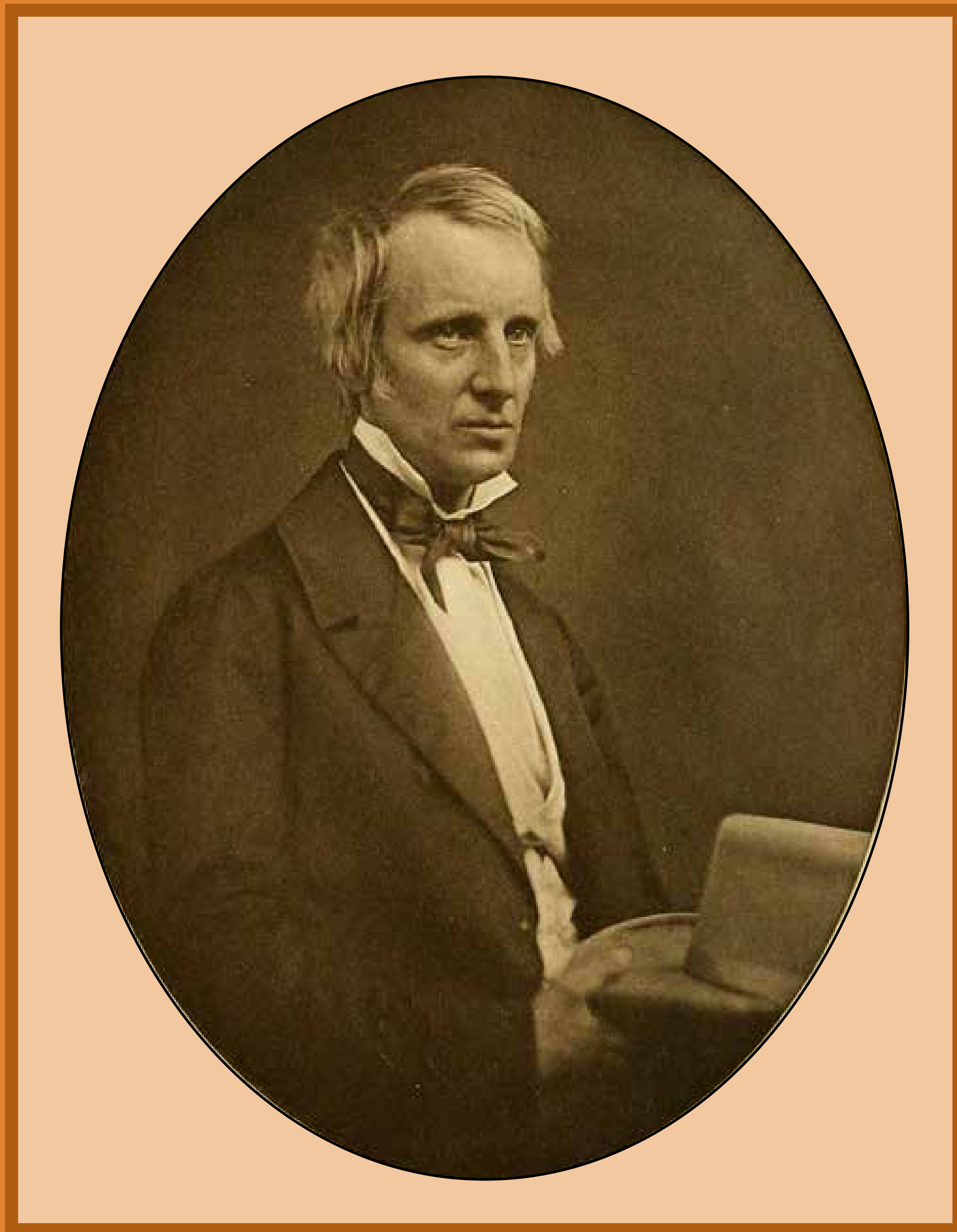

Henry Ingersoll Bowditch (1808-1892). Reading Room 2020 / Alamy Stock Photo

AN ABOLITIONIST'S CAUSE AND A FATHER'S GRIEF:

HENRY INGERSOLL BOWDITCH AND THE AMBULANCE ACT OF 1864

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During the American Civil War, Jonathan Letterman's (1824-1872) system of ambulance evacuation and tiered regimental and divisional hospitals in proximity to the battlefield was an unquestioned success when it was applied in the major battles of the Union Army of Potomac in 1862-1863. On March 11, 1864, Congress passed an act that made his reforms mandatory throughout the Union command. Tens of thousands of injured soldiers were thus spared the torment of being stranded and unattended on battlefields, sometimes for days, with wounds that festered and often doomed the victim to a slow, agonizing death.

