Sickness and Medicine in the Civil War

**Minnesota K-12 or District Standards:**

Regional tensions around economic development, slavery, territorial expansion and governance resulted in a civil war and a period of Reconstruction that led to the abolition of slavery, a more powerful federal government, a renewed push into indigenous nations’ territory, and continuing conflict over racial relations. (Civil War and Reconstruction: 1850—1877)

**Minnesota K-12 Benchmark:**

 Describe how the political policies, innovations and technology of the Civil War era had a lasting impact on United States society. (Civil War and Reconstruction: 1850—1877)

**Rationale:**

 The biggest enemy for both sides in the Civil War was not each other, but rather, disease and sickness. Students generally have an idea of the startling number of human limbs that were amputated and some have a grasp of the poor state of the medical technology leading up to the Civil War. This lesson illuminates the sheer number of soldiers that died as a result of the lack of medical technology. These letters provide some insight into how an average soldier reacted to the day-to-day sickness and his wounded friends in his Company.

**Activities: Middle School**

* “Sickness and Disease during the Civil War” Video
	+ Watch video (4:39)
	+ Formative Assessment
* Civil War Medicine Handout
	+ Read first three pages
	+ Formative Assessment
* Letter Analysis Activity
	+ Read letter excerpts
	+ Answer questions after each excerpt

**Materials:**

* Introductory video “Sickness and Disease during the Civil War”
* Civil War Disease handout:
	+ <http://www.civilwar.org/education/pdfs/civil-was-curriculum-medicine.pdf> and read the first three pages.
* “Civil War Soldiers Decimated by Disease” article (attached)
	+ <http://www.historynet.com/civil-war-soldiers>
* Photocopy of the authentic handwritten letters are available at the following links:
	+ First Letter: <http://cdm16921.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/cord-dfah/id/146/rec/1>
	+ Second Letter: <http://cdm16921.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/cord-dfah/id/9/rec/1>
	+ Third Letter: <http://cdm16921.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/cord-dfah/id/146/rec/1>

**Time:**

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| **Activity** | **Purpose** | **Estimated Time: 50 min** |
| “Sickness and Disease during the Civil War” | Introduce the material in an efficient manner. Follow with formative assessment to get feedback and check for understanding | 10 min |
| Civil War Disease handoutMiddle School. | Examine information about Civil War disease in a different medium. Follow with more formative assessment to check for understanding and feedback. | 20 min |
| “Civil War Soldiers Decimated by Disease” High School. | High School**.** Allow students to read a scholarly article that details one regiment’s experience with disease and how it affected the soldiers. Follow with formative assessment to check for understanding and feedback.  | 20 min(Assign as homework the night before to allow for more discussion) |
| Letter Analysis | Give students a chance to read a soldier’s accounts of the war battles and day-to-day camp life. The students will answer questions for a summative assessment | 20 min |

**Middle School Assessment:**

After “Sickness and Disease during the Civil War” video ask formative assessment questions of the class (can also use Think Pair Share to answer questions)

* What surprised you about diseases and infections? What did the man say was the most dangerous thing for a soldier to do? Why?

After the “Sickness and Disease during the Civil War” video continue with formative assessment questions that also include different perspectives. Imagine the horrible smell of a Civil War camp!

* Was a Civil War soldier sick more often than healthy? Would you be able to survive camp life of the Civil War?

The final assessment is the questions at the conclusion of each of the letter excerpts. You may select one or two if time is a factor.

**High School Assessment:**

After Civil War Disease Video ask formative assessment questions of the class (can also use Think Pair Share to answer questions)

* What surprised you about diseases and infections? What did the man say was the most dangerous thing for a soldier to do? Why?

Review “Civil War Soldier Decimated by Disease” article by Glenn W. LaFantasie (Read in class or assign as homework the night before) and have class discussion from critical thinking questions

* What were some of the hardships of the 15th Alabama Infantry Regiment? What brought about the disease outbreak? How do you think disease affected morale in the Regiment? Would you have the will to fight after seeing hundreds of fellow soldiers die before seeing the enemy?

The final assessment is the questions at the conclusion of each of the letter excerpts. You may select one or two if time is a factor. Use the Civil War Disease handout to answer question one of the first excerpt.

