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Lancaster County and Civil War Medicine: Civilian Physicians Turned Military Surgeons

Scott L. Mingus, Sr.

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The Early History of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lancaster

James M. Gerhart and Joseph M. Herman

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Lancaster County and Civil War Medicine: Civilian Physicians Turned Military Surgeons

Scott L. Mingus, Sr.



Surgeons of the Third Division, Ninth Army Corps
in front of their tent near Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864.

Source: Library of Congress

At the time the Civil War began in the spring of 1861, more than 115,000 people called Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, home. It was a bustling, commercially successful region, one that provided stable employment opportunities in mills, factories, and railroads, as well as fertile, well-watered farmland for those residents who desired an agrarian lifestyle. The population had increased by 17.5% since the 1850 US Census with foreign immigrants (many from Germany and other parts of Western Europe) making up a significant portion of the new dwellers. With the rise in population came the need for additional medical attention, and the 1850s saw a commensurate increase in physicians hanging their shingles throughout the county. From small-town general practitioners to a variety of specialists in Lancaster borough, the medical profession flourished in the area.¹

The contentious election of 1860 saw the rise of the Republican Party to power in the North, a development which unsettled many in the South who feared that radical elements in the young party would prevent the westward expansion of slavery, or, worse yet, seek its

total and immediate abolition. Firebrands in South Carolina led efforts for the state to secede from the Union; six other Southern states joined them in the new Confederate States of America before Lincoln took office in March 1861. Within weeks of the inauguration, Rebels around Charleston, South Carolina, bombarded and forced the surrender of Union-held Fort Sumter. The news stunned the now-divided nation, and eager men of military age flocked to recruiting stations in both the North and South. Most believed the war would be of short duration and they would soon return home as victors. Most of the new Union regiments raised in the spring of 1861 were scheduled to serve for only 90 days.

President Lincoln issued several calls for volunteers in the first year of the war, and from them the War Department formed scores of new infantry and cavalry regiments, as well as artillery batteries. The two most populous states, New York and Pennsylvania, naturally provided a significant portion of the Union troops that would eventually fight in the Eastern Theater.²

As the fledgling Federal soldiers marched off to war, local doctors often accompanied them. Each

regiment had to recruit one surgeon and at least one assistant surgeon before it was allowed to deploy for duty. It was not uncommon for army physicians to serve with regiments from outside of their home region, but most tended, at least initially, to enlist with their patients in local units. Brigade-level surgeons often carried the equivalent rank and pay of a major, with assistant surgeons usually being captains or lieutenants. Hence, these assistants often accepted promotions to another regiment when the surgeon's post became open.³

***Dr. James P. Andrews
and Dr. Augustus Rox Nebinger***

A prime recruiting ground early in the war was the Lancaster County Medical Society under the direction of its president Dr. James P. Andrews from 1861 to 1862. Andrews himself would volunteer for duty in September 1862 in the 2nd Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia, one of several temporary regiments raised by Governor Andrew G. Curtin to defend southern Pennsylvania during the Confederates' northward thrust that culminated in the bloody battle of Antietam. Another local practitioner, Augustus Rox Nebinger, also served with the "emergency men" during



Dr. John Levergood.
From a drawing by F. P. Mentzer.
LancasterHistory.org 1090287

the Maryland Campaign, acting as the assistant surgeon for the 12th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia. Dr. Nebinger, a York County native whose eldest brother William was the surgeon of the 56th Pennsylvania at the battle of Gettysburg, also was variously the assistant surgeon of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry (also known as the 108th Volunteers) and later as the assistant surgeon of the 158th Pennsylvania Infantry (Drafted Militia). He was in his late twenties when he served; he would die at the age of fifty in 1884.⁴

