

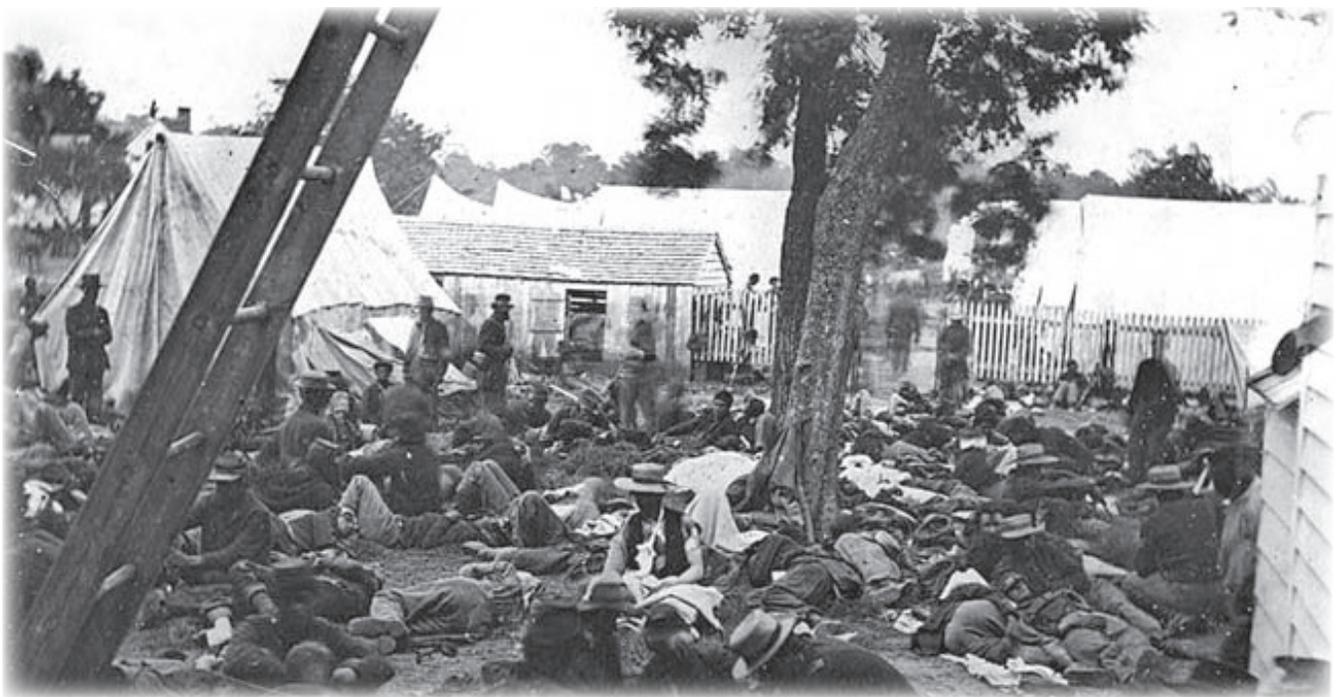
THE CIVIL WAR: MEDICINE, WOUNDS AND DISEASES

The Civil War. Many nations and countries had one. But there was a lot more riding on the American Civil War than just political disagreement. Brave men fought each other for what they believed was right; there were many reasons to choose sides. There were just as many reasons to die for that side. In fact, approximately one out of every four Civil War soldiers died during the conflict.

The Civil War is ranked number one in total number of deaths in any war fought by our nation¹. There were more deaths in this war alone than in World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War and the Korean War combined². These wars are in the top five total number of deaths, and combined they are still less than the Civil War. And even with all this death, a soldier was far more likely to die from an illness, such as typhoid fever, than he was from getting shot. There were nearly 625,000 deaths in the war and 388,580 (well over half) of them were due to this lurking predator. In the final count, disease was the unrivaled contributor of Civil War deaths.

On the Union side alone there were 360,000 deaths and 3 out of every 5 of those were from disease. There were 260,000 on the Confederate side and 2 out of every 3 deaths were from disease!

So why were over half the deaths in America's bloodiest clash due to disease? Well, at that point in time medical progress was just nearing the end of "the medical Middle Ages."³ There was little understanding of the cause of diseases, how to cure



Field Hospital, Savage Station, Virginia. After battle of June 27, 1862

1 From eHistory.com

2 WWI: 116,516 deaths; WWII: 405,399 deaths; Korea: 36,516 deaths; Vietnam: 58,151 deaths. The total for these four wars was 616,582 deaths.

