

Richmond's Medical Miracle

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During the opening months of the Civil War, the streets of Richmond, Va., filled with bloodied bodies. The thousands of Confederate wounded were treated in a range of makeshift hospitals hastily established in hotels, factories and private homes. But by autumn, as hopes the conflict would be brief faded, it became clear a war of this magnitude required a modernized medical response.



Library of Congress, Chimborazo Hospital, Richmond, Va.

That fall Samuel P. Moore, the Confederate surgeon general, secured both the facilities and the personnel to provide such a response at [Chimborazo](#), a 40-acre plateau just east of the Confederate capital's stately Church Hill neighborhood (the site got its name from Mount [Chimborazo](#), an inactive volcano in Ecuador, famous at the time after being "discovered" by the German explorer-scientist Alexander von Humboldt). Occupying 150 buildings, it was one of the largest hospitals in the world, typically serving around 4,000 sick and wounded soldiers at a time. Over the next three and a half years it treated 77,000 patients — twice the entire population of Richmond at the outbreak of the war.

But Chimborazo was remarkable for more than just its gargantuan size. It would prove to be among the world's most efficient, modern and sanitary hospitals of the period, an achievement due in no small part to Moore's appointment of [James B. McCaw](#) to run the facility. The son, grandson and great-grandson of physicians, McCaw embodied the emergence of the modern, professional doctor. After attending medical school in New York, he returned to his native Richmond, accepting a professorship at the Medical College of Virginia and editorship of the Virginia Medical and Surgical Journal. His nascent understanding of the hygienic importance of cleanliness, his ties to M.C.V. (the only medical school in the

Confederacy to remain operational throughout the war, allowing Chimborazo to pioneer the practices of a teaching hospital), and his talent as an administrator proved invaluable in superintending Chimborazo.

McCaw organized Chimborazo into five divisions, each with its own surgeon-in-chief. Within each were 90 wards measuring about 80 feet by 28 feet and containing 40 patient beds. The wards were spaced along 40-foot-wide avenues and 10-foot alleys, with 3 doors and 10 windows on the long sides of the buildings to provide ventilation. During the most propinquitous and bloody campaigns, when the number of wounded exceeded the capacity of the wards, 100 Sibley tents were pitched nearby, accommodating up to 10 patients each. Once the tents filled, additional patients were bivouacked in the open air.

McCaw LibraryAn 1863 map of Chimborazo Hospital.

The complex also included bathhouses, ice houses, carpentry and blacksmith shops, a soap manufactory, a stable, a chapel, an apothecary shop, a bakery that produced 10,000 loaves daily, a brewery that produced 400 kegs of beer at a time, and five dead houses, one for each of the divisions. (Although one advantage of Chimborazo's location was its proximity to [Oakwood Cemetery](#), the patient mortality rate was fairly low for a Civil War hospital, between 9 and 11 percent.) Chimborazo maintained a large vegetable garden on a nearby farm, as well as herds of goats and cows. McCaw even secured a canal boat to travel the James River, bringing provisions from as far away as Lexington, Va.

If the bustling facilities were unlike anything the South had ever seen, so were its personnel. In addition to the dozens of physicians, who were organized into a hierarchy of assistant surgeons, surgeons and surgeons-in-charge, the hospital employed enormous nursing and support staffs. Military hospitals had previously been manned largely by convalescing soldiers, but the labor needs at Chimborazo were so great — as was the [pressure for any able soldiers](#) to return to the front — that McCaw relied heavily on slaves, free blacks and white women to keep the hospital running.

Indeed, African-American labor was paramount to the running of Confederate military hospitals. Though the Civil War is often thought of as the watershed that opened the field of nursing to American women, female nursing was largely a Union, and not a Confederate, phenomenon; 9,000 women served as nurses in Union hospitals, compared to only 1,000 in Confederate hospitals, primarily because the use of hired-out male slaves in the South preempted the recruitment of white women.

McCaw repeatedly advertised for slave labor throughout the war, and he pleaded with Moore for impressment of Chimborazo's enslaved staff, to prevent owners from removing the slaves in his service. Slaves (and a smaller number of free blacks) cooked, cleaned, and worked in manufacturing — tasks similar to those they'd long been assigned in non-hospital settings. But enslaved men also served in the nursing staff, an arrangement that shocked some of the patients. One wounded infantryman wrote in horror, "There are only two brute attendants,

both black (they call them nurses, God save the mark!).”

White women did play a crucial role at Chimborazo, serving as matrons on the wards. Matrons oversaw the preparation and distribution of medicine and meals, as ordered by the physicians. They also provided a range of patient care, from reading Bible passages to writing letters home, and fielding requests for everything from a haircut to a “b’iled sweet pur-r-rta-a-a-tu-ur,” as **Phoebe Yates Pember, who served as matron from late 1862 through the fall of Richmond, recalled in her entertaining, if occasionally self-aggrandizing, 1879 memoir, “A Southern Woman’s Story: Life in Confederate Richmond.”**

Unfortunately, the historical record hasn’t yielded anything analogous to McCaw’s official correspondence or Pember’s memoir to provide the perspective of the enslaved and free black staff regarding their wartime experience at Chimborazo. Nevertheless, in a significant post-bellum coda to the story of Chimborazo, the facility that was constructed with slave labor in October 1861 and employed hired-out slaves throughout the war was converted after the war into a freedmen’s school. Opened in June 1865, it served hundreds of African-American students, many of whom lived on site. Like other freedmen’s schools, Chimborazo attracted a broad swath of the free black population in the years following emancipation; the [November 1869 register](#) listed students between ages 4 and 29.

As significant as McCaw’s wartime administrative foresight and efficacy were, ultimately Chimborazo’s legacy lay in the expansion of gender and race roles, as much as it did the modernizing of medical practices.

Sources: Carol Cranmer Green, “Chimborazo: The Confederacy’s Largest Hospital”; Phoebe Yates Pember, “A Southern Woman’s Story: Life in Confederate Richmond.”