

**Understanding Typhoid in the American Civil War:**

**A Study of Typhoid within the Union and**

**Confederate armies, 1861-1865**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I want the reader to understand and become familiar with the topic of typhoid fever in the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865. It was during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that typhoid fever emerged as a deadly infectious disease in which there were no effective treatments. Early in the war, from 1861-1863, this infectious disease spread from camp to camp, causing men to become sick and die. This period early in the war was called the medical middle ages due to a lack of knowledge towards infectious diseases and what made them so lethal. Typhoid fever was one of several infectious diseases that emerged in 1861 during the first year of the war. At the start of the war, in both the Confederate and Union armies, there were few doctors to help against this disease. Many of these doctors were inexperienced in the way of medicine, and therefore, were unable to stop the spread of these diseases that caused more deaths than battlefield wounds. For this paper, I want to analyze and explain what made typhoid fever such a deadly disease from 1861 to 1863 when the practice of medicine was in its infancy.

My goal in this paper is to separate typhoid into two periods. The first period, from 1861 to 1863, I will go into detail on the severity of typhoid fever. In 1861, neither side was prepared for such a long war, and therefore, were ill prepared to treat diseases like typhoid fever that caused thousands of deaths. For the second period, from 1864 to 1865, I will look at the efforts and solutions put forth by both sides to decrease the severity of this infectious disease.

## Introduction: Typhoid Fever and its Symptoms and Treatments

Throughout the 1800s, typhoid fever was a disease that was feared by many people. One reason for this fear was due to the inability to contain its spread. An individual infected with typhoid can spread it to others through a cough. It is important for the readers to first understand what is typhoid fever and what makes it so deadly? Typhoid begins as an infection in the intestinal tract that is spread by ingesting food or water contaminated with "Salmonella typhi". Once the person is contaminated, they pass this disease along to others without knowing it. In the early years of the American Civil War from 1861 to 1863, there was poor hygiene in both the Union and Confederate camps. Most of the food that was eaten or water that was drunk was contaminated with this "Salmonella typhi", which led to illness and death for many soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

Typhoid fever was a disease in which the symptoms were severe and the treatments basic. In the first year of the war from July 1, 1861 to June 30, 1862, 5.9 percent of Union soldiers were infected with typhoid, while two percent of those died from the disease. Just like with any infectious disease, the symptoms of typhoid were debilitating and fatal to the individual infected. Individuals with severe typhoid developed a fever and red skin lesions called "rose spots", and experienced decreased mental function. This was just some of the severe symptoms linked to those infected with the disease.<sup>2</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were no effective treatments

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Jay Bollet, "Civil War Rx: The Source Guide to Civil War Medicine," *Typhoid Fever* (2011-2015): 1, accessed November 16, 2016, <http://civilwarrrx.blogspot.com/2013/04/typhoid-fever.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.

to stop the spread of typhoid from one area to another. Those treatments that were used were rudimentary and did not help contain the spread of the disease. Some doctors of the period tried to treat typhoid with the use of analgesics and quinine, while others used calomel. This use of calomel proved fatal, as it led to mercury poisoning in the patients being treated.<sup>3</sup>

### **At the end of the Medical Middle Ages**

When the war started, there was little preparation made in the field of medicine. As the fighting grew more violent and bloody from 1861 to 1863, the medical equipment that was used was primitive and lacked the ability to care for Union and Confederate soldiers. There was no effective response to the many wounds, infections, and diseases that spread from one camp to the next. Soldiers who lived in poorly sanitized camps were even more vulnerable to infectious diseases like typhoid due to exhaustion from fighting and the meager rations provided to them. On each side, the beginning of the war was characterized by disorganization in the way the wounded were transported from the battlefield. This led to more deaths that could have been prevented with a better knowledge in medicine.<sup>4</sup>

The doctors and nurses during the early years of the American Civil War had little knowledge about germ theory, clean medical practices, advanced equipment, and organized hospitals with adequate transportation. Unknown to the medical workers of the period, germs and diseases were spread from one soldier to the next, creating an environment filled with death and disease. Union and Confederate soldiers who were able to overcome deadly diseases like