**Letter Analysis Activity**

 The following are excerpts from three letters written by Isaac Mark Abbott, a sergeant in Company K of the 68th Indiana Volunteers, during the Civil War. These letters provide some insight into how an average soldier reacted to sickness and his wounded friends in his Company. To get a better understanding of what kinds of diseases soldiers dealt with in the Civil War read the attached PDF. Then read each excerpt and answer the questions for each.

(Excerpt from letter to Roe Abbott from Isaac Abbott, 1863)

Dear Brother Roe, The Capt. got a letter from the Surgeon that had charge of John Smith notifying him that Smith has been sent home on a discharge furlough. I am glad that he has been sent home for John was a good soldier as long as he kept his health & I don’t believe he will ever be able to soldier anymore so he might just as well be at home with his folks as to be grieving himself to death in the hospital. Roe, the Capt. is very sick & I am afraid that he will never be any better & if he dies what will we do? He has the fever & he has not been in his right mind for two days. He has been sick now a week. I do hope he will soon get well again however, for I am satisfied that I can never like Edd Wood for a captain.

1. What sickness does the Captain likely have based on the “Medicine in the Civil War” link? Why do you think so?
2. What specific reason does Isaac give for why he wants the Captain to get better?

(Exerpt from letter to Family from Isaac Abbott, 1863)

The Rebs kept gradually developing their whole force & old Rosey in turn massed his forces & soon the entire armies both Union and Rebel were into it head & ears & our brigade suffered terribly that day & our reg’t was so badly cut up! The reg’t was under fire about 2 hours & our loss was 17 killed, 105 wounded & 14 missing. Co. K had five wounded & two missing. Bill McGehan was the only one mortally wounded. He was shot in the head & afterwards taken prisoner. It is supposed that he is bad ere this! Sanford Lewis & Tom Truitt were the two missing ones. We don’t know what became of them. They may both be killed or wounded, or they may have been taken prisoner before they were hurt at all. At any rate we have not heard nor seen anything of them since the fight of the 19th. On the 20th the fight began again at daylight, harder than ever, but our brigade was not in a very hot place that day & although it was twice as hard a battle as the day previous. Our reg’t only had one or two wounded & none killed. The object of the Rebels was to get into Chattanooga by cutting their way through our lines & they fought desperately to get possession of the road & no other but an American army could have checked their fierce assaults & withstood such showers of grape Shell & Canister as they rained upon our boys. But every time they made a charge they were as quickly hurled back with their ranks thinned & bleeding from the effects of our deadly fire of mini balls. They shoot a different cartridge from ours. For while we shoot but a single bullet, they shoot a ball & three buck shot & that is the reason why they wounded so many more than they kill. While we kill about as many as we wound for when we level our old enfield on a Reb he may as well prepare to go up the spout!

1. Which side won this two-day skirmish? What was the objective of the Rebels in this fight?
2. According to Sergeant Isaac Abbott why do the rebels wound so many more than they kill in battles?
3. What happens to wounded soldiers when they get back to camp? Will they likely recover?

(Exerpt from letter to Roe Abbot from Isaac Abbott, 1864)

Our reg’t was laying within 200 yards of the very spot that we camped on when we marched from Nashville to Murfreesboro a year ago last spring and as we lay there in battle array I though what a change had taken place with the 68th and especially with Co. K since that evening! Then Lieut’s. Breweington and Gould were both with us! And McKeighan Jones and Tanner and Wilson, Galt & Cravens were all there at roll-call with as good prospects of going through the war safe as any of us, but alas! They are numbered among the silent dead! Martyrs for the freedom & liberty of our country. Then I thought of our Old Mess we numbered seven in the old tent that night, but now I & Nelson is all that is left! Two dead, two in Southern dungeons, my own brother desperately wounded and in a hospital among strangers, and the other two worn out by sickness. It was a sad picture, but it is only one among thousands that this terrible war has made!

1. Of the seven soldiers that started with Isaac Abbott how many died in battle? How many are in POW camps? How many are too sick to fight?
2. What is a martyr and why does Isaac Abbott call his dead friends martyrs?

