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## To Remake a Man: Disability and the Civil War

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# To Remake a Man: Disability and the Civil War

## **Abstract**

With a disability certificate and discharge from the military in hand, disabled citizens who had not long previously been abled bodied servicemen went through a period of emasculation followed by a return to waged labor which redeemed their sacrifice. These disability certificates were issued in large quantities by the sprawling northern bureaucratic machines created by the Civil War. The above-pictured certificate, issued to James Murray of the 56th New York, discharged Murray from service because, according to his regimental surgeon, he would “never be able to discharge his duty as a soldier.” Murray stood 5’8” when he re-enlisted for three more years in the unit on February 17th, 1864 at Beaufort, South Carolina. This certificate was issued to him less than a year later. Murray had fulfilled Victorian notions of manhood by serving in the military and satisfying his patriotic duty; however, this certificate ensured that James Murray never finished out his term of service, thus leaving his patriotism and manhood questionable to outsiders, and perhaps even to Murray himself. Disabled Civil War veterans faced much uncertainty when they reentered the civilian world with these certificates in hand. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Disability Certificate, James Murray, Pensions

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**


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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

## To Remake a Man: Disability and the Civil War

By [Cameron Sauers '21](#)

**ARMY OF THE UNITED STATES.**  
CERTIFICATE  
OF DISABILITY FOR DISCHARGE.



*Private James Murray* of *Company G*, *1st* *Regiment of Artillery*, *United States Army*, was enlisted by *Capt. James G. Smith* of the *1st* *Regiment of Artillery*, *United States Army*, on the *10th* day of *February*, *1862*, to serve *three* years; he was born in *New York* in the State of *New York*, is *thirty* years of age, *five* feet *eight* inches high, *light* complexion, *blue* eyes, *dark* hair, and by occupation when enlisted a *private*. During the last two months said soldier has been unfit for duty *thirty* days. *Private Murray was wounded at Gettysburg, Pa. on December 31st, 1862, and in my opinion will never be able to discharge the duty of a soldier.*

STATION: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Commanding Company.

I CERTIFY, that I have carefully examined the said \_\_\_\_\_ of *Company G*, and find him incapable of performing the duties of a soldier because of \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sergeant.

DISCHARGED, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 186\_\_\_\_, at \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Commanding the Reg't.

The Soldier desired to be addressed at \_\_\_\_\_  
Town \_\_\_\_\_ County \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

\* See Note 1 on the back of this. \* See Note 2 on the back of this.

(A. G. O. 29, 1874, 11-1-1864) [REPLACES]

James Murray's disability certificate.  
(via Gettysburg College Special Collections)

The above-pictured oversized sheet of paper changed the entire world of its possessor. With a disability certificate and discharge from the military in hand, disabled citizens who had not long previously been abled bodied servicemen went through a period of emasculation followed by a return to waged labor which redeemed their sacrifice. These disability certificates were issued in large quantities by the sprawling northern bureaucratic machines created by the Civil War. The above-pictured certificate, issued to James Murray of the 56th New York, discharged Murray from service because, according to his regimental surgeon, he would “never be able to discharge his duty as a soldier.” Murray stood 5’8” when he re-enlisted for three more years in the unit on February 17th, 1864 at Beaufort, South Carolina. This certificate was issued to him less than a year later. Murray had fulfilled Victorian notions of manhood by serving in the military and satisfying his patriotic duty; however, this certificate ensured that James Murray never finished out his term of service, thus leaving his patriotism and manhood questionable to outsiders, and perhaps even to Murray himself. Disabled Civil War veterans faced much uncertainty when they reentered the civilian world with these certificates in hand. The Civil War had the power to make men, but it also had the power to break men. Disability certificates were a common piece of Civil War paperwork. They were issued in depressingly high quantities that must have taken a physical and emotionally high toll on clerks who had to create and fill out the form, but which fundamentally changed the ways in which their recipients and non-combatants viewed and interacted with former soldiers .

Federal disability certificates marked the end of military service and of individuals’ direct association with the federal government. Discharge via this certificate was likely an intensely emotional experience as soldiers sought to wrestle with their new identities and new relationships with civilian society. However, these certificates also created a comforting sense of community for their many recipients who could bond over their shared journeys from soldiers to disabled citizens. Such certificates would be churned out following battles like the one at Deveaux Neck, South Carolina that ended Murray’s service, or the battle at Honey Hill just prior, which claimed 50 of Murray’s comrades as casualties. An office clerk had to sit and painstakingly produce stacks of these certificates as the post-battle casualty lists rolled in, escalating further the enormous amounts of paperwork generated by the war. Upon receiving this certificate, Murray may have been relieved that he was never again going to be thrown into the maelstrom of the killing fields, or alternately, perhaps he felt guilty that he was alive and receiving the disability certificate when many of his comrades had died on the field of battle. For some, the issuing of these certificates by clerks and surgeons confirmed the emasculation of soldiers who had been wounded. Murray had reason to be proud of his service, but he also may have felt guilt for not being able to serve until the completion of the war.