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<sup>3</sup> Bollet, *Typhoid Fever*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ina Dixon, "Civil War Medicine: Modern Medicine's Civil War Legacy," *Civil War Trust* (October 2013): 1, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

typhoid during the war, owed their survival to simple luck. It was difficult to avoid the impacts of diseases like typhoid in camps whose poor sanitization and bad hygiene were breeding grounds for disease, infection, and death. One key weakness of this early period of the war was due to the inadequate transportation of wounded and infected soldiers from the battlefield. These soldiers were rushed to nearby cities and towns in makeshift hospitals like the Fairfax Seminary, which held 1,700 sick and wounded throughout the war.<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, who was a poet and Civil War nurse of the period, described the haphazard uses of hospitals early in the war, describing them as “merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs or small leaves.” This clearly revealed just how ill prepared both sides were in the caring of their soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

Medical practitioners in the United States were unprepared, underqualified, understaffed, and undersupplied in their practice of medicine on soldiers. Medical students before the American Civil War had little training in the field of medicine. These students trained for two years and received little to no experience in the practice of medicine. At the start of the war, the Union army had only 98 medical officers while the Confederate army had just 24. As the war grew more bloody and violent, it was clear on both sides that their medical corps were understaffed and overwhelmed with the endless line of sick and wounded soldiers that needed to be treated. A major reason for the outbreak of diseases like typhoid was due to the filthy conditions of the camps, described by one inspector as being “littered with refuse, food, and

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<sup>5</sup> Dixon, *Civil War Trust*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

other rubbish, sometimes in an offensive state of decomposition; slops deposited in pits within the camp limits or thrown out of broadcast; heaps of manure and offal close to the camp.”<sup>7</sup>

Hospitals of the period were feared by Union and Confederate soldiers. In an attempt to avoid going to a hospital, these soldiers tried hard to conceal the wounds or illnesses brought upon them. Although medical advancements were being made in Europe, such as the discovery of germs and microorganisms, Civil War doctors and nurses in the United States were unaware of such practices. These medical practitioners were unaware of the relationship between water and typhoid and did not understand that the use of unsterilized instruments on more than one soldier resulted in the spread of disease. Diseases like typhoid proved to be so fatal that a regiment of one thousand men was reduced to half that number before the regiment was sent into battle. The crowding of men of different backgrounds and areas of origin, such as those from rural areas, led to the spread of typhoid fever and other major illnesses in army camps.<sup>8</sup>

The period from 1861 to 1863 and the increased number of diseases like typhoid proved to be challenging for both sides of the war. Diseases like typhoid were so bad that it led to the postponement of several military operations by the Union and Confederate armies. Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate army, was unable to push forward with his West Virginia campaigns in 1861 to disease incapacitating many of his men. Efforts by the Union army to capture Vicksburg in July 1862 was stymied due to the spread of illness within half the

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<sup>7</sup> “Encyclopedia of the Civil War: Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease,” *The Civil War Society* (February 2002): 1, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

<sup>8</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 486-487.

army. During the early years of the American Civil War, some of the military operations that were planned failed due to widespread illness and disease. From 1861 to 1863, the health of both armies continued to deteriorate. This showed just how lethal a disease like typhoid could be on an army of men in camps where diseases were being spread at an alarming rate.<sup>9</sup>

### **Typhoid: Effect on key Individuals**

Typhoid was a deadly disease in which there was no known cure once the American Civil War broke out in 1861. This spread of disease from soldier to soldier and camp to camp led to key individuals of the period to be infected with typhoid. One of these individuals was general George B. McClellan, who suffered from typhoid during the winter of 1861 to 1862. Despite this bout with typhoid for a three-week period, McClellan was still able to function and run the war effort as the commanding general of the Union army. In the first week of his illness, he was treated by two homeopathic doctors. The general's use of homeopathic treatments was considered unusual and criticized by many in the medical profession during the period. During the period of the American Civil War, people within and outside the medical field were suspicious toward these treatments. Some of general McClellan's peers, such as George Meade, claimed to have been astonished at his use of a homeopathic doctor.<sup>10</sup>

A correspondent from the *New York Tribune* made a report that described how McClellan's illness was not going as well as everyone believed. McClellan's bout with typhoid

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<sup>9</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, 488.

