

NAGLE (J. T.)

The Acting Assistant Surgeon of  
the United States Army in the  
War of the Rebellion

BY

JOHN T. NAGLE, M.D.

NEW YORK

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*Reprinted from the* MEDICAL RECORD, *February 1, 1890*

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THE agitation which has taken place, for a couple of years past, to fix the status of the acting assistant surgeon of the United States Army, now serving, and give him the rank, pay, etc., of second lieutenant of cavalry, should be persevered in, as I feel quite sure that, if Congress could be made to understand his true position and the arduous duties he performs, that it would concede the modest request he makes. The MEDICAL RECORD has from time to time informed its readers of the almost humiliating position the acting assistant surgeon is now placed in. Some of them held, I am informed, medical commissions of high rank during the late war, and ought to deserve well of their country and receive the sympathy of every lover of justice. I sincerely wish them success in their movement.

The position of the acting assistant surgeon of the United States Army of the present day is pretty well understood by the medical profession, particularly that portion of it that is interested in military affairs; and as very little has been said of the acting assistant surgeon of the army during the late war, I think the following brief account may be of interest.

**The Medical Staff of the United States Army.**—The "Medical History of the War of the Rebellion," Part III., Surgical Volume, page 899, informs us that, at the outbreak of the rebellion, the medical department of the

United States Army was composed of one surgeon-general, with the rank of colonel; thirty surgeons, with the rank of major; and eighty-four assistant surgeons, with the rank of first lieutenant for the first five years of service; and that these medical officers formed a portion of the general staff of the army, and were not permanently attached to any regiment or command, but were subject to duty wherever their services were needed; and that at the beginning of hostilities, in 1861, large forces of State troops, or militia, responded to the several proclamations of the President calling for aid in suppressing the rebellion, and that each regiment was provided with a surgeon and an assistant surgeon, commissioned by the States in which the troops had been enlisted. These officers were borne on the muster-rolls, and permanently attached to the regimental organizations, being seldom detached except for urgent reasons. The calling out of a force of five hundred thousand volunteers, on July 22, 1861, necessitated an increased medical force to care for the wounded and disabled soldiers, and an act to reorganize and increase the efficiency of the medical department of the army was approved April 16, 1862. The organization of the regular staff was increased so as to number 1 surgeon-general, 1 assistant surgeon-general, 1 medical inspector-general, 16 medical inspectors, and 170 surgeons and assistant surgeons; there were appointed 547 surgeons and assistant surgeons of volunteers; there were mustered into the service, between April, 1861, and the close of the war, 2,109 regimental surgeons, and 3,882 regimental assistant surgeons. During the same period there were employed 85 acting staff surgeons, and 5,532 acting assistant surgeons.

The Regular Army commissioned medical officers, the surgeons and assistant surgeons of United States Volunteers, and the Acting Assistant Surgeons of the United States Army, were not attached to any regiment or command, but were subject to duty wherever their services were needed, while the regimental surgeons and

assistant surgeons were rarely detached from their regiments.

The laws of the United States prescribed the age of an applicant for the position of assistant surgeon to be from twenty-one to twenty-eight years, and no person who was under twenty-one years or over twenty-eight years could receive an appointment as an assistant surgeon in the United States Army. The regimental medical officers and the acting assistant surgeons were not limited to this age, but were required to be physically sound on entering the service.

**The Acting Assistant Surgeon, how Appointed.**—The acting assistant surgeon United States Army, or contract surgeon, in order to be appointed as such, had to make application to be examined for the position in the manner described in the following circular, issued by Joseph K. Barnes, who was acting surgeon-general of the United States Army, viz.:

“Information for applicants for the position of contract surgeon, in the United States Army.

“1. All candidates must make application in their own handwriting (accompanied by sufficient evidence of good moral character, of physical ability, and of being graduates of some regular medical college), to the surgeon-general at Washington, assistant surgeon-general at Louisville, or a medical director of a department.

“2. Upon the receipt of such application, a permit will be given for examination before the nearest medical board then in session, or before a board convened temporarily for that purpose by a medical director.

