Georgiana Willets & James M. Stradling:

Standing Up for Faith, Country & Human Rights

Those of us of a certain age don't need Marie Kondo to get us thinking about decluttering. The urge to downsize and simplify is something of a rite of passage when retirement is on the horizon. One of my own recent forays in the quest to cull and purge meant going through my many books. In that process, I rediscovered an 1866 edition of a book titled *Women of the War* by Frank Moore . . . and found a subject for this column.

The Introduction to *Women of the War* (subtitle: *Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice*) states: "The story of the war will never be fully or fairly told if the achievements of women in it are untold." It then chronicles the contributions of over three dozen women to the Union cause during our Civil War. Among them was Miss Georgiana Willets, a young woman of about 24 from a Quaker family who left her Jersey City home in 1864 and traveled south to Washington D.C. Soon after her arrival there, she departed Washington in the company of a woman named Jane Grey Swisshelm, a well-known abolitionist, women's rights advocate and newspaper publisher. The two women made the perilous trip to Fredericksburg Virginia to serve as nurses ministering to the wounded survivors of the Battle of the Wilderness.

As the fighting continued and moved closer, Georgiana assisted in the relocation of hundreds of Union wounded by steamer via the Rappahannock River and later worked as a nurse at City Point Virginia, assigned to the hospital of the 2nd division, 2nd corps, Army of the Potomac. The descriptions of the conditions in which she worked are stark and evoke images of wounded men brought by wagon from the battlefield to makeshift "hospitals" where there was little to offer them in treatment or relief of their suffering.

After the end of the war, Georgiana taught at a Freedman's school in Lynchburg Virginia and there she met a Union veteran named James M. Stradling who was the school superintendent. Stradling, a Quaker born in Pennsylvania, had served in the New Jersey Cavalry, 1st Regiment, advancing to the ranks of quartermaster and 2nd lieutenant. They married in 1869 in Jersey City. In the 1880s, the Stradlings lived in Camden and James was active in local politics there, serving as a councilman and council president. The 1880 US census shows the family, including children Geraldine, Eloise, and James Garrison, living on 2nd Street North. James gave his occupation as "book publisher." Thirty years later when the 1910 census was taken, Georgiana and James were living in Englewood and he was still in book publishing.

As I searched for more information about Georgiana and James, I wondered about the inherent conflict between the

Georgiana Willets Stradling

pacifism of the Quaker faith and their involvement in the violence of our Civil War. Many Quakers, it turns out, answered President Lincoln's call for volunteers to join the Union Army. Despite admonishments from their spiritual leaders that war was wholly incompatible with the tenets of their faith, these Quakers, compelled by a combination of fervent patriotism and deeply-rooted abolitionist views, joined the Union cause.

My research very quickly led to the unexpected discovery of Georgiana and James's connections to notable people whose lives intersected with theirs. It turns out that although Jane Grey Swisshelm may have been the first person of note Georgiana Willets met during her war service, Swisshelm wouldn't be the last. Sometime during her service in Virginia, Georgiana crossed paths with Emily Howland, a Quaker abolitionist, philanthropist, and life-long civil rights activist who came to Virginia in 1863 to work with freed slaves, providing food, clothing, medical care, and education. As more and more former slaves moved north to escape captivity and claim their freedom, the federal government set up camps to provide for them. One of those was Camp Todd in Arlington Virginia where Emily Howland worked until about 1867, after which she opened her own school for newly-free families. In early 1864, Emily Howland was given the gift of a photo album by her friend Caroline "Carrie" Nichols who had worked as a Union Army nurse and spent time at Camp Todd. Over time, Howland filled the pages of that album with images of nearly fifty people. The album has survived for 155 years and among its photos are two of Harriet Tubman . . . and one of Georgiana Willetts (inscribed underneath: "Georgy" Willets). The album is now in the joint collections of the Library of Congress and the National Museum of African American History, Smithsonian Institution and was recently on public exhibit.

Not to be outdone, Georgiana's husband James had his own encounter with a very notable person in 1863: President Abraham Lincoln. James, then a sergeant, had been granted a furlough and had traveled home to Pennsylvania to visit his friend John Gilbert, a man he had been apprenticed to prior to his enlistment in the

army. On the trip back to Virginia to rejoin his cavalry unit, he took a stage to Lambertville, boarded a train for Trenton and then another in Philadelphia that brought him to Washington where he located a river steamer destined for the front at Aquia Creek and attempted to arrange passage. The steamer captain refused his request even after James showed him his furlough which expired the following day and explained that a failure to return to his unit on time could mean a charge of desertion. James left the pier and was walking down Pennsylvania Avenue when he got the idea that he should go to the White House and plead his case with the President. He envisioned himself walking up to the front door, ringing the bell and being welcomed in, perhaps by Mrs. Lincoln herself.