**Word Bank**:

**Discharge furlough**—orders to leave where a soldier is stationed

**Old Rosey**—Nickname Civil War General William Rosencrans

**Reg’t**—short for regiment

**Grape Shell & Canister**—ammunition fired from a cannon that shot many small projectiles to wound and kill as many infantry as possible.

**Enfield**—Civil War rifle

**Martyr**—someone who died for his or her beliefs

**Civil War Soldiers: Decimated by Disease**

By Glenn W. LaFantasie

Disease and primitive medical knowledge were the Civil War soldier’s worst enemies. For every soldier killed in battle, two died of disease. During their first summer of service in the Confederate army, William C. Oates and his comrades of the 15th Alabama Infantry Regiment watched as the first casualties dropped from their ranks, not from wounds inflicted by their Federal foes but from the deadlier onslaught of microbes and viruses in their camp. The Alabamians learned before they ever fired a single shot in anger that war often brought suffering and death where they were least expected, and that this particular war would seldom show mercy to anyone caught in the swath of its deadly scythe.

The 15th Alabama Infantry fell victim to an enemy more powerful than any Union army in the summer and autumn of 1861

Oates was a lawyer, newspaper publisher and editor, as well as a former fugitive from justice who had spent part of his youth as a gambler in Texas. In July 1861 he formed a militia company in Henry County, Alabama—the “Henry Pioneers”—that become Company G of the newly established 15th Alabama Infantry, under the command of Colonel James Cantey. Oates was named captain of Company G. From Fort Mitchell on the Chattahoochee River, Cantey moved his regiment—about 1,000 men strong—north by train to Richmond, where the 15th Alabama spent a few weeks drilling and training. Then, on August 21, the regiment received orders to proceed to the front. When they heard the news, the men cheered and sang all through the night.

The next morning, Cantey led the regiment through the streets of Richmond to the railroad depot, where President Jefferson Davis reviewed the troops and complimented Cantey on their fine appearance. The newly elected governor of Alabama, John Gill Shorter, a prominent Democrat from Eufaula with whom Oates was politically allied, was also there to see the 15th off, and he delivered a short address before the men boarded the cars. According to one Alabama soldier, Gill’s speech “did our hearts good,” for apparently the governor stirringly invoked the memory of Patrick Henry who, 80 years before, had denounced King George III by declaring, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” Once on the train, the men gave a rousing Rebel yell, the whistle blew, and the wooden stock cars lurched forward toward Manassas Junction.

All around Centreville and Manassas, near where the Confederates had won their first major victory in a battle fought on July 21, Brigadier General Joseph E. Johnston had extended the Southern lines. Reinforcements from all over the South were being rushed to the Manassas defenses as recruits poured into the army in the wake of the fighting along Bull Run. By August, Johnston’s army numbered less than 40,000 soldiers, and the general believed he needed more men to keep the Federal army from contemplating—and perhaps succeeding in—another southward push.

As the train carrying the 15th Alabama passed through little hamlets—places no bigger or even smaller than Abbeville, the county seat where Oates had mustered in the Henry Pioneers—on its ambling journey north, Virginians stood by the tracks cheering the soldiers and waving their hats and handkerchiefs. At each stop, Gus McClendon, one of Oates’s privates in Company G, remembered that “the patriotic ladies and beautiful Virginia girls would be gathered…to welcome us, distributing their fruits and flowers and cheering us on with expressions of delight when informed we were from Alabama.”

It took all day for the train to reach Manassas Junction, where the men of the 15th Alabama got off the cars, formed ranks, and marched about five miles from the station to an old field called Pageland, a flat open plain just north of Warrenton Turnpike where the Page family had intended to build a mansion and develop a plantation. On the march, Captain Benjamin Gardner of Company I led his men while he held a great umbrella over his head. “It had a most unmilitary appearance,” Oates remembered years later, “but the captain was large and corpulent, a lawyer by profession, unused to the sun, 52 years old, and therefore excusable.”