“3. If reported favorably by the board, the candidate will receive a certificate to that effect, which will secure him the position of contract surgeon whenever his services may be needed.

“4. In accepting a contract, the physician binds himself to serve the United States for a stated period, unless sooner discharged, and to be subject, in all respects, to the same control as all other medical officers.”

### Requirements and Duties of the Contract Surgeon.—

The successful candidate is required to subscribe to a printed form of oath, which is administered to him, and he is now officially designated as acting assistant surgeon, United States Army. The duties of the acting assistant surgeon were similar to those of assistant surgeons and surgeons of the medical staff of the army. He wore the uniform and insignia of rank of assistant surgeon, and was allowed the same amount of pension that was given to a first lieutenant of the military or marine corps. He was assigned to commands, in the field and elsewhere, which were without medical officers. Many were assigned to the charge of United States general hospitals, where the responsibility was very great, and the executive officers of a very large number of the United States general hospitals were acting assistant surgeons.

Nearly all the United States hospitals for the care of the soldiers who suffered from small-pox, and other contagious and infectious diseases, were in charge of acting assistant surgeons of the United States Army. The following account of one of them, which was furnished by Dr. J. V. Patterson, of No. 104 West Penn Street, Germantown, Pa., who was an acting assistant surgeon, United States Army, in charge of the United States Hospital, near Philadelphia, is interesting and amusing. Dr. Patterson states that he was assigned to duty as acting assistant surgeon, United States Army, on August 21, 1862, and after serving two months, he states that it was determined to open a hospital for small-pox and other contagious diseases. Several regular army surgeons refused to have anything to do with it, and the medical director of the department requested him to open and organize such a hospital, which he did on October 7, 1862, and he remained surgeon in charge until August, 1865, when he closed up the hospital. He not only acted as physician, but he was obliged to serve as clerk, paymaster, etc. On account of small-pox patients, everyone fought shy of the hospital. The paymaster refused to come to the hospital, and he, Dr.



Patterson, was obliged to make out the pay-rolls, and take them to the paymaster in the city of Philadelphia, and the paymaster, after eying them suspiciously, would draw his check for the amount. Of the officers sent from Washington to make an official inspection of the hospitals, there never was but one man who had the courage to enter the wards, examine the bedding, and make a thorough inspection. At the close of his term of service he had the satisfaction of being complimented by the medical director with the remark, that he had given him the least trouble of any surgeon in the department, and that the hospital fund had been so well managed that, on two occasions, he had drawn from its surplus to help to pay the debts of other hospitals.

On page 902 of the "Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion," Part III., paragraph 5, the following appears :

"As soon as possible after every engagement, the wounded were transferred from the division or corps hospitals to the base or general hospitals, which at one time numbered 205; these were under the charge and command of the regular or volunteer staff, assisted by acting assistant surgeons, medical cadets, and officers of the second battalion of the veteran reserve corps." This statement is not altogether accurate, as there were several United States general hospitals under the charge and command of acting assistant surgeons of the United States Army. The hospital railway transportation service was generally placed under the charge of acting assistant surgeons. Acting Assistant Surgeon J. P. Barnum fitted up the ambulance or hospital train for the transportation of the sick and wounded between Louisville and Nashville, a distance of one hundred and eighty-five miles.

"Surgeon George E. Cooper, U. S. A., Medical Director of General George H. Thomas's Army of the Cumberland, reported that when he arrived in the Department he found a train, fitted up by Dr. Barnum, already in operation on the line, one train, at least, leaving the vicinity

