

# The Role of Medical Care in the Civil War: The Hospital and the Battlefield

## An Online Professional Development Seminar



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from the National Humanities Center

## UNDERSTANDING

Even with the limited knowledge and range of drugs available in the mid-nineteenth century, medical care in the Civil War could effectively help soldiers recover from wounds and illness. This was most successful when the hospital recreated the conditions of home health care, where a patient received nourishing food and drink, attention to cleanliness, rest, and comfort. The North approached this goal more successfully than the South and had more success in healing its troops.

## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What tools and procedures did Civil War surgeons use to operate on the wounded?
- What role did Clara Barton play in the development of Civil War medicine?
- Were any methods of anesthesia available, other than perhaps whiskey and having the patient literally "bite the bullet?"

What, if any, recent advances in medical practice aid the health care professionals treating wounded soldiers?

Did any advances in medical treatment result from the treatment of injured soldiers?

- How did the medical care available in the US compare with that available in Europe at the time?
- Did Civil War medicine influence battlefield medicine in World War I?

## FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Before the war, most medical care was delivered in the home, by female relatives. How did women respond when the armies of both sides created vast hospital complexes that situated health care outside of the home?
- What special challenges did battlefield care impose on wounded men and their doctors?
- What factors differentiated the best of Civil War medical care from the worst?
- Since southern doctors often had the same medical training as those in the north, why did southern troops suffer higher rates of death from disease than northern soldiers?



## Margaret Humphreys

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Soldiers in the American Civil War  
(Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008)

## Introduction

- The war put millions of men in the hospital with wounds or disease
- A successfully healed man was then once again available to his army
- 90-95% + of hospitalized patients survived
- Stats: CSA deaths from disease in first two years of the war, 167/1000; Union rates in 1862: 49/1000, 1863: 63/1000
- Difference depended on access to food, certain drugs, and mobilization of women to provide “home care” in the hospital and on the battle field.



## Cornelia Hancock

1839-1926

- Born in New Jersey
- Quaker
- Volunteered for nursing service in 1863
- Served at Gettysburg and Petersburg
- *Letters of a Civil War Nurse, 1863-65*

## Health Care after a Battle: Gettysburg

Cornelia Hancock: After arriving at Gettysburg 3 days after the battle: “We went the same evening to one of the churches, where I saw for the first time what war meant. Hundreds of desperately wounded men were stretched out on boards laid across the high back pews as closely as they could be packed together. ...I seemed to stand breast high in a sea of anguish.”

### Discussion Questions

14,500 Union men were wounded at Gettysburg; 12,700 CSA.

- What does this quotation tell you about the challenges of caring for them?
- Why was Hancock there? What was her authorization?
- What did these men need, first and foremost?



