

CIVIL WAR AND MEDICINE



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

Civil War and Medicine

Introduction

Medical sciences and medical education in the United States shortly before the Civil War were very different from what they are today. Most doctors were poorly trained. It was not unusual for a doctor to practice after receiving only several months of medical training. Particularly in smaller towns and in rural areas, doctors did not have any formal medical education at all. Furthermore, American medical schools did not keep up with their European counterparts. If an American wanted to gain comprehensive medical education aligned with the most recent findings in medical sciences, they usually traveled to Europe and studied at European medical universities.

In the mid-19th century, even the best-trained doctors did not know what we know today. No correct theories of disease or germ theory existed yet, and doctors were guessing rather than knew what was causing disease. Consequently, their methods of treating patients were not what doctors today consider suitable and effective. However, several important medical developments were already known at the time. Perhaps the most important in the context of the Civil War was using opiates, or natural substances that interact with central the nervous system, to ease the pain. However, doctors did not know at the time that while helping with pain, opiates are also very addictive and can cause extreme harm to a patient.

Because of these developments, medical care during the Civil War was limited. Doctors tended to soldiers who were already sick, in pain, or wounded but did not offer any solutions to prevent disease. Crowded and unsanitary conditions in military barracks contributed to the rapid transfer of contagious diseases, e.g. measles, yellow fever, cholera, or typhoid. Poor diet and polluted water commonly caused gastrointestinal (digestive) disorders. Amputation, which typically meant removing one's limb, was a major method of addressing battlefield wounds. Hospitals were built quickly, haphazardly, and without proper accommodations. Doctors, many of whom were young and inexperienced, worked long shifts without much rest. Two out of three Civil War deaths occurred from disease rather than as a result of a battle.

In this activity, you will examine a Civil War-period military order concerning “a sick call” and a photo showing hospitals that cared for the sick and wounded during the Civil War.

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General
Order
No 15

Head Quarters Division
Fort Smith Ark
Jan 17/61

Sick call in each regiment must be sounded out 7 o'clock A.M. and under no circumstances must it be neglected. At the call the 1st Sergeants of Companies must send the sick of their Companies with a written list of them in a book kept for that purpose to the Serg^s of the Regt who will examine and place them on their reports if he considers it necessary.

The Sick report of the Surgeons embracing every member of the Regiment excused from duty for the day will be handed into the Adjutant's office by him immediately after sick call.

No officer or Soldier whose name does not appear on the report of the Surgeon will be excused from duty.

This Order must be rigidly and efficiently enforced by Regimental and Battalion Commanders.

By order of Col McInloch
Col Comdr
L L Lomax Capt + Adj^t
Genl Denison

The above is a true and correct extract
H. D. Garden
Adj^t Gen 2nd Brigade

An extract from General Order No. 15 concerning the rules of sick call, from the collection of Orders concerning Arkansas Cavalry troops written to and from John Rice Homer Scott during the Civil War, January 3, [18]61 (John Rice Homer Scott Collection, 1836-1895)

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Questions:

1. What is a sick call in the military? If you do not know, try to define this term from the context provided in this document. If you are still not sure, look it up.
2. What were the rules of a sick call for the Eighth Regiment described in this document?
3. Who could be “excused from duty” (i.e., released from their military responsibilities) every day?
4. Check again what time a sick call needed to be conducted every day. What kind of problems could that cause for soldiers? For example, what likely happened to those soldiers who got sick after a daily report was submitted?

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A hospital complex in Little Rock during the Civil War in what is today the MacArthur Park, 1864
(Civil War: Places Photograph Collection, 1863-1865)

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Questions:

1. When and where was this photo taken? See the photo caption for more information.
2. What are the buildings in the photo? Describe the buildings.
3. Do the buildings in this photo look like hospitals today?
4. Why do you think there are several separate buildings and not one large hospital building in the photo?
5. Find images of other hospitals from the Civil War era (many are available online). Does the hospital complex in this photo look like a typical or unusual Civil War-era medical structure?
6. Look up the area where this photo was taken today. Does it look the same or different? Are the buildings seen in this photo still there? If not, why?