

Civil War Hospitals

Introduction: During the Civil War, medical knowledge and medical practices were primitive. Thousands more men died from infections, disease, and wounds than in battle. Medical teams worked on the front lines in makeshift hospitals under the most difficult conditions. The following documents illustrate what life was like for those in these makeshift hospitals during the Civil War. The first document is a set of letters from John Gardner Perry, a Union surgeon, to his wife. The second document is a photograph by James F. Gibson of the Savage Station, VA Field Hospital.

Perry, John Gardner, 1840-1926, Letter from John Gardner Perry, July 1, 1862, in *Letters from a Surgeon of the Civil War*. Perry, Martha Derby, comp.. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, & Co., 1906, pp. 236.

Letter from John Gardner Perry, July 1, 1862

A new contingent to-day of sick and wounded; in fact, the men arrived in such numbers that we laid them on the grass and dressed their wounds there. I was obliged to perform an operation on one man and cut off two of his fingers. He sat up perfectly straight and did not wince a particle. I called him a "man," for he truly deserved the title, though he, poor fellow, was a mere boy of eighteen years. The surgeon-general says he shall place the worst cases here, as it is the healthiest place there is. Think of the experience I shall gain!

May 24, 1863

I can scratch only a few lines, being up to my elbows in blood. Oh, the fatigue and endless work we surgeons have! About one night in three to sleep in, and then we are so nervous and played out that sleep is impossible. The hospital is fast filling up with poor fellows who last night charged upon the enemy's works on the other side of the river. It seems to me I am quite callous to death now, and that I could see my dearest friend die without much feeling. This condition tells a long story which, under other circumstances, could scarcely be imagined. During the last three weeks I have seen probably no less than two thousand deaths, and among them those of many dear friends.

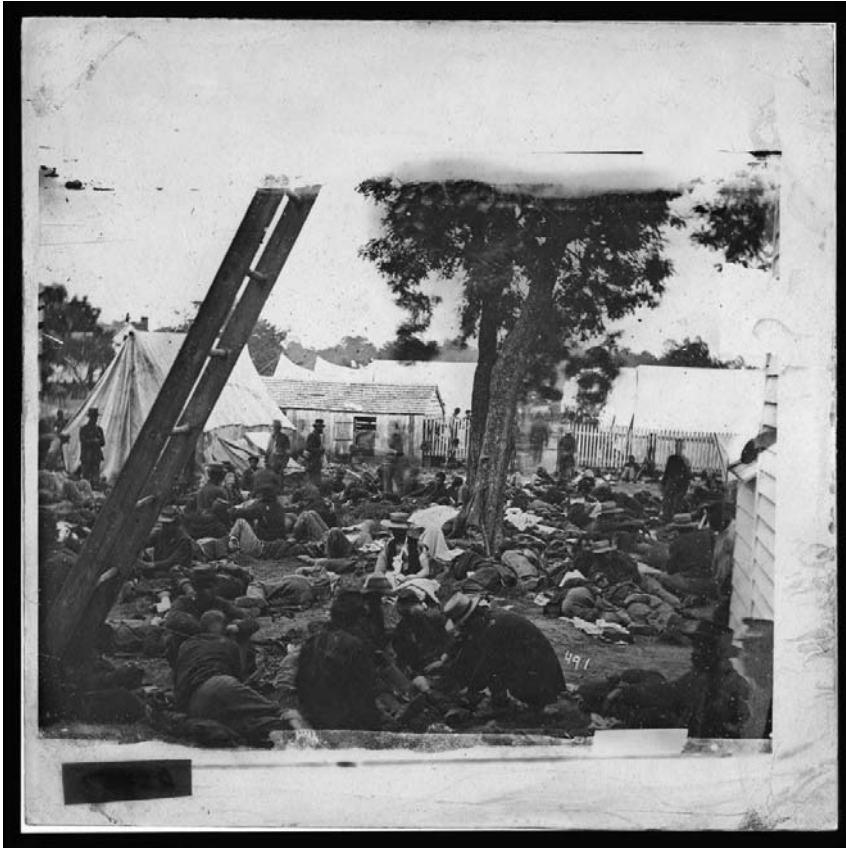
July 18, 1864

I am retained, and General Hancock says I must remain.... I still hope that I may be mustered out of service before very long, however. I know very well that General Hancock from his standpoint is right to retain me, but all the same it seems as if I could not bear it. If I remained in the army until September I should be made surgeon, but I do not care a fig for that.

Document Questions

1. How does Dr. Perry feel when he first begins his work as a surgeon?
2. What are some of Dr. Perry's complaints as the war progresses?
3. What are Dr. Perry's thoughts about his position in 1864?

Savage Station VA Field Hospital after the battle of June 27, James F. Gibson



1. List three details from the photograph that strike you as being significant. Explain why you chose these three details.
2. How do Dr. Perry's experiences from the previous documents compare to this image? From looking at this picture, what might Dr. Perry have experienced in the field that would make him not want to continue his career as a surgeon?