

## From the Civil War to the Present: A Snapshot of Floating Hospitals

MARY KORR  
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

The following pages offer a graphic glimpse into the strategic role floating hospitals have played in taking care of the wartime wounded and the most vulnerable in American society over the centuries.

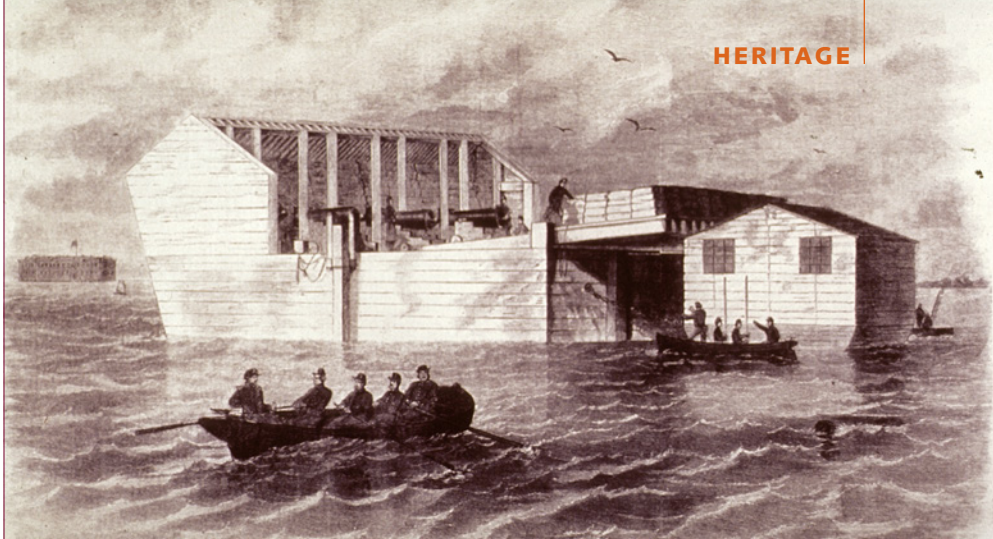
From the Civil War to the present, from the Mississippi to the Narragansett waterways, these ships and their dedicated cadre of healthcare providers have made a difference in the lives of those facing war, contagion and what today is termed health inequities.

The historic photos and illustrations also capture the dedication of photographers, artists and journalists who pursued these stories relentlessly, whether working for the illustrated weeklies of a bygone journalistic era or for the government and military of yesteryear as well as today.

The final piece on the Providence Floating Hospital, which first appeared in RIMJ in 2015, is the home-town story the City can be proud of. ❖

### USS Red Rover, 1863

This illustration of the USS Red Rover, the first US Navy floating hospital, appeared in Harper's Weekly on May 9, 1863. The steamer was captured from the Confederacy and used as a hospital ship during the Civil War as part of the Mississippi Squadron. Its medical staff included nurses from the Sisters of the Holy Cross, the first female nurses to serve on board a Navy ship. In addition to caring for and transporting sick and wounded men, the ship provided medical supplies to Navy ships plying the Mississippi waterways. [THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE]



