

# Civil War Surgical Saw

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## BRIEF OVERVIEW

Medicine and surgery played a critical role during the four years of the American Civil War. Over 600,000 soldiers were killed between 1861 and 1865 and tens of thousands returned home with an amputated limb, resulting from battlefield surgeries.

In this lesson, students will analyze a Civil War era surgical saw toolkit that belonged to a North Carolina surgeon.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Examine** primary source material related to Civil War surgery.
- **Analyze** the role of medicine and surgery during the Civil War.
- **Practice** visual analysis using a primary source.
- **Engage** with digital collections as primary source.

## BEFORE CLASS

- Ask students to watch the [Introduction to Rubenstein Library Collections](#).
- Have your students take a moment to [read the Rubenstein Library's approach to classes](#). It's very short, but includes things students will want to keep in mind as they work with primary sources now and in the future.
- Have students read [Amputations and the Civil War](#) on the American Battlefield Trust. Suggested questions for the article:
  - How many injuries resulted in amputation during the Civil War?
  - According to the article, what are some misconceptions about Civil War surgery?
  - What type of decisions might a surgeon have to make regarding whether to amputate or not?
  - What issues did many amputees face when returning home from battle?
  - Describe how surgery today differs from that of Civil War surgery.

## SESSION OUTLINE

### Activity 1

#### OBJECT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

- Briefly review and discuss the advance reading. Ask students to reflect on the discussion questions. Have students closely examine the Amputation set, early to mid-19th century.
- Have students work in small groups to analyze the item using the Document Analysis Worksheet as a guide. Encourage students to take notes as they work. Feel free to adjust the worksheet questions to better meet the goals of your class.
- Have groups share what they've learned about the item with the entire class, either in an online discussion post or by informal reporting at the end of the class session.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are some misconceptions about Civil War surgery?
- What type of questions might a surgeon have to make regarding whether to amputate or not?
- What issues did many amputees face when returning home from battle?
- How does surgery today differ from that of Civil War surgery?
- Do all the items in the surgical set serve the same purpose? What are their uses?

## Activity 2

### DIGITAL COLLECTIONS SEARCH AND TRANSCRIPTION

In this activity, students will learn to search for digitized primary sources and practice reading and transcribing a handwritten document. This portion of the module can easily be done asynchronously or as an after-class activity for a synchronous session.

- Students should start by watching the Rubenstein Library's short instructional videos that explain a bit about [digital collections](#) and give suggestions for how to [best search](#) the collections.
- Next, students will visit the [Duke Digital Repository](#) and locate one piece of correspondence that dates between 1861 and 1865.
- After students select a document, have each student read and transcribe the first 8-10 lines of the document. Students can then post their transcriptions to a shared online space to compare your results and to compare results and get help with hard to transcribe words.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you are interested in expanding this learning module or incorporating additional primary sources, here are a few places to get started:

- [Research Guide to Civil War Resources](#) in the Rubenstein Library (guide to additional material available in the Rubenstein Library and online).
- [Life and Limb: The Toll of the American Civil War](#) (online exhibition from the US National Library of Medicine (NLM)).
- [If These Saws Could Talk](#) (blog article on the history of the Rubenstein Library's Civil War era amputation and surgical saw).
- [Artifacts](#) from the History of Medicine Collections (digitized objects from the Rubenstein Library's collection).

### QUESTIONS?

[AskRL@duke.edu](mailto:AskRL@duke.edu)

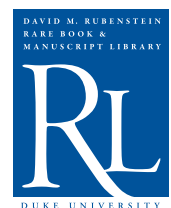
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