

Amputations in the Civil War ^[1]



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Amputations in the Civil War

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by Ansley Herring Wegner

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[Unidentified soldier with amputated arm in Union uniform in front of painted backdrop showing cannon and cannonballs]
[2] Many wounded soldiers [3] during the Civil War [4] (1861–1865), including those from North Carolina, had an operation called an amputation [5]. In an amputation, a person has an arm [6] or leg (or sometimes just a hand or foot [7]) removed from their body because of a terrible injury or infection. Military advances before and during the Civil War meant more powerful, destructive weapons, and more devastating injuries, including shattered bones [8]. Most American doctors, however, were unprepared [9] to treat such terrible wounds. Their experience mostly included pulling teeth and lancing boils. They did not recognize the need for cleanliness and sanitation. Little was known about bacteria and germs. For example, bandages were used over and over, and on different people, without being cleaned.

With so many patients, doctors [10] did not have time to do tedious surgical repairs, and many wounds that could be treated easily today [11] became very infected. So the army medics amputated lots of arms and legs, or limbs. About three-fourths of the operations performed during the war were amputations.

These amputations were done by cutting off the limb quickly [12]—in a circular-cut sawing motion—to keep the patient from dying of shock and pain. Remarkably, the resulting blood loss rarely caused death. Surgeons often left amputations to

North Carolina. [Hanna's wooden leg](#) [20], as well as Civil War surgical equipment, may be seen at [Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site](#) [21] in Four Oaks.

**Ansley Herring Wegner is a research historian with the North Carolina Office of Archives and History. She is the author of Phantom Pain: North Carolina's Artificial-Limbs Program for Confederate Veterans*

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Resources:

Wegner, Ansley Herring. 2004. *Phantom Pain: North Carolina's Artificial-Limbs Program for Confederate Veterans* NC Office of Archives and History.

Additional Resources:

U.S. National Library of Medicine. "Maimed Men." <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/lifeandlimb/maimedmen.html> [22] (accessed April 5, 2016).

Image Credits:

[\[Unidentified soldier with amputated arm in Union uniform in front of painted backdrop showing cannon and cannonballs\]](#) [2], ca. 1861-1865. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/pp.print> [23]

Amputation Kit. 1800-1899. From the Country Doctor Museum. Image courtesy of the Eastern North Carolina Digital Library, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University. <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/13941> [15] (accessed May 4, 2015).

[Artificial foot that enables Limp-free walking](#) [24]. Patent number 16360. Issued January 1857 to Benjamin W. Jewett by the U.S. Patent Office.

Subjects:

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