



2-10-2014

Tales from a Boston Customs House: Recovering from Trauma

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Johnson, S. Marianne, "Tales from a Boston Customs House: Recovering from Trauma" (2014). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 28.

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Abstract

After losing both arms in a gunnery accident aboard the USS *Rhode Island* in 1863 and being told he would not live, Medal of Honor recipient Lewis Horton resolved that he would recover and be with his family again soon. The double amputation, completed within an hour of the accident, was successful, but Horton lost a significant amount of blood and could merely wait and hope. Eighty days after amputation, the ligatures — cords left in the limb to hold arteries closed until they had sufficiently healed — were removed, and healing commenced quickly. Shortly after, he was discharged and the process of learning to live as a double-amputee began. [excerpt]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Civil War Medicine, Amputation, USS Rhode Island, US Navy

Disciplines

History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Tales from a Boston Customs House: Recovering from Trauma

February 10, 2014

By: Sarah Johnson, '15

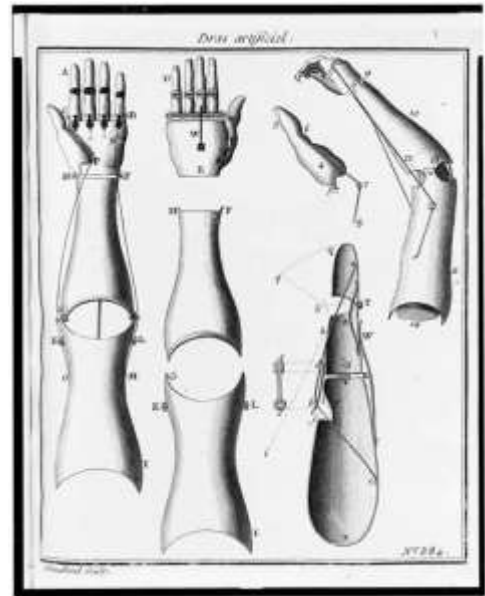
After losing both arms in a gunnery accident aboard the USS *Rhode Island* in 1863 and being told he would not live, Medal of Honor recipient Lewis Horton resolved that he would recover and be with his family again soon. The double amputation, completed within an hour of the accident, was successful, but Horton lost a significant amount of blood and could merely wait and hope. Eighty days after amputation, the ligatures — cords left in the limb to hold arteries closed until they had sufficiently healed — were removed, and healing commenced quickly. Shortly after, he was discharged and the process of learning to live as a double-amputee began.

Upon returning to his hometown of Boston, Massachusetts, Horton began the work of re-learning everyday tasks. He taught himself to write by holding the pen in his mouth and got a job in a local customs house. His penmanship was praised by observers and Horton was regarded as one of the ablest workers of the customs house as both messenger and watchman. The road was a difficult one, nonetheless. A medical survey taken in 1893 filled out by Horton himself gives insight into the life of an amputee. Although claiming that he had never “been as robust or strong,” Horton later gave a description of the pain with which he lived. He wrote that he could feel the palms of his hands and his fingers as if they were still there and the pain gave him “no pause.”

Horton described his stumps as six inches long and wrote that though he was not able to manipulate them himself, they would occasionally involuntarily twitch or move spasmodically. Such movements were followed by a sharp pain where his fingers used to be. Although he had tried artificial arms, he did not like them, describing them as “tiresome, of no use.” In the margins of the survey next to the question asking for a description

of the stump, Horton sketched his stump to show its shape. The image of a double-amputee veteran actually drawing his own stumps with his mouth is a powerful one.

And yet, Horton was not ready to allow pain and difficulties with artificial arms get the better of him. In addition to working in the customs house, Horton was able to re-teach himself to sail his yacht and remained a popular member of the Savin Hill Yacht club. Not only did Horton continue to sail leisurely, but he also continued to race. An article reporting on the outcomes of a regatta race claimed Horton “managed with all sail set as well as a man with two arms could.” In this particular race, Horton actually placed second in his racing class with a time of one hour and twenty-nine minutes, only twelve minutes behind the winner. Horton continued to sail late into his life and handed the pastime down to his son and grandson. He passed away on June 8, 1916, at the age of seventy-four, after a lifetime of demonstrating the human being’s ability to overcome great trauma.



Sources:

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“His Bravery Rewarded: Lewis A. Horton, The Armless Veteran, Given a Bronze Medal by Congress,” The Boston Globe, Monday, March 7, 1898. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

Unidentified newspaper clippings, Lewis A. Horton Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Image:

“Bras artificiel.” Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Online. Digital ID: cph 3c10398. Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-110398.