

"I PRAYED AND SUNG IN EVERY TENT....":
ISRAEL SILVERS, U.S. CHRISTIAN COMMISSION
DELEGATE FROM NEW JERSEY

BY FERNANDA H. PERRONE

The newest additions to Rutgers' Civil War manuscript collections are the two United States Christian Commission diaries and related documents of Israel F. Silvers (1832–1864) of Pennington, New Jersey, which were donated to Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries (SC/UA) by Israel Silvers' descendants in 2014. Despite its importance to the Northern war effort, only a few studies have been done of the Christian Commission, and almost nothing has been written on the Christian Commission in New Jersey or about New Jersey delegates. The acquisition of the Israel Silvers collection will make a small contribution towards filling these gaps.

The United States Christian Commission was established in November 1861 at a meeting of several Northern chapters of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) whose members sought to better coordinate the organization's relief efforts. The purpose of the Christian Commission was "to take active measures to promote the spiritual and temporal needs of the soldiers in the army ... in co-operation with chaplains and others." The founders of the commission viewed the war as an opportunity to minister to men's souls. They supported Christians in their faith and tried to convert non-believers. The Commission's volunteers, known as delegates, distributed Bibles and tracts, conducted prayer meetings, and performed other religious duties. Confronted with the desperate lack of personnel at hospitals and camps, the delegates soon began offering more practical assistance, such as writing letters, preparing special meals, distributing food and clothing, and helping doctors care for the sick and wounded.

The work of the Christian Commission overlapped to some degree with that of the better-known Civil War relief organization,

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Israel Silvers, photograph by Morris Moses, Trenton, NJ, ca. 1863.

the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC). The Sanitary Commission was founded by a small group of Northern civilians in the summer of 1861 to support the Union military effort through providing medical care, and supplies to soldiers in the field. Headed by Unitarian minister Henry Bellows, the Sanitary Commission was a secular organization that used paid workers rather than volunteers, emphasized efficiency, eschewed sentimentality, and opposed restricted gifts. The Christian Commission, on the other hand, was supported by networks of local church groups and encouraged maintaining direct ties with the soldiers. Reflecting the masculine Christianity of the YMCA tradition, the Christian Commission had no women on its governing board. Only twelve women, all but one of whom was from the Midwest, were issued credentials as delegates. Women sometimes accompanied their husbands to the front, and played an important support role through local aid societies. In contrast, the Sanitary Commission was led by a small group of men, but its branches, which were responsible for the everyday work of the organization, were managed by women.

After a year of disorder when its headquarters moved four times and initial skepticism from military leaders and medical staff, the Christian Commission demonstrated its worth on the battlefields of Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. Gettysburg, however, became the proving ground that made the reputation of the commission. Three hundred and fifty-six delegates served there along with fifty to sixty women volunteers. Local churches mobilized to raise funds and pack and send supplies. After Gettysburg, donations matched or exceeded those to the Sanitary Commission and the number of delegates grew. Ironically, this development forced the Christian Commission to professionalize, hiring dozens of men and women as salaried managers and organizing a Ladies Christian Commission to raise funds.

One of the 356 delegates at Gettysburg was Israel Silvers. Born in Reaville (East Amwell Township) in Hunterdon County on June 19, 1832, Israel Fish Silvers was the son of Job Silvers and Maria Large. His father later owned and operated a general store in Lambertville, where Israel sometimes helped him. At the age of seventeen, at a religious revival led by the Reverend Wesley Robertson, Israel Silvers was "born again....born of the spirit." Although little is known of his early education, Silvers soon found a vocation as a school teacher. He taught Sunday school and became

a leader in the local Methodist church. In 1856, Silvers was teaching at Swedesboro Academy in Gloucester County, which was accessible to Lambertville by river. There he met the daughter of a cobbler, Emma Belleville Talman, whom he married in 1857. The couple moved to Pennington where Silvers taught in another school and became the father of two daughters.