The legislation adopted Letterman's plan word-for-word, but he was not the driving force behind its enactment. Its champion was Henry Ingersoll Bowditch (1808-1892), a professor at Harvard Medical School and an ardent abolitionist, who before the war supported the immediate abolition of slavery and the emancipation of all enslaved Black Americans.

As a volunteer physician during the conflict, Bowditch witnessed firsthand the torture of incapacitated men abandoned on the battlefield. In one of the conflict's "terrible ironies"[1] his eldest son, Nathaniel, suffered for hours with fatal injuries only 25 miles from where Letterman's ambulance system had saved thousands of lives just weeks before at the Battle of Fredericksburg. The profound guilt in having a son die transmogrified into a crusade to establish an ambulance rescue system throughout the Union armies.

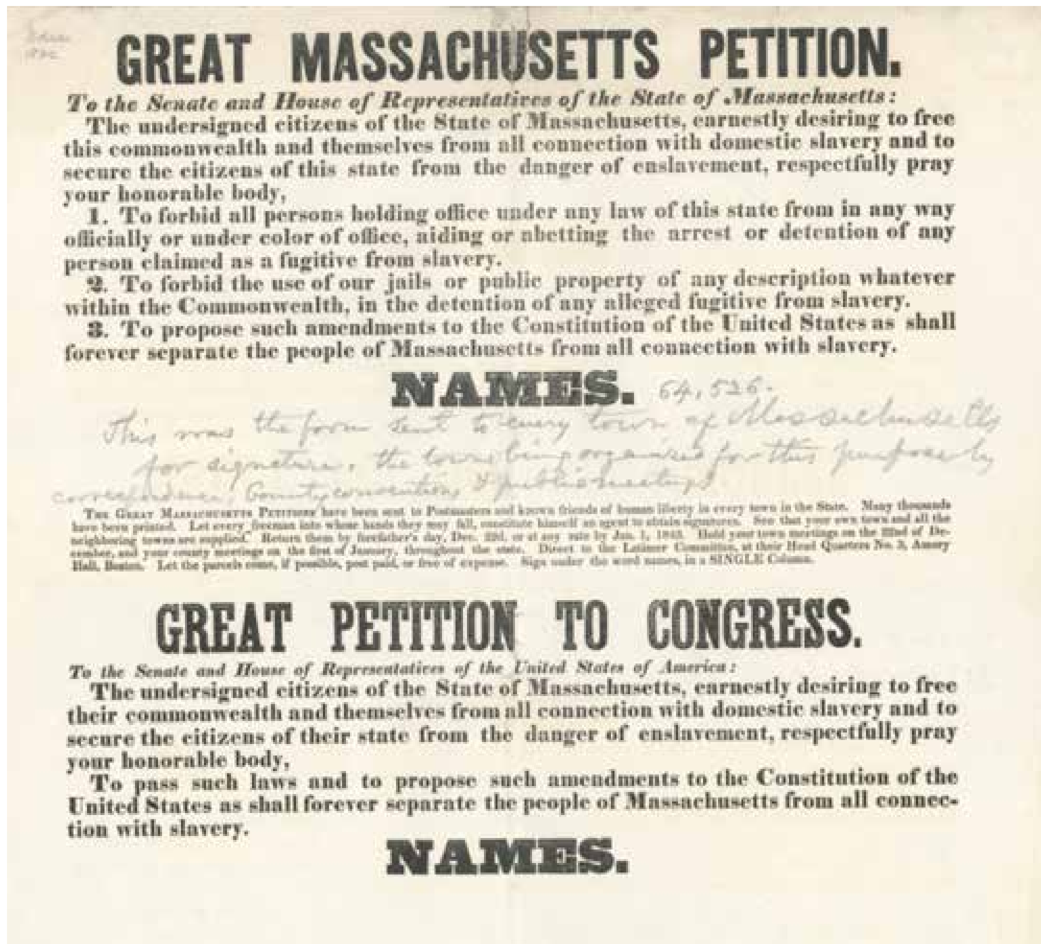
The abolitionist

Born in 1808 in Salem, MA, Henry Bowditch was the third son of the celebrated navigator, astronomer, and mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch (1773-1838), and his wife Mary (née Ingersoll). Henry's father was a self-educated son of a cooper who in 1802 published the *New American Practical Navigator*, a book that immediately became the standard reference for navies throughout the world. He translated his skill with numbers into two hugely profitable businesses—a marine insurance company and a corporation specializing in trusts and investments. His wealth did not hide a lack of culture and bearing, but nonetheless the topmost tier of the Boston elite embraced the Bowditch family when they moved there in 1823.[2]

