

Walt Whitman, John Mahay, and Urotrauma in the American Civil War

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Introduction: Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a visionary American poet who inspired innovation within the literary landscape, choosing to preserve real, complex life with poetic imagery. He also chose to volunteer as a nurse during the American Civil War, daring to confront the violent, painful reality of war's aftermath with precision and unflinching honesty. The United States Sanitary Commission organized volunteer nursing for the Union Army during the Civil War (1861-1865). Our objective is to investigate the urologic management and perspectives of Walt Whitman during his service as a nurse during the American Civil War.

Sources and Methods: We conducted a review of the literature pertaining to Walt Whitman, his clinical practice, and his relationship to John Mahay during the Civil War. A review of textbooks, peer-reviewed articles, works of prose, and government archives was performed. Original publications and images were reviewed through the Walt Whitman Archive, Library of Congress, the National Museum of Health and Medicine, and the archives of the International Journal of Urologic History.

Results: During the Civil War, Whitman cared for numerous patients, including Private John Mahay, who sustained a penetrating GU injury during the second battle of Bull Run (August 29th, 1862). He passed several bone fragments per urethra, suggesting a PFUI (pelvic fracture urethral injury). Mahay continued his chronic urologic care with Walt Whitman. The entry and exit wounds resulted in fistulas to the urinary tract with documented blood, pus, and urine drainage. Mahay ultimately died on October 24th, 1863, after nearly a year of chronic urologic care. Several urinary stones were removed from Mahay's bladder on autopsy and archived. Whitman's account of John Mahay preserved him as a living person, his travails, and sufferings prior to the advent of modern urologic care.

Conclusions: Walt Whitman's Civil War writings chose to confront reality with honesty, precision, and eloquence. His commitment to John Mahay's care during the Civil War underscores the essential human aspects involved in acute and chronic urologic care following traumatic injury.

Keywords: Trauma, Walt Whitman, Civil War, Fistula, History

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a visionary American poet who inspired innovation within the literary landscape, choosing to preserve real, complex life with poetic imagery. He also chose to volunteer as a nurse during the American Civil War, daring to confront the painful reality of war's aftermath with precision and unflinching honesty. In "The Wound Dresser", a compilation of letters he wrote from Washington D.C.'s wartime hospitals, he reflected,

"Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through
the hospitals; The hurt and wounded I pacify with
soothing hand, I sit by the restless all the dark night
— some are so young; Some suffer so much — I
recall the experience sweet and sad." (1)

Whitman defied the pomp and circumstance prized in artist's portraits of the time. In a now lost photo by

Gabriel Harrison (1818-1902) from 1854, Whitman was captured, in his own words, "just as you see me"; his shirt is open at the collar.(2) His hair and beard are flyaway, hat purposefully aslant, and his stance, with his hand on one hip, is casual in a time that sought to preserve an image of staid formality rather than reality (Figure 1). Whitman's choices of portraits, like his poetic word choice for the care for the injured and the dying, demonstrates his ability to cut through facades to arrive at the heart of the matter—our shared, fated humanity. One of the many wounded Whitman personally cared for was the New York soldier John Mahay, who infamously sustained a urogenital injury in 1862. Whitman himself wrote of the account but there has been no formal urologic evaluation of the Mahay case from the perspective of Whitman's eyewitness account and the impact the case had on him. Our objectives were to investigate Walt Whitman's wartime experiences as a nurse during the Civil War and his role in the management and outcomes of the urogenital wounds of Private Mahay.

SOURCES AND METHODS

We conducted a review of the literature pertaining to Walt Whitman, his clinical practice, and his relationship to John Mahay during the Civil War. A review of textbooks, peer-reviewed articles, works of prose, and government archives was performed. Original publications and images were reviewed through the Walt Whitman Archive (whitmanarchive.org), Library of Congress (www.loc.gov), the National Museum of Health and Medicine (medicalmuseum.health.mil), publicly available literary databases, and photographic archives of the International Journal of Urologic History (www.ijuh.org).

