

Chimborazo Hospital: a description and evaluation of the Confederacy's largest hospital.

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# Chimborazo Hospital: A description and evaluation of the Confederacy's largest hospital



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## Abstract

This study will attempt to develop a fuller understanding of the Civil War and the history of medicine by carefully examining what occurred at Chimborazo Hospital, the largest and best known hospital in operation during the war. By constructing a picture of the Confederacy's flagship hospital, this work will help describe a major part of a Civil War soldier's life. During the war, of the 600,000 men who fought for the Confederacy "approximately 3,000,000 cases of wounds and disease were cared for by the Medical Corps of the Confederate States Army. On the average, then, each Confederate soldier was disabled by wounds and sickness about six times during the war." Located just outside of Richmond, Virginia, Chimborazo Hospital cared for 77,889 patients between its opening in October 1861 and its surrender to Union troops in April 1865. Although its institutional lifespan was relatively short, Chimborazo Hospital affected the development of modern medicine by directly exposing this large number of soldiers to successful medical treatment in a large institutional setting. Another goal of this work is to show the changing nature, role, and perception of the hospital. Americans living in the mid-nineteenth century had a very different view of hospitals than we do today. The term did not bring to mind images of white-clad nurses, antiseptic-smelling hallways, or sterile operating rooms. Instead, they thought of filthy, dimly-lit, crowded buildings provided in the cities by charities or city governments for those who were destitute, or of the horrors they had read about the military hospitals during the Crimean War of 1853-1856, where fatality rates soared to approximately twenty percent in British hospitals and thirty percent in French hospitals.' The average American saw hospitals only as places where the chronically-ill and poor could go to receive minimal health care; most Americans did not consider the hospital setting healthy or respectable for visits, much less for extended stays. The development and success of hospitals such as Chimborazo began to change those perceptions, prompting Americans to see potential in large medical institutions.

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