

General Introduction

These files comprise a small portion of the United States Sanitary Commission Records, 1861-1872 (bulk dates 1861-1865; 765 linear feet) in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library.

Historical Note: The United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), 1861-1865, was a voluntary organization formed to provide medical and physical relief to Union soldiers and officers during the United States Civil War (1861-1865). The USSC modeled its services on women's volunteer organizations such as the women's Central Relief Association (New York), which became a branch of the USSC. Early in the war, these organizations provided local relief to the army; the Commission later expanded this concept throughout the states loyal to the United States government.

The USSC was officially approved on June 9, 1861, by order of Simon Cameron, secretary of war, and endorsed by President Abraham Lincoln. The central headquarters was located in Washington, DC and was also known as the Eastern Department. Branches and societies were eventually formed throughout the country.

Despite the official approval, the USSC was called the "Fifth Wheel to the Coach" by President Lincoln because the government generally believed that major organizations of its kind, such as the Medical Bureau, were already in place. This sentiment was echoed by the Medical Bureau despite the fact that it was a poorly run department unable to handle the needs of a large volunteer army. However, after lengthy negotiations, the USSC was finally approved on the condition that it confine itself to the care of volunteers.

The Commission, as a voluntary organization, did not receive funding from the federal government. Money was raised in various ways and came from a variety of sources. Insurance companies were solicited. Money was raised by women's organizations and through "Sanitary Fairs." Funds were also donated by states loyal to the United States government, including the Pacific states. (On October 14, 1862, California made its first contribution: \$100,000.00.) Money also came from England, Scotland, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Russia, Turkey, China, Japan, and the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), Costa Rica, Chile, Peru, Buenos Aires, Canada, and Cuba.

The USSC continued to minister to veterans after it was officially terminated in July of 1865. Its remaining funds were distributed, and services were offered until the USSC felt that its mission was completed. In the July 1865 session of the Commission a resolution was adopted to cease operations.