

# From Contract Surgeon to Town Doctor: The Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Light Herr

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**Introduction:** The life and legacy of Dr. Martin L. Herr of Lancaster, PA helps to correct the popular perception that contract surgeons in the Civil War were nothing more than quacks and butchers when in fact they proved to be courageous and competent physicians essential to give medical care to overwhelming numbers of casualties.

**Sources:** Personal papers and archives of ML Herr in the Lancaster Historical Society (Lancaster, PA) were reviewed.

**Results:** ML Herr obtained his medical training and degree while serving as a contract surgeon during the Civil War. He transformed that experience to become a community leader and town physician and surgeon. His legacy helps to restore the reputation of contract surgeons to the honor they deserve.

**Conclusions:** Dr. ML Herr served both his fellow man and his community with distinction during the Civil War and in civilian life. He left the army, his country, the people of Lancaster, his family, and his profession better off because of his presence.

**Keywords:** Civil War, Contract Surgeons, Martin Light Herr



n February 10, 1902, the Lancaster Register announced the untimely death of a prominent local citizen and surgeon, Dr. M. L. Herr.(1) The obituary headlined, "one of the city's oldest and leading physicians summoned." After collapsing from a "stroke of paralysis", he never regained consciousness and died late in the afternoon on February 8th at his residence in Abbeyville, on the Columbia turnpike. He was in his sixty-third year and the cause was listed as 'Bright's disease'. Although Dr. Herr did not enjoy robust health for several years before his death, he was able to attend to his practice. A week before his attack, he visited patients and attended the annual banquet of the Lancaster Pathological Society. Recounting the accomplishments of his life, the eulogies following his death bemoaned the loss to community, family, friends, and patients.(2) Dr. Herr was praised as "one of our best physicians, beloved husband and father, loyal to country, a generous and true friend." The Board of Directors at Lancaster General Hospital passed a resolution in his honor and displayed a plaque at the entrance that reads "firmness of honest conviction, devotion to his laborious profession, well-stored and ready mind, called him daily to this hospital." The Member Board of the Conestoga National Bank

described him as "a public-spirited citizen and a devoted, unselfish, ever-watchful physician." And the faculty at Franklin and Marshall College paid homage to him as an educator having "lofty qualities of character and mind, genial disposition, sympathetic spirit, high sense of humor, and Christian manliness." Herr served as well during the Civil War as a 'contract surgeon', a medical position that infamously had not been held in high regard by either contemporaries or subsequent historians of that conflict. The contrast, therefore, between the great accolades of Herr's life with the lowly field position he once served requires closer inspection. Our objective is to determine whether Herr's remarkable career illustrates a more accurate example of a Civil War contract surgeon than what is popularly alleged.

## SOURCES AND METHODS

M.L. Herr's personal papers, containing military documents, correspondence, and newspaper articles, housed at the Lancaster Historical Society, were reviewed by the author. Primary surgical data from the 1861-1865 conflict was obtained from the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*. Archives of Vanderbilt University School of Medicine were accessed with secondary source materials as cited.

## RESULTS

### Contract Surgeons

At the start of the Civil War in 1861, the Federal medical corps was comprised of 113 regular army surgeons, of whom 24 resigned their commissions and went South to join the Confederacy. To meet the demands of the mounting casualties of war, the Union army began to recruit civilian physician volunteers to help regular surgeons care for overwhelming numbers of wounded. They were known as 'contract surgeons.' Many had little to no surgical experience. Herr was one of the 5,532 civilian physicians who worked for the Union army as a contract surgeon. Officially titled Acting Assistant Surgeons, U.S. Army, contract surgeons served primarily as ward physicians in general hospitals located in cities and towns remote from the battlefields. They held no commission and were paid monthly. Most contracts lasted only 3 to 6 months (4).

Contract surgeons were held in low esteem by regular army medical officers because they were perceived as inexperienced (certainly in surgery), refused to perform mundane medical tasks such as dressing wounds, and wanting only to operate (meaning to amputate) without the surgical judgement to decide how and when. Throughout the war, the press was especially critical of

surgeons in general, especially after Antietam, the war's 'bloodiest day' on September 17, 1862. The October 19, 1862 issue of the New York Times reported that the medical corps had "so many quacks and butchers", that "the damned surgeons (were) not worth a curse", and that the "limbs of soldiers were in as much damage from the ardor of young surgeons as from the missiles of the enemy." That popular perception persisted during and after the war. Herr, however, was an example of a contract surgeon who took full advantage of his wartime experience to further his education and improve his skills. He served until the end of the war, completed his medical education and left the army as a regular army surgeon. Both the gravely wounded during the war, and his civilian patients in later life, benefited directly from his experience. Overall, contract surgeons performed admirably and with great courage, and many went on to have notable careers (4). Without them, many more wounded would have died. Dr. Herr was not an exception; he was the norm.

