

### J. Franklin Dyer's The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon

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#### Recommended Citation

D'Onofrio, Peter J. (2004) "J. Franklin Dyer's The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon," *Civil War Book Review*.  
Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.6.1.25

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss1/25>

## Review

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Winter 2004

**Chesson, Michael B.** *J. Franklin Dyer's The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon.*  
University of Nebraska Press, \$25.00 ISBN 803266375

### Healing Hands

Letters illuminate doctor's life on the front

This volume is a compilation of letters written by Jonah Franklin Dyer to his wife, Maria, while he served as a Union surgeon. The letters cover the period from July 1861 to August 1864. They provide the reader with a unique insight into the Civil War through the perspective of a surgeon who spent there years on the front lines.

Dr. Dyer began his wartime career as the surgeon of the 19th Massachusetts Volunteers and, due to his talent as both surgeon and administrator, was promoted to Acting Medical Director of the Second Corps of the Army of the Potomac. He participated in all of the major battles of that army.

As one reads the letters, the change in the doctor's initial attitude and his opinion of the various leaders of the army becomes evident. He is frustrated with the bureaucracy, the red tape, the lack of adequate help, and the lack of supplies. Not only did he and his fellow surgeons have to deal with thousands of wounded and dying soldiers, but they also had to fight cholera, typhus, and scurvy, among other diseases that plagued the army, while his superiors in the Medical Department in Washington, D.C. denied the existence of some diseases in the army.

After his discharge, due to expiration of enlistment, Dr. Dyer returned home to Gloucester, Massachusetts to slowly rebuild his medical practice. He served as postmaster, member of the Massachusetts General Court, coroner, medical examiner, school committee member, alderman, and mayor of Gloucester. He died in 1879, two months short of his 53rd birthday. He was well liked, both as

surgeon and an officer, as evidenced by the ringing endorsements by his peers and superiors, both in and out of the medical profession.

The editor, Michl B. Chesson, is a professor of History at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and has authored or edited two other books dealing with the Civil War, *Exile in Richmond: The Confederate Journal of Henri Garidel* (2001) and *Richmond After the War* (1981). Professor Chesson has done an excellent job of making the narrative accessible to any reader interested in American History, not just Civil War medicine. Especially helpful is the introduction at the beginning of each chapter in which the editor presents an overview of the time period of the letters of that chapter. An extensive endnotes section is included, as well as four appendixes which include a letter from Dyer to a prominent Massachusetts politician, a series of letters written before, during, and immediately after the battle of Gettysburg, a history of Gibbon's Division at Gettysburg, and a roster of the medical officers of the Second Division, Second Corps, Army of the Potomac.

All in all this is a very well edited volume and provides one of the best insights in the daily life of a front line medical officer during the most turbulent period in our country's history.

*Peter J. D'Onofrio, Ph.D. is the president of The Society of Civil War Surgeons. He is also the editor of The Journal of Civil War Medicine, the quarterly publication of the Society. Dr. D'Onofrio has been a student of Civil War medicine for over 23 years. He can be contacted at: pjdsocws@aol.com.*