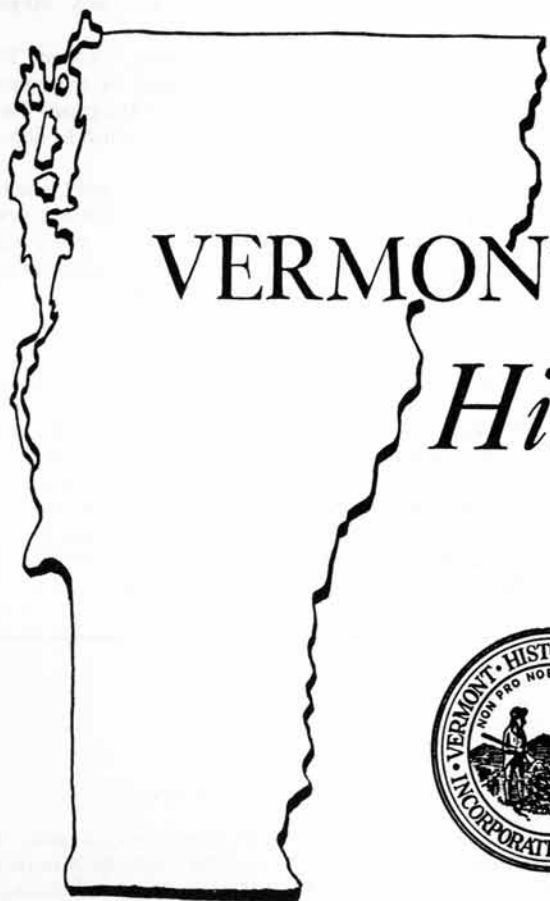


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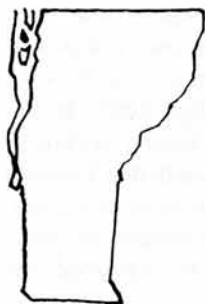


VERMONT

History



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Three physicians examined about 17,500 Vermonters between 1863 and 1865 and afterwards summarized their findings . . .

The Health of Vermont's Civil War Recruits

By JOHN DAVID SMITH

IN the first two years of the Civil War, Union forces were recruited in Vermont as throughout the North by volunteer enlistments administered by the individual states. Because this system proved inadequate, Congress passed on March 3, 1863, "An Act for enrolling and calling out the national Forces" which created the Provost-Marshal-General's Bureau of the War Department. This bureau was to control recruitments either by accepting volunteers or, if needed, by draft. Prior to a draft, a complete enrollment of all men liable for service was made of males, twenty to forty-five years old. The enrolling process was administered in the states by boards of enrollment, one for each congressional district. The boards were "composed of the provost-marshal, as president, and two other persons, to be appointed by the President of the United States, one of whom shall be a licensed and practising physician and surgeon." The act further specified that all draftees were to "be carefully inspected by the Surgeon of the board, who shall truly report to the board the physical condition of each one. . . ."¹

In accordance with the Enrollment Act, boards of enrollment were established for Vermont on April 24, 1863. Three boards were created to serve

1. J. H. Baxter, "Introductory," in *Statistics, Medical, and Anthropological, of the Provost-Marshal-General's Bureau, Derived From Records of the Examination for Military Service in the Armies of the United States During the Late War of the Rebellion, of Over a Million Recruits, Drafted Men, Substitutes, and Enrolled Men* (2 vols. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1875), I, i (cited hereafter as *SMA*); U.S. Congress, *United States Statutes at Large* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1863), XII, 36th-37th Congress, 1859-1863, Session III, 732-734.

each congressional district with a Provost-Marshal, Commissioner, and Surgeon.² Governor John Gregory Smith expressed his concern that Vermont would meet her draft quota in his correspondence with Provost-Marshal-General James B. Fry. Writing to Fry in May, 1864, he explained, "I do not wish the impression to be that the State is behind."³ Later in the war, President Abraham Lincoln reminded Smith that Vermont had to keep pace with New Hampshire in the number of recruits she supplied the Union armies. "If there be different reasons for making an allowance to Vermont," wrote the President, "let them be presented and considered."⁴

