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Vinay Giri
Duke University

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“To Collect Their Shattered Energies”:

Hammond Hospital and Military Mental Healthcare during the Civil War

Vinay Giri

Duke University

A horse-drawn carriage rumbles and rattles as it rolls over a long wooden dock. Its occupants wheeze and cough incessantly, suffering from one of the multitude of illnesses that have run rampant through the Union ranks. A set of doors slowly begins to open, providing entry into a looming, three-story structure that juts out over the calm sea. All throughout the country, bullets whiz, cannon roar, and men fall. But here, in the small town of Beaufort, North Carolina, these sick soldiers have finally found a refuge from the chaos of war, as they begin a much-needed rest at Hammond Hospital.

In 1862, the Atlantic Hotel, a towering and majestic resort that was supported on pilings extending into the Beaufort Inlet and adorned with “triple porches and numerous windows to catch the breeze,” was seized by the Union Army and converted into a hospital.¹ For the next three years, Hammond Hospital treated government employees and soldiers, Union and Confederate alike. One such soldier was Private Lyman Chamberlin. A member of the 27th Massachusetts Regiment, Chamberlin was admitted to Hammond Hospital while suffering from

¹ Dorothy Griffin, “The Hammond Hospital,” in *North Carolina’s Coastal Carteret County during the Civil War*, ed. Jean Bruyere Kell (North Carolina: J. B. Kell, 1999), 87-89.

“fever and ague,” perhaps attributable to malaria.² Upon recovering, Chamberlin became employed at the hospital as both a nurse and orderly. His letters, written during his three-year stay at Hammond to a female friend back home in Massachusetts, depict both the emotional hardship of war and the army’s never-ending struggle against disease. While the majority of Civil War military hospitals simply treated trauma cases and performed surgeries, Hammond Hospital instead provided a safe environment where soldiers could relax, de-stress, and recover from illness or amputation. Lyman Chamberlin’s letters illustrate the significance of Hammond Hospital as a center for holistic recovery, and the establishment of such an institution during the Civil War reflected the military’s developing appreciation for the importance of mental healthcare.

At the time of Hammond’s opening there was no clearly defined niche for recovery and mental health in the Union’s medical framework. Civil War military hospitals can simply be grouped into the broad categories of field hospitals and general hospitals. Field hospitals usually consisted of a makeshift tent network surrounding a large building where surgeons would operate. Injured soldiers would be directly transported from the battlefield to these hospitals, which were often in a state of disarray. Walt Whitman described a Virginia field hospital in 1862: “within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each cover’d with its brown woolen blanket.”³

In contrast, general hospitals were permanent structures, and this category can be further divided into two informal groups: trauma centers and specialized hospitals. The most common

² Lyman Chamberlin to Maria Willard, Letter 5, *The Civil War Letters of Private Lyman Chamberlin, 1862-1864*, Beaufort Historical Association, Beaufort, NC.

³ Learn NC, “Civil War Army Hospitals: Walt Whitman Describes a Battlefield Hospital,” UNC School of Education, 1882, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-civilwar/4694>.

general hospital, and the type most associated with military medicine, was the trauma hospital. These hospitals would perform amputations, treat intensely ill patients, and operate on soldiers with tricky wounds that a field hospital could not address.⁴ A small subset of “specialized hospitals” also began to arise, as Union commanders realized they had nowhere to put ill soldiers. At the start of the war, tented areas of infantry camps would be sectioned off for recovery, but soon thereafter new hospitals had to be erected to combat a dramatic increase in disease prevalence.⁵ Some hospitals only treated specific conditions, such as Turner’s Lane in Philadelphia, a military hospital that cared for soldiers with neurological disorders.⁶

Though Hammond Hospital was officially classified as a “general hospital” by the Union government, it cared for patients very different from those of most other hospitals. While the majority of the military’s general hospitals were trauma centers primarily concerned with physical wounds, primary documentation reveals that Hammond Hospital was a center of convalescence, filling the need for soldiers’ spiritual and mental recuperation amidst the chaos of war. This is directly seen in Lyman Chamberlin’s letters, as he wrote that he was sent to Beaufort to “recover his health.”⁷ According to Chamberlin, Union physicians decided that Beaufort was well-situated to serve as a location for rehabilitation due to its “fine sea breeze,”⁸ in contrast to the “bad air” created by the “dead water” surrounding nearby New Bern, referring to the still water that allowed bacteria and mosquito larvae to thrive.⁹ New Bern, forty miles from Beaufort, was better connected to the state’s transportation infrastructure and had a pre-existing trauma

⁴ Harold Elk Straubing, *In Hospital and Camp: The Civil War through the Eyes of its Doctors and Nurses*, (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1993), 75-85.

⁵ Robert Denney, *Civil War Medicine: Care & Comfort of the Wounded* (New York: Sterling, 1994), 46-48, 82-83.

⁶ “To Bind Up the Nation’s Wounds: Evacuation and Hospitalization,” National Museum of Health and Medicine, May 18, 2012, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.medicalmuseum.mil/index.cfm?p=exhibits.nationswounds>.