### Charleston, South Carolina, 1861

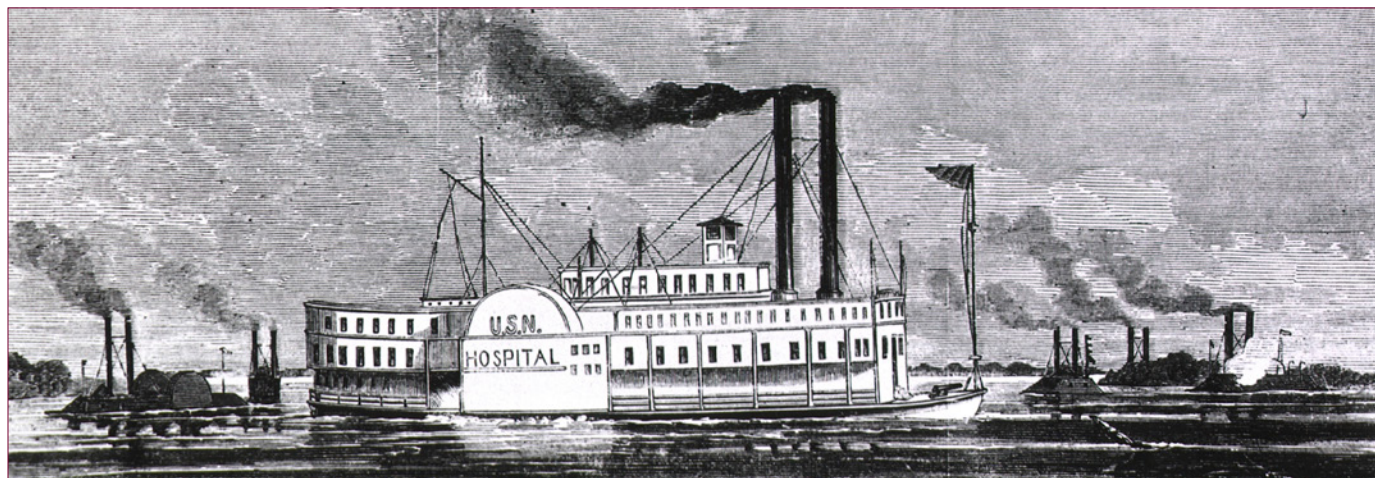
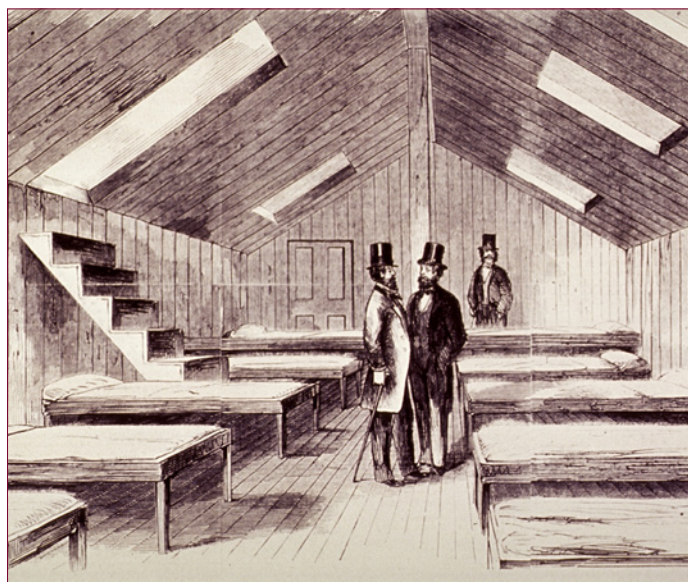
Interior and exterior views of the floating battery and hospital in Charleston Harbor. During the Civil War, Dr. Columbus DaVega served as a surgeon aboard the hospital, which had 10 beds and medical supplies to treat soldiers wounded on the battery, built to attack Fort Sumter from the water.

[NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE, FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER, 1861]



Dr. Columbus DaVega

[WARING HISTORICAL LIBRARY,  
MEDICAL COLLEGE OF THE  
STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA]





The Helen C. Juilliard, (above), a riverboat used as a hospital, was operated for the poor by St. John's Guild in New York Harbor, shown here in the early 1900s. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

**St. John's Guild, 1866**

Founded in 1866, The Floating Hospital was one of the first healthcare charities in New York City, dedicated to caring for the sick children of families living in tenement homes. While they were aboard, the staff of pediatricians, dentists, nurses, and social workers would provide healthcare services to indigent children and health and nutrition education to their parents and caregivers. ❖

*The Floating Hospital*

We don't like to ask it  
Your purse helps so many,  
But look at our basket  
It yearns for your penny.  
If you help, it's soon filled  
We thank you.

Please make checks payable to  
J. W. Hoanor, Treas.,  
52 Vanderbilt Ave., N. Y.

ST. JOHN'S GUILD

**THE SEASIDE HOSPITAL**



"WE DON'T WANT TO GO HOME"

To afford relief to the sick children of the poor of the City of New York, without regard to creed, color or nationality.

- \$1 will keep a child a day.
- \$7 will pay all Nursing, Dietary and Medical care for one child for one week.
- \$10 will pay for the Special Care required by a child suffering from heart disease.
- \$50 will name one crib for one month.
- \$100 will name one crib for one season.
- \$5,000 will endow one crib in perpetuity.