<sup>10</sup> Ethan S. Rafuse, "Typhoid and Tumult: Lincoln's Response to General McClellan's Bout with Typhoid Fever during the Winter of 1861-62," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 18, no. 2 (1997): 2, 6, accessed November 23, 2016, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20148953?seq=8#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20148953?seq=8#page_scan_tab_contents).



became more evident in the second and third week of this severe illness. On December 31, 1861, this correspondent, who was unnamed, reported: “Gen. McClellan is worse today, much worse. The danger of a typhoid fever is unconcealed. His case excited a very general interest ... so thorough as to provide speculatively, even for his successor.”<sup>11</sup> It was noted that McClellan’s illness was much worse than what was being reported back to President Lincoln. On January 2, the general’s illness improved, allowing him to return to his role as general in chief.<sup>12</sup>

Another key individual who suffered from typhoid was Willie, the third son of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. His bout with this deadly illness culminated on February 20, 1862 with his death. As a result, Mary Todd was sent into a grieving state from the death of her son. Along with the war effort, the death of Willie turned out to be one of the major burdens on Lincoln. Due to the stresses of the war effort, the Civil War president turned to his family as a way to retain some happiness in his life. The death of Willie, Tad, Lincoln’s youngest son who also suffered from typhoid but survive, and the instability of Mary Todd Lincoln, proved to be too much for Lincoln. Rebecca Pomeroy was tasked with taking care of a grieving Mary Lincoln and Tad Lincoln during his bout with typhoid. She provided comfort and encouragement to the president who was feeling a great amount of pressure during a tumultuous period.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rafuse, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Erika Holst, “One of the Best Women I Ever Knew”: Abraham Lincoln and Rebecca Pomeroy,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 31, no. 2 (2010): 12, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0031.204/--one-of-the-best-women-i-ever-knew-abraham-lincoln?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

Typhoid fever during the early years of the American Civil War was a deadly disease whose reach spread from camp to camp and person to person. The suffering of key individuals like general George B. McClellan, Willie Lincoln, and Tad Lincoln proved that early in the war typhoid's reach could spread and infect anyone. Willie died as a result of this disease. From 1861 to 1863, Civil War soldiers experienced a wide range of diseases that led to thousands of deaths. There were more deaths due to diseases like typhoid than there were of those who fought on the battlefield.

### **Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862 - 63**

Typhoid fever proved to be deadly for the Army of the Southwest from December 1861 to July 1862. During the army's occupation of Helena in July 1862, it was devastated by severe diseases like typhoid. Several regiments within the Army of the Southwest died from diseases that spread from the Eastern Theatre of the war to the Western Theatre in areas like Helena, Arkansas.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the war, but especially in the years 1862 to 1863, the Union troops stationed at the Helena camp found the living conditions to be filled with sickness and death. By January 1865, general Henry W. Halleck recommended the post to be abandoned due to its unsanitary conditions and military insignificance at the end of the war.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the struggle with disease at the post, Union soldiers became unserviceable. Many of these men died due to a lack of understanding of medicine at the time. Little understanding of sanitation and hygiene resulted in diseases like typhoid to create a hazard environment for the

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<sup>14</sup> Rhonda M. Kohl, "This Godforsaken Town:" Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862-63," *Civil War History* (2004): 109, accessed November 23, 2016, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/168369>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 109.