RESULTS

A Call to Action:

At the close of 1862, as Walt Whitman cared for his ailing mother in Brooklyn, New York, he read the list of Union Casualties from the Battle of Fredericksburg (December 11-15, 1862) and suspected his brother, George, enlisted in an involved regiment, was among the wounded. Walt quickly boarded a train for Virginia and eventually found George alive in a Union Army Camp in Falmouth Virginia, recovering from a minor jaw injury. But at the Lacy House, a makeshift hospital



Figure 1. Walt Whitman, 1854, in a Samuel Hollyer (1826-1919) engraving of the original daguerrotype by Whitman's friend and fellow New Yorker Gabriel Harrison (1818-1902) (Beeghly Library, Ohio Wesleyan).

of sorts, Walt was profoundly shocked by the heaps of amputated feet, legs, arms, and hands carried in a cart nearby. He became inspired to visit the weak and wounded soldiers of Falmouth, then traveled back to Washington, DC, where he spent his days and nights tending to soldiers as a volunteer nurse at the Armory Square Hospital, long razed, but now the site of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.(3) Armory Square was the first of many hospitals established by the United States Sanitary Commission, a civilian run relief organization first approved by President Lincoln in June, 1861, and which coordinated the provision of relief supplies, and medical facilities for the Union Army during the Civil War (1861-1865). Whitman recalled these days at Armory Square Hospital and other sites in "The Wound Dresser" (1865) which revealed the trauma of the war and the ongoing pain and suffering of the injured soldiers.

"I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet
unavoidable,

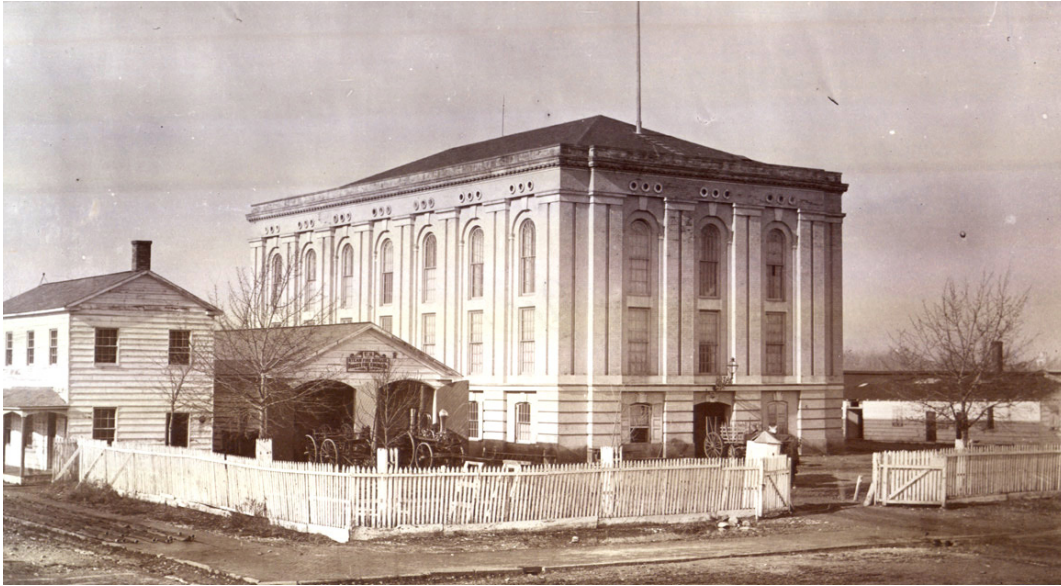


Figure 2. Armory Square Hospital, the largest and busiest of the US Sanitary Commission facilities during the American Civil War, could contain 1,000 patients. Walt Whitman spent most of his bedside time here where one of his patients was John Mahay. The location is now the site of the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum.

