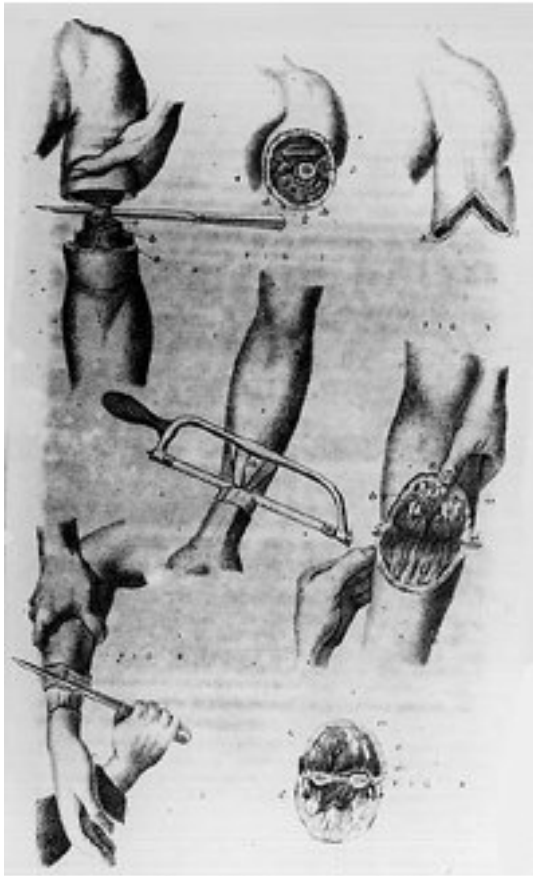


Civil War Amputations

John, age twenty, is a Confederate soldier from Johnston County. It's 1862, and he's in his first campaign. His regiment is charging a hill against Union fire. Suddenly a bullet hits him in the leg. The bullet is a minié ball, a common kind of ammunition used during the Civil War that flattens when it hits bone and causes gaping wounds. He falls to the ground, scared and in pain. What will happen to John?

The regiment's ambulance corps soon arrives. Someone hands John a canteen and tells him to drink. The whiskey burns his throat, but it numbs him a bit. He feels very weak as the medics carry him to the hospital tent. He's glad a doctor will see him but worried that his leg will be amputated.



This page, from *A Manual of Military Surgery*, shows methods of amputation. Courtesy of the N.C. State Archives.

The doctor examines where the bullet entered John's leg. He looks for an exit hole but finds nothing. He checks to see whether torn clothing is lodged in the wound. He explores the wound with his finger to find the bullet. He wraps the wound, attaches a note to John's shirt, and pats John on the back.

John is placed in a wagon and carried to the nearest hospital. His leg is throbbing, made worse by the rough, dusty ride. At the hospital, a doctor reads the note on John's shirt. He wraps John in blankets, gives him more whiskey, and places an object with two metal tubes into his nostrils. John breathes in the anesthesia—chloroform—and drifts off.

Just as John feared, the note has advised the surgeon to amputate his leg. The surgeon, with two assistants, cuts through John's skin with a knife. They are careful to leave a flap of skin to cover the exposed bone later. Next they cut through the muscle. Then they use a surgical saw to cut through the bone. They stop the bleeding by tying arteries with surgical thread, and they smooth the stump of bone with a bone

file. Last, they sew the wound shut. The operation takes only fifteen minutes. (Surgeons had learned that patients were more likely to survive quick amputations because they were less apt to go into shock.)

The surgeon wraps John's leg in a warm, wet bandage and wakes him up. John smiles because his leg hurts, and that means he still has it. But the surgeon gives John the news and tells him that it is common to feel phantom pain after losing a limb. He says that John should recover but that his leg may become infected. The chance is less, however, because he had surgery within a day of being injured.

John's story is common among Confederate soldiers. Thousands of men had limbs amputated during the Civil War, and many survived. Corporal Spencer R. O'Brian, a Granville County farmer, was wounded four times. The final wound resulted in the amputation of his left leg. The wooden leg that O'Brian made for himself from a wagon axle is now part of the museum's collection.help you decide!