soldiers at Helena. Specific diaries and letters from soldiers stationed at Helena described the suffering and hopelessness that was prevalent in the camp.<sup>16</sup> Before the recognition and general understanding of germ theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a belief that the Hippocratic tenets of the body made up of blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm were the major causes of diseases like typhoid. Doctors during the American Civil War tried to regulate the accepted balance of these tenets through bleeding, purging, salivating, and perspiring. It was commonly thought by doctors of the period that bodily poisons were due to extreme climate change, diet, and living conditions.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Cloud of Doom**

The American Civil War was fought in a century where there was little understanding of infectious diseases like typhoid. It was a period in which medicine was in its primitive state. Neither the Union or the Confederate armies expected the war to last as long as it did, and therefore, were unprepared for such an onslaught of death and misery. This war was, and remains to be, the one with the most deaths compared to other wars fought by the United States. Various estimates place the number of deaths from the war at over 625,000 lives lost. Over half of these

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<sup>16</sup> Kohl, *Civil War History*, 109.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

deaths were due to diseases like typhoid. Medical training throughout the nation was inadequate, leaving many doctors and nurses to have little knowledge in a war plagued by widespread death and disease.<sup>18</sup> The requirements to become a doctor during this period were also primitive. It involved two years of book learning and a few weeks of training to become a doctor. These requirements, as simple as they were, resulted in a lot of mismanagement in the treatment of diseases early in the war from 1861 to 1863. One noteworthy area that was not addressed during the war was personal hygiene. Many of the diseases that infected soldiers from both sides could have been avoided by taking showers, clearing waste away from the camps, and including but not limited to isolating the sick so they would not spread diseases like typhoid to others.<sup>19</sup>

These diseases often began with a simple cold that turned into something fatal, like typhoid or pneumonia. Despite these setbacks, doctors and nurses had no other choice but to be brave and use the little knowledge they had about medicine to aid wounded Civil War soldiers. Most notably, the medical practices of the Confederate army had to find alternative medical methods due to the Union blockade of the South from the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Confederate doctors turned to nature's "substitutes" like hemlock, dogwood, wild jalap, and others to treat their wounded and infected soldiers. From 1861 to 1865, the Confederacy used various trees like hemlock to treat their soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *The Civil War: Medicine, Wounds and Diseases*. <http://www.gwood.us/history-research/files/Civil%20War%20Medicine.pdf>, 25-26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

There was direct evidence that during this war both the Union and Confederacy medical professions were unprepared for battle wounds and the spread of disease. When the war started, the Union had one assistant surgeon for every regiment of 1,200 soldiers. These men were unqualified and unable to keep up with the soldiers who were always pouring into Civil War hospitals. The Confederate Army, at the start of the war, was slow to organize a system of medicine, putting just \$50,000 toward military hospitals in 1861. This was a low number and proved just how unprepared both sides were at the beginning of the war. Disease turned out to be a major killer during this conflict from 1861 to 1865. In the first year of the war, typhoid fever caused 17 percent of military deaths, proving just how lethal of a disease it was. Soldiers who drank from dirty, unclean streams filled with their dead brethren or human waste, or who ate raw, uncooked foods like meat, resulted in a large number of diseases, most notably typhoid.<sup>21</sup>

Like I mentioned before, the Union naval blockade of the Confederacy during the American Civil War resulted in the southern states to have a difficult time obtaining medicine. As a result of this, the Confederacy published a pamphlet that discussed a variety of herbs and plants to be used for treating diseases when regular medical supplies were unavailable. Some of the herbal alternatives used by the south were snakeroot, partridgeberry, sassafras, lavender, tulip tree, dogwood, and the leaves and bark of white oak. For the Confederacy, its use of these herbs for the treatment of wounds and infections was revolutionary in a period in which access to medical knowledge was limited.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Simkin, "Medical Treatment," *Spartacus Educational* (September 1997): 1, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://spartacus-educational.com/USACWmedical.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

