

## Private Franklin Thompson: The Civil War Legacy of Sarah Edmonds Seelye

**Sarah Emma Edmonds Seelye** (December 1, 1841 – September 5, 1898) was a Canadian-born woman who successfully disguised herself as a man to fight for the Union Army. Serving honorably under the alias "**Franklin Thompson**," she worked as a soldier, frontline field nurse, and mail carrier. Her extraordinary journey from a disguised fugitive to a vindicated veteran culminated in her post-war advocacy, making her the **only female veteran** formally admitted into the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) during the 19th century.

### Early Life and Escape to America

Born in New Brunswick, Canada, Edmonds fled an abusive father and an unwanted arranged marriage in 1857. To travel undetected and find employment safely, she assumed a male identity and took the name **Franklin Thompson**. She migrated to the United States and found successful work as a traveling Bible salesman in Flint, Michigan. When the Civil War erupted in 1861, a deep sense of duty compelled her to defend her adopted country.

### Wartime Service as Franklin Thompson

On May 25, 1861, Edmonds officially enlisted in **Company F, 2nd Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment**. For nearly two years, her comrades had no idea "Franklin" was a woman.

- **The Field Nurse:** She initially served as a male medical orderly, tending to catastrophic injuries on the front lines. She witnessed the horrors of the **First and Second Battles of Bull Run**, the **Peninsular Campaign**, and the **Battle of Antietam**.
- **The Mail Carrier:** Her reliability earned her an appointment as a regimental mail carrier under Colonel Orlando Poe. This vital, dangerous job required her to ride through hostile territory to deliver military correspondence.
- **The Spy:** In her famous memoir Edmonds claimed she was recruited as a Union spy. She described crossing Confederate lines 11 times in various disguises, including an Irish peddler named Bridget O'Shea and a Black laborer named Cuff. While National Park Service historians note that formal military records do not officially corroborate these espionage missions, her absences from camp perfectly align with the dates of the intelligence operations outlined in her journal.



Sara Emma Edmonds as  
Franklin Thompson

In April 1863, Edmonds contracted severe **malaria** during the Vicksburg Campaign. Fearing that a military hospital doctor would discover her biological sex, she fled her unit to seek private treatment. Because she left without leave, the Union Army officially branded "Franklin Thompson" a **deserter**.

Once recovered, she dropped her male disguise but refused to abandon the war effort. Reassuming her true identity as Sarah Edmonds, she spent the remainder of the war working as a civilian nurse for the **United States Christian Commission**.

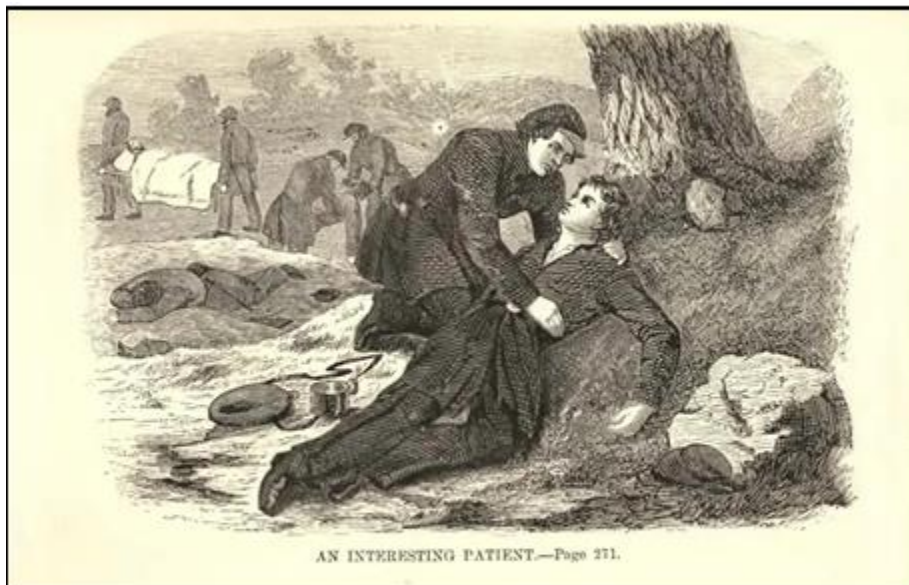
## Nurse and Spy in the Union Army

In 1865, Edmonds published her memoirs, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*. The book sold over 175,000 copies, and true to her philanthropic nature, she **donated her royalties** to various Union soldier aid societies. In her memoir, Edmonds writes that she found a mortally wounded soldier who turned out to be a female soldier in disguise:

*In passing among the wounded after they had been carried from the field, my attention was attracted by the pale, sweet face of a youthful soldier who was severely wounded in the neck....The soldier turned a pair of beautiful, clear, intelligent eyes upon me for a moment in an earnest gaze, and then, as if satisfied with the scrutiny, said faintly: "Yes, yes; there is something to be done, and that quickly, for I am dying.*

*I can trust you, and will tell you a secret. I am not what I seem, but am a female. I enlisted from the purest motives, and have remained undiscovered and unsuspected. I have neither father, mother nor sister. My only brother was killed to-day...I have performed the duties of a soldier faithfully, and am willing to die for the cause of truth and freedom...I wish you to bury me with your own hands, that none may know after my death that I am other than my appearance indicates.*

*I remained with her until she died, which was about an hour. Then making a grave for her under the shadow of a mulberry tree near the battle-field, apart from all others, with the assistance of two of the boys who were detailed to bury the dead, I carried her remains to that lonely spot and gave her a soldier's burial...*



Edmonds, Sarah Emma Evelyn. "*The Female Spy of the Union Army.*"  
United States: De Wolfe, Fiske, 1864. 271.

## Post-War Life and Vindication

Moving forward with civilian life she married **Linus Seelye on April 27, 1867**, and raised a family. In 1876, Edmonds Seelye attended a regimental reunion of the 2nd Michigan. Her former brothers-in-arms were shocked by her revelation but fiercely rallied behind her. Her comrades signed affidavits attesting to her bravery and character. Following an Act of Congress in 1884, **the charge of desertion was wiped clean** from her record, and she was granted an honorable discharge alongside a federal veteran's pension under her married name.

## GAR Membership and Legacy

Edmonds Seelye's final and most historic victory came in **1897**. Recognizing her exceptional combat-zone service and her newly vindicated record, she was officially inducted into the **Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)**, the nation's largest and most powerful organization for Union veterans.

She joined the **McClellan Post No. 9** in Houston, Texas. While other women had served disguised as men, Edmonds Seelye was the **only female veteran** formally admitted into the GAR as a regular member during the 19th century. Her membership was a monumental acknowledgment by her male peers that her service was equal to theirs.

Sarah Emma Edmonds Seelye died shortly after her GAR induction, on September 5, 1898, in La Porte, Texas. In 1901, her local GAR post helped arrange for her to be reinterred with **full military honors** in the GAR Plot at Houston's Washington Cemetery, forever remembered as a patriot who defied the boundaries of her time to serve her country.



Headstone at Washinton Cemetery,  
November 4, 2023

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Riley, L. (2026). *Private Franklin Thompson: The Civil War legacy of Sarah Edmonds Seelye*. Auxiliary to Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. <http://camplea.org>

## Sources and Further Reading

- **Edmonds, Sarah Emma.** [\*Nurse and Spy in the Union Army\*](#): *Comprising the Adventures and Experiences of a Woman in Hospitals, Camps, and Battle-Fields*. Hartford, CT: W.S. Williams & Co., 1865. (Available as a free public domain eBook via Project Gutenberg).

- **U.S. House of Representatives.** [House Record H.R. 5335: An Act Granting a Pension to Sarah E. E. Seelye.](#) Washington, D.C.: 48th Congress, 1884. (*Official legislative record removing the charge of desertion and validating her military service*).
- **U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).** [Civil War Pension File for Sarah Emma Edmonds Seelye](#) (alias Franklin Thompson), Company F, 2nd Michigan Infantry. Record Group 15.
- **American Battlefield Trust.** "[Sarah Emma Edmonds Biography.](#)" Washington, D.C.
- **U.S. National Park Service.** "[Sarah Emma Edmonds \(Franklin Thompson\) Biography.](#)" Antietam National Battlefield / Manassas National Battlefield Park. (*Authoritative government biography detailing her battlefield nursing and modern consensus on her espionage claims*).