### Early Life

Martin Light Herr was born September 13, 1838, in Strasburg, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. His father was Christian B. Herr, a prominent miller and farmer of West Lampeter township. His mother was Maria Light, daughter of Martin Light, also a prominent farmer and landowner. Dr. Herr was a descendent (as is the author)



**Figure 1.** (Left) M L Herr (1838-1902), in an 1864 daguerrotype at the time of his service in the Union Army as a contract surgeon in the Civil War.(3) He married Rosina E. Hubley (1846-1889) six years later, having five children between 1871-1880, and were both active members of the Lancaster Pennsylvania community. (Lancaster County Historical Society)





**Figure 3.** The contract surgeon of the Civil War period, in caricature. The drawing included the unflattering lyric: *"Ho! Ho! old saw bones here you come, Yes when the rebels whack us, You are always ready with your traps, To mangle, saw, and hack us."* (The Library Company of Philadelphia)

(7) It is interesting and noteworthy that Herr not only successfully passed a rigorous medical examination as a medical student that many certified physicians failed, but that he was appointed as a surgeon rather than as a medical cadet. On the following day, January 22, 1863, Herr signed a contract as a private physician with the United States Army in which he agreed to perform the duties of a medical officer in whatever capacity the army sees fit and to be paid the sum of \$100 dollars each month for his services (Figure 2).

Late in January 1863, Herr received Special Order No. 13 from the Office of Medical Director, U.S. Army, in Philadelphia – "Dr. M.L. Herr having received a favorable response from the Examining Board will proceed without unnecessary delay to Nashville, Tennessee and report in person to surgeon Henry Thurston, Assistant Medical Director, Department of the Cumberland."(8) Herr was referred to as 'doctor' in these official reports despite not having a customary medical degree. At any rate, at the start of the third year of the war, Herr's medical

training was undoubtedly needed to bolster the understaffed medical corps. Responding to a request from the Governor of Ohio, surgeons were especially needed in Tennessee because of heavy casualties sustained among Ohio regiments after battles at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, and Stones' River. (4) Despite lacking a formal medical degree, the records indicate that Herr served in full capacity as Acting Assistant Surgeon, including performing many varied and complicated surgical operations. He referred to himself as Acting Assistant Surgeon in the Personal Report of his activities submitted every month, and he was referred to as Herr, M.L. (a. a. surg.) in written orders he received daily as well as his monthly payment receipts.(8)

### Medical service in Nashville

His orders to proceed to Tennessee without delay brought Herr to Nashville sometime in March 1863. On April 2, 1863, he was assigned to General Hospital, No. 8, one of Nashville's eleven general hospitals active during the war. These hospitals were sprawling affairs composed of hundreds of tents scattered among single-roofed frame buildings. Each hospital housed between 500 and 1000 beds, and most

were always occupied. On his first day, Herr was issued Circular No.1 prepared by J. Morris Brown, Assistant Surgeon, U.S. Army for General Hospital No.8 outlining the duties of the medical staff – "Medical officers are expected to visit the wards under their charge regularly each day at 8 1/2 o'clock a.m. and 4 o'clock p.m. Each officer will be required to serve as officer of the day as per roster and will perform the duties usually devolving upon such. He will report in person to the surgeon in charge at 9 1/2 o'clock a.m. when he goes on duty and in writing at 9 1/2 o'clock p.m. when relieved. He will be found at his post at all times when not engaged officially elsewhere. It is expected he will wear his sash." Since surgeons (and not medical cadets) wore a sash suggests that Herr's superiors regarded him as acting assistant surgeon.(7-9)

Like many other contract surgeons in Nashville, Herr was assigned as a ward physician responsible for dressing wounds, prescribing drugs and caring for the overall needs of injured soldiers convalescing in the general hospitals. He was also detailed to "attend daily at the Engine House No. 3 Cherry Street South, Nashville, between the hours of three and five o'clock p.m. and vaccinate (against smallpox) such citizens as may present themselves for that purpose." There is no record