By the end of 1863 thousands of Vermont recruits had been examined by military surgeons. The Medical Branch of the Provost-Marshal-General's Bureau was created in 1864 to provide a systematic and uniform medical examination for soldiers and to insure "that none but able-bodied men should be put in the field." Under Federal Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Jedediah H. Baxter, this department administered all aspects of medical examinations and provided the state boards of enrollment with examination forms to record each soldier's medical history.⁵

In late April, 1865, after the end of the war, Dr. Baxter concluded that important information could be obtained from the surgeons who examined soldiers under the 1863 Enrollment Act. Subsequently, on May 1, 1865, Baxter ordered every doctor in each state to prepare a written report describing his experiences as a medical examiner. Baxter's circular letter required the physicians to comment on the number of recruits they had examined, the geography of their enrollment districts, the diseases endemic to the districts, and the examination procedure employed. Reports were also to discuss the maximum number of recruits which could be examined per day, the frauds attempted by draftees or substitutes, and the doctors' explanations of both what nationality was best suited for military service and their experiences "as to the qualifications of the colored race for military service." Baxter further inquired into the surgeons' opinions of the enrollment laws.⁶

2. United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (127 vols. and index. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. III, Vol. V, 891-892 (cited hereafter as *OR*). Members of Vermont's three enrollment boards included: First District — Cyrus R. Crane (Provost-Marshal), Andrew C. Brown (Commissioner), Dr. Benjamin F. Morgan (Surgeon); Second District — Gilman Henry (Provost-Marshal), Darwin H. Ranney (Commissioner), Dr. Carlton P. Frost (Surgeon); Third District — Rolla Gleason (Provost-Marshal), Elisha White (Commissioner), Dr. John L. Chandler (Surgeon).

3. Smith to Fry, May 3, 1864, *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 258.

4. Lincoln to Smith, February 8, 1865, in Roy P. Basler, editor, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols. and index. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), VIII, 271-272.

5. *SMA*, I, i, v.

6. A copy of Baxter's circular letter is found in *SMA*, I, 161-162.

The collected responses of examining surgeons were published in 1875 as the massive two-volume *Statistics, Medical, and Anthropological, of the Provost-Marshal-General's Bureau*. Included in these volumes are the reports of Vermont's three examining physicians, Doctors Benjamin F. Morgan, Carlton P. Frost, and John L. Chandler.

Dr. Morgan had been born at Pownal, Vermont, in 1799 and educated at Williams College and the Castleton Medical School. While practicing in Pownal he was elected to the Vermont Legislature. In 1856 he moved to Bennington, but to examine Civil War recruits he set up headquarters in Rutland.⁷ He was responsible for Vermont's First Congressional District, which consisted of Bennington, Rutland, Addison, and Washington Counties. He conducted examinations at the rate of forty to fifty each day, and by the end of the War had examined "about" five thousand men.

After carefully describing the rocky geography of his mostly agricultural district, Morgan explained that it was a generally healthy region, "abundantly supplied with water" and almost free from "the influence of marsh-miasm" due to careful drainage and cultivation. He considered rheumatism, phthisis pulmonalis, pneumonia, diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid fever, and scarlatina to be common ailments suffered by men he examined. Diphtheria, however, had served within the last four or five years as the most serious disease.⁸ According to Dr. Morgan, locality had little influence on the cause of the sickness since it "prevail[ed] about equally upon our highest inhabited mountain-districts, and in the lowest valleys." Instead, he believed that the diseases found in this part of the state were caused by "the sudden changes of our variable climate."⁹

Morgan described the men he examined as hearty New Englanders. "Generally sober and industrious," and "thinking and law-abiding citizens," they resided mostly in rural areas although some villages contained from 500 to 4,000 people. He found the native Vermonter to make the best soldier owing to his "cleanly habits, . . . persistent determination to succeed, . . . [and] high tone of patriotism." The small towns were local centers of manufacturing and subsequently were also populated with "many persons of European birth." "Mostly Irish," these foreigners were "the

7. Lewis Cass Aldrich, editor *History of Bennington County, Vt.* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1889), pp. 293-294.

