

Law, Sallie Chapman Gordon ^[1]

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by C. Sylvester Green ^[2], 1991

27 Aug. 1805–28 June 1894

Sallie Chapman Gordon Law, humanitarian, was born in Wilkes County ^[3], the daughter of Chapman and Charity King Gordon. Her father was a native of Virginia and a soldier in the American Revolution ^[4] who fought at the Battle of Kings Mountain ^[5] and continued his military service under Generals Thomas Sumter ^[6] and Francis Marion ^[7]. Her mother was from South Carolina, and it has been inferred that the couple met during his days of military service. Nothing is known of Sallie Gordon's early schooling, but she often exhibited evidence that it was thorough. On 28 June 1825 she married Dr. John S. Law in Eatonton, Ga., and they made their home in Forsyth, Ga., where Law practiced medicine until 1834. In that year they moved to Columbia, Tenn., where he continued his practice until his death in 1843. They were the parents of seven children, one of whom was the Reverend John Gordon Law, a noted clergyman in South Carolina during the last half of the nineteenth century. After her husband's death, Sallie Law moved to Memphis because it offered better facilities for the education of her children.

The approaching Civil War ^[8] stirred her to half a century of activity and service to humanity. Her sympathies were with the Confederacy ^[9], and she bemoaned the fact that she had "only one son [John Gordon] to lend to the Confederate Armies." Anticipating that there would be instances in which she might be of service, she began to seek out opportunities. Her first project was the establishment in April 1861 of the Southern Mothers' Hospital in Memphis for the treatment of the wounded without regard to their loyalty to either side. With constant expansion, the hospital proved to be of outstanding service following the Battle of Shiloh ^[10].

Mrs. Law made two early trips to field hospitals in Columbus, Ky., with food and clothing for the soldiers. When the hospital in Memphis was closed by invading Federal troops, its assets were invested in medical supplies, bedding, and clothing which she personally delivered to hospitals in many places including LaGrange, Ga. On those missions she attracted the attention of General Joseph E. Johnston, who was so impressed that he is said to have "ordered a review of thirty thousand troops in recognition of her services."

At the close of the war she was the leader in activating the Southern Mothers' Association. In May 1889 that group formed the nucleus of the Confederate Historical Association, which numbered Jefferson Davis among its early members. This pioneer memorial association "helped erect monuments, mark graves, and distribute historical data about the Southern cause and its conduct." Mrs. Law was the only president of this group during her lifetime. She wrote a sixteen-page pamphlet, *Reminiscences of the War of the Sixties between the North and the South* published in 1892, setting forth her activities over a thirty-year period.

For all of these expansive and unselfish services, she was adored by soldiers during the war and by veterans afterwards. They knew something of how unswervingly she gave of herself without compensation or reimbursement of expenses. It was they who early referred to her as "the mother of the Confederacy," and that designation began to be repeated across the country.

Sallie Law was an active Presbyterian ^[11] from her youth. She died at her home in Idlewild, a suburb of Memphis.

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Additional Resources:

NC Military Nursing. Appalachian State University: <http://nursinghistory.appstate.edu/nc-military-nursing> ^[12]

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

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From:

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1 January 1991 | Green, C. Sylvester

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