The 15th Alabama went into camp beside the 21st North Carolina, the 16th Mississippi, and the 21st Georgia Regiments. Across the broad expanse of field, practically nothing but row upon row of tents could be seen. The noise of camp—officers shouting, feet plodding on dry sod, bugles blowing, drums tapping—echoed over Pageland in one vast discord of sound. Although the water in the camp was bad, the weather was hot, and many thirsty soldiers decided to drink the tainted water rather than suffer from dehydration. Colonel Cantey saw to it that his companies drilled hard every day, and from miles around one could see the dust rising from Pageland like the billowing smoke of a forest fire.

“Drilling and performing the routine of camp duty was the regular order,” recalled Oates. Despite the arduous regularity of drilling every day for at least four hours, the men did have some respite and moments of gaiety and laughter. Oates fondly remembered “the fife of old Hildebrand, and Jimmie Newberry’s and Pat Brannon’s drums, as they were heard at reveille and tattoo.” Colonel Cantey’s teamster also brought a smile to the men’s faces: He “was the only man connected with the regiment,” Oates said, “who could surpass the Colonel in profanity.” But camp life involved mostly endless marching and backbreaking work. As Gus McClendon remembered: “The fatigue duty consisted of policing the camp, looking after its sanitary condition, cutting and hauling wood, and going with the forage and commissary wagons to the depot at Manassas Junction, to assist in loading them with the supplies for man and beast.”

With the camp less than two miles from the fields where the Battle of Manassas had been fought, Oates decided to take Company G and some other men from the regiment on a tour of the ground. It had just been a month since the Confederate victory, and the Alabamians were all curious to see what a battlefield really looked like. At first, the terrain matched their own romantic conceptions of the battle and the heroes who had fallen fighting for their righteous cause. Oates recalled that white posts “had been set up to mark each of the places where fell General [Bernard] Bee, of South Carolina, Colonels [Francis] Bartow, Georgia; [Charles] Fisher, of North Carolina, and [Egbert] Jones, of Alabama.”

The men walked over the ground with expressions of awe and wonder on their faces. Caspar W. Boyd, a private in Company I, wrote home to his parents that he “found a sight ther that I never saw befor.” Some of the dead from the battle had been hastily buried and their arms and hands protruded from beneath thin mounds of dirt. Boyd and his comrades even discovered severed hands and feet on the ground. The carcasses of dead horses still littered the field. He remarked that they strolled by the Widow Henry house, where the widow herself had been “kiled on her bed” during the battle.

Oates distinctly remembered, almost 45 years later, the pungent smell of fennel and pennyroyal—weeds growing on the battlefield that had been mashed down during the fight and still gave off their recognizable aromas. Some of Oates’s men thought the odor came from “dead Yankees,” concluding that Northerners must have a different smell in death than Southerners. A few of the Alabamians reacted to the battlefield with less solemnity than did Oates or Caspar Boyd. Gus McClendon reported that some of the men treated the outing like a picnic, and they felt “like birds turned out of a cage.” Nevertheless, he and his companions could not avoid being amazed at the sight of the remnants of a stand of pine where the 7th Georgia was known to have held its ground during the battle. The trees had been chopped to pieces by musket volleys. “It was a wonder to us,” wrote McClendon, “how a man could live in such a place.”

If nothing else, the excursion to the Manassas battlefield gave the Alabama boys reason to ponder war and its grim realities. Oates and his men roamed fields where the grass was still stained red with dried blood, where unexploded shells lay exposed to view, and where minié balls covered patches of ground in a thick lead carpet. To McClendon, the “horrible” battlefield offered “sad scenes” that “furnished food for reflection.” Although some tried to treat the tour as a frolic, no one who visited the battlefield that day would ever regard war in quite the same fashion as he had done before.

--> “At the time,” wrote McClendon, “I was full of malice and hatred for the ‘Boys in Blue’ and was just as anxious to kill him as he was to kill me, yet when I would stop and take a second thought, and gaze upon those little mounds I could truthfully say of the dead ‘Boy in Blue’ that sometime, and somewhere, he had been ‘somebody’s darling.’ ” When the men walked solemnly back to Pageland and reached their camp, they thought their short journey had showed them the worst of war. They had no idea of the far worse horrors yet to come.

