

Dr. Benjamin Rohrer's Artifact Collection

The National Museum of Civil War Medicine in Frederick, Maryland, houses numerous letters, maps, medical supplies, and other artifacts pertaining to medical developments during the Civil War. Among these collections are the personal possessions of Dr. Benjamin Rohrer, a surgeon with the Tenth Pennsylvania Reserves. Dr. Rohrer's artifacts, donated by Dr. Gordon Dammann, include his leather surgeon's shoulder bag, a carte de visite, saddle bags, a spur, a Bowie knife, and a collection of twenty-seven letters and one map of Gettysburg showing the position of hospitals after the battle there. Rohrer's Civil War story begins in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he left in August 1861 to fight for a "righteous cause," as mentioned in a letter to his brother dated August 18, and ends in the furthest reaches of Florida four long years later. Dr. Rohrer's experience encompasses almost every phase of the medical system, ranging from time as a regimental surgeon to charge of a general hospital. He treated the wounded soldiers of the Tenth Pennsylvania Reserves at battles such as Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg. Later he was transferred to Germantown, Pennsylvania, to operate the general hospital there. The final letter in the collection, dated May 9, 1865, reassigned Dr. Rohrer to Key West, Florida.¹

One of the most interesting pieces of the collection is Dr. Rohrer's carte de visite. With this picture, we can see and appreciate the Union major's visage and bearing. Rohrer looks out at us dressed in a double breasted coat and wearing a full beard. Rohrer's medical kits, although not complete, provide further evidence of his life and of medical practice during the war. The different leather containers provide tangible examples of how surgeons carried medicine in the field. Rohrer's collection includes a shoulder bag with the number "10" on the flap, identifying him as a member of the Tenth Pennsylvania Reserves. Rohrer would have carried this bag on his person at all times to treat wounded soldiers at one of his unit's

¹ Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5* (Harrisburg, PA, 2005), 1:823, May 31, 1864; Third Division Headquarters orders ordering Surgeon Benjamin Rohrer to take charge of Fifth Corps wounded on June 1, 1864, L3.2003.028; Department of Pennsylvania Medical Director's Office Special Orders No. 123 regarding Acting Assistant Surgeon Benjamin Rohrer being reassigned to Key West, May 9, 1865, L3.2003.031, both National Museum of Civil War Medicine, Frederick, MD.

treatment areas before, during, and after the battles. The spur and saddle bags suggest that Dr. Rohrer rode horseback to quickly make his rounds to attend to his injured comrades.²

The history of the Civil War is not only the story of battles, politics, and generals. A seldom-mentioned but important aspect of the war's history is its medical history. Countless lives were saved by medical innovations and experienced surgeons, such as Dr. Benjamin Rohrer of the Tenth Pennsylvania Reserves, were vital in treating the wounded soldiers not only on the battlefields, but in the many hospitals around the country, days or weeks after the initial injury. The National Museum of Civil War Medicine presents these practices and advancements in medical science on both sides of the conflict by tracing the care of wounded soldiers from battle to recovery at long-term-care hospitals. While the museum emphasizes the significance of the achievements of Dr. Jonathan Letterman, a Pennsylvania native who revolutionized battlefield medicine forever, it also recognizes that the individuals who treated the wounded, like Dr. Rohrer, are an integral part of this important history. Only a small portion of this history can be told through Dr. Rohrer and his possessions. The rest can be found somewhere in the collection of the National Museum of Civil War Medicine, waiting to be discovered.

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² Carte de Visite, L3.2003.003; spur, L3.2003.002; and field medical case, L01.2000.075, all National Museum of Civil War Medicine.