



Witness to War Through a Child's Eyes: Laura Thornberry (1854-1937)

When the first Battle of Manassas broke out on July 21, 1861, Laura Thornberry was just six years old. She, her brothers, and her sister were about to see just how destructive war was firsthand. More than 70 years after that battle, Laura would be inspired to write down her story so that she could pass it on to her grandchildren in the 1930s.

At the time of the battle, Laura's father, John Thornberry had left home to join the 49th Virginia, one of the Confederate regiments that would fight on Henry Hill in the afternoon of what would be the first major land battle of the American Civil War.

On the evening of July 20th, 1861, the locals living near Manassas were on alert; they knew something was coming. Laura's uncle, James Wilkins arrived at the Thornberry's home to check on Laura, her siblings, and her mother, Martha. He suggested that they leave their house and come with him to his home, about a mile away from theirs so that they would be safely out of the way during the fighting.



The Thornberry House in March 1862. Photograph by George Barnard.

According to Laura, her mother responded, *"If you think so, I will get the children's clothes ready for Sunday School and I will go."* Laura's family lived very close to the Methodist church in their little community of Sudley, and she knew that because it was a Saturday night, her family would be attending church the next day. Her uncle responded, *"They will not need any clothes for Sunday School for there will be no Sunday School tomorrow."*



Sudley Methodist Church, which was near the Thornberry's house, would not hold Sunday School or a worship service on Sunday, July 21, 1861.

Her uncle turned out to be right, there would be no Sunday School the next day. In fact, there would be no worship service. Though people did gather for church, it was decided to call off worship that day because of the presence of Union troops moving down Sudley Road right in front of them. They knew a battle was about to begin.

Unfortunately, though their uncle moved them to his home for safety, the Thornberry children were not going to be spared the horrors of war. At their Uncle's home, they could see *"the firing of muskets and cannons, and falling men."* Laura also remembered bodies *"piled high as anyone would pile up wood."*

When Laura and her family returned home the next day, their lives had been changed forever. Their home, along with the Methodist church had become a part of the complex of buildings being used as a Union field hospital.

Writing down her story in 1936 when she was in her eighties, this is what Laura remembered of the aftermath of the battle:



The Thornberry children at Sudley Ford, where the Union Army had crossed Catharpin Run on July 21, 1861. Sudley Ford was near their home. Looking at Federal Cavalry, Laura is the little girl on the left. Photograph by George Barnard.

"My Father, John F. Thornberry... was in that great battle, was wounded and disabled for service any more. My father and mother with five little children (I was one of them) lived across the road from the church and two and a half miles from Manassas...

The next morning (Monday) my mother went to our home. It was desolate [empty of our things]. She with us children left it Saturday evening as we [my family] had lived in it for 15 or 20 years, and there was not an article of anything in it. Ten men had bled to death in mother's bedroom the night before. Carpets and all furniture were out and gone. We never saw anything

of it again or anything else. The old farm well in the back yard was almost full of everything that would go in it. Such as china ware [dishes], cooking utensils, flat irons, and everything you can imagine used in a family was thrown in it. Of course everything was broken. How we all cried over it; and with no prospect [likelihood] of replacing any of it...

My father was brought to my Grandfather's from the battlefield of Manassas, with typhoid fever (from a wound) and remained ill for eight weeks."

Laura's father survived his injury and fever. He was discharged from the army and allowed to join his wife and children again. Even though they had lost a lot of their possessions and things that were special to them, they had their father home again.

The next spring, in March of 1862, the Union Army moved into Manassas Junction, several miles to the south of the Thornberry's house. At that time, a photographer named George

Barnard came and took pictures of the destruction that the battle had caused. Laura, her brothers, and her sister feature in many of these photographs, like ones you have seen above on this sheet, and the one below:



The Thornberry boys kneeling at the graves of soldiers. Sudley Methodist Church is in the background. Photographed by George Barnard.

The Thornberry children would also witness the Second Battle of Manassas in 1862, 13 months after the first major land battle of the American Civil War had taken place. The photographs George Barnard has left us serve to remind us that children were also witnesses to the horrors of the Civil War. They had to figure out how to rise above what they had witnessed; and carry on.

Laura died about a year after she wrote down her memories of the battles of Manassas. She was an old woman in her eighties, surrounded by loving family, and died a well-loved member of her local community.

Questions:

1. Who was Laura Thornberry? How old was she at the time of the battle in 1862; and how old was she when she died?

2. What things did Laura experience with her brothers and sister?

3. What are some of the things Laura might have been worried about when her uncle came to bring her mother and siblings to safety?

4. What are her brothers wearing in the photos? Why do you think they are wearing the clothes they are?

5. Why do you think George Barnard chose to photograph the Thornberry children as many times as he did? Who do you think got to see those photographs?

6. What are some things that children who witnessed battles or fights in the Civil War could do to move on after what they had seen?

7. George Barnard, who photographed the Thornberry children and the damage caused by the first battle of Manassas, worked with a lot of other photographers to document the Civil War. In 1864, he even became an official photographer for the U.S. Army.

During the war, many images from the battlefield were put on exhibit in galleries in New York. Pretend you are visiting New York during the war. You just saw an exhibit that included the photographs of the Thornberry children. Write a short letter home to someone telling them about your impressions of these photos. What are you thinking about what you just saw? How do these photographs make you feel about the war? Does where you are from matter in your impression of the photos (for example, being from the North vs. South)? Write you letter on the next page:



George Barnard, self-portrait

Dear _____,

Sincerely,