From 1861 onward, the widespread unsanitary conditions within Civil War camps turned out to be breeding grounds for diseases like typhoid. In the early years of the war, from 1861 to 1863, the number of deaths from typhoid increased on a yearly basis. During July through November 1861, the mean strength of soldiers within the Army of the Potomac increased every year. In July 1861, there was four total deaths from typhoid fever, and this increased to 119 deaths in November. There was a significant rise of deaths due to typhoid as the mean strength of white soldiers increased each month of the year. From July 1861 to June 1862, there was a total of 917 deaths within this part of the Army of the Potomac due to typhoid fever. It is important to note that this was data collected from one region, and that the numbers pertaining to deaths in the Union Army varied from one camp to another. For instance, in another set of data collected by Joseph K. Barnes, the Union army from 1861 to 1862 had a total of 5,648 deaths from typhoid.<sup>23</sup>

This information proved that in the early years of the war, diseases like typhoid fever were fatal and a major killer for both sides of the war. It was a war that was bloody and led to thousands of deaths. Within the Department of the Tennessee, there were 4,837 cases of typhoid and 1,334 deaths from the illness. Over half of the deaths from the war were due to diseases like typhoid fever.<sup>24</sup> It was a period in which it was difficult to survive. Diseases like typhoid proved to be so deadly that recruitments in both the Union and Confederate armies died within just a few days, never to see the field of battle. For African American troops, the period from June 1864 to June 1865 was one in there were severe cases of typhoid. In 1864, there were 752 deaths within the African American ranks, while in 1865 there were 1,189 deaths. This proved that African

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph K. Barnes, "Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War," *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion (1861-1865)* 1, (1870): 30-31, 147.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

Americans, who became involved in the war during its later years, were affected by typhoid fever in the same manner as the white soldiers were from 1861 to 1863.<sup>25</sup>

### **Wisconsin and Typhoid in the American Civil War**

During the American Civil War, Wisconsin played a major role. It had Camp Randall, which was a prison camp from April to June 1862 for Confederate troops captured at the Island No. 10 battle. At one moment during the war, there were 60 sick Confederate prisoners, some of whom were infected with typhoid. This illness spread from one area to another, stretching throughout the United States into remote areas like Wisconsin.<sup>26</sup> The American Civil War affected many states, including Wisconsin. Over 11,000 Wisconsin soldiers were killed on the battlefield or by diseases like typhoid. Civil War soldiers from Wisconsin feared the hospital as much as the rebel prison. Wisconsin families frequently received heart-breaking news about comrades and loved ones who died and would never return home from the south. Soldiers from Wisconsin, despite experiencing death on a regular basis, sent heartfelt letters home describing their military life while also giving homage to those who perished in an environment filled with death and disease.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 710.

<sup>26</sup> John Zimm, *This Wicked Rebellion: Wisconsin Civil War Soldiers Write Home* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2012), 30-31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 143.

Typhoid was a disease that affected soldiers from all states, especially those from Wisconsin. Alexander Randall, who served as governor of Wisconsin during the early years of the American Civil War, was criticized for his handling of the war effort. There were complaints that he wasted state funds, provided Wisconsin soldiers with shoddy uniforms, and misused his patronage in the appointments of agents and representatives who were with Wisconsin regiments on the battlefields to provide care for the men.<sup>28</sup> Typhoid fever affected Wisconsin soldiers just as much as any other soldier during the Civil War.

At the end of the war in 1865, thousands of Wisconsin soldiers passed through Milwaukee in a terrible state. These men, who returned from fighting in one of the deadliest conflicts in United States history, were sick with various diseases that included typhoid. In addition to this, they were disabled and impoverished and forced to beg in order to get food, a place to live, and transportation to their homes. In the spring of 1864, a group of women formed the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home Association in response to this desperate situation for the returning Civil War soldiers. These women provided homes to these men, and this was further explained in this statement: "Here the soldier could come and be provided with temporary rest and entertainment, and when too sick to proceed on his journey, he could receive such medical aid as was required, and kind and careful nursing." This quote directly shows that when it came to medical treatment for Civil War soldiers, the period from 1861 to 1863 was significantly different from the period from 1864 to 1865. From April 1864 to July 1866, the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home sheltered and provided care to 31,650 Civil War soldiers from the state.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin: The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Wisconsin: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), 309.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.



