

Saving Lives through Brutality: Surgeon's Set – Civil War Era
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Although it seems counterintuitive, cutting away parts of the body can, in some cases, benefit the person as in cases of spreading cancer, and Dr. W. P. Gunnell, knowing this, packed accordingly as he departed his home. Merely looking down upon the tools employed by surgeons during the American Civil War reveals that surgeons of the time knew what would come and prepared for any incision or amputation they might need to make, for there are many tools for cutting and slicing. The set in the museum was owned and employed by Dr. William Presley Gunnell who joined the Confederate cause when the Civil War was declared. As a physician living in Fairfax, Virginia, Dr. Gunnell knew two things: that he would serve his country as a surgeon and that his house would surely be taken since Fairfax stands a mere sixteen miles from Washington D.C.¹ So, he packed his all he knew he would need and left to become one of the 109 Confederate surgeons at the beginning of the Civil War.² Due to the destruction of Confederate records after the Civil War, little is known of Dr. Gunnell's life during or after the war. His house, though, became a place of infamy.

Because of Fairfax's vicinity to the North's borders, it was quickly taken. Since Dr. Gunnell's house was a very nicely made, two story brick house, it was used as the headquarters of Brigadier General Edwin H. Stoughton, General Beauregard, and General Fitz-John Porter at different times. Although the latter two Union generals occupied the home without incident, General Stoughton, however, was kidnapped from it by the very quarry he sought. As the Union

¹ Johnson II, William Page. "McLellan at Fairfax Court House." *Fair Facts Gazette*. Winter 2012: 7. Web. 14 Feb. 2013. <http://www.historicfairfax.org/pdf/hfci_winter12.pdf

² Blanton, DeAnne. "Confederate Medical Personnel." *Prologue*. 26.1 (Spring 1994): n. page. Web. 14 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1994/spring/confederate-medical-personnel.html>>.

advanced into Virginia, their progress was hampered by Confederate Colonel John Singleton Mosby and his company of rangers. General Stoughton tasked Colonel Sir Percy Wyndham with the job of apprehending or killing the elusive Confederate colonel. Mosby constantly frustrated his Union foes by using guerilla tactics, and the Confederates, responding to a personal insult to Mosby by Wyndham, daringly sought to kidnap both Wyndham at Fairfax Courthouse and General Stoughton at Dr. Gunnell's House. Although failing to catch Wyndham, Mosby, barging into Dr. Gunnell's home, found the general still asleep. So, after waking the general by lifting his nightgown and slapping the general's behind, Mosby asked General Stoughton if he knew who Mosby was.³ Replying affirmatively, the general asked if the intruder had caught him, and Mosby replied saying, "No, but he has caught you."⁴

Dr. Gunnell's surgeon kit has a far less comedic though no less important history. With the wooden box opened, a variety of different medical tools reveal themselves. Most prominent among these tools is the large capital saw which was used to cut through and amputate weight bearing bones such as those which are in the legs. The second saw, shaped like a hack saw, is known as a metacarpal saw and used to cut through smaller bones like those in the arms or hands. Accompanying these saws is the tourniquet which wraps around a limb and, when tightened, relieves the limb of blood just before amputation. Saws, though, had a very hard time cutting through muscle. So, surgeons also carried the three different razor sharp Liston knives for that very purpose. For trimming skin, muscle, and bone, the forceps and the scalpel were employed. Unfortunately, brain damage also occurred frequently on the battlefields of the American Civil War, and consequently surgeons had to cut through the skull in order to operate

³ Stinchcum, Sheryl Wright. "Mosby's Midnight Raid." *Gothic Romance*. Word Press, n. d. Web. Web. 14 Feb. 2013. <<http://theprinceinthetower.wordpress.com/city-of-fairfax-part-ii/>>.