Case	Unit	Date of Injury	Injury/site	Operation	Date of Surgery	Outcome
AW	2nd Ken	Oct 9, '64	GSW*, head	trephine	Nov 7, '64	Survived, return to duty
JS	55th Ohio	July 20, '64	GSW, head	trephine	July 24, '64	Died, Sept. 7, '64
SR	4th Indiana	Sept 3, '64	GSW, feet	Amp**, toes	Sept 9, '64	Survived, return to duty
OW	103th Ohio	May 14, '64	GSW, pelvis	perineal incision	Nov 24, '64	Survived, discharged
DG	31st Wisc	Nov 10, '64	hydrocele	radical drainage	Nov 13, '64	Died, Dec 16, '64, pneumonia
AS	51st Indiana	Dec 16, '64	GSW, shoulder	Excision, scapula	Dec 20, '64	Died, Jan 31, '65, pyemia
PB	80th Indiana	Dec 10, '64	GSW, shoulder	Amp, arm at shoulder	Dec 10, '64	Died, Dec 11, '64, exhaustion
JD	96th Illinois	Sept 20, '63	GSW, arm	Amp, mid-arm	Nov 26, '63	Survived, return to duty
WW	125th Ohio	May 14, '64	GSW, arm	Amp, mid-arm	May 21, '64	Survived, discharged
CL	23rd Mich	Dec 3, '64	GSW, forearm	Amp, upper forearm	Dec 16, '64	Died, Dec 23, '64, gangrene
AF	86th Indiana	Nov 25, '63	GSW, elbow	none	Dec 16, '64	Died, Dec 16, '63, pyemia
GD	6th Ken	Nov 25, '63	GSW, forearm	Amp, upper forearm	Dec 13, '63	Survived, discharged
JW	19th Inf	July 30, '64	GSW, knee	Amp, lower thigh	Oct 25, '64	Died, Nov 5, '64, gangrene
WD	73rd Penn	July 30, '64	GSW, thigh	Amp, upper thigh	Aug 23, '64	Survived, return to duty
ED	18th Ohio	Dec 15, '64	GSW, thigh	Amp, upper thigh	Dec 16, '64	Died, Dec 27, '64, pyemia
BD	18th Ohio	Dec 15, '64	GSW, thigh	Amp, lower thigh	Dec 15, '64	Died, Jan 8, '65, gangrene
FK	71st Ohio	Dec 16, '64	GSW, thigh	Amp, lower thigh	Dec 17, '64	Died, Dec 29, '64, pyemia
TS	12th Tenn	Sept 22, '64	GSW, thigh	Amp, upper thigh	Nov 7, '64	Died, Nov 22, '64, exhaustion
GW	7th Ohio	Nov 27, '63	GSW, thigh	Amp, lower thigh	Mar 15, '64	Survived, return to duty
JR	59th Illinois	Aug 19, '64	GSW, thigh	Amp, lower thigh	Dec 7, '64	Died, Jan 4, '65, gangrene
GW	1st Ohio	Sept 30, '63	GSW, leg	Amp, upper leg	Nov 6, '63	Died, Nov 7, '63, pyemia
BM	8th Kansas	Dec 16, '64	GSW, leg	Amp, lower leg	Dec 17, '64	Survived, return to duty
WY	French Div	Nov 30, '64	GSW, leg	Amp, lower leg	Dec 24, '64	Survived, return to duty
DL	5th Tenn	Mar 14, '64	GSW, leg	Amp, upper leg	June 6, '64	Died, June 10, '64, exhaustion
FD	8th Ark	Nov 30, '64	GSW, leg	Amp, upper leg	Jan 2, '65	Survived, exchanged
CF	2nd Ind	May 9, '64	GSW, leg	Amp, lower leg	June 14, '64	Died, Sept 30, '64, gangrene
SB	4th Indiana	Sept 3, '64	GSW, foot	Amp, toes	Sept 3, '64	Survived, return to duty
MW	1st Mich	June 30, '65	Fracture, arm	Amp, arm at shoulder	June 30, '65	Survived, discharged
JF	13th Wisc	April 18, '65	Eye infection	Excision, ectropion	April 18, '65	Survived, return to duty

**Table 1.** Operations performed by Dr. Herr during Civil War from the epic *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, edited by GA Otis, 1876.(13) \*GSW, gun shot wound; Amp, amputation

that he performed surgery during his first five months of service, but he must have assisted some and surely faced the ravages of infection, namely cellulitis, sepsis and hospital gangrene, that ultimately took the lives of many surgical patients. It was on the wards that he began to understand the importance of antisepsis that would later mark his civilian work. He also evaluated and prescribed medications and diets for the medically ill with typhoid fever, pneumonia, and the ever-present dysentery. His letters to his mother described daily life on the wards dressing ghastly wounds, being aroused at night to stem secondary hemorrhages from the stumps of severed limbs, dispensing liberal doses of calomel, tartar emetic, quinine and opiates, the lack of sleep, and the sad, forlorn faces of the injured and dying.(7,8)

