



2-12-2014

Tales from a Boston Customs House: “Living Monuments”

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Johnson, S. Marianne, "Tales from a Boston Customs House: “Living Monuments”" (2014). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 29.
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Abstract

The image of the amputee is a classic one in the memory of the American Civil War. Francis Clarke has argued that the long-suffering and sacrificial Union amputee became a national martyr to the righteousness of their cause. While this view was manifested in various ways throughout the postwar North, the case of double-arm amputee Lewis Horton serves to give depth insight into—and possibly push back against—this argument.

[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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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Tales from a Boston Customs House: “Living Monuments”

February 12, 2014

By: Sarah Johnson, '15

The image of the amputee is a classic one in the memory of the American Civil War. Francis Clarke has argued that the long-suffering and sacrificial Union amputee became a national martyr to the righteousness of their cause. While this view was manifested in various ways throughout the postwar North, the case of double-arm amputee Lewis Horton serves to give depth insight into—and possibly push back against—this argument.

In 1865, William Oland Bourne, editor of *The Soldier's Friend*, sponsored a left-handed penmanship contest for men who had lost their right arms in combat and had to re-learn to write. The topic of the contest was the meaning of the war. Many amputees echoed Clarke's analysis of exemplary suffering. One entry, written by John Raymond, formerly of the 3rd Maine, was a beautifully written transcript of the Emancipation Proclamation. This veteran amputee, wincing in pain due to his very literal sacrifice to country, penned the words, “. . . are, and henceforth shall be free,” exhibiting exactly the kind of exemplary suffering Clarke argues. John Allison, formerly of the 111th Illinois, wrote an impassioned entry, declaring, “Wounded comrades! We are the living monuments of the late cruel and bloody Rebellion.”

The case of Lewis Horton, however, presents a different side of the story. As not only an amputee but also a Medal of Honor winner, by Clarke's standards, Horton should have been at the pinnacle of Northern society. However, in the age of Barnum and Bailey, the newspapers and people in his community seemed to regard him first as a curiosity and second as a war hero. Of the five known articles published about him, the headlines are variously titled, “Another Armless Veteran,” “An Armless Customs Official,” and “Another Armless Hero.” In all of these articles the word “armless” is the primary identifier that sets him apart as something different. The last article, unique for several reasons, was titled “His Bravery Rewarded,” but the subtitle again featured the “armless” identifier: “Lewis Horton, the Armless Veteran, Given a Bronze Medal by Congress”

The most common theme running through the articles is surprise at Horton's recovery. The newspapers gleefully related how Horton taught himself to write with a pen in his teeth and got a job at a local customs house, where people would come to get a glimpse of the armless man at work. Perhaps most shocking to modern audiences, however, is Horton's wedding announcement, which reports, "... a marriage took place in Newberryport on Thursday, where the ceremony of the ring, or of joining hands etc, was entirely omitted, the bridegroom in the case, Mr. Lewis Augustine Horton ... having no hands to use."

Unlike John F. Chase, the man wounded forty-eight times at Gettysburg who posed for pictures and became famous as the Most Wounded Man, Horton did not put his experiences into the limelight. Newspapermen commented on how difficult it was to get Horton to agree to an interview and other than to relate where he fought and what he did, there is no known document where Horton related the meaning of his war or discussed notions of sacrifice. Sketches and photographs show Horton wearing unpinned sleeves and sometimes even short capes. The difference between Chase's and Horton's photographs is striking. Chase, looking very much like a national martyr, shows, perhaps even flaunts, his injuries, drawing in wounds that had healed over by the time of the photograph. Horton's picture, however, conveys a quiet dignity, a quick glance at the photograph and one might not even realize his arms were missing.

Lewis Horton's story suggests that perhaps notions of exemplary suffering only went skin deep in the postwar North. His reluctance to give interviews or highlight his disability pushes against Clarke's arguments for exemplary sufferers as heroic national martyrs. Although many Northerners subscribed to abstract ideals of noble sacrifice and suffering heroes, Horton shows us that when Northerners found themselves in contact with a real live amputee, curiosity often reigned supreme.

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