In 1864 to 1865, doctors and nurses had a much better understanding of medicine and how to cure soldiers affected with wounds and diseases received during the war. There was progress being made, even though in the early years of the war it did not seem like it. Once the war ended, Wisconsin made sure to provide care for its soldiers, especially those who were disabled, who sacrificed their lives for their state and the Union.

There were two soldiers who served in Wisconsin during the war who I was able to find sources on, Charles W. Felker and Newton S. Smith. Felker was part of the 48<sup>th</sup> Regiment Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry as a captain, while Smith was a private in Company K of the 29<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry Regiment. Felker wrote letters to his wife detailing his activities and his bout with typhoid, while Smith wrote letters to his friends and family from 1862 up until his death in 1863.<sup>30</sup> Both these men recounted through their letters just how dangerous of a disease typhoid was. It was so deadly that Smith died of it in 1863, proving that it was more severe early in the war than during its later years. However, unlike Smith, Felker survived his bout with typhoid in 1865.<sup>31</sup>

### **African Americans and Typhoid in the American Civil War**

From 1864 to 1865, African American soldiers and civilians experienced the hardships brought upon by typhoid. As mentioned before, typhoid was one of several diseases that spread from camp to camp, infecting soldiers and civilians alike. This disease threatened the lives of

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<sup>30</sup> Charles W. Felker to his wife, 1865, Felker, Charles W., 1834-1901 Letters, The State of Wisconsin Collection, Wisconsin.

<sup>31</sup> Newton S. Smith to his friends and family, 1862-1863, file 1, folder 1, Newton S. Smith Letters, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Wisconsin.

500,000 freed slaves who escaped from slavery during the war. It also threatened the 3.5 million African Americans who were freed in 1865 at the end of the war.<sup>32</sup> For the African American slaves who escaped from plantations in the south, they were forced to travel for days, weeks, and months and live on their own without shelter, clothing, and food. This often resulted in illnesses like typhoid. The constant movement of slaves into the northern United States led to an increased spread of typhoid within those areas.<sup>33</sup> During the American Civil War, there were two major transformations that occurred: the movement of people from one geographic region to another (Union soldiers fighting war in the south and slaves escaping into the north) and the introduction of a large group of people to an already densely populated area.<sup>34</sup>

These events led to major illnesses like typhoid to spread from one area to another, infecting civilians and soldiers alike. This was no different for African Americans of the people. The Union army admitted freed slaves into overcrowded and unsanitary camps, where they were deprived of clothing, food, and shelter. One consequence of this was the existence of diseases

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<sup>32</sup> Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 21-22.

<sup>33</sup> Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

like typhoid spreading amongst African American soldiers and civilians. Although Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, it was unable to protect formerly enslaved African Americans from health threats like typhoid fever.<sup>35</sup> The goal of the Emancipation Proclamation was to preserve and strengthen the Union as the war raged into its third year. This proclamation was not, unlike popular belief, put forward to aid African American slaves. John Eaton, who sent a letter to religious leader and abolitionist Levi Coffin, backed up this argument with the quote: “Some among us, and some in England, have considered this emancipation a farce; because it was proclaimed by President Lincoln as a military necessity, and not on the ground of humanity and justice.” This proclamation helped these soldiers and slaves to gain freedom, but it did not protect them from camp diseases like typhoid.<sup>36</sup>

The type of care and treatments that were provided to African Americans were dependent upon the resources provide to local Bureau doctors. Freedmen’s hospitals in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Charleston were able to fit at least two hundred beds with African Americans who were free from the war following its end in 1865. In each of these hospitals, these freedmen who suffered from typhoid were treated and were provided shelter.<sup>37</sup> Freedom for African

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<sup>35</sup> Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 76.

Americans came at a price. They were infected with diseases like typhoid as they moved into densely populated northern cities. Typhoid was a disease that affected whites and African Americans during the period from 1861 to 1865. Population movements into the north made by these African Americans made them vulnerable to such diseases like typhoid fever.

