

## The Grisly Practice of Embalming During the Civil War – Susan Fischer

Amongst the few items that our Society has in our collection relating to Civil War hero Charles Phelps is a difficult-to-read certificate (*see image*) that accompanied the young soldier's remains from Gettysburg back to his Amherst home. Intrigued by the doctor's signature – W. J. Bunnell – I naively wondered whether he might have been the surgeon who treated the wounded Charles on the battlefield. Not being a Civil War aficionado, what I found surprised me. Dr. Bunnell was not a surgeon in the traditional sense, but an *embalming* surgeon.

Prior to the Civil War, the practice of embalming – artificially preserving dead bodies – was mostly reserved for subjects of medical research. The Civil War spurred the growth of this practice due to the unfathomable number of casualties. Desperate and grieving families were eager to welcome home the remains of their loved ones, but even if identification was possible, transport became a barrier. The overwhelming smell of rotting corpses on trains carrying the dead, would often force them to stop enroute for burial.

It was Dr. Thomas Holmes (1817-1900), known as “The Father of Modern Embalming”, who was responsible for making advances to embalming techniques that not only improved the practice but made it more practical and affordable. His first prominent patient was Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, who was shot to death in Alexandria, VA in May of 1861. An early casualty of the War and friend to President Lincoln, funeral services were held for Colonel Ellsworth at the White House, New York City, and Albany, NY, before he was laid to rest in his home town of Mechanicsburg, NY. Despite the ten day gap between the time of death and final internment, his body remained well preserved, thus garnering much publicity for Dr. Holmes and the practice of embalming.

Embalming became a logical solution to the obvious problem of transporting the dead. With grieving families happy to pay for the return of loved ones, it wasn't long before there was a rush to join this potentially lucrative business. Scores of embalming tents soon began sprouting up near battlefields to provide the needed service. Amongst those in the trade traveling from battle site to battle site was Dr. William J. Bunnell (1823-1891), brother-in-law to Dr. Thomas Holmes and embalmer of Charles Phelps.

Various sources note the fee for embalming ranged from \$7 to \$100 and up, with officers bringing in more than enlisted men. With the average family income in 1861 only \$300 to \$1,000 per year, this was indeed a substantial amount of money. We know the cost of Charles' embalming procedure from an expense account transcribed by a descendant. Norman Burdick was hired by the Phelps family to travel to Gettysburg and return Charles' body to Amherst for a total cost of \$105.15. According to a line item on his expense account (*see image*), a \$15 charge was incurred for “disinfecting”, a term used interchangeably with embalming.

With no regulation and the promise of big money, it's easy to see how this profession was ripe for unsavory practices. Early on, there are reports of embalmers displaying bodies in storefront windows in order to market their work. Some would “peddle their wares” to young soldiers before battle, having them pin embalming coupons to their uniforms. Afterwards they would methodically pick through the casualty strewn battlefield in search of their clients, ignoring the agonizing cries of the living. Thankfully, this practice of selling “chits” directly to the soldiers was soon clamped down on due to its negative impact on morale.

It also appears there was a lot of embalming done “on spec.” Many embalmers would send people out to search for dead officers on the battlefield, knowing officer families were likely to be more wealthy and willing to pay a hefty fee for their return.

Although the profession was riddled with the unscrupulous, there were honest embalming surgeons providing a needed service. There is good reason to believe that Dr. Bunnell fell into the latter category. Records show he lodged a complaint against a particularly egregious Dr. Richard Burr for unprofessional conduct and for setting fire to his embalming tent. It's interesting to note in the photo of his shed (*see image*) the sheets respectfully

obscure view. Other surgeons prominently displayed their work, even performing procedures for curious spectators.

Complaints about battlefield embalmers finally reached a crescendo. On January 9, 1865, General Ulysses S. Grant issued an order effectively excluded them "from the lines of the armies operating against Richmond".

Of the approximate 620,000 killed during the Civil War, only about 40,000 were ultimately embalmed. Most all were Union soldiers.

Ajmani, M. L. *Embalming: Principles and Legal Aspects*. New Delhi, India: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers, 1998.

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<http://civilwarundertaker.net/history.htm/>.

Brown, Geoffrey D. "The Battlefield Embalmer explains Civil War techniques."

FrederickNewsPost.com. 26 Jun 2006. Web. 18 Jan 2012.

<http://fredericknewspost.com/sections/news/display.htm?storyid=50068/>.

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Surgeon.

This Certifies, That Charles H. Phelps  
of Co. I Reg't. 5 State N.H.  
died on the 5 day of July 1863, aged 22 years.  
Cause of Death, } Direct, Gun shot  
                              } Indirect, In Battle of Gettysburg  
D. W. J. Bunnell Surgeon.  
Reg't \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

This Certificate Must accompany the remains to destination.

The certificate that accompanied Charles Phelps's remains home to Amherst.

The handwriting is difficult to read, but can be made out. (Underlined words indicate handwriting.)  
July 17, 1863./This Certifies, That Charles H. Phelps/of Co. I Reg't 5th State N.H. volt/died on the 5 day of July 1863,  
aged 22 years./ Cause of Death Direct, Gun shot/ Indirect, In Battle of Gettysburg/ D- W. J. Bunnell Surgeon.  
(Gift of Mr. & Mrs. William Hopkins)



Reverse side of Certificate

Gettysburg/July 17 1863/I certify that the w (unreadable)/with in named body is disinfected/and free from smell in a zinc coffin air tight/packed with lime/D- W. J. Bunnell

July 16	Bill at Barnum House	2.25
	Bot whiskey and Hard Bread ro carry to Gettysburg	.96
	check on Overcoat	.10
	Zinc lined box and freight	21.00
	Fare from Baltimore to Hanover Junc.	1.45
	" Hanover Junc. to Gett sburg	**---
	Paid ambulance driven for ride	25
July 17	J. Norbeck for helping get body	8.00
	for disinfecting	15.00
	for exprefs on body	30.00
	bill in Gettysburg	3.50

Excerpt from expense account of Norman Burdick, hired to retrieve the body of  
Charles Phelps

(From Nancy Hopkins Colborn)





Dr. William J. Bunnell's embalming shed set up near Fredericksburg  
"Embalming the Dead - Free from Odor or Infection"  
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>)