One turns to me his appealing eyes— poor boy! I
 never knew you,
 Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for
 you, if that would save you.”(1)

His writing style regarding the war challenged the more popular spectacle and circumstance of contemporary odes with a tone of solemnity, exposing the harsh reality that many American soldiers and nurses faced.(4)

“On, on I go... (open, doors of time!
 Open, hospital doors!)
 The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand, tear not
 the bandage away;)
 The neck of the cavalry-man, with the bullet through
 and through, I examine;
 Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the
 eye, yet life struggles hard;
 (Come, sweet death! Be persuaded, O beautiful
 death! In mercy come quickly.)
 From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
 I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off
 the matter and blood;
 His eyes are closed, his face is pale,
 (he dares not look on the bloody stump, And has not
 yet look'd on it)
 I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep, but a day or
 two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,

 And the yellow-blue countenance see.
 I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the
 bullet wound,
 Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene,
 so sickening, so offensive,
 While the attendant stands behind aside me, holding
 the tray and pail.
 I am faithful, I do not give out;
 The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the
 abdomen;
 These and more I dress with impassive hand—(yet
 deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)”(1)

American Civil War- Urotrauma

At the Armory Square Hospital, the largest and busiest of the US Sanitary Commission facilities, and a favorite of President Lincoln's to visit, Whitman would have seen the full and devastating spectrum of wounds the survivors bore (Figure 2). Civil War injuries were predominantly caused by low explosive weaponry, and infrequently resulted in genitourinary (GU) trauma. Fewer than 1% of battlefield-related trauma resulted in GU injuries. A total of nearly 1500 cases of GU trauma were recorded in the comprehensive “Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War” and 22% proved fatal.(5) Many of the surgeons during this era had little to no hospital experience, with fewer than 2 years of education.(5) Penetrating kidney injuries were associated with a 65% mortality, compared to 56%

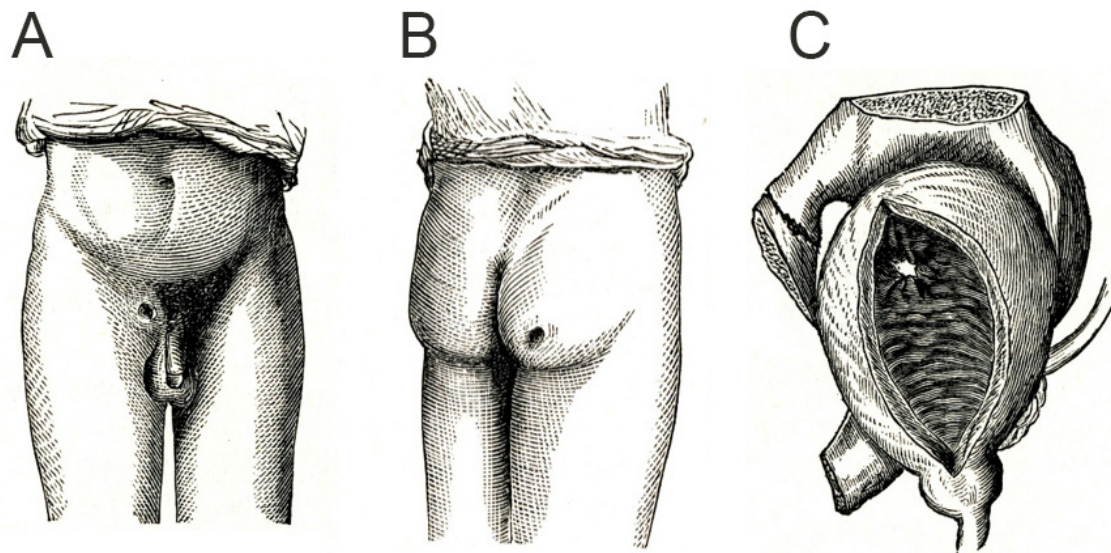


Figure 3. Injuries of private John Mahay, sustained in the Second Battle of Bull Run. A. Entrance and B. Exit wounds of penetrating injuries. C. Post mortem demonstration of shot perforation of bladder and fracture of the right ischium and symphysis pubis. All from *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, volume II, p 294 (14).