### **Advancement in Medical Care: 1864-1865**

The constant demands of medical care during the war led to an advancement in the technological innovation of medicine. Both the Union and Confederate forces were unprepared for such a war that was filled with disease and suffering. Doctors and nurses from both sides, with their constant practice in medicine in the early years of the war, brought medical care into the era of modernity. There was the development of pavilion hospitals to create better and more efficient hospital systems. By 1864 to 1865, there were medical records and reports to document soldiers who were affected by diseases like typhoid. One important person who was involved in the advancement of medicine in these final years of the war was Jonathan Letterman, the Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac. His responsible actions resulted in order and efficiency to be conducted within the medical system. It was his efforts that led to an organized ambulance system and effective evacuation plans for those who sustained wounds during the war.<sup>38</sup> There was even some evidence of this growth in medical care during the early part of the war, especially at the Battle of Antietam with the actions of Clara Barton. While this battle was

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<sup>38</sup> Ina Dixon, "Civil War Medicine: Modern Medicine's Civil War Legacy," *Civil War Trust* (October 2013): 1, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

being fought, she administered medical supplies to the soldiers and provided them with relief and care. Since there were so many soldiers who suffered from diseases like typhoid and serious battle wounds, it forced Civil War medical practitioners to develop new therapies and technologies in response to the widespread death that prevailed from one hospital to another.<sup>39</sup>

Along with this, William A. Hammond, who served as the surgeon general within the Union army, made sure that new hospitals that were constructed were clean and filled with good hygiene. One reason for the spread of diseases like typhoid was due to a lack of good hygiene, which could have been prevented with simple methods like taking a shower. Hammond's clean, well ventilated, and large pavilion-style hospitals made it so that soldiers who suffered from wounds or disease could be treated and attended to in a proper manner. During the years 1864 to 1865, there was an 8 percent mortality rate in Union hospitals, a number that was much higher from 1861 to 1863. One advantage for surgeons of the period was that as they worked on wounded soldiers, they were gaining experience that would turn medicine from an unknown field into one that would shape and innovate society. In addition, doctors and nurses in these later years had a much better understanding of how to prevent and treat infectious diseases like typhoid. The actions by individuals like Clara Barton and other Civil War doctors and nurses led to a technological innovation in the field of medicine that brought it into the modern era of quality care for those who were sick and wounded. Several of the medical achievements that

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1.

currently define the United States of today can be attributed to the legacy created in the American Civil War.<sup>40</sup>

One of the important areas of recognition that resulted from the war was increased cleanliness and hygiene. This promoted health in the human body that it was before lacking due to overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. This quote sums up the positives of such an advancement made in medicine:

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.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

There was a difference in the severity of typhoid from 1861 to 1863 as compared to the last two years of the war. This disease was a major killer in Civil War armies from both sides. When the war began in 1861, the Union and Confederate armies were unprepared for the horrors of death and illness that would follow. It was a war in which diseases like typhoid were being spread from camp to camp at a fast rate. Thousands of soldiers were affected by typhoid during the Civil War, making it one of the deadliest diseases during the struggle. Medical care was so

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<sup>40</sup> Dixon, *Civil War Trust*, 1.

<sup>41</sup>*The Civil War: Medicine, Wounds and Diseases*. <http://www.gwood.us/history-research/files/Civil%20War%20Medicine.pdf>, 27.

primitive that it was considered to be conducted at the end of the medical middle ages. In 1861, doctors and nurses were unaware of how to treat such diseases like typhoid, and this led to thousands of deaths that could have been prevented. As the war progressed, individuals such as Jonathan Letterman, William A. Hammond, and Clara Barton put forth the effort to make medicine a field that was organized and clean and able to treat soldiers with wounds or infectious diseases like typhoid. This understanding of medicine was a revolutionary advancement that made the United States stronger as a united nation in the field of medicine.

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