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Binding Wounds, Pushing Boundaries: African Americans in Civil War Medicine

Many histories have been written about medical care during the American Civil War, but the participation and contributions of African Americans as nurses, surgeons, and hospital workers is often overlooked. *Binding Wounds, Pushing Boundaries: African Americans in Civil War Medicine* will be on display at the Museum from May 29 to September 2, 2017. The exhibit provides a look at the men and women who served as surgeons and nurses and how their service as medical providers challenged the prescribed notions of race and gender, pushing the boundaries of the role of African Americans in America.

Through historical images and period documents, the exhibit explores the life and experiences of surgeons Alexander T. Augusta and Anderson R. Abbott, and nurses Susie King Taylor and Ann Stokes, as they provided medical care to soldiers and civilians while participating in the fight for freedom. “*Binding Wounds, Pushing Boundaries* opens the door to this rarely studied part of history and brings a voice to those that have remained silent for nearly 150 years,” says Curator Jill L. Newmark. With a nation divided, the American Civil War was a war to preserve the Union. For African Americans, it was a fight for freedom and a chance for full participation in American society. As all Americans supporting the Union sought ways to participate and contribute to the war effort, African Americans moved beyond the prejudices they faced to serve as soldiers, nurses, surgeons, laundresses, cooks, and laborers.

African Americans who served as surgeons and nurses for the Union Army found themselves in both new and familiar roles as healers and caretakers. Surgeons were in positions of authority, which had never occurred in the United States, while nurses received paid wages for their work. These men and women came from different backgrounds and life experiences, but their desire to participate in the cause for freedom transcended class, education, and social position. Severe injuries suffered from the bloody battles of the Civil War were all too common in the period 1861-1865.

Union soldiers alone suffered 175,000 wounds to limbs, and of that number, 30,000 resulted in amputation surgeries. Only 1 in 15 physicians in the Union ranks were allowed to perform amputations, and each amputation took 2 – 10 minutes. They used scalpels, saws, forceps, and other tools like those shown here. The surgeries themselves had a 26.3% mortality rate, though it was much more likely that a soldier would die from disease than from surgery.

At the start of the war, there were 113 doctors in the U.S. Army, and by the end, there were over 12,000 in the Union Army and over 3,000 in the Confederate Army. Of those 12,000 Union doctors, 13 were African American surgeons, including William P. Powell Jr., Anderson R. Abbott, and Benjamin A. Boseman. The exhibit *Binding Wounds* examines the history of African American doctors, surgeons, and nurses during the Civil War and the accomplishments they made participating fully in American society, transcending race, class, education, and social position.

Admission to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum is free. The Kalamazoo Valley Museum is operated by Kalamazoo Valley Community College and is governed by its Board of Trustees.