3 www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.htm

them or prevent them. Medical training for doctors, surgeons or physicians was barely adequate, and even medical school graduates had very little experience. Two years of book-learning and a few weeks of training was all that was required to become a doctor. There was also a huge hygiene issue. Many diseases could have been taken care of by doing something as easy as taking showers, clearing the waste away from camp or isolating the sick. Regulations that had been in practice since before George Washington's time were needlessly ignored. The top three killing diseases of the war were dysentery, typhoid fever and pneumonia. These diseases often started off as something simple and easily treated, like a cold, but grew into something fatal, like pneumonia. Other diseases were caused by poor diet and exposure to the elements, also something that was being ignored and could have saved lives.

About half of the deaths from disease during the Civil War were caused by intestinal disorders, mainly typhoid fever, diarrhea, and dysentery. The remainder were from pneumonia and tuberculosis.

Nevertheless the brave doctors and surgeons of the time did the best they could with what they had. Primarily on the Confederate side, whenever medicine was unavailable they would use nature's "substitutes," using American hemlock for opium, dogwood for chamomile, wild jalap for ipecac, hops for laudanum and even dandelion for calomel!⁴

Amputation was also a huge source for disease and infection. And with the sanitary conditions at that time, or lack thereof, fighting infections proved to be a very difficult task. Surgeons rarely cleaned their instruments, because they didn't have time or didn't think it important. Diseases and infections were then quickly spread from patient to patient. Despite this, 75% of the amputation patients survived⁵. And believe it or not, these surgeries actually saved more lives than they didn't. Surprisingly, almost all of the gruesome stories of going through an amputation without anesthetic aren't true. The biting down on a bullet to ease the pain was, more often than not, a myth. Chloroform and ether had already been in use for years before the war. The surgeons would generally use chloroform before-



Hospital with multiple amputees

4 www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.htm

5 www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.htm

hand, so the sounds of screaming usually came from soldiers that were watching or the soldiers that were just informed that they were going to lose a limb. Chloroform was preferred over ether because it worked faster and didn't explode. It was from amputations that surgeons got the nickname "butchers". This isn't at all shocking when you consider that three out of four surgeries on the battlefield were amputations.

There were roughly 350,000 wounds recorded in the war, and 60,000 of them led to amputation.

So what about afterwards? What happened when all these wounded soldiers came home? As a matter of fact many of them didn't. There were so many deaths and so much destruction that many of the soldiers that did return had no home to return to. The entire nation was in debt, and some states had to spend a part of what little money they had just on prosthetic limbs. So even if the soldiers, now veterans, had a home to come to, many of them couldn't enjoy it. They weren't of much use on the farm or business with an arm or leg missing. That is, if the farm or business wasn't destroyed from the warfare. Also many of them had chronic illnesses. For some poor soldiers, the diarrhea or fever that they caught at camp during the war haunted them for the rest of their lives. Some of them even came home as opium or morphine addicts from what was supposed to help, but now hindered. The veterans that were fortunate enough to survive the bullets, diseases, infections and amputations now came home to devastation, destruction and emotional turmoil.

However, there is at least one bright light in this cloud of gloom. Even though it took the Civil War to make a change, America's medical field was finally progressing. Doctors and surgeons now knew the best ways to treat a patient, the right amount of chloroform for an amputation, and the most important, the necessity for cleanliness. During the war many surgeons realized that infection and disease were caused by the unsanitary conditions of the average battle camp. Although they still didn't think it as important as other things, both sides benefited from this new information. "Throughout the war, both the South and the North struggled to improve the level of medical care given to their men. In many ways, their efforts assisted in the birth of modern medicine in the United States. More complete records on medical and surgical activities were kept than ever before, doctors became more adept at surgery and at the use of anesthesia, and perhaps most importantly, a greater understanding of the relationship between cleanliness, diet and disease was gained not only by the medical establishment but by the public at large."⁶

Even though there were so many obstacles to overcome during and after the war, at least there was medical progression, possibly one of the greatest achievements of the Great American Civil War.



Surgeon's Tools

DISEASES

This is a list of some of the common diseases and their cures during and after the war. It also shows the number of men buried in Greenwood Cemetery who received pension for these diseases that we know of. The cures listed are what the doctors prescribed at the time. Sometimes the cures were just as deadly as the diseases.

CATARRH

DEFINITION: Inflammation of the mucous membranes with increased flow of mucous.

CURES: Dr. Blosser's catarrh remedy was smoking a mixture of herbs, flowers, leaves and berries, but not tobacco or "habit forming drugs."

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: 7 (including asthma and lung disease)

DYSENTERY

DEFINITION: Many different intestinal diseases with inflammation of the bowels, abdominal pain and bloody diarrhea.

CURES: Blackberry Tea

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: 31 (including piles and chronic diarrhea)

PNEUMONIA

DEFINITION: Inflammatory condition of the lung, especially the alveoli, or when the lungs fill with fluid.

CURES: Bleeding (removing of "bad" blood), alcohol, opium and quinine, mustard plasters (soaked cloth [poultice] of mustard seed powder).