When he arrived at the White House steps, he was met by a few policemen to whom he explained his predicament and his need to see the President. Amazingly, he was shown in and, after some time sitting among a group of people each awaiting an audience with the President, a guard ushered him in to see Lincoln. As he entered, General Joseph Hooker, commander of the Union Army of the Potomac, was leaving the President's office. Sergeant James Stradling found himself all but speechless as Lincoln arose and extended his hand. He later described President Lincoln as "the tallest man I ever saw" with "a hand fully three times as large" as his own and a "grip like a vise." James cleared his throat and, striving for brevity, explained his situation. The President took the furlough document and wrote the following on it: "To any steamboat captain going to the front, please give bearer transportation." As James prepared to leave, the President asked him his thoughts about the cause of the increasing number of desertions taking place. He also asked about the reaction of the troops to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation and about James's experiences in the Battle of Fredericksburg, a devastating Union Army loss, saying that he wanted to hear the view of the rank and file.

James apparently gave his candid assessments in answer to each of the President's questions and left with Lincoln once again shaking his hand. James high-tailed it to the steamer and showed his newly-signed furlough document to the captain who simply told him to "get on board." At the same time, General Joseph Hooker also came aboard. James made it back to his unit

CAMDEN'S CITY COUNCIL.

Adjournment of the Old and Organization of the New One.

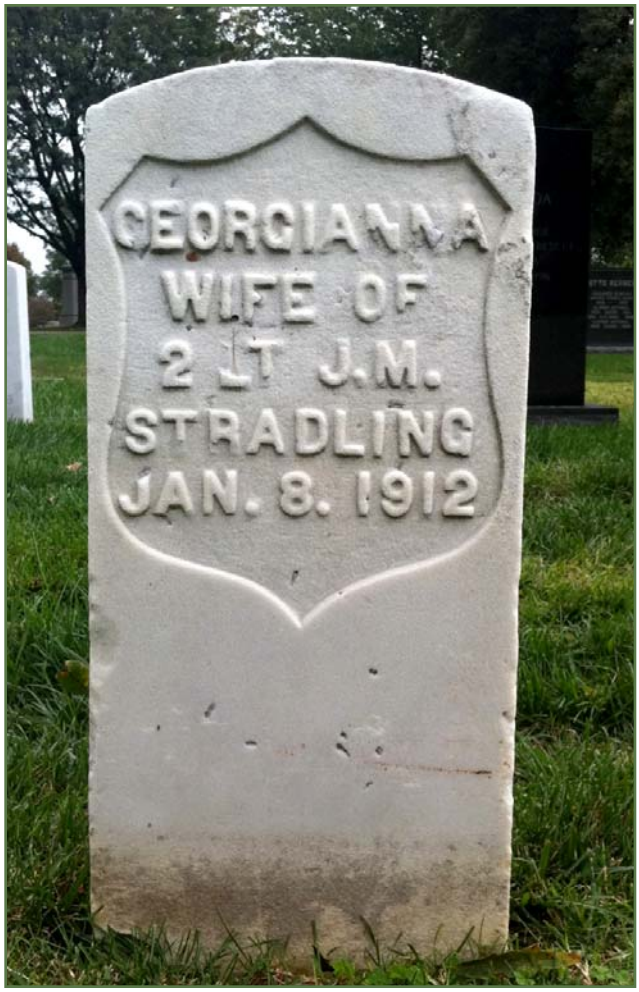
Yesterday afternoon, at five o'clock, the old Camden City Council met, John H. Dialogue, president, in the chair. The official returns of the election held on Tuesday last were read so far as they applied to the treasurer, councilman-at-large, city assessor, members of the City Council, Board of Education and Board of Freeholders. The figures were the same as already published. The new members were then qualified and took their seats, the old members retiring.

On motion nominations for president were made, when James M. Stradling and William F. Mead were named. Mr. Stradling received 13 votes and Mr Mead 9. On taking his seat Mr Stradling remarked that there were several things connected with the city that should be manfully and promptly met and disposed of. The most serious was its financial condition, which was not what it should be.

Philadelphia Inquirer, March 3, 1884

The Anti-Sewell Club, of Camden, has indorsed Samuel H. Grey for the United States Senate and James M. Stradling for Assembly in the First District of Camden county.

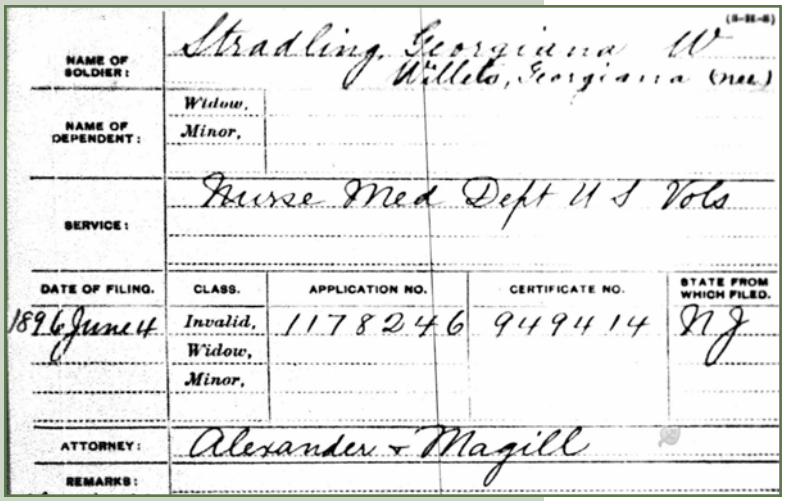
Trenton Evening Times, October 3, 1886



James Stradling and Georgiana Willets Stradling's Arlington National Cemetery graves

