

# Sally Louisa Tompkins

1833-1916

Mathews County

Nurse



Sally Louisa Tompkins was born into a life of leisure on a plantation in Mathews County in 1833. Her parents were the descendants of generations of renowned Tidewater families. Just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Tompkins' father died and her mother moved the family to Richmond. Religiously devout, she believed that her duty in the war lay in nursing the wounded back to health. Within days of the First Battle of Manassas, streams of Confederate wounded arrived in Richmond, motivating Tompkins to open a hospital. A local judge, John Robertson, generously offered her the use of his home at Third and Main Streets. At only 27 years old, Tompkins used her family's society ties to organize wealthy matrons as volunteers and her father's money to purchase beds, medical supplies, blankets, and food. At the Robertson Hospital, Tompkins demanded exacting standards for nursing care, cleanliness, and food. She rarely lost a patient. Of the 1,333 men entrusted to her care, only 73 died, the best record of all the hospitals in the city system. The men referred to her as "Aunt Sally," as she carefully administered to their needs. Her care for the Confederate soldiers was not limited to providing medicines. As each patient was discharged, she supplied him with durable clothing and a prayer book. Despite her excellent record of patient care, in 1863 the Confederate government notified her that all private hospitals would be closed. In order to maintain central control and accounting of the wounded and dead, all nursing facilities would be run by the Confederate government. The only way that Tompkins could continue to care for the wounded was to appeal to her social connections. Through a close family friend, she was able to meet personally with President Jefferson Davis. He was sympathetic to her cause, but could grant no exceptions. However, he did find a way to allow Tompkins to continue to nurse. He gave her a commission in the army. She was appointed to the rank of captain, which allowed her hospital to continue under government auspices. She was the only woman in Confederate service to receive such a commission. Strong and independent, Tompkins never accepted a government salary. She ran the hospital at her own expense. After the war, Tompkins dedicated herself to doing charitable work in Richmond. By 1905, in poor health and finances, she accepted an invitation to live out her days at the Richmond Home for Confederate Women where she remained until her death in 1916.