

Caring For the Wounded: The National Museum of Civil War Medicine

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We're here at the National Museum of Civil War Medicine in Frederick, Maryland. One of the common questions we get here at the museum is why are we located in a place like Frederick? Certainly there are other, possibly better-known sites for Civil War, places like Gettysburg, Vicksburg, or around Richmond. But the fact of the matter is the museum really belongs here and for a number of different reasons. First of all, you have to understand that Frederick and the surrounding areas were involved in a series of campaigns. In 1862, the Union and Confederate armies came through in a campaign that would eventually end in the bloody battle of Antietam. In 1863, both of the armies were through this area again on their way to Gettysburg just to our north. And finally, in 1864 there was a major campaign with an attempt to take Washington by General Jubal Early that would end in the battle of Monocacy and eventually force the Confederates back into the Shenandoah Valley. All of these troop movements around this area really testify to the fact that Frederick was an important center during the Civil War; it was a center for transportation, but it was also a center for medicine.

When the war first broke out in 1861, surgeon Tripler of the Union army came to Frederick and reported that it was an ideal location for a major hospital site. That hospital site would be the Hessian Barracks. Now the Hessian Barracks had been around obviously since the time of the American Revolution and had been in constant federal ownership ever since, Meriwether Lewis stopped there in 1804 during the beginnings of the Lewis and Clark Expeditions, but during the Civil War the building was laying more or less fallow. Tripler decided it would be a great location for a hospital because of the supplies of ample fresh water, the clean mountain air, and the ample transportation provided not only by the national road and the roads into Washington, DC, but also the rail lines that came in here from the B&O railroad and its proximity to the C&O Canal.

So in 1861 a hospital was established that would see over 40,000 patients during the course of the Civil War. After the battle of Antietam Frederick would be turned into a massive hospital with over 29 hospital sites, mostly converted public buildings, churches, and religious institutions that weren't churches such as convents. And these 29 hospitals would serve the patients coming from Antietam in addition to those already being served by the Hessian Barracks. Later on in 1864, again we would be seen as a major hospital center after the Battle of Monocacy.

During the whole course of this, you have to understand that we just aren't talking about an army; we're really talking about a civilian population that is entangled in this war. And certainly the citizens of Frederick, especially during the 1862 campaign when so many precious supplies were used up by the armies here, would really suffer. That suffering would come to a head in 1864 when General Jubal Early would actually hold the city of Frederick and to the west, our sister city, Middletown just west on the National Road. He would hold both of these cities hostage; they would require a ransom to be paid and in fact the ransom money is paid out in 1864 by the banks of the city. The city didn't actually have the cash to pay the general. Those debts would not be paid off until the latter half of the 20th Century, actually well into the 1950's, nearly 100 years after the ransoming of the town. So the citizens of this area certainly were a major part of the war.

They were also a part of the war with the loss of their churches, with the nursing that they were expected to provide, and it was one of the reasons that Frederick was chosen as a hospital center, but also with the privations that come with all the political turmoil that would develop around these various armies coming into town. Being a somewhat divided community, when the Union was in town it certainly made things uncomfortable for those who may have had confederate sympathies. And the same could be said for those in the Union in 1862 and again in 1864 when the Confederate army of northern Virginia would come to their back door. Those with Union sympathies could certainly suffer a certain amount of abuse during those times.

Now, if you want to relate Frederick to the area there's something medically very important that we need to talk about that comes from the Antietam campaign. Actually, the 29 hospital sites were part of an over-arching change in military medical planning. And that change in medical planning went by the name "The Letterman Plan." It was an over-arching plan to re-vamp the army's medical department including logistics, command and control, the very theory behind which medicine worked; going from a very reactive system to a proactive system. In 1864, this plan would actually become the law of the land by act of Congress, and today it's the basis for our 9-1-1 emergency medical systems; it's the basis for the way we handle battlefield casualties in the War on Terror, and it is, in fact, the way our major hospitals and emergency rooms work throughout the United States and most of Western Europe.

Few people really understand just how much Civil War went on in this area and what the impact was, but in fact, Frederick County and those surrounding counties were at some of the very epicenters of some of the most important events in American history. You also have to realize our close proximity very early in the war, even before the war was really a hot war, a shooting war, and that's our proximity to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. Harper's Ferry, of course, was the site of the famous 1859 John Brown Raid and it probably really demonstrates

some of the political turmoil that the local citizenry here would have to have gone through. Being at the very center of the beginning of this conflict, we were set up very early for what would later come to pass as the armies came through this community.

Our museum is not in one of the original hospital sites in Frederick but that doesn't mean that we don't have a connection to the medical story. This building in 1862 was the White Hill and Company's Undertakers, as you can see behind me and it was an embalming station used by the federal government by the army for those men who died in the hospitals here in Frederick and were to be interred later at Mt. Olivet's Cemetery. They were brought here, where their bodies were preserved. Now, understand that in the 19th Century they didn't preserve them for viewing, they preserved them primarily for shipment home, and that means that we had to bury the man, but we also had to prepare some type of grave marker so the body could be identified later. In the case of Charles Green, one of the men who died in the hospitals here in Frederick, that meant that they had a temporary grave marker painted and those grave markers and the coffins the men were buried in were made right here in this building. That temporary grave marker would be put up when the body was claimed by the family, in this case for a return to Rhode Island, the temporary grave marker then became a shipping label for the coffin. They are very rare artifacts today, and we're very, very encouraged that we were able to find one and very happy to have it back on display in the very building where it was made.

The Frederick area saw many Civil War notables during the course of the war. Obviously, generals like Meade, Jackson, Robert E. Lee and McClellan all came through here and as a matter of fact in 1862 Abraham Lincoln came to the city of Frederick and traveled out through the countryside in Antietam to view the battlefield and to talk to the wounded. Another one who came at this time, a very important woman, was Clara Barton. She would come to the battle of Antietam primarily to deliver supplies, medical supplies which she had collected, to the Union Army. She actually ended up nursing a number of men and even performed a minor surgery with her penknife, removing a bullet from the cheek of a soldier that she found at the Poffenberger House. After the war, she is obviously going to be best known for developing the American Red Cross which actually was started in Geneva, Switzerland in 1864 during the course of our war. When she was traveling through Europe after the war, she understood what the Red Cross would mean, and understood that she could bring it back to the United States and continue the work that she, the Sanitary Commission, and the United States Christian Commission had all started during the war. In 1881, she would bring the American Red Cross back to the United States.

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