

MP01-12

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

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*"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"*

Walt Whitman, *The Wound Dresser* (1865)

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. Volunteer nursing for the Union Army was organized by the United States Sanitary Commission during the Civil War (1861-1865).

Objective:

Our objective is to investigate the urologic management and perspectives of Walt Whitman during his service as a Nurse during the American Civil War.

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 anatomic diagrams were reviewed through the Walt Whitman Archive and the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

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; Figure 1). He passed several bone fragments per urethra suggesting a PFUI (pelvic fracture urethral injury). Mahay continued his chronic urologic care with Walt Whitman. Whitman described how the bullet had struck Mahay "front, low in the belly", piercing his bladder.

The entry and exit wounds resulted in fistulas to the urinary tract with blood, pus and urine drainage (Figure 2). Infection was an ongoing issue, as antibiotics would not be discovered for another 75 years. Suprapubic catheters were commonly used to divert urine during the Civil War, but Mahay's wounds would never heal.



Figure 1. Second Battle of Bull Run (August 29, 1862); Image courtesy of Library of Congress

"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)

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Mahay died October 24th, 1863 after 14 months of chronic urologic care. Several urinary stones were removed from Mahay's bladder on autopsy (Figure 3).

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

- American Poet and Volunteer Nurse for the Union Army
- Born on Long Island NY, Whitman worked as a journalist, teacher and government clerk in addition to being 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



Figure 2. Private John Mahay, who sustained a penetrating GU injury during the second battle of Bull Run; Image courtesy of NMNH



Figure 3. Several bladder stones removed from Private John Mahay; Image courtesy of NMNH

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.



National Museum of Health and Medicine (NMHM)



References:

Whitman, W. *Drum taps* (1865). New York: Somerset Books
Whitman, W. *Specimen Days & Collect* (1883). Glasgow: Wilson & McCormick