8. Diphtheria continued to be a dreaded disease in Vermont during the Civil War. See the diary entries of a Corinth woman, Mrs. George Cooke, for August and September, 1863, in "Mrs. Cooke's Civil War Diary, 1863-1864," *Vermont History*, XXV (January 1957), 58.

9. *SMA*, I, 190-191.

only ones who made resistance to the enrollment,"¹⁰ yet were superb physical specimens with "capacious chests, tight joints, and abundant vitality." The French-Canadians were also highly rated by Morgan. He praised "their snug, compact forms, their healthy, and hardy appearance, their elasticity of constitution, and cheerfulness of disposition." Because few blacks resided in his district, Dr. Morgan could form no opinion of the capacity of Negroes as soldiers. Those blacks he had examined were mulattoes, and not "pure Africans." He concluded that mulattoes "probably lose in vitality what they gain in symmetry of form by this mixture." Further, Morgan explained that they "die early of scrofula or tuberculosis, and in our cold climate would not be reliable soldiers."¹¹

Much of Dr. Morgan's report concerns the ailments he found among recruits and drafted men which disqualified them from the service. Among quarry-men and slaters, fractures, dislocations, and rheumatism were most frequent. Hernia and varicose veins characterized the infirmities usually suffered by lumbermen and "men employed in clearing lands." In general, Morgan rated agricultural workers to be stronger and more acceptable to the army than the merchants, tailors, and shoemakers he examined who possessed less physical strength.¹²

A major problem confronting Civil War surgeons was the constant attempt by draftees to avoid service by claiming some physical disability. According to Morgan few drafted men did not seek exemption on medical grounds. "Armed with his physician's deposition, certifying that the man never made a good recovery from pneumonia, or disease of the heart or kidneys," the draftee attempted to convince the doctor "that the least exposure" would bring on a relapse and endanger the man's health. Entering his office with a full assortment of coughs, limps, glasses, and canes, recruits attempted numerous ploys to convince Dr. Morgan of their inability to do military duty. At the other extreme, men who sought entrance into the army as substitutes in order to collect a fee also attempted incredible frauds concealing injuries or serious physical disorders. Examples include the substitute who "hops and jumps upon an injured limb to satisfy you that it is sound" or "applies cold to a hernial tumor to produce contraction

10. On June 16, 1863 Irish enrollment resisters at Rutland threatened violence and refused to cooperate with Provost-Marshal Crane. Joined by Commissioner Brown and Dr. Morgan, Crane searched the marble quarries for offenders. The trio was soon surrounded, however, "by about 500 laborers, who appeared at a given signal, armed with clubs and stones, which were mercilessly hurled upon us until we were driven entirely from the neighborhood." The Irishmen were further supported by close to one thousand of their countrymen in adjacent quarries. Lacking a military force to coerce the resisters, Crane enrolled the Irishmen from their payroll account lists. See Eugene C. Murdock, *One Million Men: The Civil War Draft in the North* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971), p. 57.

11. *SMA*, I, 191-192.

12. *SMA*, I, 191.

of the parts before examination." Morgan considered substitutes "mostly a worthless, unreliable set of men" who "should never be paid for service until they have earned it." He concluded that the surgeon required "a great deal of time and patience" in order "to satisfy himself that he does no injustice to the drafted man nor to the Government in these examinations."¹³

Dr. Carlton P. Frost located himself in Windsor in order to serve the counties of Caledonia, Orange, Windsor, and Windham — the four counties of the Second Congressional District. He had been born at Sullivan, New Hampshire, in 1830 and educated at Thetford Academy, Dartmouth College, and the Dartmouth College Medical School. He was practicing at St. Johnsbury when the Civil War commenced.¹⁴