⁷ Chamberlin, Civil War Letters, Letter 6.

⁸ Ibid., Letter 5.

⁹ Ibid., Letter 3.

hospital; however, when the decision of where to establish a recovery hospital was made, the ability to facilitate long-term recuperation was prioritized over ease of access.

During Hammond Hospital's early years, many amputees would come to Beaufort to rest and recover.¹⁰ But although amputees rested at Hammond, amputations themselves were not carried out by the hospital staff. In fact, it seems as if the hospital was not stocked with many surgical instruments at all. When Lyman Chamberlin began to suffer from a decaying tooth, he wrote, "I am very much troubled with the tooth ache to day & have been for a week past. I have not sleep a wink for five nights. & I cannot either sit. or stand. or lie. in any peace whatever." His tooth had to be dug out, yet the medical staff at the hospital had "no instruments for that purpose," and Chamberlin simply had to deal with the pain.¹¹ That a military hospital did not have the scalpel and pliers necessary for a simple tooth extraction suggests that few surgical procedures were carried out there, and it seems as though the majority of the hospital's patients suffered from illnesses such as "consumption and typhoid."¹² The hospital's location, patient population, and medical capabilities suggest that Hammond Hospital was a recovery hospital, not a trauma center.

The establishment of recovery and other specialty hospitals illuminates the Union military's approach to healthcare. It suggests that military physicians were beginning to realize that there were many components needed for effective care, importantly rest and recovery. Hammond Hospital was set up as a center for holistic rehabilitation, reflecting the evolution of this Civil War medical theory. It was a place for soldiers' spirits to be lifted, and the importance of morale in improving health outcomes is seen throughout Chamberlin's letters. "It does a sick soldier more good to have a lady visit him than all the medicine he can take," wrote Chamberlin.

¹⁰ Ibid., Letter 6.

¹¹ Ibid., Letter 11.

¹² Ibid., Letter 13.

“Ladies from the north,” the “Surgeons wife,” and others would visit and uplift the soldiers.¹³ Chamberlin himself appears to have found solace in the letters he wrote to his friend Maria. When Maria was slow to respond, Chamberlin’s tone becomes anxious and worried; during times of quick correspondence, he seems relieved, as if his storytelling were cathartic. For Chamberlin, Maria was the “lady” that kept him strong and his morale high.

Spiritual support was provided by a trio of religious leaders, representing the Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal churches.¹⁴ Religious figures were retained by the hospital and were central to the overall well-being of its patients. One affair displaying the value of these men took place after a young soldier contracted a fatal disease. The ill man anguished in terror and anger until he was visited by an Episcopalian priest. “The clergyman came. talked & prayed for him & finally baptized him. & he was a changed man after that,” wrote Chamberlin. “He was ready.”¹⁵

While religious visits for the infirm were nothing new, Hammond Hospital seems to have provided a well-rounded environment for rehabilitation. A library, for instance, was located in the hospital, providing a mental diversion not found in bustling field or trauma hospitals.¹⁶ Indeed larger hospitals in nearby New Bern and Morehead City, which primarily served traumas cases and intensely ill patients, lacked similar features.¹⁷ The role of Hammond Hospital was to provide a safe environment for relaxation and recovery. It was a place for soldiers to de-stress after enduring a traumatic war, and these new medical practices had a great effect. According to an 1863 report from surgeon D.W. Hand, who was stationed at the trauma hospital in New Bern, most of the “convalescents and slight fever” cases in the bustling New Bern hospital were sent to

¹³ Chamberlin, Civil War Letters, Letter 10.

¹⁴ Griffin, “The Hammond Hospital,” 91.

¹⁵ Chamberlin, Civil War Letters, Letter 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., Letter 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., Letter 13.

Beaufort, and “the patients rapidly recovered,” proving the effectiveness of Hammond’s practices.¹⁸ This is further shown by Lyman Chamberlin’s own recovery. After arriving at the hospital worn out from travel, weakened by illness, and weary of combat, Chamberlin thrived in a calm environment. Hammond Hospital thus marked the beginning of the evolution of military medical practice, from only providing drugs and surgery to understanding the importance of stress and pressure on a soldier’s well-being.

The need for peaceful recuperation and thus the need for a hospital like Hammond can clearly be seen not only from Chamberlin’s accounts, but also from the writings of its visitors. Herbert Valentine, a clerk in Chamberlin’s regiment who toured the hospital in 1863, wrote that Hammond was a place for “worn out” soldiers “to collect their shattered energies.”¹⁹ Valentine’s analysis of Hammond Hospital aligns well with Chamberlin’s and provides additional evidence that Hammond was viewed as a holistic recovery hospital.