According to its website, thefloatinghospital.org, "We were a revolutionary concept in the late 1800s, turning the routine occurrence of quarantine barges into a health excursion that combined medical care, healthy eating, and entertainment into one experience." [THEFLOATINGHOSPITAL.ORG]



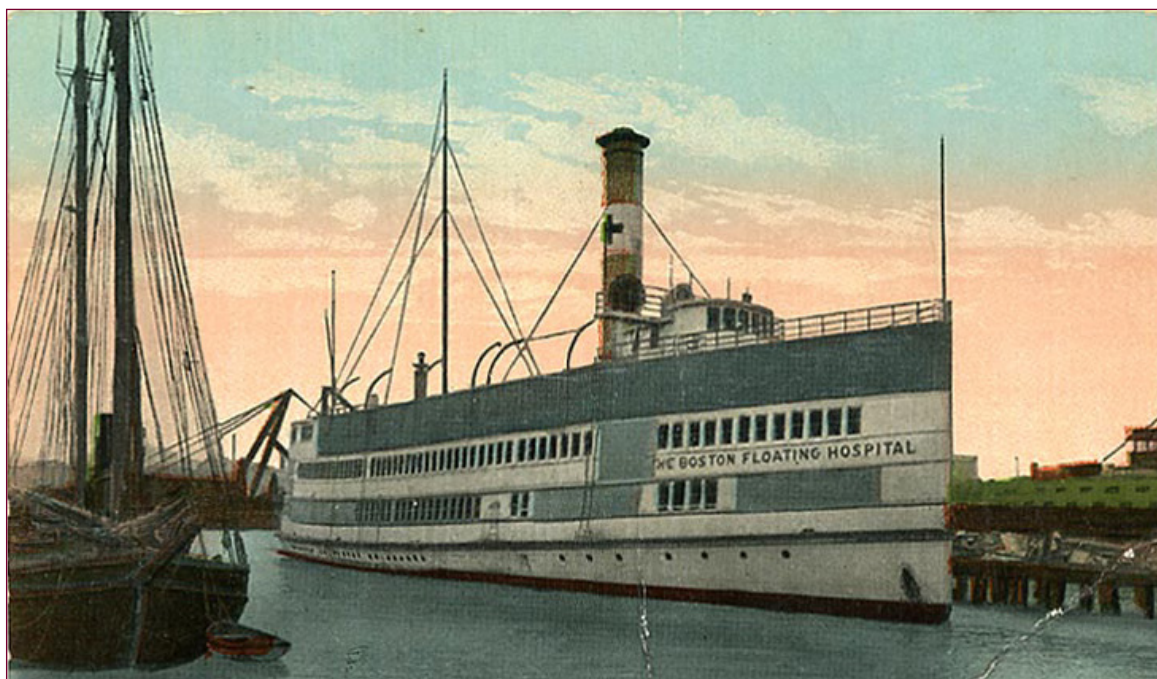
This vintage photo shows a shuttle car transporting a family to the Boston Floating Hospital in the first half of the 20th century. [TUFTS MEDICAL CENTER]

### Hospital in the Boston Harbor

The S.S. Boston Floating Hospital, a 672-gross ton excursion steamer, was built in 1905–1906 to provide Boston’s disadvantaged children with healthful harbor cruises and other medical services. It was operated by a philanthropic organization of the same name that had been founded in 1894, inspired by a similar New York City institution, due to the efforts of Rev. Rufus B. Tobey. The 1894-period barge plied the waters of Boston Harbor, offering fresh air and a respite to the city’s poor children, who had the opportunity to be seen by volunteer doctors and nurses.

In early January 1918, the ship was taken over by the U.S. Navy and placed in commission as USS Boston Floating Hospital but was returned to her owner in June of that year. The ship then returned to her original purpose, which lasted until 1927, when fire damage caused her retirement. Though

no longer a shipborne facility, Boston Floating Hospital conceptually lives on as the land-based Floating Hospital for Children, the pediatric component of the Tufts Medical Center. ❖