The senior Nathaniel Bowditch had a navigator's view of ethics that plotted, in the words of a friend, a "straight line of integrity and truth."[2] On the wrong side of the line was slavery, which he abhorred from his earliest days at sea as a 22-year-old clerk aboard the trading ship *Henry* (1795) in the Indian Ocean. He saw "the unhappy wretches" trying to escape a Liverpool slaver back to their native Madagascar.[2] "God grant that that detestable traffic which she pursued may soon cease, ... & that the tawny sons of Afric [sic] may be permitted quietly to enjoy the blessings of Liberty in their native Country."[2]

However, he was loath to support abolitionism, the burgeoning anti-slavery movement in the United States led by William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the first American anti-slavery organization, the New England Anti-Slavery Society, and publisher of *The Liberator*, its official publication (both 1831). The radical evangelical fire of Garrison and the abolitionists disturbed the refined, well-structured lives of the Boston social elite.

Garrison was "dangerously extremist."[2] The first-generation Boston Brahmin owed his station to capitalism and the rights of property. But the rights of property, if given to slaveowners, denied liberty to Black Americans. Garrison saw the paradox as a fundamental flaw in the



GREAT MASSACHUSETTS PETITION.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts:

The undersigned citizens of the State of Massachusetts, earnestly desiring to free this commonwealth and themselves from all connection with domestic slavery and to secure the citizens of this state from the danger of enslavement, respectfully pray your honorable body,

1. To forbid all persons holding office under any law of this state from in any way officially or under color of office, aiding or abetting the arrest or detention of any person claimed as a fugitive from slavery.
2. To forbid the use of our jails or public property of any description whatever within the Commonwealth, in the detention of any alleged fugitive from slavery.
3. To propose such amendments to the Constitution of the United States as shall forever separate the people of Massachusetts from all connection with slavery.

NAMES. 64,526.

This was the form sent to every town of Massachusetts for signature, the towns being organized for this purpose by correspondence, County conventions, & public meetings.

The Great Massachusetts Petitions have been sent to Postmasters and known friends of human liberty in every town in the State. Many thousands have been printed. Let every freeman into whose hands they may fall, constitute himself an agent to obtain signatures. See that your own town and all the neighboring towns are supplied. Return them by forefather's day, Dec. 22d, or at any rate by Jan. 1, 1843. Hold your town meetings on the 22nd of December, and your county meetings on the first of January, throughout the state. Direct to the Latimer Committee, at their Head Quarters No. 3, Amory Hall, Boston. Let the parcels come, if possible, post paid, or free of expense. Sign under the word names, in a SINGLE Column.

GREAT PETITION TO CONGRESS.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America:

The undersigned citizens of the State of Massachusetts, earnestly desiring to free their commonwealth and themselves from all connection with domestic slavery and to secure the citizens of their state from the danger of enslavement, respectfully pray your honorable body,

To pass such laws and to propose such amendments to the Constitution of the United States as shall forever separate the people of Massachusetts from all connection with slavery.

NAMES.

Great Massachusetts Petition. Massachusetts Historical Society

Constitution that could only be expiated by secession, ironically with "the North [breaking from] the South to avoid the constitutional responsibility for slavery." [3]

Henry would come to disagree with his father on the fundamental political issue of antebellum American politics. As a child he was imbued with the devout Christianity of his parents, to whom the Sabbath was a time of quiet reflection, not play, after morning church services. He received the classical education and social breeding that his self-taught father lacked, receiving his baccalaureate in 1828 from Harvard College, and medical degree from the Harvard Medical School in 1832. After a house officership at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Henry went abroad to Paris where he studied under Pierre Charles Alexandre Louis, a great French physician.

Upon his return from Europe, Henry encountered disturbing episodes of racial violence. When Prudence Crandall admitted Black children to her school in 1833, it was forcibly closed down by the townspeople of Canterbury, CT.[4] In October 1835, Henry saw a Northern pro-slavery mob seize Garrison and lead him to makeshift gallows in front of his home where they set his effigy ablaze.