Dr. John Levergood

Several other members of the Lancaster County Medical Society

also served in the Federal armed forces during the Civil War. They included John Levergood of Lancaster borough. He was a native of Windsor Township in eastern York County and had graduated from the University of Pennsylvania medical school in 1847. He enlisted on September 14, 1861, as the surgeon of the 51st Pennsylvania infantry regiment. Levergood would stay in the army for the duration of the war, mustering out of the service from the 101st Pennsylvania on June 30, 1865. He was among the longest-serving Lancasterians among the physicians who had not been in the army before the rebellion. He rose to become a medical examiner, one of the army's highest ranks for a physician.⁵

Dr. Edward de W. Breneman

Another Lancaster County doctor who answered Lincoln's call to arms was Edward de W. Breneman, the assistant surgeon of the 1st Pennsylvania Reserves, who enrolled in Company B, the "Union Guards," on June 6, 1861. A couple months after enlisting, Breneman sent a letter home to the Lancaster Express, which published it on August 8. He discussed the circumstances of a cold-blooded shooting of a

pro-Union citizen by a quarreling Secessionist at a grocery and liquor store in Howard County, Maryland. A local doctor named White had called in the army physician as a consultant to see if the victim could be saved, but despite Breneman's and White's best efforts, he died ten hours after being shot. The constant tensions between angry pro-Southern residents and pro-Union men kept the new soldiers on their toes. "We are here in the heart of the enemy's country, and the strictest vigilance is required from our pickets in order to guard against surprise..." Breneman wrote. "It is quite perilous for any man to attempt to pass our pickets after 8 o'clock in the evening." However, despite the danger, "It will be gratifying to the friends of the Lancaster Boys to know that we are all well and tolerably well satisfied here...the weather is quite warm—on Saturday, 90 degrees in the shade—the country poorly cultivated, but abounding in blackberries and whortleberries, game is plenty, the facilities for bathing are good, and I am glad to see the men avail themselves of it—not much sickness, and none in the hospital. Prevailing diseases, Pneumonia, Influenza, Dysentery, &c."⁶

A week later, Dr. Brenemen boldly predicted a short outcome for the conflict: "When the veteran [General Winfield] Scott and the brave [Major General George B.] McClellan issue forward, I doubt not it will be to victory." The overly optimistic Breneman could never have imagined that the Civil War would drag on for almost four more years. He was among the surgeons who labored for days to treat injured men following the battle of Gettysburg. As with many of the surgeons, the pressures of army life and the trauma of working with battle casualties eventually took a considerable toll. On Sunday, August 9, another veteran Army of the Potomac doctor, Cyrus Bacon, Jr., reported, "Breneman was well drunk last night. He hesitates, he says, whether to go to Grace Church or Church of Repentance. And being told of being drunk last night, [he] acknowledged he had fallen some." Later that Sabbath day, Bacon "found Breneman near [the] office, gloriously drunk." In the summer of 1864, Breneman and his fellow overworked army surgeons would have to deal with the overwhelming casualties from General Ulysses S. Grant's ill-fated Union assaults on Robert E. Lee's



Dr. John B. Huber of Providence Township (1840–1876).
LancasterHistory.org 1100480

firmly entrenched Confederates at the battle of Cold Harbor.⁷



More than three dozen other physicians with strong local connections served as army surgeons or assistant surgeons during the Civil War. They included Benjamin Rohrer, who served as the surgeon of the 39th Pennsylvania shortly after the war began. Benjamin Barr

joined Rohrer the next year as his assistant. They both mustered out when the regiment's three-year term of service expired in June 1864. Israel M. Groff was appointed as the assistant surgeon of the 34th Pennsylvania in 1862; he resigned in July 1863. After the war, he practiced in Ephrata. John F. Huber served the men of the 49th Pennsylvania as assistant surgeon the early part of the war before being promoted to the surgeon's post of the 131st Pennsylvania in September 1862. Other volunteers included Jacob C. Gatchell of the 53rd Pennsylvania, James J. Straum of the 59th Pennsylvania (also known as the 2nd Pennsylvania Cavalry), John Houston of the 81st Pennsylvania, Daniel D. Swift who served the 2nd Pennsylvania Provisional Cavalry and the 126th Pennsylvania Infantry before joining the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry; and John W. Rawlins of the 88th and 116th Pennsylvania.⁸