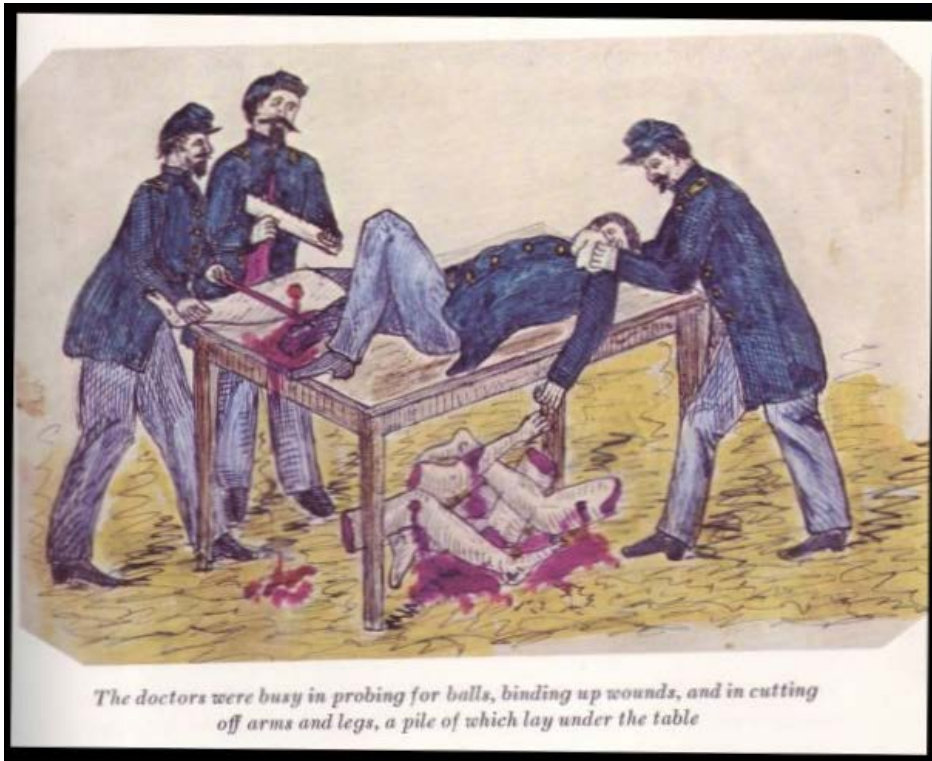
## Battlefield Relief Efforts

Hancock: “It was swiftly borne in upon us that nourishment was one of the pressing needs of the moment. . . Wagons of bread and provisions were arriving and I helped myself to their stores. I sat down with a loaf in one hand and a jar of jelly in another...a dozen poor fellows lying near me turned their eyes in piteous entreaty.” “An hour or so later, in another wagon, I found boxes of condensed milk and bottles of whiskey and brandy. It was an easy task to mix milk punches and to serve them from bottles and tin cans emptied of their former contents.”

## Discussion Questions

Hancock broke the bread in pieces and spread it with a stick; she had no utensils to prepare or serve food. She used tin cans as cups.

- What does this tell you about the material needs of nursing in the acute battlefield situation?
- Do the provisions on hand surprise you?
- What are the challenges in feeding the wounded?