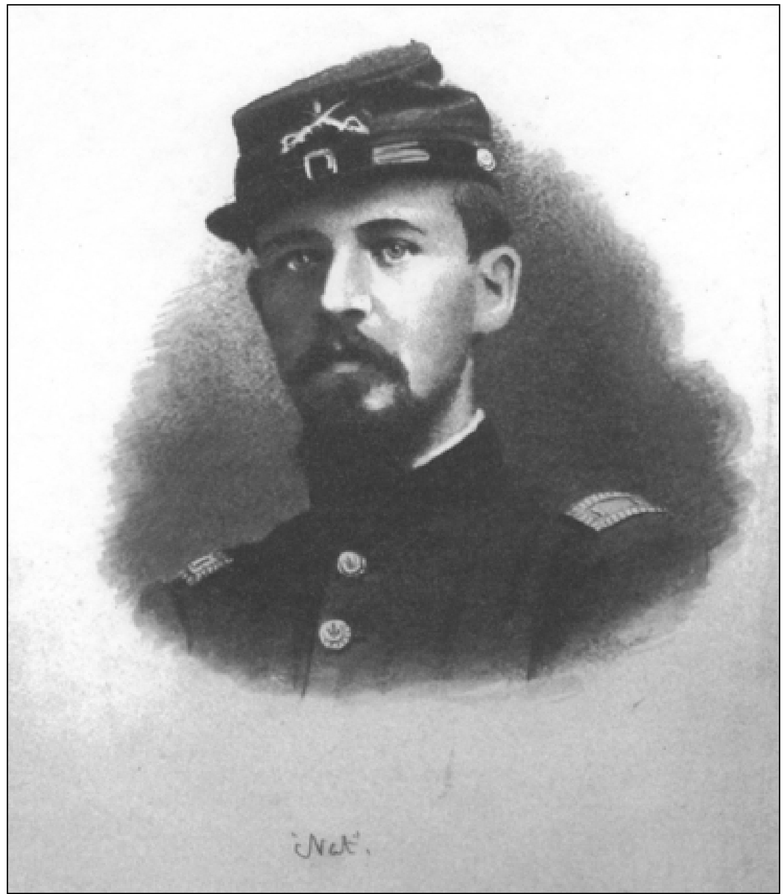
Shaken by the viciousness of the attack on Garrison, Henry resolved that "it is time for me to become an abolitionist." [5] He risked rejection by his father, the ostracism from the privileged social circle into which his family had been adopted, and the destruction of his professional future. When the Massachusetts General Hospital decided to exclude Blacks from admission in 1841,

Henry offered his resignation. The hospital refused to accept it.[5]

The peak of Henry's abolitionism was the case of George Latimer, a Black man who had escaped enslavement in Norfolk, VA, and sought refuge in Boston. On October 21, 1842, Latimer was arrested off the streets and held in a Boston jail at the request of James Gray, his purported owner. When a furor arose in a public meeting at Faneuil Hall, to avert a riot a Boston reverend paid Gray $400 to give Latimer his freedom. The interchange only confirmed Latimer's status as property that could be bought and sold.[6]

Henry and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society sought to make the imprisonment of enslaved persons in the commonwealth illegal. To build public support, he and his colleagues began publishing the *Latimer Journal* and *North Star* three times a week to oppose the "high-handed act of injustice [that] had just been perpetrated by the slaveholder on the free soil of the old Bay State."[5]

Henry worked day and night making speeches, printing the journal, and getting signatures on a petition to protest the imprisonment of Blacks seeking asylum. When additional funds were needed, he dipped into the meager capital from his fledgling medical practice.



Nathaniel Bowditch (1839-1863). Massachusetts Historical Society

The final product, the Great Massachusetts Petition, was a giant barrel-sized roll of paper weighing more than 150 pounds and bearing nearly 65,000 signatures. The top signature was that of George Latimer, citizen of Massachusetts.[7] In February 1843, Henry, and a delegation of five other abolitionists, delivered the massive petition for presentation to the General Court, the bicameral legislature of the commonwealth.[8] On March 24, 1843, Massachusetts passed the Personal Liberty Act that made the detention or arrest of any person claiming to be an enslaved person seeking refuge in the state illegal.[9]

Another copy with nearly 52,000 signatories was sent to the Congressional House of Representatives. Rejecting a measure analogous to the one in Massachusetts, Congress, several years later, passed instead the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), an opposite measure that required all states, slave and non-slave, to cooperate with the return of enslaved persons to their putative owners.[10] It was one of the signal events in the buildup to the outbreak of the Civil War.[11]