Dr. Joseph Andrew Erastus Reed

Joseph Andrew Erastus Reed (spelled Read in some army accounts) was a York County native and University of Pennsylvania graduate who practiced in Mountville for several years before the war. At



Dr. J. A. E. Reed, 155th Pennsylvania Volunteers.
LancasterHistory.org 2010122

the age of thirty, he enrolled as the assistant surgeon of the 155th Pennsylvania on September 12, 1862, and joined his regiment on its march into Maryland. He tended to the wounded at the battle of Antietam. Reed was promoted to surgeon with the rank of major on April 10, 1863. After the battle of Gettysburg, he and other Union physicians help treat several wounded Rebels, including two lieutenants from the 15th Alabama who were shot during the attack on Little Round Top. One of them was the younger brother of Colonel

William Oates, who led the ill-fated assault. Dr. Reed resigned his position on January 2, 1865, and returned home.⁹

Dr. Abraham Pfantz Frick

Abraham Pfantz Frick was in the 101st and then the 103rd Pennsylvania; he was from Neffsville in Manheim Township. Frick had just graduated from the University of Pennsylvania medical school in 1861 before enlisting. His wife Phebe Mary K. (Smith) accompanied him to his post in Plymouth, North Carolina. When Brigadier General Robert F. Hoke's 4,500 veteran Confederates attacked the badly outnumbered Union garrison on April 17, 1864, Mary Frick and other refugees hastily boarded the steamship *Massasoit* which took the non-combatants to safety on Roanoke Island. However, her husband was not as fortunate. Dr. Frick was among the hundreds of Union prisoners taken when Colonel Henry W. Wessells reluctantly surrendered Fort Williams on April 20. Frick had stayed behind to help treat the wounded men and was briefly interred in Libby Prison in Richmond, the capital city of the Confederacy. After being paroled, he returned to his badly

depleted regiment, but many of his former patients were destined for the infamous Andersonville prison in Georgia, where 132 men of the regiment died. Frick later served at Fortress Monroe near Hampton, Virginia, before being assigned to various posts in North Carolina. He was discharged in January 1865. He eventually rejoined the army and served in the Old West before dying in 1913 in San Patricio County, Texas, where he is buried.¹⁰



Isaac C. Hogendobler of Silver Spring in West Hempfield Township served with the 122nd and 143rd regiments. His neighbor Samuel Getz Gray was the assistant surgeon of the 29th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia and later the 181st Infantry. Another local regimental surgeon was Francis G. Albright of Lancaster borough. He began his military career as the assistant surgeon of the 79th Pennsylvania Infantry before being promoted to the surgeon's post of the 19th Pennsylvania Cavalry. He was an 1851 graduate of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania. The loss of so many experienced doctors weighed heavily on the county, but it gave a good opportunity for



Dr. Samuel T. Davis and his dog, with chauffeur, Phares Auxer in front of the doctor's office, around the turn of the nineteenth century. LancasterHistory.org 2030431

younger physicians to begin or expand their practices. Several were straight out of medical school, but even those ranks were being affected by the war effort.¹¹

***Ambrose J. Herr
and Dr. Samuel T. Davis***

For example, the youthful Ambrose J. Herr of Strasburg Township, a recent graduate of Jefferson Medical College, was

commissioned as the assistant surgeon of the 61st Pennsylvania Infantry in 1861. A year later, he became the regimental surgeon of the 68th Pennsylvania and served until the war ended in 1865. Several other young men, including Samuel T. Davis of Lancaster, were still in the midst of their medical studies when the war began. A student at Millersville State Normal School in 1861, he was concurrently studying

medicine under the direction of a physician from Huntingdon County. Davis postponed his studies and enrolled in the 15th Pennsylvania Infantry for a three-month term. He stayed in the army as a staff officer before becoming a captain in the 77th Pennsylvania. He survived being wounded in a battle at Resaca, Georgia, during William T. Sherman's attack. After the war, Davis resumed his medical studies under Dr. S. B. Hartman of Millersville and later practiced there and in Lancaster. He died in 1908 in Mexico. His younger brother, M. L. Davis, served in the army from 1863 until the end of the war; he too was a physician in Millersville and Lancaster in the 1870s and 80s.