of the field hospitals daily. The trains were prepared under Dr. Barnum's direction, and Dr. Barnum states that he conveyed twenty thousand four hundred and seventy-two sick and wounded soldiers from the battle fields, general hospitals, etc., with a loss of but one man, who, despite the advice of his surgeons, implored that he might be taken to die in the bosom of his family. Dr. F. L. Town, U. S. A., in a report to Assistant Surgeon-General R. C. Wood, remarks that Acting Assistant Surgeon J. P. Barnum had charge of the first hospital train built at Nashville, and that he studiously labored to improve and systematize its working, and devised many expedients looking to the comfort of the patients in days when the theory of hospital trains was not so well understood as now" (see pp. 962-3, "Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion," Part III., Surgical Volume). Dr. Barnum states that he was with General W. S. Rosecrans' advance column, and participated in the battle of Chickamauga, and organized the Main Street Hospital in Chattanooga on Sunday after the battle. This hospital he turned over to Brigade Surgeon J. P. Arter, and took charge of the ambulances, which conveyed two thousand men from Bridgeport to Nashville. Dr. Barnum was afterward placed in charge of the river transportation of sick and wounded soldiers, having direct control of the steamer Mercury, where he not only acted as surgeon-in-charge, but also as post commandant, commissary, quartermaster, paymaster, and had authority to sign the name of R. C. Wood, Assistant Surgeon-General, by order of the Secretary of War; a power granted, he believes, to no other official of any rank in the Department.

Acting Assistant Surgeon Solomon A. Andrews was in charge of the ambulance or hospital train between Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.

The acting assistant surgeon of the United States Army was subject to do duty wherever his services were most needed, in accordance with the United States Army regulations, and he was liable to be changed from one post to another at the will of his superior officers.

There were many very eminent physicians and surgeons in this branch of the medical service of the army, as the following extract from the "Medical and Surgical History of the War," Surgical Volume, Part III., page 901, entitled the Medical Staff, and prepared under the direction of General Joseph K. Barnes, Surgeon-General, United States Army, will show :

" Besides the medical officers of the regular and volunteer staff, and the medical officers of regiments, there was a class designated as acting assistant surgeons, who were private physicians, uncommissioned, serving under contract to do duty in the field or in general hospitals. This class was very large, and embraced in its number some of the most eminent surgeons and physicians in the country."

The acting assistant surgeon ought to be proud of the compliment paid him, as it was the only branch of the medical staff of the army that was singled out and received special mention on account of the eminence of some of the physicians and surgeons that were attached to his corps. The tribute, however, was well deserved. Professors in medical colleges, editors of standard medical works, and other physicians and surgeons of eminence, abandoned the comforts of home and sacrificed lucrative practices to share the dangers and discomforts incidental to camp life, because their country needed their services, and their patriotism and sense of duty to their country, and the sick and wounded soldiers who suffered in its defence needed the most eminent medical and surgical care that the country could give.

The orders that were given to the acting assistant surgeon were similar to those that were issued to other medical officers. I submit a few of those that were received by an acting assistant surgeon as examples of the form, to show that he was as strictly under military laws and discipline as the assistant surgeon of the regular army who he personated :

## ORDERS.

MEDICAL DIRECTOR'S OFFICE,  
WASHINGTON, D. C., June 23, 1864.

Acting Assistant Surgeon John T. Nagle, U. S. A., will report for duty without delay to Surgeon John Higgins, Surgeon-in-chief of the Cavalry Depot, Camp Stoneman, D. C.

J. V. D. MIDDLETON,  
*Assistant Surgeon, U. S. A.,*  
For Medical Director.

Through Assistant Surgeon C. A. McCall, U. S. A.,  
Mt. Pleasant Hospital.

HEADQUARTERS CAVALRY DIVISION,  
DEPARTMENT OF WASHINGTON,  
CAMP STONEMAN, D. C., July 4, 1864.

DOCTOR: You will report for duty to the commanding officer of the second battalion, consisting of the third division and reserve brigade, which is to march to-morrow morning.

By order of WILLIAM GAMBLE,  
*Colonel Commanding.*

A. HARD,  
*Surgeon-in-chief Cavalry Division,*  
*Department of Washington.*

JOHN T. NAGLE,  
*Acting Assistant Surgeon, U. S. A.*

## PASSES.

HEADQUARTERS MILITARY DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON,  
WASHINGTON, D. C., July 2, 1864.