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: 3

RHEUMATISM

DEFINITION: Chronic inflammation of the joints; also an obsolete term for rheumatic fever.

CURES: A poultice of vinegar and very hot water; massage of joints; time.

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: 23

SCURVY

DEFINITION: A disease marked by debility (weakness), anemia (decrease in number of red blood cells), edema (dropsy, abnormal accumulation of fluid beneath the skin), and ulceration (open sore) of the gums. Due to a lack of Vitamin C.

CURES: Green vegetables

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: 3

TUBERCULOSIS

DEFINITION: Infectious disease causing tubercles in the lungs. The symptoms are fever, weakness, emaciation (weight loss) and chronic cough.

CURES: Even in the 21st century this can be treated but is extremely difficult to cure⁷. Treatment includes isolation, rest, sunshine and fresh air.

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: None

TYPHOID FEVER

DEFINITION: Acute infectious disease with continued rising fever, physical and mental depression, pink spots, loss of appetite, and dry mouth with fur tongue as symptoms.

CURES: Treated with purgative calomel, quinine opium pills for pain and diarrhea, cold compresses for fever, blistering, whiskey if the patient collapsed and oral turpentine (to cure intestinal parasites or as a general cure-all.)

NO. OF GREENWOOD VETS WHO CONTRACTED THIS: 4

OTHER DISEASES

BOWEL COMPLAINTS: Open bowels were treated with a plug of opium. Closed bowels were treated with the infamous “blue mass,” a mixture of mercury and chalk.

MALARIA: Treated with quinine or sometimes even turpentine if quinine was not available.

CAMP ITCH: Treated by ridding the body of the pests or with poke-root solution (poisonous to most mammals, yet when cooked properly was a Southern United States staple)

GENERAL WOUNDS OR DISEASES: Whiskey and other forms of alcohol were used to treat wounds and disease.

7 wikipedia.org/wiki/tuberculosisdiagnosis.en

WANTED.

The Medical Purveyor's Department, Charlotte, N.C., is in need of the following articles for the use of the Army, for which the annexed prices will be paid:

ROOTS, HERBS and BARKS.,

Seneka Snake Root	per lb	60 cts	White Oak bark	per lb.	20 cts
Pocoon or Blood Root		40 "	Meadow Sweet		25 "
Wild Cherry Bark		30 "	American Columbo root		50 "
Indian Turnip		20 "	Willow bark		20 "
American Epecac—root		\$1 00	Tulip tree bark or White Poplar		20 "
Blooming Spurge—root		50 cts	Persimmon bark, from root		20 "
Indian Physic—root		25 "	Centaury herb		20 "
Indian Tobacco		25 "	Bonsett		20 "
Black Snake root		50 "	Butterfly Weed, or Pleurley Root		30 "
Poke root		20 "	Dandelion root		30 "
Cranesbill		20 "	Hops		\$1 00
Blackberry root		50 "	Wild Senna		50 cts
American Gentian		20 "	May Apple, or Mandrake		75 "
Dogwood bark		25 "	Butternut—inner bark of root		50 "
Fever Root		20 "	Hesbane—leaves and seed		75 "
American Hellebone root		20 "	Barberry leaves		50 "
Peppermint Leaves		25 "	Flabase		25 "
Skunk Cabbage—root		20 "	Soctch Broom—tops of stems		50 "
Jamestown Weed, seed & leaves		20 "	Pink Root		50 "
Hemlock leaves		20 "	Worm Seed		25 "
Hemlock Seed		50 "	Calamus		25 "
Wintergreen, or Partridge Berry		50 "	Wild Ginger, or Canada snake root		50 "
Horsemint		20 "	Queen's Root		50 "
Sassafras—bark of root		20 "	Slippery Elm		50 "
Sassafras pith		\$5 00	Red Pepper		\$1 00
Ginseng Root		50 cts	Anise seed		50 "
Sarsparilla root		75 "	Spear Mint		25 "
Lavender—leaves and stem		20 "	Bitter Sweet,		
Flaxseed	per bushel	\$2 00	or Woody Nightshade		50 "

BOTTLES and VIALS.

Quart Champagne Bottles	\$ 25	per doz	Pewter Bottles	75 cts.	per doz.
Pint	"	"	75 "	"	"
Quart wine (claret)	"	100 "	8 Oz. Vials.	75 "	"
Quart Castor Oil	"	75 "	6 and 4 Oz. Vials	60 "	"
			1 and 2 Oz. Vials	30 "	"

To be delivered in any quantity at the N.C. Military Institute, or to Drs. Duffy and Arendell, Medical Purveyor's Agents, who will visit the various towns in this State.

M. Howard,
SURGEON AND MEDICAL PURVEYOR, CHARLOTTE N.C.

JULY 16, 1862