Those horrors began at Pageland. It was in the Confederate camps there that, in the words of one private in the 15th Alabama, “the reaper commenced the harvest of death” that would continue for the regiment until its surrender at Appomattox. When the 15th Alabama had first arrived at Pageland, its closest neighbor in the camp, the 21st North Carolina, was already struggling with an epidemic of measles and serious outbreaks of mumps and typhoid. All of these diseases were—and still are—highly contagious, although in our modern times we have grown accustomed to dealing with them during childhood and have vaccines that prevent their spread and other medicines that quickly wipe them out. In the Civil War, measles was by far, as Oates himself declared, “the worst enemy of our army,” for it spread rapidly among the adult soldiers who had developed no immunity to the disease and who could do nothing to fight it.

Measles cut through the ranks of the 15th Alabama at the encampment like a biblical plague or the medieval Black Death. No one, including the small number of surgeons assigned to the army, knew that the disease was carried on droplets through the air and that proximity to the virus meant almost certain infection. In this respect, it is somewhat miraculous that the entire Confederate camp at Pageland was not stricken with the disease. Infected soldiers experienced high fever, rash, runny noses, watery eyes, and coughing. Due to the lack of a vaccine and effective treatments, few men who were infected survived the illness. After the initial symptoms, their condition generally worsened. Some soldiers came down with pneumonia and encephalitis (brain inflammation) as a result of measles; others suffered middle-ear infections, severe diarrhea, and convulsions. The worst cases—and there were hundreds of them among the troops of the 15th Alabama—resulted in death.

The first man in the regiment to die was Andrew J. Folmar, 18, a private in Company I. Then many others quickly became sick and had no strength or immunity to fight off the overwhelming disease. About 100 of the regiment’s men died over the span of six weeks. A military funeral and burial were performed for each death, and obsequies soon became part of the camp’s daily routine. Overcome with emotion from this profusion of sickness and death, one private wrote in despair: “Beneath the soil of Prince William [County], now slumber in quiet repose, secure from summer’s heat and winter’s cold, from the cares of life and shock of strife, the noblest and best of the regiment.”

Those who fell to sickness were stricken by the fear—and the near certainty—of approaching death. Sick and well alike yearned for the comforts of home and to be magically transported from this strange land where so many men were dying. For those on death’s doorstep, the longing for home was even more pronounced. “The thought of home is ever uppermost in the mind,” admitted one Alabamian, “and a wish exists to be buried with their fathers and the companies of their youth.” Their wish would not be granted. At Pageland, the “Dead March” was so frequently heard that men became inured to it and soon did not even inquire as to who had died or was being buried. The endless deaths produced a “crude shock” among the men of the 15th Alabama and, as anyone might expect, “threw a gloom” over the camp that could not be shaken off.

So many men were sick that the routine camp duty for those who remained healthy became more strenuous than ever, for now there were fewer hands to do the work. Throughout the desolation of this epidemic, the 15th Alabama—just like all the other regiments—was ordered to keep up its drill four hours a day, although those who were not sick began to lose their strength under the physical burdens they had to bear.

Oates became outraged at the desperate situation. He faulted the army for keeping the sick in the same camp with the healthy men, which ensured that those who were not yet sick soon would be. Years later he wrote in anger:

I do not know who was responsible for it, but it was a great mistake. There was not that care taken of the men of any regiment, so far as my observation extended, which foresight, prudence and economy of war material—leaving humanity out of the question—imperatively demanded….Had the Confederate authorities made more persistent efforts than they did, hospitals could have been more established in sufficient numbers to have saved the lives of hundreds and thousands of good men, which were for the want of them unnecessarily sacrificed.

Oates believed that the surgeons could be blamed as well. They were “criminally negligent,” he said, “for not earnestly protesting against such sacrifices of human life.” He reached a bitter, but obvious, conclusion: “This folly lost to the service more men than were put out of it by the enemy’s bullets.”

