Disabled Veterans of the Civil War, Part II

Public Realm of Disabled Civil War Veterans

Adaptation to newly-acquired disabilities was a challenge among veterans. Tasks such as walking, moving, eating, and doing chores were now obstacles. Daily life was now harder and veterans required help. Social ideas also harmed disabled veterans. Most people in the United States followed a set of social ideas called “Victorian” in the years around the Civil War (1820-1914). These ideas were popular in England. They influenced other countries like France and the United States. Men (and women) have specific social roles in Victorian thinking. Men are strong and able to produce for their families. Disabled veterans were not able to perform in these ways. They were mocked for their inability to perform roles as they had before acquiring a disability. They could not work, or could only do specific types of work. They required help in the form of public programs like pensions. A pension is a payment of money given to someone. Veterans received pensions for fighting or becoming disabled in the war. This need for support also challenged social ideas. Being unable to provide for their family caused disabled veterans to think differently. They had to reconsider ideas of what it meant to be a “man.”

Disabled men were no longer able to work most jobs that they had left during wartime. They required care for their injuries from their children, wives, or another caretaker. They could no longer provide for their home in the way that they had before the war. These challenges made living with a disability even harder. Walter W. Lenor was a Confederate officer from Fort Defiance, North Carolina. He became disabled after his leg was amputated at the Battle of Ox Hill. His journals after becoming disabled show us how a disability challenged social ideas of being a man. They also show the unique relationships between women and men with disabilities.

Challenges against being a man also hurt family structures. Many disabled veterans were poor after the war. This problem was worse in the South. They could not work in the same types of jobs. The Thirteenth Amendment emancipated enslaved workers. The slavery-based economy of the South was damaged as a result. Southern states had supported a war and Black people were no longer being forced to work for free. These factors created a depressed Southern economy. The Civil War also damaged a lot of the South’s cities, and finding work was very difficult for disabled veterans. Disabled fathers and husbands often used alcohol or gambled to help themselves feel better. Gambling and buying alcohol used money which was already in short supply. Many disabled veterans did not have enough money to pay for their homes and became homeless. Homeless and disabled Confederate veterans wandered from town to town. They searched for food, jobs, and a place to live. They were a common sight in the post-Civil War South.

A physical disability also changes the way someone looks. They may have only one leg or one eye, for example. It also changes the way others view them. Prosthetics are artificial body parts designed to replace missing ones, like a glass eye or a wooden leg. They helped veterans with physical disabilities return to routine lifestyles. With the use of a prosthetic leg, a veteran with an amputated leg could now walk again. With a prosthetic eye, they could look like they had two eyes instead of one. Prosthetics helped veterans feel more comfortable in their bodies. Appearing non-disabled was also important to some veterans. Prosthetics also helped them appear non-disabled.

Some veterans had psychological disabilities. These affected their capacities in public life after the war. Newly-acquired disabilities like melancholy or nostalgia changed their behaviors. They could make veterans violent or experience different realities. “Delusional” veterans often had little control over their actions. They did things that sometimes caused harm to themselves or their families. “Melancholy” veterans sometimes could have suicidal ideas. These could make them want to cause themselves pain and some veterans died by suicide. Benjamin A. Withers of Davidson College, NC, was an example of a soldier with psychological disabilities who harmed himself. He was part of the Bethel Regiment and suffered PTSD from his time as a soldier. His arm was also amputated during the war. He could not work as he had before the war. He also had pain from his amputation. He died by suicide in June 1881. A Raleigh newspaper said that “poor health, low spirits, and an unhealed wound received during the war” were the cause for his death.

Physically disabled veterans were sometimes institutionalized (placed in a healthcare facility) by their families. They were institutionalized to avoid public scrutiny and the need for caretaking due to their disabilities.

Some veterans were able to use their disabilities to gain public support. Physical disabilities in some cases became symbols of war-time sacrifice. A veteran without a leg gave their body “support to the cause. Sacrifice in war translated into public support for elected offices. Disabled Civil War veterans won elections to public offices with this support. Some veterans were even elected to high-ranking positions, like governor, in their states. Lucius Fairchild of Wisconsin, Francis Nichol of Louisiana, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of Maine, and James Henderson Berry of Arkansas were all veterans who became disabled in the Civil War. They were all elected as governors of their states after the war. Even more disabled veterans became representatives or senators for state and federal congresses.

Disabled veterans were not always supported. Public support of disabled veterans did not focus on the pain and suffering of a disability. Support and charity focused on the “helplessness and dependence” of a veteran. Many veterans were not helpless and this was insulting to them. Amputation disabilities attracted public support but other disabilities did not. Disabilities like incontinence (inability to control bodily functions) were not supported. They were viewed as “helplessness.” Mental disabilities were also viewed as “helplessness.” Disabilities like PTSD or “melancholy” were also viewed this way. The symptoms of some disabilities also attracted negative attention. Many people considered drinking alcohol and using drugs like opium “amoral” (having no moral standards of right and wrong) around the time of the Civil War. An addicted veteran’s physical dependence on alcohol or opium could cause them to be considered an “amoral” member of society, and being considered “amoral” would cause them to be ostracized by their peers. Disabled veterans experienced more problems near the end of the 1800s. Aging veterans began applying for pension benefits. The Pension Bureau was the branch of the government that handled pension payments for Union soldiers. It was operated by pensioners. Disabled veterans had to complete repeated exams on their body to ensure that their disability was “real.” Pensioners made them do this to ensure that they were not taking advantage of the pension system. Newspaper editorials and cartoons during this time supported the idea that recipients could abuse the system, and were “rascals.” Soldiers with mental disabilities were seen as useless since the end of the Civil War. Publications created images of disabled veterans in workplaces. Their presence scared – and negatively affected those around them in these publications. These publications were untrue and hurtful towards disabled veterans. They made it harder disabled veterans to receive public support and find work.

References:


From: LEARN NC North Carolina History: A Digital Textbook [31]
Authors: Dease, Jared [32]
Copyright Date: 2023
People:
Walter Waightstll Lenoir [6]

"Wrestling at the Gates of Death": Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Nonvisible Disability in the Post–Civil War North[23]
from Journal of the Civil War Era

Related Topics:
The Continuation of Slavery: The Experience of Disabled Slaves during Emancipation[34]
from Disability Studies Quarterly

Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War–Era South[35]
from JSTOR

Primary Sources:
Confederate Pension Applications [36]
from the North Carolina Digital Collections

After the Amputation [8]
from the National Museum of Civil War Medicine

Artifacts:

"Result of Appointing a Veteran as Postmaster." Image courtesy of the Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.
A political cartoon depicting fraud from the Pension Bureau. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.

27 September 2023 | Dease, Jared

Source URL: https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/disabled-veterans-civil-0

Links