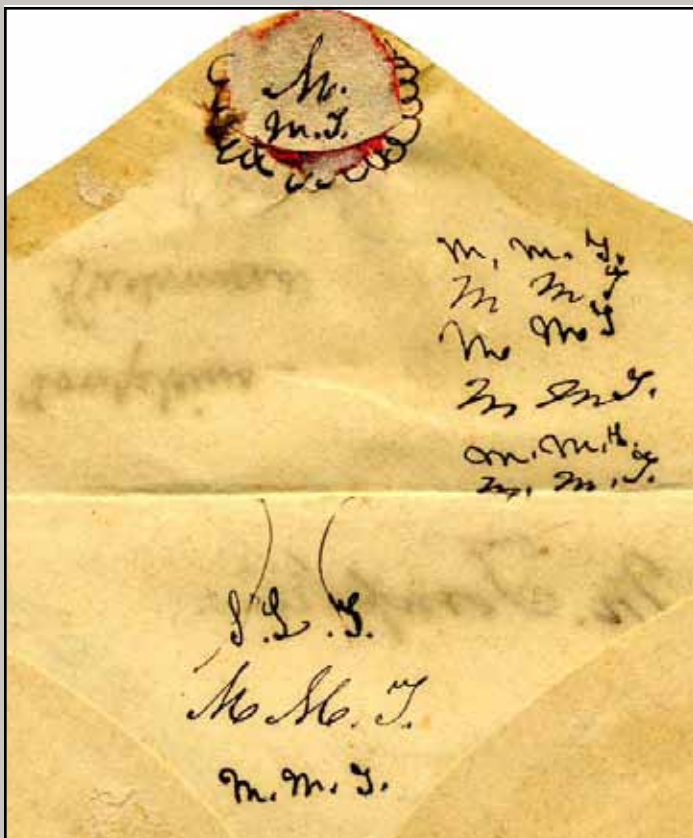


Figure 7c: 'S.L.T.' initials of Sally Louisa Tompkins in her cramping handwriting, as well as her sister's initials, also in Sally's hand.