Someone in Johnston’s high command eventually decided that the Alabamians had stayed in Pageland long enough, and around the middle of September the 15th Alabama, along with several other regiments, received orders to transfer their camps closer to Centreville. Oates and the other capable officers and men of the 15th struck their tents under a sweltering sun, leaving about 300 of the regiment’s sick behind, and marched up and down the swales of the Warrenton Turnpike toward Bull Run. Surely the sights and sounds of death had been more than enough for them at Pageland, but the Alabamians once more had to march across the Manassas battlefield, where those dour reminders of war and combat remained exposed in their shallow graves. One of Oates’s men later wrote that the decomposing carcasses of humans and beasts spoke “in dumb eloquence” of man’s inhumanity.

From the battlefield, Oates led his men—beaten down by the heat, their own fatigue, and somber thoughts of death—along the Alexandria Pike until they reached a vast open field, not altogether unlike Pageland, about five miles east of Centreville and three miles west of Fairfax Court House. There they established Camp Toombs, named in honor of Robert Augustus Toombs of Georgia, who had resigned his appointment as Confederate secretary of state to become a brigadier general. (Oates called him “Georgia’s most erratic and greatest talker.”) Not far from the camp were “bold springs” of water, the kind Virginia was noted for, Oates said happily.

The measles predictably followed the column from Pageland to Camp Toombs, even though the sickest men had been quarantined at Pageland. The men of the 15th Alabama, and of a good number of other regiments as well, kept dying. Barnett “Bud” Cody, a private in the 15th Alabama who was the son of a clergyman and Oates’s playmate in their younger days, became ill and began to fear for his life. The doctor told him to stay in his tent, which soldiers were not allowed to do, especially when it came time for drill and dress parade. Oates, however, released Cody from duty from several days and allowed him to get stronger.

The army had an epidemic on its hands, and no one seemed to know quite what to do about it. The men turned to religion, as people—and particularly soldiers—do in times of doubt or utter despair. They were desperate, these young Confederate boys who cherished their Bibles and wrote home to their families to inform them that they kept up with their Scripture readings despite the taxing demands that the army placed on them every day. While Gus McClendon was on guard duty one day, a little girl gave him a Bible as a present, all carefully inscribed with the girl’s name. He carried the book through several battles, treasuring the gift and honoring the girl who had given it to him. In camp, an itinerant preacher arrived to do some Bible thumping and held a prayer meeting that attracted large numbers of soldiers. The preacher handed out Bibles to the men, but only if they would promise to carry the Good Book with them, which many of them did.

As the Confederates camped around Fairfax Court House and Centreville waited for the war to erupt into battle again, which it did not do during these long weeks in the early autumn of 1861, separate hospitals for each regiment’s roster of sick men were finally established. The 15th Alabama’s was set up at Haymarket, a little village of a handful of houses and shops 10 miles west of Manassas Junction. Ill and dying soldiers from the 15th Alabama, including the ones who had been left behind at Pageland and those who had more recently succumbed to disease in Camp Toombs, were transported in uncomfortable springless wagons to the field hospital in Haymarket.

The village, located about six miles southwest of the Manassas battlefield, was not a perfect place to set up a hospital. South and west of the town a marshy stretch of woods produced more than a sufficient quantity of “bad air” and “bad water” that Civil War doctors incorrectly believed were the causes of contagious diseases.

The men of the 15th Alabama were brought to St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, and as many of them as would fit were laid out on the pews in this house of God. For some, those who held to their faith, knowing they were housed in a church gave them succor and hope. For others, they must have been pleased, at the very least, to have a sturdy and dry roof over their heads. Many of the sick, however, were quartered in tents raised in the fields around the church, the fields that already held those soldiers who had not recovered from their wounds after the Battle of Manassas. Others were given beds of straw and hay under the only protection available—the tall trees that shaded the yard around the church.

The sick were attended by Dr. Francis A. Stanford, a native of Georgia who had enlisted in the 15th Alabama at Fort Mitchell on the Chattahoochee, and by a Dr. Shepherd of Eufaula, Alabama, who was nearly 75 years old. Stanford had carefully selected Haymarket as the site of the regimental hospital. One soldier said of Stanford that he missed “no opportunity to provide for the well-being of the invalids.” This Alabamian had nothing but praise for the good doctor: “All of his time and talent is devoted to his profession and the amelioration of the suffering. Day by day we see him on his rounds of mercy from the rising of the sun until ‘the going down thereof,’ and from dark until midnight, in fair weather and foul, and oh! ungrateful humanity; we hear him abused the remaining six [hours of the day].”