***Dr. Samuel R. Sample
and Dr. Benjamin Franklin Sides***

Other Lancaster County medical practitioners who enlisted in the army in the first two years of the Civil War included Samuel R. Sample of Intercourse in Paradise Township. A graduate of Jefferson Medical College and the son of a prominent doctor originally from York County, in early August 1862 Dr. Sample became the assistant surgeon of the 49th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. However, his

term of service proved brief. He suffered a severe attack of typhoid fever, an illness rampant in the regiment that year, and was obliged to retire from the army on December 2. He eventually recovered and returned to private practice. He was replaced by forty-year-old Dr. Benjamin Franklin Sides, a native of Providence Township in south-central Lancaster County. Sides served until the end of the war. He is buried in Quarryville.

Many Lancaster County residents followed the war news through local newspapers or from passersby who happened to have first-hand knowledge of the events. In late June 1863, the war came uncomfortably close. Rumors circulated that some of Robert E. Lee's legions were marching toward Harrisburg, with a second powerful column heading east toward Gettysburg and York. Dr. Henry Palmer, the Wisconsin-born commander of the 2,000-bed US Army General Hospital in York, had feared such an occurrence and had previously taken steps to safeguard his patients. The ambulatory ones received arms and began drilling. His assistant, Dr. Alexander G. Blair, escorted 64 soldiers who were seriously injured but could travel via train to

Wrightsville. They crossed the mile-and-a-quarter-long covered bridge that spanned the Susquehanna River between Wrightsville and Columbia, arriving after midnight on June 23. Several local women provided food and temporary bedding. Fourteen more men arrived via train the next day, and Dr. Blair eventually consolidated his charges in a new school building, hoisting a bright red flag to identify it as a military hospital.

On Sunday afternoon, June 28, more than 2,000 Confederate infantry, cavalry, and artillerymen under Brigadier General John B. Gordon marched through York to Wrightsville, where a motley collection of Pennsylvania emergency militiamen guarded the western approaches to the bridge. That evening, Gordon attacked and drove the militia back across the bridge, which was set on fire to prevent the Rebels from entering Lancaster County. One of the retreating militiamen, Charles H. Voute of Company B, 27th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia, suffered a heart attack from all the excitement and exertion; he was carried into a house on Locust Street and a doctor was summoned. A Pottsville *Miner's Journal* newspaperman

who doubled as a lieutenant in the regiment penned that Private Voute was “seriously ill with an attack of palpitation of the heart. Poor fellow, it is feared that he cannot recover.” The stricken soldier indeed lived but never served again.¹²



During the emergency of 1863, Governor Curtin called out more than 7,000 militiamen to serve until the Rebels had left Pennsylvania. Each of the new temporary regiments, as required, had a formal medical staff, including the 47th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia's Dr. Brainard Leaman of Lancaster County. Others included Conrad Ruttgers (53rd PVM); R. B. Watson (55th PVM); John T. De Mund (58th PVM); and Jesse H. Davis who served in a temporary cavalry battalion. By late July, the Rebel threat had ended and the doctors returned to private practice after their respective regiments mustered out of the service. Most of them, unlike their counterparts serving in the Federal armies, did not have to deal with the stress of treating battle casualties. Still, their service helped the men maintain their health and few of the emergency men perished from disease, stress, or exhaustion.¹³

As the war escalated and the Union armies expanded, the need for trained physicians increased correspondingly. Lancaster County native Martin L. Herr, though he only had one term of study at Jefferson Medical College, entered the medical department of the Army of the Cumberland in Tennessee in 1862. After graduating from the Medical University of Nashville in 1864, he became an army surgeon and became known as “among the most skillful in surgical practice.” He left the service in 1866 and settled in Lancaster.

