



FOR US *the* LIVING

MEDICAL TREATMENT AND INNOVATION IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR





The year was 1863, the height of the Civil War. In the field, soldiers on both sides were dying not only from battle wounds but from dysentery, pneumonia, and smallpox. Amidst the brutality and the overwhelming human suffering, however, medical science responded with creativity, innovation, and compassion.

In Richmond, the Medical College of Virginia (an antecedent of the modern-day VCU Health System) helped fuel this innovation through the training of new physicians. The college graduated a class during each year of the war, something no other Southern school still in existence can say.

These physicians were in great demand on both sides, and many brought creativity as well as commitment to their battlefield labors. In 1863, for instance, physician John J.

Terrell, stationed at Lynchburg's General Hospital No. 1, began to pack wounds with lint to exclude air, a practice that predated modern germ theory. It was one of many innovations that helped advance American medicine during this era.

As historian Peter Houck writes, "Post Civil War medicine improved because this major event . . . cloistered numerous doctors who had been working in a vacuum into a crucible where they had to communicate, share ideas, set standards."

"It is for us the living . . . to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS, NOVEMBER 19, 1863

INNOVATIONS OF CIVIL WAR MEDICINE

- + Development of the "general pavilion hospital," with better ventilation and access to patients.
- + The ward system, whereby patients with similar health problems were segregated. This, in itself, stimulated more accurate assessments and treatment plans.
- + Expansion of ambulance systems, progressing from horse-drawn wagons to trains and ships.
- + Significant improvements in medical education and training.
- + Establishment of the American Red Cross.
- + Advances in nursing, spearheaded by the Ladies Relief Societies on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.
- + Improved medical record-keeping.
- + The beginnings of specialty care, especially in orthopedics.
- + The use of prosthetic limbs, beginning when a Confederate private, James Edward Hanger, fashioned an artificial leg out of barrel staves.



PAGE 3: Wounded soldiers gather at the field hospital at Savage Station, Va. after the battle of June 27, 1862.

TOP: A Zouave ambulance crew demonstrates the removal of wounded soldiers from the field.

BOTTOM: Ward K of Armory Square Hospital, Washington, DC