Convalescents provided the nursing care to their comrades at the hospital. Oates visited St. Paul’s and described with a critical eye what he saw there:

At this improvised hospital there was neither accommodations nor comfort; no bedding but the soldier’s blanket, with his knapsack for a pillow, and no nourishment but army rations; a scant supply of medicine and no medical attention worth having, except such as old Dr. Shepherd…could give….The nights in October were cold, and early in the month there was frost, and the suffering of the sick men was intolerable….It was no uncommon sight at that hospital to see six or seven corpses of 15th Alabama men laid out at once.

There were probably worse places to die than under those high trees (heavenly trees, the locals call them) or in the peaceful fields surrounding the church or in the quiet chancel of St. Paul’s in Haymarket. But the men did die, and whether the place was good or bad, serene or bedlam, the only thing that mattered was that poor boys who could not do anything to save themselves, young men a very long way from their homes in Alabama, were slipping away. In time, the epidemic abated and the deaths finally ceased, but the Confederate forces in northern Virginia had already paid a very stiff price by losing good men, young men who had not yet even experienced the horror of combat but who had come to know of hell by confronting an invisible enemy against whom they had no defense.

At Camp Toombs, where the remainder of the 15th Alabama spent that autumn, camp life fell into the same old routines. Company and battalion drill, said Oates, was the daily occupation. Years afterward he remembered: “Occasionally we were aroused by a rumor, incident to such a life, concerning the advance or other movements of the enemy; but, having no foundation, the excitement soon subsided. Later in the war the soldiers denominated such rumors as ‘grapevine telegrams’ and paid no attention to them.” In the loneliness of an army camp, with thousands of fellow soldiers all around, some of the men, Oates claimed, died of homesickness.

As for the sick and dying at Haymarket, Oates could not take his mind off them. Their suffering, as he had said, was unbearable—to them and to their comrades who survived. It is not known precisely how many men the 15th Alabama buried in the fields around St. Paul’s Church, where their remains still lay after all this time. A stone marker near the entrance to the church states flatly, without mention of the dead of the 15th Alabama: “In this area are buried 80 unknown Confederate soldiers who died of wounds after the battle of Manassas, July 21, 1861.”

Oates thought that at least 150 men died there and were buried in the churchyard, but in old age, as he wrote his memoirs and strained to remember the details of the Haymarket hospital, he caught himself and confessed that the number must have been much greater. The adjutant’s report for the month of November 1861 alone listed 60 dead. With sadness in his heart, Oates said he thought the estimates were all low. And he was probably right. It seems likely that no less than 200 men from the 15th Alabama, and perhaps considerably more than that, fell from disease at Haymarket and are buried in the fields (or what is left of them) to the north and west of the church building.

Haymarket was not unique in the autumn of 1861, for there were hospital sites just like the one at St. Paul’s near practically every army camp, Union and Confederate, from Virginia to Texas. The hell faced by the men of the 15th Alabama at Haymarket was experienced by thousands of soldiers on both sides. Few of the men who got sick in their camps recovered from their illnesses; most who contracted measles or mumps or whooping cough or typhoid—or any of the other highly contagious and highly lethal diseases that sliced through Civil War armies—died without ever really understanding what had happened to them or why they had to die. Over the next four years, disease continued to take its toll in the Confederate and Union ranks, and the terrible scenes that had taken place at Pageland, Camp Toombs, and Haymarket would repeat themselves across the American countryside until the war, and all its hard suffering, finally ended.

What William C. Oates and the boys of the 15th Alabama learned in the late summer and autumn 1861 was a lesson learned by every soldier in every war. It was a lesson as old as time. War is all misery, cruelty, and hell. And all too often young soldiers—brave and true boys—give their lives for no good reason at all.

*Glenn W. LaFantasie is the author of* Gettysburg Requiem: The Life of William C. Oates *(Oxford University Press, 2006).*

- See more at: http://www.historynet.com/civil-war-soldiers#sthash.Q8oUhxYP.dpuf