



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Touched by the Better Angels: Inspiration

Part Three of a five-part series

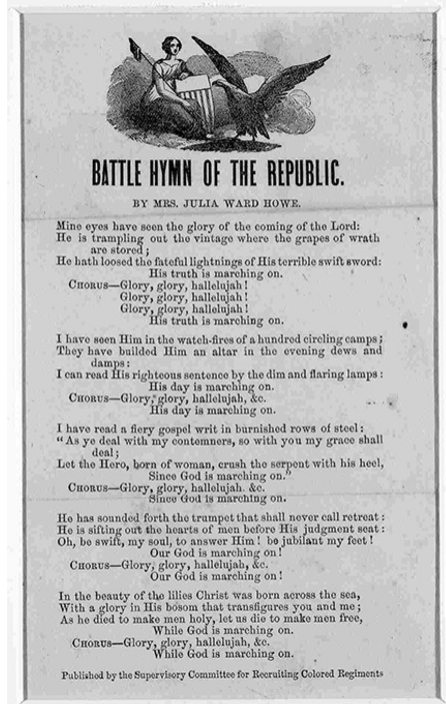
Robert C. Plumb, January 15, 2021

blueandgrayeducation.org



Julia Ward Howe by John Elliot, 1925 | [public domain](#)

Starting in the antebellum period in America and continuing through the Civil War, five women performed extraordinary actions that supported the Union cause. They accomplished these acts amid the chaos and gloom during a period that left little room for anything but suffering and loss. Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, and Sarah Josepha Hale boldly made contributions that were manifested in acts of freedom, truth, inspiration, compassion, and reconciliation. And, importantly, their legacies live on today after more than a century and a half. Over the course of a five-part series between now and February, we will be taking a look at each one. Here we present Part Three: Julia Ward Howe: Inspiration.



Score sheet | LOC

The year 1861 was not going well for the Union cause. The First and Second Battles of Manassas, or Bull Run, had been fought with devastating losses for the Union Army—both in casualties and reputation. Likewise, the Peninsula Campaign, under Gen. George McClellan's leadership, collapsed with heavy Union casualties. The Union civilian population saw a revolving door of military leadership at the top levels of the Army, and there was growing anxiety in the North that Washington City was in the Confederate's sights as a vulnerable target for attack.

This gloomy backdrop was what Julia Ward Howe and her husband experienced as they visited Washington City in November 1861. Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe was in Washington to attend meetings of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, of which he was a newly-appointed member. While her husband was involved in official Sanitary Commission business, Julia, accompanied by four friends from Massachusetts, including her minister, Rev. James Freeman Clarke, wanted to see the military aspects of the nation's capital.

The group asked to visit a Union troop encampment across the Potomac from Washington. Their request was granted and they started the day observing a troop review. The review was interrupted when Confederate skirmishers fired on the assembled Union troops. The small rebel force was quickly dispersed, but the remainder of the review was cancelled. As the Howe entourage began their trip back to Washington City, they were surrounded by marching Union troops. The soldiers were keeping their marching tempo by enthusiastically singing "John Brown's body lies a mold'ring in the grave ..." The melody of the song is attributed to late 18th- and early 19th-century camp meeting songs. Reverend Clarke suggested that Julia, as a published poet, should write more inspirational lyrics. Something more noble than "John Brown's body lies a mold'ring in the grave."

Exhausted by her travel during the day, Howe fell into a restless sleep. In the early morning she awoke and was moved to begin writing a poem on scraps of Sanitary Commission letterhead by lamplight in her hotel room. Once she had completed her draft she went back to bed. The next morning, she awoke and made some minor changes to her draft. She felt her work was inspired and didn't require major revision.

When she returned home from the Washington trip, Howe sent her poem to the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* for possible inclusion in an upcoming issue. The editor, James Fields, quickly responded by accepting the poem and running it in the February 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. It is believed that Fields came up with the title, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

"The Battle Hymn" quickly spread to other publications and was soon being sung by Union troops in the field and Union prisoners in Confederate prisons, as well as civilians in the North. The 42-year-old wife, mother of six, and aspiring poet had captured a cause and national purpose so effectively and movingly that her hymn quickly became a favorite of Northern military and civilian singers.

Julia Ward Howe's husband, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, never an enthusiastic supporter of his wife's literary aspirations, best captured "The Battle Hymn's" importance in February 1862: "Our men in the field do not lack faith or clothing or money, but they do lack noble watchwords and inspiring ideas such as one worth fighting and dying for."

Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" provided that inspiration.



Music score cover, 1863 | [public domain](#)



This Civil War Dispatch has been brought to you by the Blue and Gray Education Society, a non-profit 501-3C educational organization. Please visit us at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

P.O. Box 1176
Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .

To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.