The success of the Latimer campaign was limited to only his home state, but the experience transfigured Henry:

> The excitement I was under was so great ... that it seemed to me at times my mind would be perfectly unbalanced if the excitement continued.... Complete calmness and peace came over me.... I seemed transformed, regenerated...and I never lost heart afterwards. It was a curious psychological phenomenon never to be forgotten....God bless the hour, under the great leadership of [William Lloyd] Garrison, I became an Abolitionist.[5]

"A sad and terrible journey"

Slavery sundered the Union into free North and slaveholding South; the Civil War (1861-1865) became the manifestation of abolitionism. The Battle of Bull Run (July 21, 1861), the first major land battle of the war, confirmed that neither side was prepared for the sheer number of casualties. A pell-mell Union retreat left

hundreds of injured soldiers on the battlefield, some suffering slow, excruciating deaths. Thousands more made the 30-mile trip to Washington on their own, only to find hospital facilities filled to overflowing, and injured men in makeshift shelters or in the open on roads, sidepaths, and churchyards. Bands of desperate and hungry soldiers foraged through backyard gardens, and begged door-to-door for food and water.[11]

Seeking a quick end to the war by capturing Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, Maj. Gen. George McClellan invaded the Virginia Peninsula on March 17, 1862, in the first major Federal offensive of the conflict. The Confederate Army of Northern Virginia under Gen. Robert E. Lee outmaneuvered McClellan's army of the Potomac winning a series of battles that threatened an early end to the war and a Confederate victory. Spent of manpower and the will to fight, the Union forces retreated to Harrison's Landing on the James River on July 1, from where they evacuated the Virginia Peninsula to bases in the Washington area.

On August 7, Lee's army turned northward in a Confederate counteroffensive that reached the outskirts of the capital, once again at Bull Run. Lincoln, losing confidence in McClellan, ordered Maj. Gen. John Pope and the Federal Army of Virginia to face Lee. In the Second Battle of Bull Run (August 28-30, 1862) Lee trounced Pope's army, which escaped total defeat only with a last-ditch rear-guard action that defended yet another precipitous retreat. Once more, Union forces left thousands of its wounded stranded on the battlefield.[11]

On September 5, 1862, Dr. Henry Bowditch arrived in Virginia answering a call for volunteer physicians in the aftermath of the fight. He joined an ambulance train of 45 carts, 170 had been requested, destined for Centreville, the train station nearest the scene. The drivers were "worse than useless,"[11] recruited from the "vilest purlieus" of the city.[12] Arriving drunk, several lost their nerve when hearing scattered gunfire and escaped back to the city. The driver of Bowditch's ambulance was so inebriated that the doctor had to take the reins and drive the horses himself with one hand, his other arm holding the driver upright to keep him from falling backward onto the injured men.

As painful as the bumpy trip to the rear on rutted paths was for Bowditch, just shy of his 54th birthday, it was worse on the injured men in the cart. At Centreville, volunteer nurses working under Clara Barton cared for the throngs of the injured that spilled out of the rail station onto acres of the surrounding ground. Straw was strewn haphazardly to soften the ground the soldiers lay on.[11]

"[It was] a sad and terrible journey," Bowditch wrote.[8] After his experience, he went straight to the 33-year-old Surgeon-General William Hammond. A brash former lieutenant, Hammond won his promotion because reformers convinced Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and President Lincoln of the necessity of radical reform of the army medical department, ossified by tradition and its seniority system.[13]

Bowditch poured forth his revulsion over the neglect of thousands of injured men that recapitulated the disastrous aftermath of the First Battle of Bull Run. In apology Hammond explained that ambulances were under the quartermaster's department, and, thus, out of his control. When he took office in April 1862, he tried to convince Secretary Stanton and Union General-in-Chief Henry Halleck to institute an ambulance corps, but was met with recalcitrance. "It was proper to remark," Stanton wrote at the time, "that the enemy have provided for their wounded on every battlefield with not one-half the ambulances and facilities provided our armies."[1]

Bowditch wrote, "I returned to Boston determined, as I was in the Latimer case, to arouse the people and compel the Government to do something, and to have a regular enlisted corps of ambulance attendants. In Heaven's name, let it be done."[8]