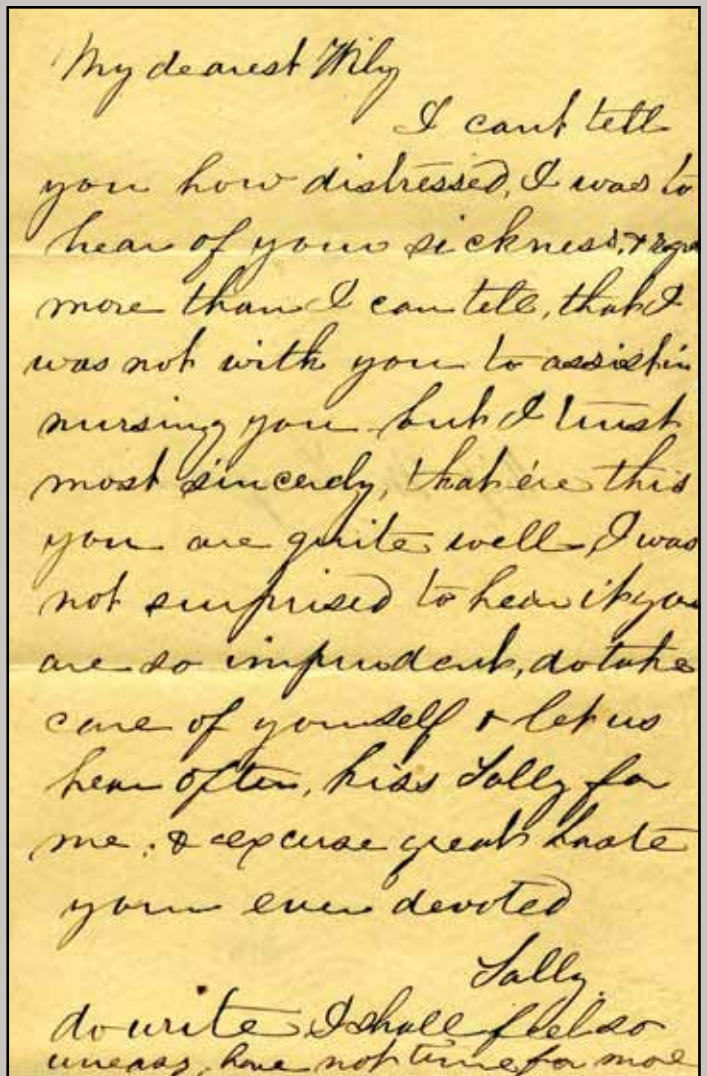


Figure 7d: A letter erroneously identified as from Sally Tompkins, enclosed in the cover in Figure 7a.

I was hopeful that perhaps the handful of other covers in the lot might yield other examples of Sally's hand, but it was not to be. Nonetheless, it is a nice lot of associated covers addressed to her or her sister before and after the war. With the lot were Richmond newspaper clippings touting Captain Sally and her hospital, probably from the era of the Civil War centennial. An assortment of items from the Tompkins find is illustrated in Figure 8.

Conflicting Information

Research often provides a series of conflicting information. The 1860 federal census shows Sally as 31 years old and her sister, Maria M. Tompkins, as 27 or 29 years old—younger than Sally. It is unclear whether the last digit is a 7 or a poorly formed 9.


Other sources indicate an older Maria born in 1831 and Sally in 1833, including on her gravestone. What is certain is that Maria died at a young age in 1864. I could not determine of what she died.

THE ONLY WOMAN TO RECEIVE A COMMISSION FROM THE CONFEDERATE ARMY...

CAPTAIN SALLY TOMPKINS OPERATED A PRIVATE HOSPITAL IN RICHMOND TO TAKE CARE OF BATTLE CASUALTIES. IN ORDER TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR HER TO CONTINUE HER WORK OF MERCY WITH GOVERNMENT SUPERVISION, PRESIDENT JEFFERSON DAVIS HAD HER COMMISSIONED CAPTAIN OF CAVALRY, UNASSIGNED...



Need of Miss S. L. Tompkins \$100.00
on acct of house rent
Nov 20. 67. D. L. Baker
for Exp.



Captain Sally Tompkins Served Richmond in '61

At Third and Main, Sally Tompkins set up a hospital to take care of the Confederate wounded. However, the government could only maintain military hospitals and "Aunt Sally's" was threatened with closing. To comply with the law, she was commissioned Captain of Cavalry and continued her work in Richmond.




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Miss Sally Tompkins
Box No. 100
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Va.



Figure 8: An assortment of items from the Tompkins find.

Another discrepancy I find particularly annoying are sources that state Robertson Hospital did not open until 1862 and speculating why President Davis commissioned her a year earlier.

It is quite clear from the local Richmond newspapers, from Mary Chestnut's diary entries, from President Davis' commission of Captain Sally, and from the historic hospital register itself, that Robertson Hospital was open at least by August 3, 1861, not long after the Battle of First Manassas (Bull Run), which was fought in July 1861.

These are verifiable primary sources that are indisputable. There is no room for doubt. I found sources stating a half-dozen differing dates for the hospital opening that ranged from July 31, 1861, to September 1862.

Sally's obituary said she was the only woman who received a commission in the Confederate army. Other accounts say that Lucy Mina Otey of Lynchburg, who founded another hospital, also was commissioned as a Confederate captain.

Another story is that General J.E.B. Stuart named Antonia Ford, a Confederate spy in Fairfax County, as an honorary aide-de-camp for her bravery in carrying state papers, although that is not the same as an official commission from the Confederate War Department.

I have not researched the Otey information, and thus I present the most popular version of the Captain Sally story herein with an obligatory caveat.