## The wounded soldier's medical journey often began here.

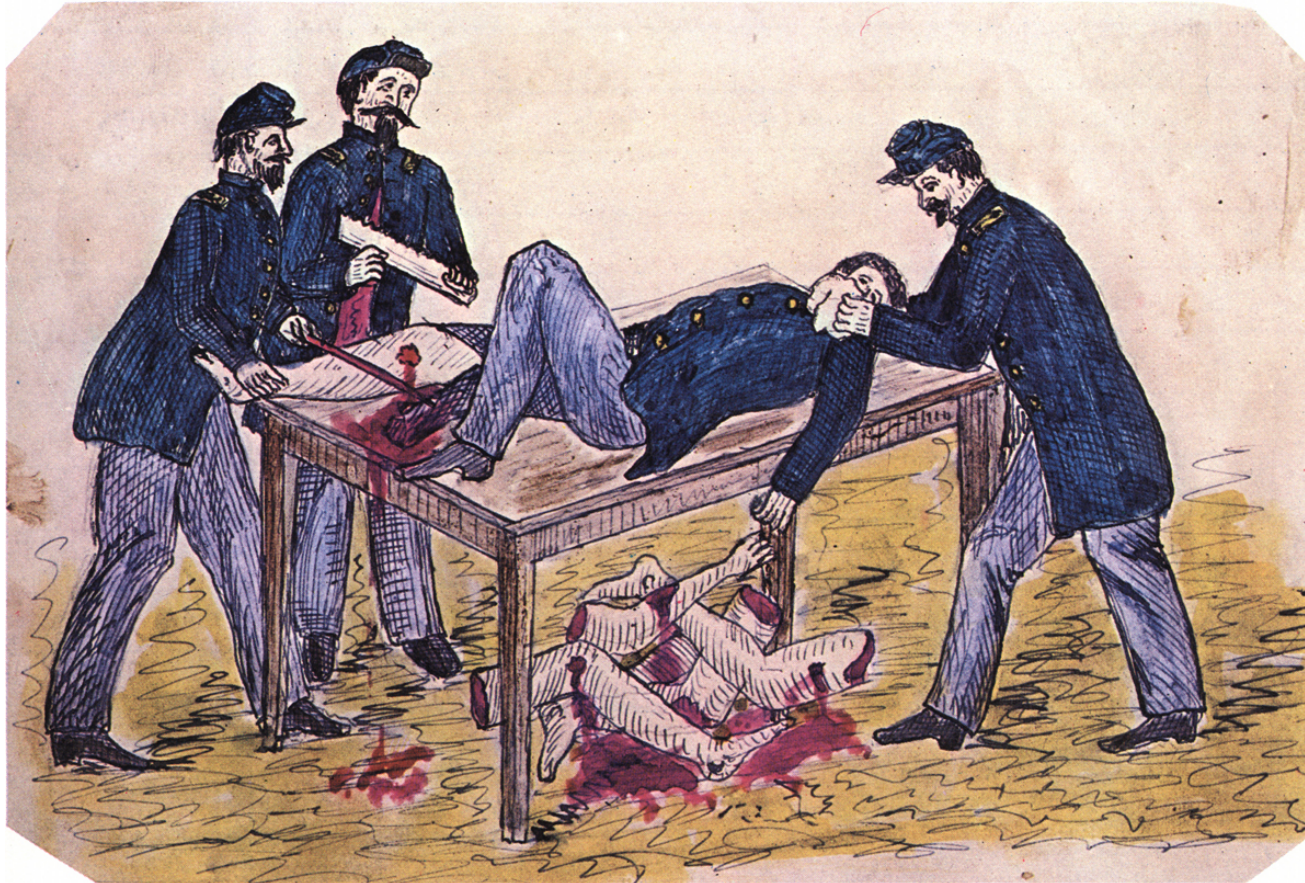
Hancock: "A long table stood in the woods and around it gathered a number of surgeons and attendants. This was The operating table, and for seven days it literally ran blood." "It took nearly five days for some 300 surgeons to perform the amputations that occurred here."

## Discussion Questions

- What surprises you about this picture?
- What are the doctors wearing and doing?

# The Hospital and the Battlefield

*Chancellorsville*



*The doctors were busy in probing for balls, binding up wounds, and in cutting off arms and legs, a pile of which lay under the table*

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/lifeandlimb/images/OB1371.jpg>

# The Hospital and the Battlefield



Civil War surgery, done under anesthesia, concentrated on stopping bleeding; amputating limbs to prevent gangrene. Medical care utilized effective remedies like quinine, opiates, and disinfectants.