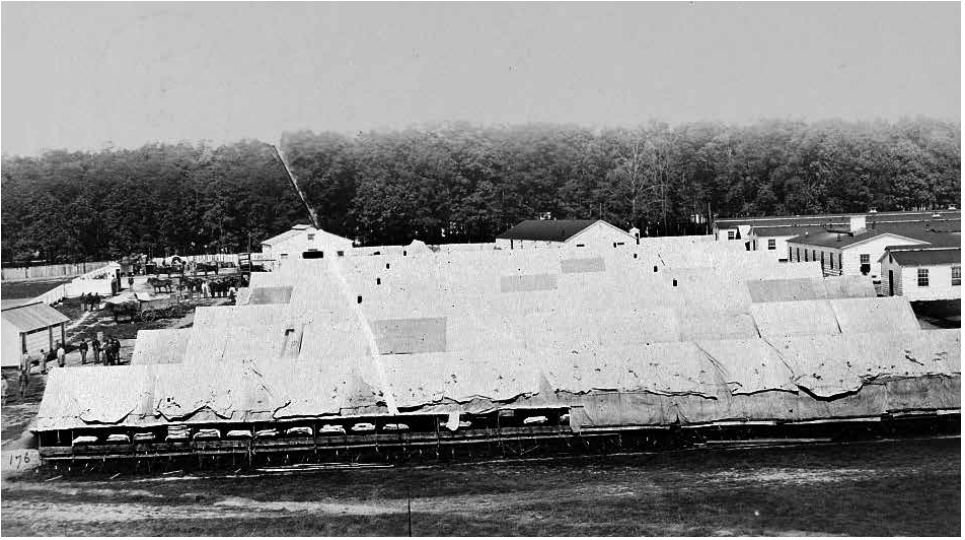
Other physicians from Lancaster County who enrolled in the middle or toward the end of the war included Adam Wenger of the 105th Pennsylvania Infantry; Joseph R. Martin of the 124th; John Henry Longenecker, born in Lancaster in 1823, of the 130th; Abraham M. Barr of the 142 and 192nd; George W. Withers of the 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry; Isaac Bowman of the 167th; George Mays of the 93rd and the 178th; and John M. McCreary of the 201st Pennsylvania.¹⁴ Winfield Scott Yundt of Blue Ball tended to the 45th Infantry as one of its assistant surgeons from 1863 before resigning on May 18, 1865, because he was not promoted to fill the chief

surgeon's spot (Governor Curtin instead appointed a stranger to the regiment). Yundt briefly served in the 45th alongside C. Edward Iddings, a non-practicing Quaker from the southern part of Lancaster County. “Both were competent physicians,” recalled the regimental chaplain, the Reverend F. A. Gast, who was Iddings' tent-mate. He found Iddings to be “an agreeable and estimable companion” and Dr. Yundt to be “genial” and “capable as a medical officer.”¹⁵

Dr. Francis Hinkle

A pair of doctors from Lancaster County served in the Union Navy during the Civil War. Francis Hinkle, born near Reading in Berks County in 1824, was a graduate of the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania. In 1846, he moved to Marietta and practiced there until the outbreak of the Civil War. Among his contributions was the first recorded use of anesthetics in Lancaster County in 1847. A Republican in his political leanings, he enrolled in the Union Navy as an assistant surgeon in August 1861 before resigning because of illness.