In late July 1863, with the school term over and the country still reeling from the horrors of the battle of Gettysburg, Silvers volunteered for the Christian Commission. Like all the delegates, he was issued a leather-bound journal in which he recorded his experiences and kept detailed statistics on his accomplishments. Delegates typically served three-to-six-week terms, after which they turned in their diaries to the commission's central office. Selections were then edited for publication and were distributed to both secular and religious newspapers. By the time Israel Silvers reached Gettysburg on July 27, the various field hospitals had been consolidated into one site, Camp Letterman, where 4,000 difficult cases remained. A second hospital, where half the patients were Confederate soldiers, remained open in a Lutheran seminary. Silvers recorded his first impression of Camp Letterman in his diary:

I saw to-day for the first a real hospital. I never would wish to see another such awful wounds. I wonder they can keep good spirits, so many flies about them too, clothing flyblown & wounds maggoty. I distributed a large amt. of Reading matter, & stores & wrote letters for Union & Rebs.

On August 1, a surgeon asked Silvers to witness the amputation of the left arm of a Confederate soldier:



Kate Silvers, daughter of Israel Silvers, photographed by J.C. Reeve of Cray's Hall, Lambertville, New Jersey.

I did not so much like to be a looker on, but when they were about half through, I was asked to render some assistance. I then stood it quite well. In the afternoon I saw the left leg of a Rebel amputated.

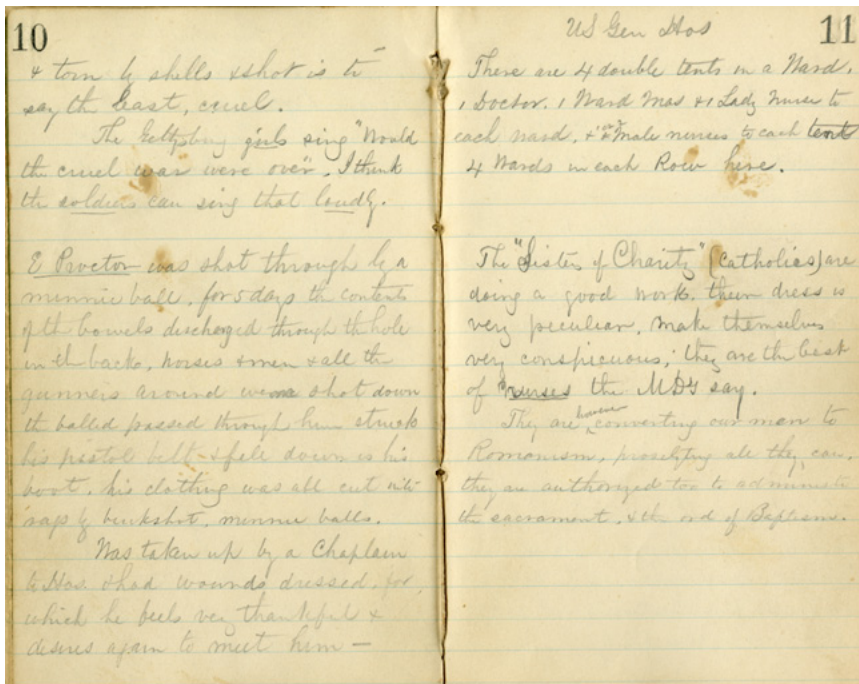
Silvers took an interest in the embalming process, noting in his diary that prices corresponded to rank: \$20 for privates, sergeants, and corporals; \$25 for lieutenants; \$30 for captains; \$50 for colonels; and \$100 for a major general. As well as attending the dying and reading the burial service, Silvers helped a woman who had come to Gettysburg in search of her wounded husband procure a coffin and transport his body home by train.

Silvers regularly led prayer services, the part of his work that he found the most fulfilling: "I prayed & sung in every tent in my 4 wards, men followed from tent to tent in rounds...oh how my boys enjoy our dev[otional] Ex[ercises]." On August 7, the work of the special Christian Commission committee that had been created to deal with the Gettysburg situation was turned over to the local branch at Camp Letterman, which established a commission station with five tents. The following day, Silvers was made temporary manager of one of these tents, where he was responsible for distributing supplies and generally overseeing commission business, as well as continuing to lead devotions and help the embalmer.