Pass John T. Nagle, acting assistant surgeon, U. S. A., to Camp Stoneman, Md., for the purpose of joining camp.

This pass will expire July 2, 1864.

By order of M. N. WISEWELL,  
*Colonel and Military Governor.*  
WILLIAM H. ROGERS,  
*Captain and Aide de-camp.*

No.....

OFFICE OF PROVOST MARSHAL,  
SANDY HOOK, July 28, 1864.

Guards and pickets pass John T. Nagle, surgeon, to Harper's Ferry and return. Good for this day.

WILLIAM H. H. GONTZ,  
*Captain and Provost Marshal.*

Pass no goods.

Several of the acting assistant surgeons served nearly during the entire war, and the "Medical and Surgical History of the War" shows that they performed their duty with zeal and fidelity, and that they never shirked any duty or responsibility imposed on them.

The following record of military history will show the form furnished to an applicant, who served in the late war, for a copy of his history, viz. :

Military history of Charles H. Bowen, M.D., as shown by the records of the Surgeon-General's office.

October 7, 1861, was appointed medical cadet, U. S. Army, and assigned to duty at the Infirmary, Washington, D. C. December 31, 1861, was transferred to Circle Hospital. January 4, 1862, ordered to report to Surgeon Cooper, at Port Royal, S. C. January 9, 1862, order rescinded, and was reassigned to duty at Circle Hospital. September 15, 1862, reports from Armory Square that his time is about to expire. October 8, 1862, entered into contract with the Surgeon-General U. S. Army for duty as acting assistant surgeon U. S. Army, and was assigned to duty at Armory Square Hospital, Washington, D. C. November 24, 1862, was on leave of absence for six days. December 13, 1862, ordered to report to medical director's office, Washington, D. C., for temporary duty with the army of the Potomac. Returned December, 1862, to Armory Square Hospital for duty. April 19, 1863, contract annulled, and a new one made at an increased compensation. Remained on duty at Armory Square Hospital to November 11, 1863, when ordered to report to Surgeon J. C. McKee, U. S. Army, at U. S. General

Hospital, Pittsburg, Pa. ; was on duty at General Hospital, Pa., to February 20, 1864, when his contract was annulled at his own request. Under contract April 8, 1864, was on duty at Chicago, Ill., to April 25, 1864, when contract terminated. Under contract dated May 10, 1864, was on duty at Armory Square Hospital, Washington, D. C., Fort Simmons and Mansfield, Lincoln and Armory Square General Hospitals, and U. S. engineer brigade, D. C., and at Slough General Hospital, Alexandria, Va., to November 11, 1865, when his contract was annulled at his request.

Official :

C. H. CRANE,  
*Assistant Surgeon-General, U. S. Army.*

SURGEON-GENERAL'S OFFICE,  
December 4, 1880.

The "Medical History" further says: "Of the amount of labor performed by the medical staff during the war some idea may be obtained when it is stated that 5,825,480 cases of wounds and disease occurred among the white troops, and 629,354 cases among the colored troops. The total expenditure of the medical department to the close of each fiscal year, from June 30, 1861, to 1866, inclusive, was \$47,351,982.24 (exclusive of salaries of commissioned officers) for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers of the nation." The report says: "It is a matter of just pride that it can be said that the medical disbursing officers performed their duties faithfully and honestly, and that the immense quantities of medical supplies distributed all over the country were, almost without exception, properly accounted for."

To the fidelity and efficiency of this vast body of professional men, the Surgeon-General, in his annual report of 1865, bears the following well-deserved tribute: "I desire to bear testimony to the ability, courage, and zeal manifested throughout the war by the officers of the medical department, under all circumstances and upon all occasions. With hardly an exception, they have been actuated by the highest motives of national and professional

pride, and the number who have been killed or wounded bears honorable testimony to their devotion and duty on the field of battle."