Hinkle, after recovering his health the next year, served on the medical staff of Campbell US General



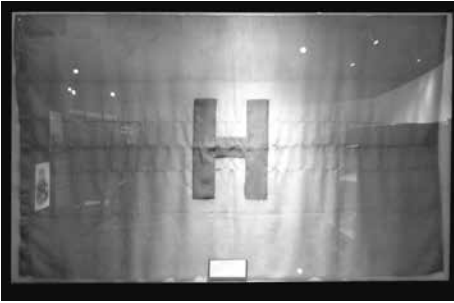
Tent wards of the sprawling Harewood (Campbell) Hospital near Washington, where Dr. Francis Hinkle served for a time. Source: Library of Congress

Army Hospital near Washington, D.C., where he was credited with discovering that permanganate of potash could be used to treat gangrene as well as acting as an antiseptic for instruments and hand-washing. Hinkle also experimented with using the compound as an embalming fluid; preserving one soldier's body for eight days without decomposition. He also spent some time at the Seminary Hospital and Armory Square Hospital in Washington and the Jarvis US Army Hospital in Baltimore, being honorably discharged in the summer of 1864. He returned to Lancaster County, where he eventually

established a thriving practice in Columbia. He would later receive a military pension of \$40 a month.¹⁶

Dr. Jonathan M. Folz

Another prominent naval surgeon from Lancaster County was Jonathan M. Folz, a graduate of Jefferson Medical School who had made the US Navy his career choice well before the Civil War. He enrolled in the navy in 1831, served with distinction, and twenty-two years later married a woman from Lancaster. Dr. Folz was the personal physician of James Buchanan during his term as president of the United States and helped him recover from



The US Army adopted the rectangular yellow flag with a large green capital H as its official hospital flag under a general order issued on January 4, 1864. Prior to then, military hospital sites were generally marked with either a solid yellow or red flag. Source: Wikimedia Commons

a serious bout of dysentery caught at the National Hotel in Washington, a malady that sickened some 400 guests, killing 40 of them including three congressmen. During the Civil War, Folz served in the fleet of famed Union Admiral David G. Farragut at the battle of Mobile Bay and then on the Mississippi River in 1862 and 1863. He then was a member of the Navy's Board of Examiners from 1864 until the end of the war. He stayed in the service as fleet surgeon of the European Squadron until his well-deserved retirement in 1869 after thirty-eight years of faithful and meritorious service.¹⁷

It will never be known how many

Civil War soldiers, suffering from acute and life-threatening diseases or from potentially mortal battlefield wounds, owed their lives and futures to the skillful, compassionate efforts of army surgeons and assistant surgeons who lived or worked in Lancaster County before the war. Perhaps Sergeant Eugene Beauge of the 45th Pennsylvania summed it up best, "The medical staff was an important branch of the military service. The surgeon of a regiment and his assistant, to a certain degree, had the health and well being of a thousand men, more or less, in their keeping." It was an awesome responsibility, one that at times surely tested the resolve and mettle of the county's medical men who faithfully kept the Hippocratic Oath while in the service of the United States Army.¹⁸



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About the author

Scott Mingus is a scientist and executive in the paper industry, and holds patents in self-adhesive postage stamps and bar code labels. The Ohio native graduated from the paper science and engineering program at Miami University. He was part of the research team that developed the first commercially successful self-adhesive US postage stamps.

The York, Pa., resident has written fifteen Civil War books. His biography of Confederate General William “Extra Billy” Smith won the 2013 Nathan Bedford Forrest Southern History Award as well as the Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr. Literary Prize, and was nominated for the Virginia Literary Award for Non-Fiction. He also wrote several articles for Gettysburg Magazine. Scott maintains a blog on the Civil War history of York County (www.yorkblog.com/cannonball). He received the 2013 Heritage Profile Award from the York County Heritage Trust for his contributions to local Civil War history.

He also has written six scenario books on miniature wargaming

and was elected to the hobby's prestigious Legion of Honor. His great-great-grandfather was a fifteen-year-old drummer boy in the 51st Ohio Infantry, and other family members fought in the Army of the Potomac at Antietam and Gettysburg.