On October 7, 1865, his contract with the U.S. Army was formally annulled. The Medical Director's Office, Department of Tennessee issued – "The service which Dr. M.L. Herr has rendered in this Department, were well and faithfully performed."(10) That did not end his military service, as he was formally appointed in December 1865 as assistant surgeon and assigned to the Army of Tennessee (11). He served in this capacity until late 1866, when he resigned from the army to return home to Lancaster.

### Medical degree

During the latter part of 1863 and into 1864, and while serving as a medical officer under contract in

the General Hospitals in Nashville, Herr completed his studies in the Medical Department at the University of Nashville (now Vanderbilt University Medical School) (Figure 4). Requirements for a medical degree at Nashville included 1) three years regular study in the office of a regular physician, 2) attendance upon two full courses of lectures in a regular school of medicine, the last of which must be at this Institution, 3) four years reputable and regular practice will be accepted in lieu of one course of lectures, 4) write a clear thesis on some medical topic and deposit it with the Dean by the first day of February, and 5) the candidate must be 21 years of age, and of good moral character (11). Herr's three-year preceptorship with Dr. Cassidy, attendance of more than one lecture term at Jefferson Medical College, and his ongoing war activities more than qualified him as a candidate. He paid for and received tickets to attend the \$105 second course of lectures required for his medical degree, under the direction of W.K. Bowling, Dean (12). These included instruction in chemistry and pharmacy (materia medica), surgery, surgical anatomy, physiology, obstetrics and diseases of women and children, and practice of medicine. He also studied surgical anatomy, McLeod's Crimean War, camp diseases, surgical fevers, and Wood's Practical Medical Principles and Therapeutics, spending a total of \$177.23 on medical books (12). His thesis aptly addressed sanitation and problems of wound infection. In 1864, he was awarded a Doctor of Medicine degree from the



Figure 4. The medical school at Nashville where Herr completed his medical studies and obtained his degree in 1864 about 10 years before it became better known as Vanderbilt University School of Medicine (Eskind Biomedical Library, Vanderbilt).

University of Nashville. On September 29, 1864, Herr again appeared before an Examining Board of Surgeons, this time in Nashville. The Medical Board informed A.L. Gillem, acting general of the state of Tennessee "we have examined Dr. M.L. Herr thoroughly in medicine and surgery and found him well qualified for the position of surgeon, and do therefore recommend him for that position"(10). In 1865, he was assigned to the Army of Tennessee as assistant surgeon (11).

### **Surgical experience**

Dr. Herr performed a variety of surgical procedures on soldiers on both sides. He also assisted other surgeons during operations and performed all or part of many others not registered in the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*.(13) Indeed, he received a request from the surgeon in charge at General Hospital No. 1 to provide medical histories to accompany specimens for "your surgical operations since September 30, 1863."(7) He was particularly busy in November and December 1864 after the Battles of Spring Hill, Franklin and Nashville.

Of Herr's operative cases, 52% died of their wounds, mostly caused by overwhelming infection. The most common operation performed was amputation, but Herr acted not only as a military trauma and orthopedic surgeon but also as neurosurgeon, urologist, ophthalmologist (Table 1). Since Herr did not practice in a field hospital near the battles, he seldom had an opportunity to intervene soon after injury. His surgical results reflect the ravages that festering wounds imposed despite later heroic attempts at aggressive surgery. Weeks or months after attempts to save limbs by conservative 'resections', contaminated wounds were far too advanced to salvage many patients, although there were exceptions. He contributed a total of seven specimens to the army war museum in Washington D.C. He also conducted autopsies on all his fatal cases to document the lethal pathologic effects of local wound sepsis and septicemia on distant organs.