mortality of bladder injury.(5) The high fatality rate of these injuries was due to either hemorrhage or intra-abdominal sepsis. However, injury to the urethra or external genitalia had a much lower mortality rate (20% and 13%, respectively). While many of these injuries were complicated by fistula and stricture, mortality was improved, partly due to the diversion of urine via perineal urethrostomy or suprapubic cystostomy.(6) Patients with adequate urinary drainage had improved outcomes, presumably due to decreased intra-abdominal sepsis.(5) Civil War battlefield triage did not exist until the pioneering efforts of Army Medical Director, Maj. Jonathan Letterman (1824-1872) in September, 1862. The successful treatment of pelvic injuries during the Civil War era included a commitment to the proper control of bleeding vessels, removal of foreign bodies, debridement of necrotic tissue, incision of infected collections, and adequate diversion of urine when external injury occurred.(5)

Second Battle of Bull Run- August 29th, 1862

Several months before George Whitman entered the Battle of Fredericksburg, the Army of Northern Virginia, led by Robert E. Lee (1807-1870), made a major assault into the United States at Manassas, Virginia against the Union Army of the Potomac under John Pope (1822-1892). There, in what became the 2nd Battle of Bull Run,

Lee's outnumbered forces outmaneuvered and defeated Pope and allowed Lee to cross the Potomac river into western Maryland, threatening Washington D.C. itself. The two-day battle left 1700 dead and 22,000 casualties including Private John Mahay of the New York 101st. Mahay sustained a penetrating bullet wound through the pelvis (see Editor's note). The projectile shattered his pelvis and perforated the bladder, leaving a wound that drained pus, urine, blood, and bone fragments per urethra (Figure 3).(7) Surviving the initial trauma and under the care of Major John Hill Brinton (1832-1907), Mahay was brought to the Armory Square Hospital in Washington where the private would later suffer chronic fistulas, pain, bladder stones, and infection (Figure 3).

A Poet at the Bedside

It was at Armory Square, therefore, where Whitman first came across Mahay, who would become one of Whitman's first and favorite patients, resulting in numerous writings and correspondences. Whitman was known to visit Mahay for his care and supply him with candy to improve his morale. Whitman could not ignore, however, the devastation of Mahay's injury, writing on one occasion that "the water came out of (his) wound, by slow but steady quantities, for many weeks – so that he lay almost constantly in a sort of puddle".(7) Whitman recalled later the case from Second Bull Run

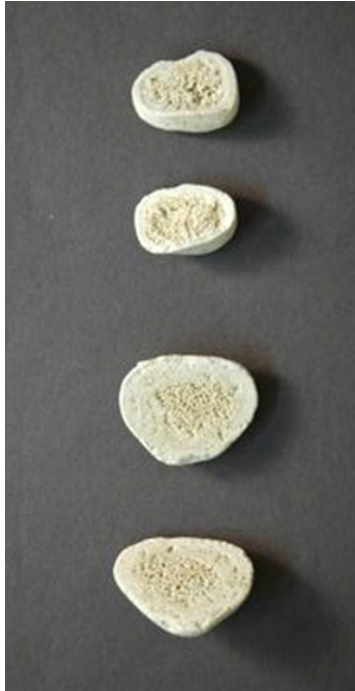


Figure 4a (left). Bladder stone fragments recovered from John Mahay at autopsy by D.W. Bliss, USV on October 25th, 1863. They remain in the National Museum of Health and Medicine (NMHM). Image courtesy of NMHM. **Figure 4b (right).** Gravestone of John Mahay, Congressional Cemetery, Washington DC, section 3, site 148. Image courtesy of Sophie Seypura, IUH.