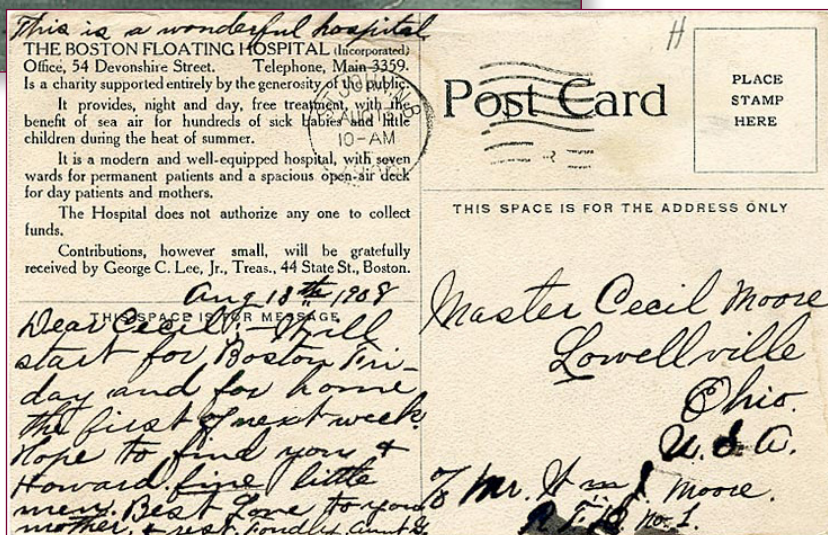


Color tinted photograph of the ship tied up at Boston, with weather screens erected around many of her deck openings, published on a postcard by The Leighton & Valentine Co., New York City, during the first two decades of the 20th century.



Reverse of a postcard published in 1908 by the Boston Floating Hospital, Incorporated, 54 Devonshire Street, Boston, MA. The card was mailed in Boston on August 18, 1908 and addressed to Cecil Moore of Lowellville, Ohio.

[INFORMATION AND PHOTOS: U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER PHOTOGRAPH; DONATION OF CAPTAIN STEPHEN S. ROBERTS, USNR (RETIRED), 2007]





## USNS Comfort Departs NYC

*Prepared for Future Tasking,  
Military Relief Efforts Continue*

NEW YORK (NNS) – The hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) departed New York City on April 30th, after supporting the Department of Defense's COVID-19 response efforts to New York and New Jersey residents during the coronavirus outbreak.

USNS Comfort has been at Pier 90 in New York City for a month, providing relief to a healthcare system stressed by the surge of COVID-19 patients. Even as USNS Comfort departs NYC, the ship and its embarked medical task force remain prepared for future tasking. The Navy, along with other U.S. Northern Command-dedicated forces, remains engaged throughout the nation in support of the broader COVID-19 response.

Comfort, which arrived in New York City March 30, was originally tasked with providing care to non-COVID patients, bringing the first aboard on April 1. It quickly became apparent that in order to be of help to the city, Comfort needed to treat all patients, regardless of their COVID status. April 6, after being directed to accept COVID-positive patients and following a thorough assessment of the existing design of the ship, Military Sealift Command civil service mariners physically separated the hospital from the rest of the ship by cordoning off doors and ladder wells on the main deck; reconfiguring the ship to admit and treat all patients.

"This amazing crew of over 1,200 people treated 182 patients, of which approximately 70 percent were afflicted

The Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) is escorted by U.S. Coast Guard, New York Police Department and New York Fire Department assets as the ship arrives in New York City on March 30, 2020. Comfort deployed in support of the nation's COVID-19 response efforts and will serve as a referral hospital for COVID and non-COVID 19 patients currently admitted to shore-based hospitals. [U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO BY PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS CORY J. MENDENHAL]

by COVID-19," said Capt. Patrick Amersbach, commanding officer of the Comfort's Medical Treatment Facility. "We were dedicated to providing the highest quality of care to each person who arrived to our hospital."

