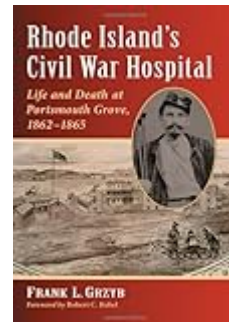


Frank L. Grzyb. *Rhode Island's Civil War Hospital: Life and Death at Portsmouth Grove, 1862-1865.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2012. 208 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6861-4.



Reviewed by Shauna Devine (Western University)

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Commissioned by Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz (Eastern Illinois University)

Rhode Island's Civil War Hospital

In his new book, *Rhode Island's Civil War Hospital*, Civil War scholar Frank Grzyb offers an account of the origins and development of Portsmouth Grove Hospital along with the myriad experiences of patients (many of which were prisoners of war), doctors, guards, nurses, and civilians who together shaped the new hospital. The hospital at Portsmouth Grove, as the author notes, treated a total of 10,593 patients with a mortality of 308 patients, and overall the hospital ranked 12th for patient bed capacity out of 183 military hospitals, "surpassed only by those in larger cities" (p. 138). And yet historians have been slow to incorporate the medical experiences at Portsmouth Grove into the larger narrative of Civil War medicine, making Grzyb's new book a welcome contribution to the historiography. The author is not a professional historian but rather one who has spent a lifetime studying all aspects of the Civil War and is a self-described "Civil War addict" (p. 3). He has written two previous monographs on the Civil War era and military history, and is a long-time member of the Rhode Island Civil War Round Table. There is indeed an in-

dustry devoted to studying the Civil War, and round tables remain an important part of how those interested in the conflict remember and commemorate the Civil War. Bringing his extensive knowledge of Rhode Island and his passion for the Civil War era, Grzyb's monograph is an enjoyable read.

This work is written for a broad public, rather than specialists, and the book is more episodic than analytical but this works in bringing the story of Portsmouth Grove to life. The author has a wonderful eye for interesting details and colorful stories, which he weaves throughout the narrative. The monograph is arranged into fourteen very short chapters addressing such topics as present-day Portsmouth Grove (chapter 1), the challenges of acquiring land, building and supplying the new hospital, and the often acrimonious relationship with both the press and some of the citizens of Portsmouth Grove in the hospital's first months (chapters 3-6), the way in which food was procured and the important role that the U.S. Sanitary Commission and local citizens played in humanizing the health care at the hospital (chapter 6), the challenges

of policing the hospital and the new corps of hospital guards (chapter 7), the often excessive alcohol consumption of soldiers and guards (chapter 8), hospital volunteers and benefactors (chapter 9), the overcrowding of the hospital and subsequent challenges in disease transmission (chapter 10), and the importance of female nurses as domestic caregivers for the soldier-patients (chapter 11). The next two chapters examine the hospital between the years 1862-64 (chapters 12-13). In these well-researched chapters, the author notes the continuities as well as the changes as the hospital developed through the war. He more fully explores patient life and death at Portsmouth Grove, the changing personnel at the hospital, the influx of new patients in 1864, some of the operations performed, and the importance of hygiene in the hospital environment. Through an examination of letters and diaries, Grzyb entertainingly covers the daily life of the patients within the hospital and their varied efforts at relieving the inevitable boredom that followed long confinement. This included letter-reading and -writing, playing checkers or cards, gambling, minstrel shows and the occasional furlough (which may have even included a sailing trip). The final chapter turns to the disability discharges, an examination of the invalids who stayed on the grounds just after the war, the disestablishment of the hospital, and finally a very brief look at some of the hospital's former patients, nurses, and physicians in the postwar period. This is followed by appendices that list the names of the hospital's guards, the soldiers that died at the hospital, and a map of the Cypress Hills National Cemetery.

Academic readers may be disappointed with certain aspects of the study. While the work is filled with intriguing anecdotes about patients, caregivers, and the surrounding public, it lacks an analytical voice. As one example, the second chapter aims to give a brief his-

tory of nineteenth-century medicine; however, the author neglects to consider the larger context of American medicine and medical education prior to the war, the influence of European medicine in America, or the varied experience levels of the many physicians that volunteered for service in 1861 on the Union side. On the centennial of the Civil War medical historian Richard Shyrock wrote a survey of Civil War medicine and concluded that the doctors were unnecessarily brutal and that the war was a medical disaster. Over the past two decades historians have increasingly coalesced around the idea that wartime doctoring was an important antecedent to modern science. Grzyb makes no reference to these historiographical trends nor does he engage with the current scholarship of Civil War medicine. Despite the relatively low mortality rates of this hospital, the author seems determined to portray all doctors as barbaric, noting that patient care by Civil War doctors was "regarded as a frightening adventure of drug experimentation and voodoo medicine" (p. 9). It is rather frustrating that the author does not more fully consider how ideas about medicine developed in the hospital as the war progressed or the many experiments, research projects, and management strategies that Civil War physicians developed in order to manage the unprecedented disease environments.

This said, *Rhode Island's Civil War Hospital: Life and Death at Portsmouth Grove* is popular history as it should be: a compelling and little-known story which the author passionately recounts with numerous interesting details and references. The book is also a good starting point for discussions on how to incorporate the medical ideas, practices, and practitioners of these less-studied local histories into the larger narrative of Civil War medicine. It will find an audience among those interested in the Civil War and Civil War medicine.

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