in his memoir *Specimen Days*:

"One scene at his bedside will suffice for the agonies of nearly two years. The bladder had been perforated by a bullet going entirely through him. Not long since I sat a good portion of the morning by his bedside, Ward E, Armory-Square. The water ran out of his eyes from the intense pain, and the muscles of his face were distorted, but he uttered nothing except a low groan now and then. Hot moist cloths were applied, and relieved him somewhat. Poor Mahay, a mere boy in age, but old in misfortune."(8)

Mahay's wounds would never heal. Mahay died on October 24th, 1863, after 14 months of chronic care. Several urinary stones were removed from Mahay's bladder on autopsy on the 25th, which Major Brinton himself archived at the National Museum of Medical History (Figure 4a). Private Mahay was buried three days later in the Congressional Cemetery in Southeast Washington on the banks of the Anacostia River. Whitman recalled "he had quite a funeral ceremony"(Figure 4b).(8)

Whitman worked in Washington D.C. the remainder of the war in the US Paymaster's office but his true

devotion appeared to be as a caregiver in the city's rudimentary military hospitals. He estimated that he made over 600 visits to tens of thousands of wounded soldiers, most barely adults, "as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need". (9)

DISCUSSION

At the time of the Civil War, Walt Whitman was already a celebrated, if not controversial, writer, celebrating the beauty and "sacred everydayness" of American life, and known to figures as diverse as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase. Whitman's attachment to the "'divine Average' American life" may have predetermined his year's of service as a spiritual and bedside caregiver to the Union's war injured (10). His additional commitment to John Mahay's care underscores the essential human aspects involved in acute and chronic urologic care following traumatic injury when the modern technologic aspects of management had not yet existed.

Walt Whitman's Civil War writings chose to confront reality with honesty, precision, and eloquence while skirting the inevitability of death in so many

patients, lingering in the open wards of mid-19th century hospitals, devoid of antibiotics, autoclaves, or modern concepts of surgical management beyond amputation and debridement. Instead, Whitman's words highlighted the humanism in caring for traumatic injuries which ultimately claimed their victims. Several years before the war, Whitman considered the far reaching impact of the death experience on the physical and emotional elements that surrounded the deceased.

The dull nights go over, and the dull days also;
 the soreness of lying so much in bed goes over,
 The physician after long putting off gives the silent
 and terrible look for an answer
 The children come hurried and weeping, and the
 brothers and sisters are sent for
 Medicines stand unused on the shelf (the camphor-
 smell has long pervaded the rooms)
 The faithful hand of the living does not desert the
 hand of the dying,
 The twitching lips press lightly on the forehead of the
 dying;
 The breath ceases, and the pulse of the heart ceases
 The corpse stretches on the bed and the living look
 upon it
 It is palpable as the living are palpable
 The living look upon the corpse with their eyesight,
 But without eyesight lingers a different living and
 looks curiously on the corpse.(11)

Mid-19th century American attitudes of death reflected, as the Emily Dickinson scholar Carol de Grasse wrote, the "paradox of the social death scene", a kind of Victorian 'cult of death' encompassing uplifting elegies and 'mortuary verse' about the departed.(12) Some, like Dickinson and Whitman, looked at death in a quasi-Romanticized framework, a mixture, as de Grasse writes, of fascination and horror. Whitman's wartime efforts with John Mahay and so many others, may have been fueled by his recognition that death, while inevitable and loathed, may also be embraced and eased with compassion and humanism.

"The sun bursts through in unlooked-for directions!
 Strong thoughts fill you and confidence - you smile!
 You forget you are sick, as I forget you are sick,
 You do not see the medicines -
 You do not mind the weeping friends- I am with you,
 I exclude others from you- there is nothing to be
 commiserated,
 I do not commiserate- I congratulate you."(13)

CONCLUSIONS

Walt Whitman's commitment to John Mahay and thousands of patients' care during the American Civil War underscores the essential human aspects involved in acute and chronic urologic care following traumatic injury, when the absence of modern technology prioritizes the power of compassion and bedside care.