Bowditch brought an abolitionist's passion to his new cause. His polemic before a September 22, 1862 meeting of the Society for Medical Improvement appeared just three days later in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (now the *New England Journal of Medicine*), a respected mouthpiece where issues of national importance were published.[12] Editorials in the *Medical and Surgical Reporter* in Philadelphia, and the widely-read *American Medical Times* in New York expressed support. Surgeon-historian Ira Rutkow found a poignant appeal in the former publication: "In Heaven's name, let it be done, and that speedily, before another great battle is fought."[14]

Bowditch, a naïf in Washington politics, stumbled into an internecine rivalry in the war department with Secretary Stanton and General-in-Chief Halleck on one side and on the other the 30-year-old upstarts Hammond and McClellan, commanding general of the Army of the Potomac. Complicating the politics was the Sanitary Commission, a vigorous group of non-military physicians and citizens who pestered the Union Army to institute hygienic standards for military camps, and supported Bowditch's cause. The military hierarchy deeply distrusted the commission, considering it, in Lincoln's pithy description, a "fifth wheel to a coach."[1] As long as these

rivals were in place there would be no general order for an ambulance corps.

Undaunted, Bowditch turned his energy to Congress. The House was unanimous in support of an ambulance bill. But, the senators of the Commonwealth were no help. Sen. Henry Wilson, who chaired the Senate Military Committee, was aligned with Stanton and Halleck. He allowed that there was "a great interest in regard to [a mandated ambulance corps]," but "it is an impracticable measure to organize such a corps at this time." The Senator "seemed to deem it a preposterous notion of an unpractical enthusiast."[8] On February 24, 1863 the committee rejected it out of hand. Charles Sumner, the Bay State's other senator and a leading radical Republican, did nothing to stop its defeat.

Bowditch did not give up. On March 11, 1863, he addressed the graduating class of the Harvard Medical School where he "begged of the earnest youths, then before me, to do everything they could to alleviate the sufferings of the sick and wounded soldiers."[15]

Within a week, his eldest son would endure the agony of exactly what Bowditch had feared.

Letterman's plan

As Bowditch worked for ambulance reform in Boston and Washington, Captain Jonathan Letterman restructured military medicine. Newly named medical director of the Army of the Potomac in the closing days of its defeat on the Virginia Peninsula, on July 1 he first visited the army in its sodden, miasmatic, and disease-ridden encampment at Harrison's Landing.

Twenty percent of the force was incapacitated with illness. With military efficiency that would become his hallmark, he evacuated 6,000 of the 24,000 sick and injured soldiers to hospitals in New York and Philadelphia. Letterman used hospital tents to expand his inpatient capacity to 1,200 beds, and employed infirmaries for those not needing hospitalization.[16] He instituted rational hygienic practices to ensure that living spaces were in open air, kept clean, and stood on dry ground. He made sure that cooks provided plenty of nourishing food to improve the nutrition and lift the spirits of the soldiers.

Letterman's lasting contribution to medicine was the creation of a system to retrieve soldiers injured on the battlefield and transport them to nearby fully equipped hospitals for prompt surgical treatment. The centerpiece was a separate ambulance corps with the sole responsibility to deliver the wounded from the field to hospitals with its own fleet of ambulances and stores of medical supplies and food. "No person will be allowed to carry from the field any wounded or sick except this corps," he wrote.[16]

For each division, the three most qualified surgeons were assigned to perform the surgical operations without regard to rank, but "solely on account of their known prudence, judgment, and skill."[16] It was a radical departure from tradition. For the first time in American history, Rutkow noted, military surgeons were expected to show technical proficiency in order to perform surgical operations.[1]

On August 2, 1862, just a month after Letterman took control, McClellan issued a general order to create an army ambulance corps for the Army of the Potomac based on Letterman's plan.[16] Later that month, most of McClellan's army, including Letterman's fledgling ambulance corps, remained in Washington during Pope's defeat at Bull Run, leading to the medical disaster that Bowditch witnessed in Centreville.

After the Second Battle of Bull Run, Lee decided to turn farther northward to bring the fight into the North. McClellan and the Army of the Potomac, with the remnants of Pope's army, met Lee near Sharpsburg, MD, in the Battle of Antietam (September 16-18, 1862). The fighting was among the hardest of the war, most intense at the Rebel center at the Bloody Lane. "Night fell on a scene of horror beyond imagining," McPherson wrote.[11] Thousands lay on the battlefield, 6,000 dead and 17,000 wounded, more than the number of Allied casualties four score and two years later on D-day in the Normandy invasion (more than 13,000 casualties, of which 4,400 were deaths).[17]

Antietam was the first test of Letterman's system. It was one of the few battles in the Civil War where both generals were able to choose the field and position their forces beforehand.[11] Letterman had the opportunity to set his field hospitals beyond the reach of Rebel artillery. He didn't have time to construct walled tent hospitals, but the mild weather allowed for the care of the wounded in the open.