War overwhelmed many, and thus a hospital like Hammond was invaluable in maintaining the emotional and mental health of its patients. The hospital was in a secluded location by the sea, and no bloody medical procedures, with the accompanying screams, smells, and frequent deaths, took place there. This provided a feeling of safety to its residents. There were books available for mental relief and religious figures available for spiritual support, and the staff emphasized the importance of morale. Taken together, this evidence suggests that Hammond Hospital was home to the nascent mental healthcare of the Civil War. Before post-traumatic stress had been codified in the medical lexicon, military medical practitioners seem to have been aware of its debilitating effects. What Lyman Chamberlin’s letters indicate is that the battle to keep a soldier’s spirit, not just his body, intact began during the Civil War.

¹⁸ Denney, *Civil War Medicine*, 252.

¹⁹ Herbert Valentine, source name?, August 19, 1863, Herbert Valentine Papers, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

This is not to say that mental illness was invisible in the United States before the Civil War. In fact, 1860s military researchers attributed a variety of symptoms, including apathy and loss of appetite, to broad mental imbalances.²⁰ Severe, personality-changing disorders would likely guarantee a trip to a run-down mental asylum or dangerous prison. Unfortunately, the government and the general public were not sympathetic to the plight of these individuals. During the mid-1800s, activists such as Dorothea Dix tried but failed to enact major policy that could protect this vulnerable population.²¹

During the Civil War, however, there seems to have been a shift towards a new understanding of mental health. Military physicians were beginning to appreciate the importance of mental health treatment, and Hammond Hospital embodied the attempt to tackle this issue. Hammond and other recovery hospitals operated under the assumption that a soldier's mentality and stress level affect his well-being, and exhaustion, both physical and mental, became a new area for treatment. Medical historians have previously documented the trajectory of the military's understanding of mental illness, while military historians have comprehensively described the objectives of Union and Confederate hospitals and the tools wielded by army physicians. However, the care provided at Hammond illuminates the poorly explored intersection of these two fields. Hammond Hospital, along with similar Civil War recovery hospitals, might represent the beginning of a slow but significant shift in how the military, the government, and the public viewed PTSD and mental illness.

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²⁰ Kenneth C. Hyams, F. Stephen Wignall, and Robert Roswell,, "War Syndromes and Their Evaluation: From the U.S. Civil War to the Persian Gulf War," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 125, no. 5 (September 1996): 398-405.

²¹ Wayne Viney and Steven Zorich, "Contributions to the History of Psychology: Dorothea Dix and the History of Psychology," *Psychological Reports* 50, no. 1 (February 1982): 211-18.

Even the strongest refuge could not shield Lyman Chamberlin from the escalating devastation of the Civil War. In 1864, the Confederate army assaulted Union strongholds in North Carolina. Thousands of women and children were sheltered in buildings such as Hammond Hospital, and Lyman Chamberlin oversaw a ward with about two hundred of these refugees.²² At first, most of these civilians were “in good health.” However, their fortunes soon turned. Chamberlin witnessed disease rip through those under his care. He wrote: “It is a hard sight to look & see little ones pass away... To hear them plead for what cannot be had. To listen to their half suppressed groans. To see the chest labour & hear the death rattle as their end draws nigh & when all is over to close their little eyes & at the same time to speak words of consolation to the afflicted mother, who quite likely lies on the next bed - unable to rise and destitute of the means to clothe her offspring for its last resting place.”²³

Chamberlin felt powerless, as civilians he had grown fond of were dying at the unbearable rate of “four a day.”²⁴ Chamberlin’s excruciating detail, with phrases such as “to see the chest labour” and “hear the death rattle,” paint a vivid image of his reaction to this miserable situation. Chamberlin’s specificity of language – for example, “half-suppressed groans” – and the unusual intensity of his writing suggest that he was deeply moved by what he observed.

After this experience, Chamberlin declined to write any letters for a month. The next letter he wrote carried a far darker tone than any he had penned previously. Chamberlin wanted to watch the execution of Union deserters, which he called a “performance.”²⁵ His letter is written in an uncharacteristically choppy style, and Chamberlin signs off with the line “So Good Bye. With Love To all both great & small,” phraseology that does not match anything he had

²² Chamberlin, *Civil War Letters*, Letter 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, Letter 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter 19.

written before.²⁶ Chamberlin mentions wanting to leave the army as soon as possible, even though he had expressed great delight in working at Hammond in earlier letters. Chamberlin was likely not traumatized by battle, but by the death and suffering he witnessed.

Lyman Chamberlin's letters depict the struggle Union soldiers faced, a struggle both physical and mental. The care provided at Hammond Hospital demonstrates the growing awareness of this hardship as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Chamberlin survived the war, returned to New England, married, and had children. Hammond Hospital was converted back into a hotel after the Civil War, though it was eventually destroyed by a hurricane in 1879.²⁷ Hammond Hospital and Lyman Chamberlin served each other well through much of the war, and the intersection of their stories provides a window into the development of wartime mental healthcare in the United States.

About the author

Vinay Giri is a Biology major at Duke University. While taking a global health class that explored the evolution of science and technology worldwide, he became very interested in the history of medicine. Vinay's research was conducted in Beaufort, NC at the Duke Marine Lab.

²⁶ Ibid., Letter 19.

²⁷ Griffin, "The Hammond Hospital," 90.