Dr. Frost examined almost 9,000 Vermont recruits. Most of the disorders identified in his reports were also noted by Morgan although cases of bone and joint disease, cerebro-spinal meningitis, and loss of teeth were diagnosed in the Second Congressional District. Frost considered the causes of most diseases in his region as predominantly "atmospheric and accidental."¹⁵

Dr. Frost's description of the Vermont natives he examined was more laudatory than what Dr. Morgan wrote. According to Frost, the inhabitants were mostly farmers. They were:

Industrious, temperate in eating and drinking, law-abiding, and justice-loving; economical in their expenditures; thoroughly loyal to the General and State Governments; and as well educated and generally intelligent as any people on the face of the earth. They are most thorough believers in universal freedom, and the equality of all before the law. Their dwellings are warm for winter, neat and tidy in appearance; their tables are provided with a [sic] plenty of well-cooked and substantial food; and in general they are comfortably and neatly clad.

In 1863, of the 2,645 drafted men examined by Frost, 1,900 were farmers; fifty-three were professional men or teachers; twenty-nine were students; and 440 were mechanics. Hernias, varicose veins, fractures, and dislocations — ailments common to farm laborers — led the illnesses which disqualified men examined by Dr. Frost.¹⁶

While both physicians agreed on the superiority of native Vermonters for military service, Frost had more experience with black recruits than

13. *SMA*, 1, 191-192.

14. Norman Seaver Frost, *Frost Genealogy in Five Families* (West Newton: Frost Family Association of America, 1926), p. 72.

15. *SMA*, 1, 193.

16. *SMA*, 1, 193-194.

did Morgan. Examining almost one hundred Negroes, Dr. Frost concluded that "some of these were very good men for the service, having a fine physical development." "Others," however, "were of the poorest material, broken-down men who had been the rounds of provost-marshals' offices, and had been rejected everywhere." Frost also complained of the frauds perpetrated by recruits but believed that a few revisions should be made in the Provost-Marshal-General's Bureau Revised Regulations. He felt that both "confirmed asthma" and "decided myopia" should be added to the list of causes for exemption. Referring to the latter disease, he commented, "I cannot imagine the use that a man can be put to in the service who cannot distinguish a man from a horse at ten rods." Dr. Frost felt that he could carefully examine only fifty men per day. Further, he felt that the examining surgeon should be required to work only six hours each day as this was "as long as he should be confined to the bad air of an examining-room."¹⁷

Dr. John L. Chandler had practiced in St. Albans for most of his life (he was 68 years old when the Civil War began), but he still examined recruits in Burlington.¹⁸ His men came from the counties of Orleans, Chittenden, Grand Isle, Franklin, Lamoille, and Essex. He examined a lesser number of conscripts, substitutes and volunteers than Dr. Morgan and Dr. Frost — about 3,500 altogether, and his report was the least detailed submitted by the three physicians.¹⁹

Although he was "not aware of the predominance of any disease . . . that should distinguish this district from New England generally," Chandler did find prevalence of catarrh, pleurisy, pneumonia, peritonitis, and enteritis in the northwestern section of Vermont. Like Morgan, he attributed these to "our variable climate, which displays great and sudden changes of temperature." But his region of the state was less susceptible to "sweeping epidemics" due to its lower average temperature and "admirable proportion of *hill and dale*."²⁰

Chandler agreed with Doctors Morgan and Frost that native Vermonters compared well with any other applicants for military service. He praised the "hardiness and enterprise" of the farmers who dominated the recruits examined. He further complimented their local institutions. "Few districts in the country," explained Dr. Chandler, "are better supplied with good

17. *SMA*, I, 194.

18. Hamilton Child, editor, *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties, Vt., for 1882-83* (Syracuse: Printed at the Journal Office, 1883), pp. 194-195.

19. *SMA*, I, 195.