Despite his busy schedule, Silvers missed his family, describing a "neat little letter" from his wife Emma, which he "entertained... as a choice guest." He had already written to his wife and brother urging them to join him in his work. His wife, trying to care for two small children, declined, but his brother Wilbur Fish Silvers arrived in Gettysburg on August 14.

In spite of his horror at the death and disease surrounding him, Israel Silvers enjoyed the novelty of encountering people and situations not normally seen in Swedesboro or Pennington. He observed the Roman Catholic sisters nursing at Gettysburg with fascination:

The "Sisters of Charity" (Catholics) are doing a good work, their dress is very peculiar, make themselves very conspicuous; they are the best of nurses the MDs say. They are however converting our men to Romanism, proselyting [sic] all they can, they are authorized to administer the sacrament & the ord of Baptism.



Israel Silvers' Gettysburg Diary. In this passage, Silvers describes the Sisters of Charity nurses.

While soldiers tended to call all women religious "Sisters of Charity," Silvers is probably referring to the Daughters of Charity from Emmitsburg, Maryland, who stood out because of their "cornet" headdresses. Equally intriguing was Mary Tippie, a vivandière with the 114th Pennsylvania, of whom Silvers bought a portrait: "she allows no one to wrong or abuse her or she shoots them quick, she carries weapons under belt always." A vivandière was a combination nurse, cook, seamstress, and laundress who traveled with Zouave regiments. Silvers was not above collecting his share of minie balls, shell fragments, and other battlefield trophies. Although this practice was strictly prohibited, he "gathd....[his] collection without interruptions."

Two days before his term was up, Silvers wrote that he wished he "could labor here for a few months longer." The following summer, Israel Silvers again volunteered for the commission. When he reported to commission headquarters in Philadelphia on June 13, 1864, he was asked to wait because the Union army was moving South. Silvers took the opportunity to visit the "Great Sanitary Fair" in Philadelphia. Upon returning, he was given a pass

to Washington, D.C., where he again took the opportunity to do some sightseeing. He visited the Capitol building, where he heard a short speech by Charles Sumner; the Smithsonian; Willard's Hotel; and the Treasury Department, where he observed that the female employees, a wartime innovation, "counted greenbacks very rapidly." At the White House, he "saw 'Father Abraham' and lady, were just coming out to get in carriage & take a ride, he looked worn down, his great care is exhausting him no doubt."

At the Lincoln Hospital near Washington, Silvers visited the Christian Commission store room and found five boxes of bottled wine from the Lambertville Ladies Aid Society as well as a letter from a former pupil, Lizzie Swan. In the evening, he went to church and was surprised to find himself in a synagogue. He departed quickly and found a Presbyterian church where he heard a good sermon. After a few days caring for the soldiers at the Lincoln Hospital, Silvers and several others were chosen to go to the front. On June 18, 1864, they departed for City Point, Virginia, by train and steamboat. Almost like a recruit heading for the battlefield, Silvers was outfitted with rubber and wool blankets, a canteen, haversack, and tin cup, and stopped in Baltimore to have a photograph taken.

During the three-day journey, Silvers passed through a panorama of the Civil War—ironclads, hospital ships, forts, abandoned buildings, and cemeteries. Finally, the party crossed the James River by pontoon bridge and saw the smoke from the army camp fires.

The life of a Christian Commission delegate at the front in Virginia was



Israel Silvers (right) and fellow U.S. Christian Commission delegate from Lambertville, Baltimore, Richard Walzl, 1864.

quite different from that at Gettysburg. Attesting to his strong organizational skills, Silvers was again appointed to a leadership position. As well as supervising the general work of the Christian Commission "corps," he was personally responsible for two hundred soldiers. Silvers met wounded soldiers coming directly from the front.

One Ambulance train came in, in the night a number of wounded, they suffer much. They carted long distances in Army Wagons (not enough Ambulances) many with amputated limbs. Witness amputations every day. Get my Corps in good working order.

The living conditions at the front were much rougher than in Gettysburg. Instead of a guest house, Silvers slept in a hospital tent and took baths in the Appomattox River: "I never was so filthy & dirty before." He was kept up at night by heavy firing on the river. The weather was extremely hot. Silvers noted if he had his thermometer with him, "the Mercury would see a spot before unknown to it in the tube."