George W. Warner of Co. B, 20th Connecticut Infantry Regiment with his wife, Katherine, and six children, Alice, Charles, George, Ettie, William, and Ruby in front of painted backdrop.  
(via Library of Congress)

Following the receipt of a grievous wound and the ensuing disability certificate, many soldiers faced the question of how to inform their families that they were coming home. Some veterans who may have lost an arm had to rely on others to write the letter home from them. Such reliance symbolized the dependency on others that threatened to emasculate disabled veterans. Victorian values placed an emphasis on a man's ability to contribute to society and perform labor, as well as a man's ability to bring home wages that would provide for their dependents; yet with prosthetic technology still rudimentary, the disability certificate guaranteed nothing but uncertainty and doubt. Nonetheless, it was in everyone's favor that disabled veterans be reintegrated into society. Without a guarantee of receiving Federal aid following their discharge, disabled Union veterans often sought out employment in whatever sectors of the regular workforce were willing to take on maimed men. When these certificates threatened to emasculate men because they prevented them from performing their traditionally masculine roles, disabled veterans instead often pointed to their war-inflicted disabilities to validate their heroic sacrifice, thereby recrafting their own narratives of war-time and postbellum masculinity.

Historian John Casey argues that Civil War veterans often used a return to employment as a way to push past the changes that had fundamentally altered them both physically and emotionally. Even though they had been issued a certificate labeling them disabled, veterans sought to prove that they were still masculine enough to work and provide for their household. Northern Civil War veterans sought to use wage labor, particularly autonomous professional identities such as farmer or salesman, to demonstrate that they were still capable of contributing to society and the enrichment of the nation and

the free-labor society for which they had sacrificed so much. Individually, being able to work meant security for veterans' dependents who had been rendered vulnerable by their patriarch's physical disabilities and discharge from the federal payroll. More than just wages, work was a way for disabled veterans to regain a sense of self, dignity, and self-mastery over one's household. Thus, while the disability certificate labeled veterans with a physical weakness over which they could have felt shame, many chose instead to combat that shame and the societal stigmas associated with physical disabilities by returning to the work force.



Group of veteran soldiers, National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers.  
(via Library of Congress)

For those who were unable to return to work, the disability certificate was just the first piece in a seemingly unending stream of paperwork. Following the disability certificate came all of the documents necessary to prove one's worth of receiving a pension, which was a critical (if meager) piece of income. Federal pension benefits expanded greatly after the Civil War due to the larger number of veterans rejoining society who advocated for financial reimbursement for the sacrifices they made as soldiers. The first pension system paid a completely disabled – meaning they could perform no labor – private \$8 a month, an amount that was continually increased to pacify veterans advocating for increased benefits. In 1879 Congress passed the Arrears Act, which allowed disabled veterans to receive in a lump sum all the pension money they had been eligible to receive since their term of service. The Arrears Act was a great relief to men like James Murray who had received a discharge on account of disability because it allowed them to regain money they missed out on due to delays in the pension system. For those who sought a disability pension, the original disability certificate was one of the important pieces of paperwork needed to prove that they had indeed been disabled and required the assistance of the federal government. The sheer number of disability certificates and

the growing pension system created an expanded reliance on the federal government as a provider for its citizens while also solidifying the contractual agreement between veterans and the federal government that promised veterans (and their families) protection in return for service and sacrifice on behalf of their country. The 1890 Dependent Pension Act expanded the umbrella of disability to include disabilities suffered post war and old age, which further strengthened citizen and veteran relationships with the government.

Recognizing that pensions could never fully replace the potential loss of wages, the federal government embarked on its first program of hiring disabled Civil War veterans, which significantly opened opportunities for the disabled. For instance, Samuel Decker, who lost both arms in an explosion, found post-war employment as a doorkeeper at the House of Representatives. Decker had once been a wounded, young soldier receiving a certification of disability without a guarantee that his future would be secured. Similarly, The Sanitary Commission sought to secure for disabled veterans occupations that were less physically demanding, such as cigar making, mail delivery, hat manufacturing, newspaper sales, and teaching. Perhaps these jobs were not the arduous farm labor that many had experienced before the war, but they did produce wages to bring home to one's family as well as a return of a sense of dignity and self-sufficiency, while still fulfilling a man's desire to perform service to their government.



Samuel Decker (via Harvard Medical School)

When James Murray received his Certificate of Disability, his future was uncertain. While no record of Murray's postwar employment can be found, perhaps he attempted to overcome his disability and rejoin the workforce. Perhaps his disability certificate helped him gain his much needed pension. With the disability certificate came the realization that the nation must aid, in some way, the Union veterans who had served the nation in its time of need. The realization that disabled veterans could still be functioning, contributing members of society helped shape the pension system and preferential hiring that serves as the foundation for modern day veterans' benefits. The large number of disability certificates issued across all theatres of the war necessitated the creation of such a support system for veterans. Even though this certificate labeled men as "disabled," the disabled veterans themselves were quick to prove that disability did not equate to uselessness or being a burden. As disabled northern veterans had to swap their military uniforms for civilian suits, they validated their manhood in the form of contributions to the free labor economy, household, and nation on whose behalf they had sacrificed dearly. Disabled veterans returned home to a rapidly changing world, one that threatened to leave them behind. However, the post-war period experienced remarkable change as disabled Civil War veterans challenged existing cultural values of manhood and created a social safety net that attempted to prevent further degradation of disabled veterans and granted federal protection to, and validation of, those men who had sacrificed their bodies on behalf of the Union.

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