

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

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MEDICINE *of* THE HIGHEST ORDER

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# Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

- American Poet and Volunteer Nurse for the Union Army
- Born on Long Island NY, Whitman worked as a journalist, teacher, government clerk and later a world-renowned poet
- Searching for his wounded brother in 1862, he found a calling in caring for wounded soldiers and would remain as a volunteer nurse throughout the rest of the civil war

*"--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"*

*Walt Whitman, The Wound Dresser (1865)*

# John Mahay (1843-1863)

- Private John Mahay, who sustained a penetrating GU injury during the second battle of Bull Run (August 29th, 1862). Mahay's surgeon described on autopsy, "just over the horizontal ramus of pubis one and one fourth inches from medium line, passed through bladder and emerged posteriorly". (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Private John Mahay, who sustained a penetrating GU injury during the second battle of Bull Run (August 29th, 1862)

- Mahay died October 24th, 1863 after nearly a year of chronic urologic care. Several urinary stones were removed from Mahay's bladder on autopsy (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Several bladder stones removed from Private John Mahay

“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... 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.”

-Walt Whitman, Specimen Days (1882)

## Conclusion

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.