In spite of the difficult and heartbreaking work and poor living conditions, Silvers again managed to have novel and interesting experiences. He met both General Ulysses S. Grant and Cornelia Hancock, the military nurse from Salem County, New Jersey, not far from Swedesboro. He also attended a religious service with some African American soldiers.

the black men pray and exhort good, & their singing excels. Their Camp is just here, & they assemble each Evg for divine service. I never had expected to be in "Ole Virginny" & witness such scenes.

Silver also reported seeing "contrabands," escaped slaves who crossed the Union lines. "Men women & children coming into our Camps. One boy often comes to our C.C. Tent his body is covered with scars large & small over nearly the whole surface." Silvers continued to find joy in his pastoral duties. "Enjoy myself much in the Hosp. Devotions to-day. The solders are eager for the word of Life. . . ."

Israel Silvers received an honorable discharge on June 29, 1864, and on the following day set off by boat on the long journey

back to Lambertville. Soon after returning home, Silvers began to complain of increased fatigue and exhaustion. On July 19, he was struck down by typhoid fever and died on July 28, 1864. A third daughter, Israella, was born in January.

After the war, many U.S. Christian Commission delegates became leaders in the church, politics, education, and reform movements. Had he survived, Israel Silvers—intelligent, resourceful, supremely organized, committed to his faith, but not without humor—would certainly have found a place among their numbers.

Notes

1. Publications include David A. Raney, "'Bully for the Christian Commission': Perceptions of a Civil War Organization's Benevolent Program," in Daniel J. McDonough and Kenneth W. Noe, ed., *Politics and Culture of the Civil War Era: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Johannsen* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006) and Daniel J. Hoisington, *Gettysburg and the Christian Commission* (Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2002). See also David A. Raney, "In the Lord's Army: The United States Christian Commission in the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2001) and Theresa Rose McDevitt, "Fighting for the Soul of America: A History of the United States Christian Commission" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1997). George Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) includes a short section on the Christian Commission.
2. Quoted in Raney, "In the Lord's Army," 22.
3. Raney, "Bully for the Christian Commission," 220.
4. Hoisington, *Gettysburg*, 6–10.
5. On women in the Sanitary Commission, see Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2000).
6. Raney, "In the Lord's Army," 29–31 and 93–94.
7. Hoisington, *Gettysburg*, 33–36.
8. *Israel Fish Silvers* [obituary pamphlet] Israel F. Silvers Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries [hereafter cited as Silvers Papers].

9. Genealogy of Silvers-Talman-Headley families, Silvers Papers. More research is needed to determine the exact location of the schools where Silvers taught and the date when the family moved from Pennington to Lambertville.
10. Hoisington, *Gettysburg*, 10.
11. Israel F. Silvers, Christian Commission Diary, Gettysburg, July 31, 1863, Silvers Papers [hereafter cited as Gettysburg Diary].
12. Ibid., August 1, 1863.
13. Ibid., July 31, 1863.
14. Ibid., August 5, 1863.
15. Hoisington, *Gettysburg*, 31.
16. Gettysburg Diary, August 8, 1863.
17. Gettysburg Diary, July 31, 1863.
18. Sister Mary Denis Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 51 and 101.
19. Gettysburg Diary, July 31, 1863.
20. Mary Tippee has been identified as Marie Tepe. See Richard H. Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2006), 30–31.
21. Gettysburg Diary, August 19, 1863.
22. Ibid., August 18, 1863.
23. Israel Silvers, Christian Commission Diary, Virginia, June 14–15, 1864, Silvers Papers [hereafter cited as Virginia Diary].
24. Virginia Diary, June 16, 1864.
25. Ibid., June 22, 1864.
26. Ibid., June 22, 1864.
27. Ibid., June 25, 1864.
28. Ibid., June 20, 1864.
29. Ibid., June 27, 1864.
30. Ibid., June 24, 1864.
31. *Israel Fish Silvers*, obituary.
32. Raney, "In the Lord's Army," 133–35.