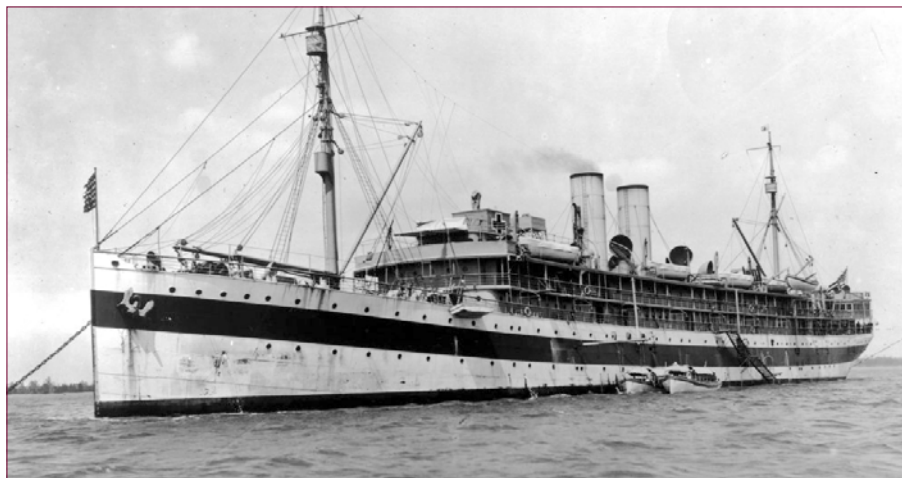
In Comfort's intensive care units, critical care nurses and respiratory technicians in particular worked together to provide constant care to many complex, high-acuity COVID-19 patients. Many of these patients suffered from rapid, multi-system organ failure requiring ventilator support.

More than 110 surgical procedures such as appendectomies, bronchoscopies, chest tube insertions, laparoscopic procedures, and tracheotomies were performed aboard. Additionally, the Comfort's radiology technicians performed more than 540 x-rays and CT-scans, while the pharmacy department prepared more than

1,300 intravenous and oral medications for the patients who received care aboard this ship. The ship's supply department ensured the distribution of ample personal protective equipment for all personnel, which were procured via a robust logistics system.

Comfort is scheduled to return to Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia where the ship will return to a "Ready 5" status to remain ready for future tasking for COVID-19 operations in support of FEMA

According to André B. Sobocinski, a historian at the US Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, during the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918, Comfort (AH-3) and Mercy (AH-4) were each briefly stationed in New York where they took care of overflow patients before sailing across the Atlantic to ferry thousands of World War I wounded and sick (including virulent cases of the flu) back to stateside facilities. ❖



USS Comfort (AH-3) serving as ambulance ship, ca. 1918 [BUMED ARCHIVES, 14-0058-003]

## 100 Year Ago – July 1915: A Floating Hospital for Children Launches in Narragansett Bay *Chair of RIMS pediatric section heads the medical effort*

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In July 1915, thanks to the efforts of seven members of the Women's Alliance of the New-Church of the General Convention of New Jerusalem in Providence, a group of 30 poor mothers and their young children took a day-long cruise on the steamer *Minnie V. Pope*, owned by E. H. Wardwell of Bristol, who provided the ship *gratis*.

Physicians and nurses volunteered their time to carefully screen and examine the children for any contagious diseases. A simple lunch was provided for the mothers, mostly immigrants from Italy, Ireland and Eastern Europe. There were instructed in well baby care and the infants were bottle-fed sterilized milk.

According to the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* (RIMJ) of November 1917, **DR. HENRY WINANS BURNETT** led the medical effort. He labored for many years at the Children's Outpatient Dept. at Rhode Island Hospital and the North End Dispensary and was the first chairman of the Pediatric Section of the Rhode Island Medical Society.

RIMJ noted, "in the early days of his work he did much for the baby camps close to the congested districts and from its inception was Chairman of the Baby Welfare Committee."

[Above] *Providence Journal* photograph of the Providence Floating Hospital Association's houseboat.

[Right] Starve Goat Island later became known as Sunshine Island when the Providence floating hospital for children relocated here.

It was from these crowded tenements that the passengers of the floating hospital came from. After that first successful summer, The Floating Hospital Association was incorporated and selected Dr. Burnett as its examiner.

In 1917, the Association purchased a large houseboat for \$3,000, which replaced the *Minnie* and served as the floating hospital until 1920, when the owner of Starve Goat Island, Frank Pettis, an oyster dealer, offered the premises for use by the Association. The houseboat was "beached" on the island off Field Point in the Providence River, off Pawtuxet Village, and transformed into a land facility for summertime use by children. The island was later dubbed "Sunshine Island." Parents were permitted a monthly visit.

The floating hospital, funded by the City of Providence at \$2,000 per annum, existed until 1938, when the Great Hurricane destroyed the island. The Association then used land in Barrington and Warwick for its summer camps, until 1961. ❖

For more photos of the floating hospital and Sunshine Island, visit <http://rhodetour.org/items/show/3?tour=1&index=2>