Letterman's central supply depot in Sharpsburg distributed medical supplies forward to regimental stations, a system that worked well during the two days of fighting. However, several stations ran out of food, a top priority for Letterman. From then on, he made sure that food stores for his medical corps were always plentiful.[16]

When Lee retreated after a day-long standoff on August 18, Letterman's corps evacuated injured men trapped in no-man's-land. Surgeon General Hammond visited soon after the battle, accompanied by Brig. Gen. William Muir, a liaison officer with the British Army.

Muir, Letterman wrote, "expressed the pleasure it afforded him to see the manner in which the wounded were attended, and remarked that although he had been on many battlefields, he had never found them more carefully provided for, or attentively treated." [16]

The armies next faced each other in Fredericksburg, VA. As the fog lifted on the morning of December 13, the Army of the Potomac, under its new commander Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside, assaulted the seven-mile Rebel position on the high ground above the town. The entire front became a killing field centered on a stone fence fronting a sunken road. By nightfall, Burnside's army had 13,000 casualties, nearly as many as at Antietam.[11]

Once more, Letterman had selected the sites of his hospitals and established his supply lines and depots. When the attack began, each hospital had its staff of three surgeons, each with his own fully supplied operating table. Stretcher-bearers and surgeons worked long into the night, sometimes without candles or lamps to avoid attracting fire from Rebel sharpshooters.

By dawn on December 14, all the wounded that were not beyond Union lines had been taken to hospitals in the rear. By that evening nearly all the important operations had been done. More than 5,000 wounded were evacuated from the battlefield by the nightfall of December 15. By the 26th all of the injured that required hospitalization had been transferred to Washington.[16]

"Letterman's Fredericksburg transport scheme was unprecedented in the annals of medical history," Rutkow wrote, "No previous army had ever organized as efficient an ambulance service or delivered better medical care through its field hospitals and cadre of chosen operating surgeons." [1]

The plan devised by Letterman and executed at Fredericksburg is the framework of evacuation and tiered care is used today.

Death at Kelly's Ford

In January 1863, the Army of the Potomac, now under the command of Joseph Hooker, wintered at Aquia Landing on the Potomac River to wait for warmer weather and the roads to dry.[11] It was still cold and blustery in March when Rebel Brig. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee (no direct relation to the Confederate commanding general) under Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, raided Union outposts along the Rappahannock. On March 17, 1863, Union Brig. Gen. William Averill rode out with the Second Cavalry Corps to confront Lee at Kelly's Ford, 35 miles west of Aquia Landing.[18]

With Averill was Lt. Nathaniel Bowditch (1839-1863). He had suspended his preparatory coursework for medical school to enlist in November 1861 as a junior officer in the First Massachusetts Cavalry. Nathaniel and his unit crossed the ford under fire from Rebel forces protected in pits and behind an abatis of felled trees. Pushing past the obstacles, they began to advance when a Rebel company, concealed in nearby woods, surprised them in open ground.

In hand-to-hand fighting with sabers, Nathaniel found himself too far in advance of his men. He tried to retreat but was incapacitated by a saber wound to the head and a gunshot in the shoulder. His horse was shot dead from under him. Rebel soldiers robbed him of his pistol, saber, and watch. As they were leaving him, one turned and shot Nathaniel in the abdomen, the fatal wound.

He lay helpless and dying as a Union straggler took the bridle from his dead horse and left. Two surgeons found him and took a glance at his wounds. They told him that it was a fatal injury. "Well," he said, "I hope I have done my duty; I am content."

"A consciousness of duty done was sufficient for this world," one surgeon said, "but is it, lieutenant, enough for the next?" [19] The surgeons then walked away, leaving him alone once more.