**Extraneous Duty of an Acting Assistant Surgeon.**  
—Occasionally Acting Assistant Surgeons were called on to perform unexpected duties ; for instance : At the battle of Kernstown, near Winchester, in the Shenandoah Valley, which took place in July, 1864, the Second Battalion, which consisted of the Reserve Brigade and Third Division of Cavalry, which left Camp Stoneman, July 5, 1864, was commanded by Colonel Samuel B. M. Young, who is now major of the Third United States Cavalry and Brevet Brigadier-General, United States Volunteers. Colonel Young was a gallant and brave officer, and was wounded and disabled while gallantly leading his men, and had to be removed hurriedly in an ambulance from the field, on account of the vigorous onslaught of the enemy. The fire became so hot that the men were driven back in confusion, the balance of the officers hurriedly left the field, and left the men to take care of themselves. Dr. John T. Nagle, who was an acting assistant surgeon in charge of this command, then took charge, rallied the men, and on the retreat spiked some abandoned guns, had the wheels removed from the gun carriages and caissons, and burned them with a number of baggage wagons to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemy, and brought the men from the field in good order. The particulars of this engagement appeared in the *Army and Navy Journal* of June 22, 1889, headed "Battle of Kernstown," and in the *New York Mail and Express*, February 2, 1889, headed "Mulligan and his Men."

The particulars are also filed with the records of the command in the War Department, adjutant-general's office, and also in the surgeon-general's office with the record of the services of John T. Nagle, late acting assistant surgeon, United States Army.

The fault of the acting assistant surgeon, United States Army, not having been legally mustered was not his ; he

wore the uniform of first lieutenant and believed that every one wearing the uniform was mustered, and so did every other person that he came in contact with ; he was sworn into the service, and he is now confronted with the statement that he is not discharged because he never was legally mustered. Without finding fault with the apparent injustice done him, and without entering into any controversy on the subject, he simply asks to have his services recognized and his position acknowledged, so that he can profit by any benefits that might be attached to an "honorable discharge."

**Incomplete and Inaccurate Record of the History of the War of the Rebellion.**—The history of the war of the rebellion will be incomplete if the services of the acting assistant surgeons are not recognized with the commands they served with ; and the omission of the services from the adjutant-general's office of the 5,532 acting assistant surgeons of the United States Army who served in the field, in charge of the railway hospital service, and in the United States general hospitals, is such an injustice to the medical officers mentioned, as well as to the American people, who are interested in the compilation of a true history of the war of the rebellion, that if for no other reason than to show that the soldiers received proper medical attendance, the bill recognizing their services ought to pass. The bill will in no way entail any expense to the United States Government, and will be a tardy recognition of the services and sacrifices that these eminent and hard-worked surgeons performed for their country during its hour of trial. The bill is as follows :

FIFTY-FIRST CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION, S. 1096.

*In the Senate of the United States*, December 11, 1889, Mr. Manderson introduced the following bill, which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Military Affairs :

A bill to fix the status of the acting assistant surgeons of the United States Army, or contract surgeons, who served in the war of the rebellion.



*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled.* That all acting assistant surgeons of the United States Army, or contract surgeons, who served in the war of the rebellion, and whose services were honorably terminated, be commissioned as acting assistant surgeons of the United States Army, the date of contract to be the date of commission and muster into the service, and the date when the service was honorably terminated, or the contract annulled, to be the date of discharge or muster out of the service: *Provided*, That any expense attending the issuance of a commission as acting assistant surgeon of the United States Army be borne by the applicant for such commission: *And provided*, That no pay or allowance be made to any such acting assistant surgeon or contract surgeon by virtue of this act.

This bill was introduced in the United States Senate on December 11th, by General Charles F. Manderson, United States Senator from Nebraska, a brave and gallant soldier, who was wounded in the service of his country, and is numbered in the Senate as Bill 1096. It was introduced in the House of Representatives on December 18, 1889, by the Honorable Amos J. Cummings, member of Congress from New York, a well-known and brilliant journalist, who served as sergeant-major in the Twenty-sixth New Jersey Volunteers during the war. The bill in the House of Representatives is numbered H. R. 603.