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Editor's Note: The full accounting of case 856, that of the pelvic injury of Private John Mahay's and his subsequent clinical course, may be found, on page 294 in volume 2 of the compendium of the *Medical And Surgical History of the War of Rebellion*:

"Case 856 private John (Mahay), company H 101st New York, aged 19 years, was wounded at the second battle of Bull Run August 29, 1862. He was taken to Armory Square hospital. Surgeon J.H. Brinton, U.S.V., made a memorandum of the case in his note book (sic), with diagrams indicating the position of the entrance and exit wounds...The missile, probably a conical musket ball, entered over the horizontal ramus of the right pubis, an inch from the symphysis, and, passing downward, and a little upward, emerged through the right buttock. Surgeon D.W. Bliss, U.S.V., forwarded a report of the case. After giving the military description and seat of injury the report continues:

"Several pieces of bone, at different periods, passed through the urethra, and although he has never been perfectly free from pain, sometimes of the most severe character, his appetite and strength long continued good. The wounds made by the entrance and exit of the ball would close up for a longer or shorter period, and again open and discharge urine, pus, and blood; and when urinating, the contents of the bladder would pass quite as freely through these fistules (sic) as through the urethra. He generally urinated freely, but never without pain, referred to at times as very severe; the urine always albuminous, mucopurulent, or bloody, and in considerable quantities. During the earlier part of the treatment, a catheter was retained in the bladder, and attempts have been made, at different later periods, to re-introduce it, but were attended with unendurable suffering. The catheter never seemed to be of much benefit. The patient has suffered much pain, referred to the kidneys, at different periods which was allayed by cupping, warm fomentations, and opiates. About six weeks ago (September 15, 1863) he was placed under the influence of ether and the anterior wound was dilated and an irregularly shaped piece of bone was extracted, and at the same time a stone was distinctly felt, but it was not deemed prudent to operate for its removal at that time. Since then, he has been gradually failing and he died on the evening of October 24, 1863. At the autopsy on the following day, it was discovered that the course of the ball varied but little from the foregoing description. The bladder was greatly contracted, and the walls or coats were three eighths of an inch in thickness, and the cavity was nearly filled by two stones, one weighing two drachms ten grains*, the

other three drachms fifty seven grains, or, conjointly, six drachms seven grains. Several pieces of necrosed bone were removed from the point of exit of the ball'.

"The two calculi here referred to were sent to the Museum** The bladder and injured portion of the right *os innominatum**** were also forwarded, and constitute the highly interesting specimen, represented in the wood cut (See Figure 3c). There is ligamentous union of the fracture of the horizontal ramus of the pubis. The fractured ischium is united by callus, and so much deformed as to be a puzzling study. The thickened bladder adheres to the pubis and ischium, and its walls appear to have been perforated at one point only, the opening remaining widely previous. The missile probably struck the viscera while distended, and produced a single laceration on his right lateral wall. In Dr. J.H. Brinton's note-book there is a memorandum of a visit to the patient January 3, 1863: "Patient is nearly well. He complains of pain at the anterior wound when he draws a long breath, and of constant pain in the glans penis, and frequently pulls at the prepuce. Appetite good. Pieces of bone were discharged some five or six days since through the posterior opening, and some little pieces came through the urethra, the size of a grain of rice and ragged. One piece was expelled, which was larger, about half an inch in length, and nearly a quarter of an inch in width. There was great pain in micturition. The catheter has, at various times, been introduced." (14)

*One *drachm* was generally regarded as 1/8th of an ounce apothecary or 3.9 grams. 60 grains = 1 drachm. Thus, six drachms and seven grains would be about 25 grams.

**National Museum of Health and Medicine, Silver Spring, Maryland.

***(*Arch.*) The point of convergence of the pubis, ilium, and ischium