20. *Ibid.*

common schools [and] academies . . . [all of which] are well improved." Chandler further expressed pride in the University of Vermont's medical college, which "in flourishing condition" was located in his district. Lacking opportunity to examine black recruits personally, the Doctor commented that he subscribed to the "common report" which held that the "colored race" had "fair qualifications for military service."²¹

In one area, the condition and age of recruits, Chandler was more outspoken than his medical colleagues. Because "so many *drafted* men are found unfit, *truly unfit*, for military service," he felt that a "more equitable method of *making the enrollment*" was necessary. Dr. Chandler's personal opinion was that "no boy" younger than age twenty should be allowed to enter the army and regretted that eighteen-year-olds were then able to serve. Such a system, he continued, was a "great error in all nations where it is permitted." Chandler concluded by explaining how the history of warfare would prove both the "impolicy" and "inhumanity" of sending young men into combat."²²

Although recent writers have generally criticized Civil War doctors for their careless induction physicals,²³ Vermont's military surgeons appear to have been as thorough as doctors examining fifty men a day could be. The medical reports submitted after the war by Doctors Morgan, Frost, and Chandler provide important information about the medical and social conditions of antebellum Vermont as well as on the nature of medical training at mid-nineteenth century. They further offer insights into the attitudes and prejudices of Vermont's examining surgeons which are probably typical of the medical profession in the state. Particularly interesting are the physicians' views of disease as a function of climate and geography and their noncommittal position on the question of blacks as soldiers. While one cannot but be impressed with Dr. Morgan's judicious attitude toward his responsibilities as a military examiner, Dr. Frost's comments on the virtues of the men from his district seem at best exaggerated. Finally, Dr. Chandler's remarks identify him as either a very prudent or an especially gullible examining surgeon.

The medical records are invaluable primary sources. Several scholars have already used the *Statistics, Medical, and Anthropological* to study the problems faced by Civil War military doctors and as sources on

21. *SMA*, I, 195-196.

22. *SMA*, I, 196.

23. See Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), p. 125; George Worthington Adams, *Doctors in Blue*, (New York, Henry Schuman, 1952), pp. 43-44; Stewart Brooks, *Civil War Medicine* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1966), p. 8.

nineteenth century anthropometry.²⁴ For students of Vermont history these reports help to better understand the state's 32,669 soldiers who fought to preserve the Union.²⁵

24. Peter T. Harstad, "Billy Yank Through the Eyes of the Medical Examiner," *Rendezvous*, 1 (Spring, 1966), 37-51; Eugene C. Murdock, "Pity the Poor Surgeon," *Civil War History*, XVI (March, 1969), 18-36; John S. Haller, "Civil War Anthropometry: The Making of A Racial Ideology," *Civil War History*, XVI (December, 1970), 309-324 and *Outcasts From Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

25. *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 1270.

Causing a Devout Man to Speak Profanely:

At meals, Isaac [Fletcher] asked a blessing, always ending with "For Christ's sake." On a certain occasion in boyhood, Charles [his son] invited a school mate to dinner and made a wager with him that he could make his father swear. This looked so improbable that the wager was quickly taken. At the table, just as his father was closing the blessing, Charles began to rattle his knife and fork, which hurried the blessing and made it close as follows: "For Christ's sake, Charles put down that knife and fork." Charles giggled, from which the boy understood Charles had won the bet and would collect it.

- submitted by Mrs. Harriet Fisher of Lyndonville from an undated newspaper clipping in the *Vermont Union Journal* of Lyndon Corners. Isaac Fletcher (1784-1842) represented Vermont's fifth district in Congress from 1837 to 1841. His son, Charles, a lively fellow, died of consumption at the age of 33 in 1851.

"A Yankee from Montpelier travelling through one of our seaports — a whale was discovered over the bar. Immediately all was hurry and bustle to man the boats for a frolic with his 'majesty of the ocean.' A squad passing our hero, inquired if he would like to go aboard and join in the chase. 'No,' said he with great gravity, 'I left my fish-hook and line at home.'"

- from the *Winooski Impetus*, published in Montpelier, Vol. I, No. 11 (Feb. 15, 1836), p. 4.