

One of our great American Specialties

Here is a subject philatelists have been enthralled with for over 100 years.



The Confederate Post

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Dr. Edward G. Porcher – a victim of “the end of the medical Middle Ages”

The illustrated cover bears a 10¢ lithograph printed from Stone Y and tied by a blue Columbia, S.C., town cancel. It is addressed to Mrs. Porcher in care of her husband, Dr. Edward Porcher, who died at the age of only 26 from tuberculosis, doubtless contracted during his medical service in the War.

It has been estimated that 120,012 men were killed in action during the American Civil War. A further 64,582 died of their wounds. However, the greatest danger facing soldiers during the war was not bullets but disease. It is believed that 186,216 soldiers died of a variety of different illnesses during the conflict. The Civil War was fought, claimed the Union army surgeon general, “at the end of the medical Middle Ages.” Little was known about what caused disease, how to stop it from spreading, or how to cure it. Surgical techniques ranged from the barbaric to the barely competent.

Edward Gough Porcher was born June 22, 1839 in South Carolina. He lived in the Parishes of St. Philip and St. Michaels, Charleston District. He received his M.D. in 1860 from the Medical College of South Carolina in Charleston. On May 17, 1861 he was appointed Assistant Surgeon, Confederate States Army. During his military career, he was Assistant Surgeon, SC Heavy Artillery, 15th Battalion at Coles Island, SC and Ft. Pemberton, MS; assigned to the 32nd Georgia Infantry; promoted to Surgeon and served with the same unit at Ft. Johnson, Charleston, SC and Camp Milton, FL. In October 1865, only six months after the close of hostilities, he died of consumption.

The main fatal diseases during the war were those that resulted from unsanitary living conditions. Army records show that myriad soldiers died from diseases caused by contaminated food and water. This included diarrhea, typhoid and dysentery. Drinking from streams polluted by dead bodies or human waste, as well as eating uncooked meat, were the cause of large numbers of deaths. Regular soldiers, who had been trained to be more careful about the food and water they consumed, were far less likely to suffer from intestinal disease than volunteer soldiers. But even physicians like Dr. Porcher were not immune to contracting a deadly disease.

Many soldiers died from tuberculosis, known more commonly then as consumption. Tuberculosis was first identified in Ancient Greece. The tubercle germ attacks the whole body, but usually settles in the lungs. Tuberculosis causes a breaking down of the normal lung tissue and, in the 19th century, was responsible for about 25 percent of all deaths in Britain. The cause of the disease



was discovered in 1882 and this enabled a vaccine to be developed. Tuberculosis today can usually be treated successfully with antibiotics.

During the period just before the Civil War, a physician received minimal training. Nearly all the older doctors served as apprentices in lieu of formal education. Even those who had attended one of the few medical schools were poorly trained. In Europe, 4-year medical schools were common, laboratory training was widespread, and a greater understanding of disease and infection existed. The average medical student in the U.S. trained for two years or less, received practically no clinical experience, and was given virtually no laboratory instruction. Harvard University, for example, did not own a single stethoscope or microscope until after the war.

When the war began, the Federal army had a total of only about 98 medical officers, the Confederacy just 24. By 1865, some 13,000 Union doctors had served in the field and in the hospitals; in the Confederacy, about 4,000 medical officers and an unknown number of volunteers treated who devoted themselves to war casualties. In both the North and South, these men were assisted by thousands of women who donated their time and energy to help the wounded.

Of the Federal dead, roughly three out of five died of disease, and of the Confederates who died, perhaps two out of three. One of the reasons for the high rates of disease was the slipshod recruiting process that allowed under-age/over-age men and those in noticeably poor health to join the armies on both sides, especially in the first year of the war.

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