### **The Court Martial**

On June 30, 1865, Herr received a request from the General Adjutant's Office in Nashville "to a report for trial tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock to answer general charges of a violation of the 7th Article of War."(8) The charges levied against M.L. Herr claimed he ordered the release of prisoners who had been mistreated and unduly confined by the commander of guards, declaring

"I don't care if they are confined there by the commanding officer, I again order you to release said prisoners. Those are my orders, and you shall obey them."(8)

Although the charges do not give details regarding injuries or medical condition of the prisoners, how they were being mistreated, or why Herr wanted them released, it seems by insisting on humane treatment of prisoners, he was interfering with military discipline. There is no record of any adverse judicial action against Dr. Herr, and he certainly retained his position as assistant surgeon in the army medical corps. The episode did upset his mother, Maria Herr. When she learned later of the court proceedings, Maria wrote to him November 15, 1865, that "he should not have risked himself" and advised him "to keep his good name." Fearing distractions, she also admonished him apologetically "not to bring a lady back from the South". (14) He obeyed and later married Rosina E. Hubley of Philadelphia, September 6, 1870, referring to her as "my dear Rose."(15) The couple raised five children. Their eldest son, John, became a physician in Lancaster after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania medical school.

### **Post Bellum Career**

Dr. Herr returned to Lancaster in 1867 and established a large and successful medical and surgical practice. His services were in great demand, and he was called to perform many delicate and intricate operations. (16) Armed with Lister's revolutionary techniques of antiseptic surgery, he applied these principles in surgical practice for the next 30 years, reducing his wartime frequency of postoperative infection. He also applied the new science of bacteriology in public health, helping to clean up the local water supply, and he established the first Board of Health in Lancaster and became its president. He lectured frequently on hygiene and infection and contributed to medical journals (18). He organized the Lancaster Pathological Society, served several terms as president and delivered a lecture to the Society titled "sepsis, puerperal fever, pelvic cellulitis and multiple abscesses are things of the past" (19.) He served as the first medical director of the newly established Lancaster General Hospital from 1893 until his death in 1902 (hospital today is a prominent regional medical center and part of the University of Pennsylvania health network). He was a member of the Medical Societies of Lancaster County and Pennsylvania as well as the American Medical Association. He was selected

twice as AMA delegate to the annual conventions of the International Medical Association held in 1890 in Berlin and in 1894 in Rome (19). He lectured on anatomy, physiology and hygiene at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster and served for 12 years on the Lancaster School Board.

### **Legacy of Dr. Martin L. Herr**

The Civil War had a profound impact on Herr's life, evidenced by much of his later professional activities. To be sure, Herr was an industrious and motivated young man who attended two distinguished medical colleges and completed his formal medical education while serving the Union army during the war. He was entrusted with the responsibilities of a ward physician as Acting Assistant Surgeon, which included performing surgery, even before he obtained his medical degree. This fact alone speaks to his ability as well as to the Civil War era as a desperate time of great need. As a result of his war experience, he began to understand and appreciate the association between contagion and infection and he recognized the importance of asepsis and antiseptic surgical techniques in preventing infection. His own favorable experiences motivated him in civilian practice to educate others on this topic in journals and lectures to professional groups and students. Concern for hygiene extended beyond his individual patients to public health when he organized the first Board of Health in Lancaster. And his lifelong interest in education was exemplified by more than a decade of faithful service on the local school board and to students at Franklin and Marshall College.

### **DISCUSSION**

Out of the conflagration, chaos, and misery of the war emerged a whole generation of educated physicians and surgeons who became trained far beyond the limitations of the lecture hall 'medical school' format of the pre-Flexner era. Post-bellum medical persons now dispersed themselves across the country and began to think and practice scientifically, well poised to take full advantage of the revolutionary medical advances to come in the late 19th century. Many of the 'new generation' of physicians had been contract surgeons like Dr. Herr, assigned to the front lines and hospital wards of the American Civil War. There are numerous

statues of generals and soldiers adorning battlefields and public squares, but there is no statue that honors a Union army surgeon. Herr's diaries and medical accomplishments illustrate popular misconceptions of the Civil War contract surgeon. In contrast to the 'quacks' and 'hacks' so erroneously vilified in the lay press, most contract surgeons performed admirably well, in harsh conditions, with ethical and scientific rigor, and advanced the field.

It was said of Herr that he "served faithfully as great a cause as earth had known, contributed to saving lives, learned from his experience, educated others, and passed again into private life as an unremembered, unrewarded servant of duty" (13). Herr served both his fellow man and his community with distinction during the Civil War and in civilian life. If a man's life is judged not by what he says but what he does, then Martin L. Herr, MD indeed did much. Herr was buried with his wife, who had pre-deceased him by several years, in Woodward Hill Cemetery in Lancaster. The well-publicized life of a leader in community affairs and promoter of many progressive enterprises had come to an end. He left the army, his country, the people of Lancaster, his profession, and his family better off because of his presence.

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