⁴ Johnson II, William Page. "Cut The Wires": The Story of a Boy Telegraph Operator at Fairfax C.H.." *Fair Facts Gazette*. Summer 2009. 3. Web. 14 Feb. 2013. <http://www.historicfairfax.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/HFCI73_Summer09.pdf>.

on the brain. To do this, they employed the T-Handle Trepanes. These tools are circular in shape with blades at the bottom and an attachable handle at the top which aided the surgeon in gripping the tool. The surgeon, when he had pressed the tool into the head of the wounded man, then turned it until it bored through the skull much like some circular attachable drill bits cut holes in objects today. As an alternative to the trepan, a surgeon could use the Hey Saw, named after the English surgeon William Hey . This saw is shaped almost like an axe with teeth on its edge and used to make incisions in the skull until a plate could be removed which allowed the surgeon to operate. The final two pieces of equipment, the dull instruments, were used to hold threads in place while the surgeon finished the rest of his needlework.⁵

Although grisly in their uses, Dr. William Gunnell and others like him used these tools to save the lives of many thousands of wounded soldiers whose bodies were ravaged and torn by the brutal projectiles of the Civil War. Amputation and the binding of wounds, the main uses of the tools included in this kit, were a soldier's best chance of survival, for, if more than 48 hours passed without an amputation, blood poisoning, blood infection, or gangrene could set in.⁶ Throughout the war, the Union surgeons amputated approximately 30,000 arms and legs with a fatality rate of around 26 percent. Though the number of Confederate amputees is not known, Dr. Gunnell and his fellow Confederate surgeons had about the same success rate as their Union counterparts.⁷ Thus, sometimes thousands of men would come to the surgeons during and after a battle for treatment and oftentimes amputation. It is said that "General Carl Schurz observed the surgeons, after the battle of Gettysburg, and wrote these memorable lines: "There stood the surgeons, their sleeves rolled up to the elbows, their bare arms as well as their linen aprons

⁵ Slater, Dr. Laurie. Interview by Sean Duffy. "1800s Surgical Kit - Unboxing." *The Good Old Days*.... 20 May 2009. med Gadget. May . Web. 14 Feb 2013.

<http://www.medgadget.com/2009/05/1800s_surgical_kit_unboxing.html>.

⁶ Brooks, Stewart. *Civil War Medicine*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1966, 92

⁷ Brooks, 99.

smear'd with blood, their knives not seldom held between their teeth ... around them pools of blood and amputated arms or legs in heaps, sometimes more than man-high.”⁸ Just imagining Dr. Gunnell in the midst of battle with bullets whizzing back and forth and men screaming around and just before him while he uses the very tools on display in the museum to hack away the limbs of men in order to save their lives almost brings one to tears. Dr. Grunnell, the Fairfax physician, his apron and tools covered in blood finishes a bandage of a soldier, stands, and moves to the next man where he stops the blood flowing, steadies his hands, and cuts away.

Sometimes, “a surgeon, having been long at work, would put down his knife, exclaiming that his hand had grown unsteady, and that this was too much for human endurance – not seldom hysterical tears streaming down his face.”⁹ God be praised for men like Dr. Gunnell who had the strength of will to use these tools, gruesome as they may be so that others might live. Praise Him also for the compassion they showed and tears they shed. Just as God closed the door of Asia Minor to Paul, so did Dr. Gunnell and his compatriots on both sides of the battlefields cut away the limbs of hapless soldiers. Had God not done so, the people of Greece would have been deprived of His gospel, and had the surgeons of the Civil War used these tools, many more would have died. These tools represent a sacrifice which surgeons made, a sacrifice of conscience and even humanity so that those around them might live. Thank God for these tools and the men like Dr. Gunnell who wielded them.

⁸ Kaller, Seth. "Civil War Field Surgeon's Kit, 6th N.Y. Infantry ." . N.p., Online Posting to *Seth Kaller Inc.*. Web. 14 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.sethkaller.com/item/408-Civil-War-Field-Surgeon's-Kit,-6th-N.Y.-Infantry&from=7>>.

⁹ Kaller.

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