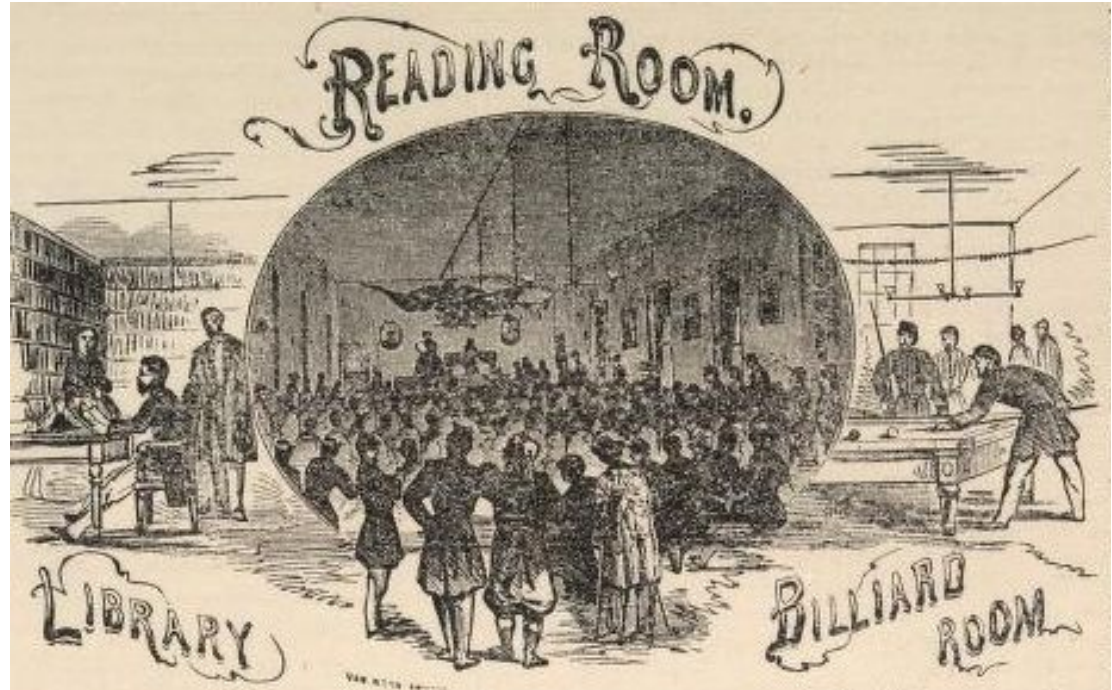
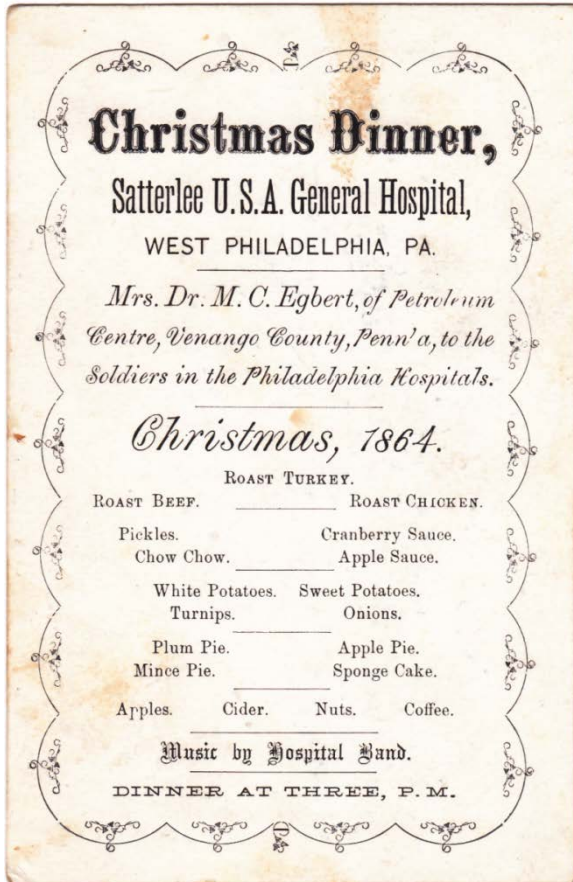
## The General Hospital

- The surviving wounded from Gettysburg were finally loaded on trains and taken to established general hospitals for care.
- 4062 arrived at Satterlee Hospital in Philadelphia; only 25 of them would die in the hospital.
- Satterlee is a prime example of the healing environment available in a northern hospital, much of it created by women.

# Satterlee General Hospital, Philadelphia



# The Hospital and the Battlefield



## Satterlee General Hospital, Philadelphia

Note the library, billiard table, concert, and the abundance of food.



## Discussion Question

What does this slide show you about the many roles Union women played in medical care?