Among those interested in this bill are many who were commissioned medical officers during the war, but who served as acting assistant surgeons, United States Army, during some period of the war of the rebellion. The following are some of those who are most actively interested:

L. S. TESSON, M.D., Fort Sidney, Neb.

H. A. ROBBINS, M.D., Surgeon, Kit Carson Post No. 2, and Medical Director, Department of the Potomac, G. A. R., 1226 Fifteenth Street, Washington, D. C.

WILLIAM BALSER, M.D., Surgeon, Koltcs Post No. 32, and formerly Medical Director, Department of New York, G. A. R., 218 East Thirteenth Street, New York City.

JOHN T. NAGLE, M.D., formerly Surgeon of Post Sedgwick No. 11, Department of New York, G. A. R., 47 East Twenty-first Street, New York.

G. M. BRADFIELD, M.D., Surgeon of Post —, G. A. R., Department of Philadelphia, Pa., 1236 Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia.

GEORGE E. STUBBS, A.M., M.D., 616 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

JAMES V. PATTERSON, M.D., 104 West Penn Street, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa.

F. P. PFEIFFER, M.D., 222 North Second Street, Camden, N. J.

E. H. KLÜBER, M.D., Ellinwood, Barton County, Kan.

J. E. BROOKE, M.D., Plymouth, Marshall County, Ind.

C. R. REED, M.D., Middleport, O.

S. C. AYRES, M.D., 64 West Seventh Street, Cincinnati, O.

THOMAS MORRISON, M.D., formerly of the Army of the Cumberland, Wayne, Mich.

GEORGE M. PAULLIN, M.D., Shiloh, N. J.

T. O. BANNISTER, M.D., Odell, Ill.

J. H. BROWNLOW, M.D., 55 Caroline Street, Ogdensburg, N. Y.

CHARLES H. BOWEN, M.D., 601 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W., Washington, D. C.

J. B. CRANDALL, M.D., Sterling, Ill.

N. A. ROBBINS, M.D., Fire Department, Brooklyn, N. Y.

ADOLPH KESSLER, M.D., 644 Lexington Avenue, New York City.

J. O. STANTON, M.D., 1344 G Street, Washington, D. C.

THOMAS G. MORTON, M.D., 1421 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

J. P. BARNUM, M.D., 543 Fourth Avenue, Louisville, Ky.

ROBERT J. REILLY, 3300 Meramac Street, St. Louis, Mo.

M. F. PRICE, M.D., Surgeon, G. A. R., Colton, Cal.

HENRY E. WOODBURY, M.D., 912 Twelfth Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

The position of the Acting Assistant Surgeon, U. S. Army, who served in the War of the Rebellion, was a curious one, and puzzled most people who did not know the punctiliousness of the U. S. military service. Although the War Department, Adjutant General's Office, did not recognize or credit the services of the Acting Assistant Surgeons with the commands they served with, they were recognized by that office in general orders which gave them the same allowance of fuel and quarters as was granted to Assistant Surgeons, with the rank of First Lieutenant, as is shown by the following orders :

GENERAL ORDERS, } WAR DEPARTMENT,  
No. 273. } ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE.  
*Washington, October 19, 1864.*

Acting Assistant Surgeons assigned to duty and serving with regiments, will be entitled to the fuel and quarters of an Assistant Surgeon in the Army in all cases in which the allowances can be issued in kind.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF WAR :

E. D. TOWNSEND,  
*Assistant Adjutant General.*

OFFICIAL :

*Assistant Adjutant General.*

GENERAL ORDERS, } WAR DEPARTMENT.  
No. 8. } ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,  
*Washington, January 18, 1865.*

Acting Assistant Surgeons, U. S. Army, assigned to duty and serving at posts, will be entitled to the same allowance of fuel and quarters in kind as is now granted to Assistant Surgeons of the Army, with the rank of 1st Lieutenant.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF WAR :

W. A. NICHOLS,  
*Assistant Adjutant General.*

OFFICIAL :

*Assistant Adjutant General.*