on time. A few days later, he wrote a long letter to his friend John Gilbert relating, in his own folksy plain-language style, the whole story of his trip back to the front. His detailed description of his meeting with Lincoln was peppered with self-deprecating humor and candor along with respect and concern for the President who he characterized as a "very sad, woe-begone, gloomy-looking man." Almost sixty years later, in 1922, James M. Stradling's letter to John Gilbert was published under the title *His Talk with Lincoln; being a Letter Written by James M. Stradling.*

Georgiana Willets Stradling died in 1912 in Beverly New Jersey and James M. Stradling died there in 1916. A half-century after these two young Quakers were drawn to the bloody battlefields of Virginia by their patriotism and abolitionist beliefs, each was laid to rest in the Arlington National Cemetery.



NAME OF SOLDIER:	Stradling, Georgiana W Willets, Georgiana (nee)			
NAME OF DEPENDENT:	Widow, Minor,			
SERVICE:	Nurse Med Dept U S Vols			
DATE OF FILING.	CLASS.	APPLICATION NO.	CERTIFICATE NO.	STATE FROM WHICH FILED.
1896 June 14	Invalid, Widow, Minor,	1178246	949414	NJ
ATTORNEY:	Alexander & Magill			
REMARKS:				

Georgiana Willets Stradling Civil War Pension Index Record

Read more about the Howland photo album: https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2018/03/celebrating-harriet-tubman-and-the-emily-howland-album/

"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies."

—Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

Genealogist, Speaker/Instructor & Author

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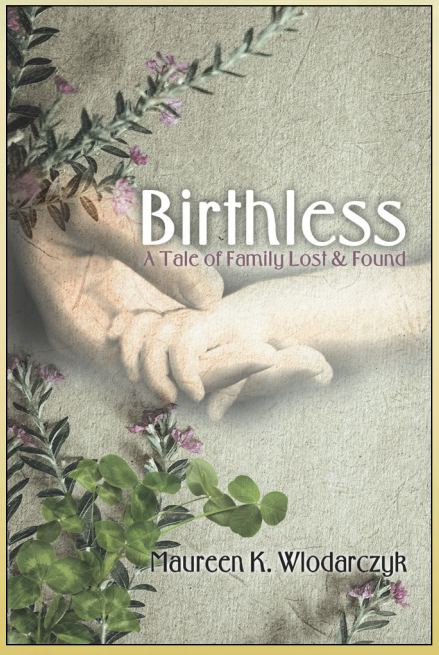

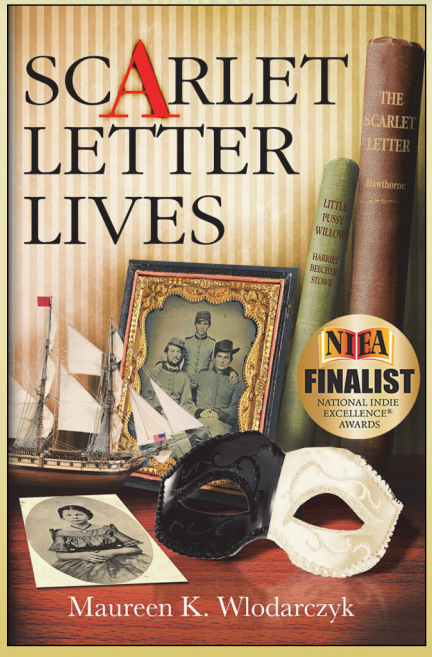

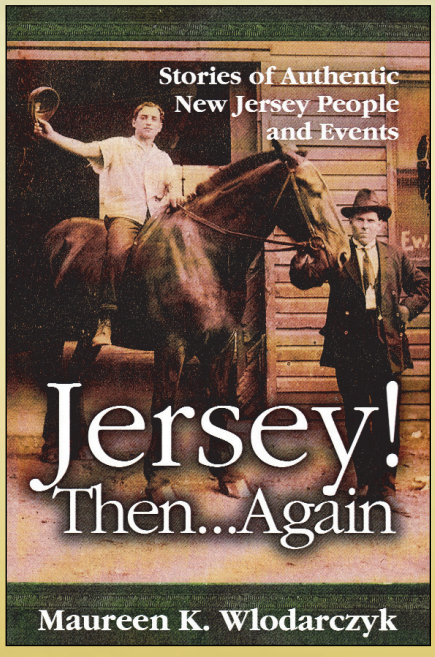

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