Later hearing the story, the elder Bowditch said in disbelief, "I cannot understand how any one could have so catechized the dying youth. [19]"

Hours passed when a member of the Rhode Island cavalry found Nathaniel still alive. He lifted the pain-wracked man and draped him across his horse's neck. With much searching, the Rhode Islander squeezed Nathaniel onto a cart in an ambulance train head toward the rear. A jarring ride took him to a farmhouse crowded with the wounded soldiers, arriving between 10 and 11 p.m. At dawn, they began the final bone-jarring 20-mile ride finally arriving at Aquia Landing at 7 p.m. the next evening. Bay State comrades tried to comfort Nathaniel until he died the next morning. [19]

A stricken father

On March 18, Bowditch received the terrible news by telegram, "Nat shot in jaw. Wound in abdomen. Dangerous. Come at once." [8]

He went to Aquia Landing to bring his son's body back to Boston. The bereaved father pieced together the story of the day Nathaniel was killed. He learned not only of his gallantry, but also his solitary hours mortally wounded but still conscious. As a physician, Bowditch

saw that an ambulance system would have lessened his son's ordeal, even though his abdominal wound was fatal. He would have been transported to Aquia Landing much sooner where he would be among his Bay State comrades. His father might have gotten there in time to see him before he died.

Nathaniel's death haunted Bowditch, who had encouraged his son's decision to enlist in the cavalry. Before the war, when his anti-slavery efforts started to flag, Bowditch would retreat to the White Mountains where the natural beauty of the wilderness always rejuvenated him. But after the death of his son, a trip to the countryside could not assuage his loss.

In a father's tortured mind, his son underwent an apotheosis. Nathaniel had been a dilatory student and an aimless pleasure seeker, a source of frustration for his parents. In death, the younger Bowditch underwent "a second birth."[20] He became "our dear dead hero … [that] offered himself 'a living sacrifice' upon his country's altar."[20] His gallantry in the final charge at Kelly's Ford demonstrated his character, befitting an honorable death.

"We will never know," wrote historian John Cumbler, "if Bowditch's obsession with his son's death was partly a result of guilt he might have felt from the fact that the campaign against slavery was his cause, yet it was his son who made the ultimate sacrifice."[20]

Bowditch's grief added to the ardor of his efforts:

> This death of my son summoned me like the notes of the bugle to the charging soldier. … I determined, a stricken father as I was, to lay aside all thought of self, save as a means of stirring the whole people in such a way that the Government would be forced to do something to prevent thereafter such vile treachery, as I deemed it, to every soldier of the Northern armies.[8]

Bowditch dashed off an addendum to the text of his medical school graduation speech, then being prepared for publication. It was a heartrending description of his son's ordeal and the sad task of bringing a dead son home. He gave title it, "A brief plea for an ambulance system for the Army of the United States"; identified the source of its inspiration "as drawn from the extra sufferings of the late Lieut. Nathaniel Bowditch and a wounded comrade"; and addressed it, "To the Loyal and Humane Hearts of Northern Men and Women".[15]

Bowditch also made certain there was no question as who was responsible for blocking the passage of an ambulance measure in Congress. He included the letter where Senator Wilson described an army ambulance corps as "impracticable."[15]

Bowditch's plea was printed in May 1863. The American Medical Association conducted its annual meeting in June, its first since the start of the war. Bowditch, a participant in the organization since its first meeting in 1847, and who would become its president in 1877, lobbied his colleagues to take up the ambulance question. Copies of his plea in hand, he enlisted such non-medical organizations as the board of trade and the chamber of commerce. Letters of support for the ambulance act flooded Wilson's senate office. In a recapitulation of the Great Massachusetts Petition in the Latimer case, petitions from throughout the country were delivered to the senator's desk.[1]

On July 1-3, 1863, the war reached a climax at Gettysburg. Letterman, working under his fourth commanding general, Maj. Gen. George Meade, again proved the brilliance of his ambulance and field hospital systems. The ferocity of the battle, and the proximity of Rebel lines to the exposed Union position on the uplands outside the town, forced Letterman to place his divisional hospitals farther from the fighting than he wanted, fully within range of Lee's artillery. In the three days of the battle Letterman's medical officers cared for 20,995 injured men, 14,193 Union soldiers and 6,802 Rebel prisoners. At the end of the conflict, he reported that all of the indicated operations were done within 24 hours after the wound was received.[16]

Ambulance Act of 1864

Senator Wilson bowed under the combination of Bowditch's lobbying efforts, the continued success of the Letterman plan in the biggest conflicts in the war, and the futility of continued feuding. Much to Bowditch's astonishment, Wilson volunteered to introduce an act for the establishment of an ambulance corps for all Federal armies. To this point, Bowditch had favored a civilian ambulance corps, but Wilson's bill established one under the Letterman plan within the military.

"I cared not what special arrangement was made, so long as a corps of drilled men was thereafter to be with every army of these United States,"[1] Bowditch explained.

On December 23, 1863, Wilson brought the bill before the Senate, and it was passed and signed into law on March 11, 1864.

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