Postwar Sally

After the war, Sally continued her charity work but eventually exhausted the inheritance left to her before the war by her late father. She spent her last days in the Confederate Home for Needy Women in Richmond. The name was later changed to the Home for Confederate Women. She moved there in 1905, dying on July 26, 1916, at the age of 83.

The July 26, 1916, *Richmond Times-Despatch* offered a moving obituary:

The funeral services will be conducted in the Home for Confederate Women this afternoon at 5 o'clock, Rev. C.G. Chamberlayne officiating in the absence of Rev. G. Freeland Peter, rector of St. James Church. The interment will take place in Matthews (sic) County, in the graveyard of the church which Miss Elizabeth Tompkins helped to establish.

R. E. Lee Camp, United Confederate Veterans, of which Captain Tompkins was an honorary member, has detailed Captain John Lamb, Colonel Joseph V. Bidgood, and Sergeant-Major W. B. Lightfoot to attend the funeral and accompany the body to its last resting place in Matthews County. There will



Figure 9: Historical marker for Captain Sally in Mathews, Va.

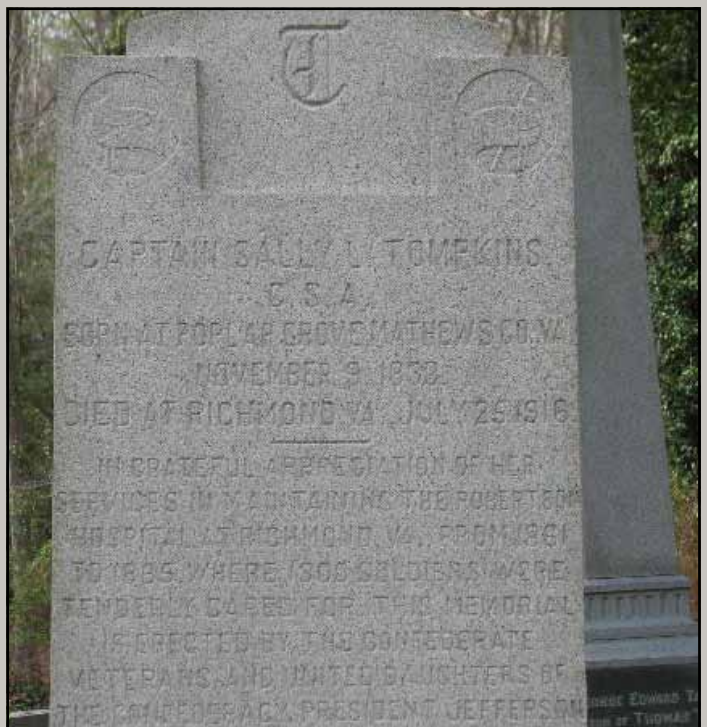


Figure 10: Memorial to Captain Sally at Christ Church Cemetery in Mathews, Va.

be a detail of veterans, also, from the Lee Camp Soldiers' Home.

Details from the Richmond Howitzers and the Blues will attend the funeral as a mark of respect to the only woman commissioned officer of the Confederate Army. There will be a committee from Richmond Chapter, United Daughters of the Confederacy. The coffin will be draped with the Confederate colors in accordance with the custom observed at all funerals of Confederate officers.

Poplar Grove Epitaph

Sally was born in Mathews County, Virginia, at Poplar Grove Plantation. Poplar Grove still stands and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

In a twist of fate, former Beatle John Lennon bought the estate less than a year before Mark David Chapman murdered him.

According to the January 23, 1984, *New York Times*, following his death Yoko Ono donated the proceeds of the Poplar Grove estate sale to a nearby home for abused boys.

No doubt Sally would have approved.

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- (Patricia (Trish) Kaufmann, Lincoln, Delaware, was introduced to postal history in 1965 and quickly became engrossed in research and writing. She became a full-time dealer in 1973, today specializing solely in Confederate States postal history. She enjoys hearing from readers and may be contacted by e-mail at trishkauf@comcast.net)



Figure 11. Rose colored glasses, in memory of John Lennon.