## Louisa May Alcott

1832-1888

- Born in Massachusetts into a prominent Transcendentalist family
- Abolitionist, feminist, novelist
- Served as a nurse in the Union hospital in Georgetown, DC, 1862-63
- *Hospital Sketches*, (1863)
- *Little Women* (1868)

## In the Hospital

L. M. Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*. “They’ve come! They’ve come!” “It’s the wounded from Fredericksburg!” “The first thing I met was a regiment of the vilest odors that ever assaulted the human nose.” “Come, my dear, begin to wash as fast as you can. Tell them to take off socks, coats and shirts; scrub them well, put on clean shirts, ...and lay them in bed.”

## Discussion Questions

Alcott’s account is fiction, but based on her experiences at a hospital in D.C. in Dec. 1862.

- Why does she respond with astonishment at the order to wash and dress the men? How do they feel about it? What mechanisms do nurse and soldier use to make the experience socially acceptable?
- What other duties does Alcott perform as a nurse? Does she note any shortages?



## Phoebe Pember

1823-1913

- Born into a prominent Jewish family in Charleston, SC
- Assumed directorship of a division of the Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, 1862

# The Hospital and the Battlefield



## **Chimborazo Model, National Park Service, Richmond**

The Southern Hospitals Had Similarly Devoted Women, but Lacked Supplies



**Phoebe Pember**  
**Chimborazo nurse**  
**Summer 1864**

“Epicures sometimes managed to entrap them and secure a nice broil for supper, declaring that their flesh was superior to squirrel meat,” she declared. “Perhaps some curious gourmet may wish a recipe for the best mode of cooking them. The rat must be skinned, cleaned, his head cut off and his body laid open upon a square board . . . then baste with bacon fat and roast before a good fire quickly like canvas-back ducks.”



In contrast to the abundance in northern hospitals, southern patients starved, subsisting on inadequate rations and resorting, yes, to roasted rats.

## CSA Hospitals

Phoebe Pember: “The money worthless.” “The railroads were constantly cut so that what had been carefully collected in the country in the form of poultry and Vegetables by hospital agents would be unfit for use by the time the connection would be restored.” Regarding cornbread, “we Measured with a string how large we could afford to cut the squares.” “Everything was reduced to the lowest level, even fuel.” Also mentions thievery, and what the blockade runners could bring.

## Discussion Questions

- Southern hospitals were short of everything—food, fuel, clothing, bedding, Medicines. Why?
- Quinine and opiates were in particularly short supply and urgently needed. Why didn't the blockade runners bring these in—they were certainly lighter than the stoves Phoebe mentioned?

## Quinine

- Undoubtedly effective drug against a common disease in the war, malaria
- Had to be imported; not grown in US
- South tried to find substitutes (dogwood)
- Quinine was smuggled, captured from enemy, and early in the war bought from blockade runners

## Cartoons as an Indicator of What “Everyone Knew.”



### ADVANTAGE OF "FAMINE PRICES."

SICK Boy. "I know one thing—I wish I was in Dixie."

NURSE. "And why do you wish you was in Dixie, you wicked boy?"

SICK BOY. "Because I read that quinine is worth one hundred and fifty dollars an ounce there; and if it was that here you wouldn't pitch it into me so!"

*Harper's Weekly* is a rich source of cartoons; available on line at <http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/the-civil-war.htm>





*Harper's Weekly*  
January 4, 1862

## HARD TIMES IN OLE VARGINNY, AN' WORSE A CUMIN' !

Scene.—Rebel Pickets in Western Virginia.

FIRST PICKET. "Awful Cold, ain't it?"

SECOND PICKET. "Co-o-ld ! yes, an' I'm jist  
gitting another Shake of that Ager, and no  
Quinine in the 'Federacy !"

FIRST PICKET. "Worser still ! Got them  
Blue Devils after me, an' nary drop o'  
Whiskey." (With much feeling.)

SECOND PICKET. "I wish I was Ho-o-me."

[They part, singing, mournfully, DIXIE,  
without the Variations.]

# The Hospital and the Battlefield



**Taking their Quinine**  
*Harper's Weekly*, March 11, 1865

**Final slide.**

**Thank you**