Achievement Under Stress

The Story of Samuel Preston Moore, Surgeon General of the Confederacy

By Mabel Montgomery

Though our Palmetto State has produced many men who have become eminent in the field of medicine, only a few South Carolinians have attained the rank of surgeon general in government service. Among them, Dr. Rupert, Blue of Marion, was surgeon general of the U. S. Public Health Service 1922-1931. Rear Admiral Elbridge R. Stitt, surgeon general of the Navy, though born in Charlotte, N. C., grew up in South Carolina, was graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1885, and served in the Navy from 1889 to 1931. Dr. Samuel Preston Moore, the subject of this sketch, rendered an extremely valuable service to the entire South as surgeon general of the Confederate States of America for the duration of the Confederate War.

The ravages of war are always serious, particularly when valuable papers are involved. Such was the case with Doctor Moore. Due to fire started by the Federal forces when occupying Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, on April 2, 1865, much of the most valuable hospital records were destroyed at the institution. This illustrious son of South Carolina, in this disastrous fire, records of the Confederate Army and Navy, combined under one surgeon general, were almost completely destroyed. This same fire consumed his office and his residence next door, destroyed valuable records and papers relative to the Moore family which had been collected and carefully preserved for many years. Thus detailed information concerning Doctor Moore is difficult to obtain. However, the material available shows conclusively the ability, the medical knowledge and the executive skill of this native son of South Carolina. Under his able supervision of the medical corps, which he had to organize from scratch and maintain in the face of almost insuperable obstacles, is said by competent observers to have been the best managed of any department of the Confederacy.

Born in Charleston

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1835, of an old and well-established family, his parents were Stephen and Eleanor Schriff Gilbert Moore. An ancestor, Dr. Mordecai Moore, came with Lord Baltimore to the field of medicine, only a few Dr. Mordecai Moore, came with Lord Baltimore to the field of medicine, only a few years. Thus detailed information concerning Doctor Moore is difficult to obtain. However, the material available shows conclusively the ability, the medical knowledge and the executive skill of this native son of South Carolina. Under his able supervision of the medical corps, which he had to organize from scratch and maintain in the face of almost insuperable obstacles, is said by competent observers to have been the best managed of any department of the Confederacy.

A Tough Assignment

Surgeon General Moore immediately threw himself into the enormous job which confronted him. To organize an efficient medical corps, in the face of a grave and immediate emergency, was an almost overwhelming undertaking which required administrative skill of a high order as well as knowledge of medical standards and procedure. Two vital tasks confronted him: lack of trained surgeons and of medical supplies. He set out at once to overcome these. Probably the most difficult task of the two was to secure a sufficient number of competent surgeons. The Southern troops were all volunteers who had been allowed to select their own officers, medical officers included, generally on a local basis and their selections were not always wise. In the early days of the war, many doctors had volunteered as soldiers, not as surgeons. Some of these were officers and some even in the ranks. In the course of time Doctor Moore set up boards which remedied this lack to a certain extent. The Southern nucleus was a group of only 24 young doctors. The surgeon general was compelled to wage a constant warfare to keep up his many organizations. Thus the medical department under him carried on a great variety of activities, all of which were highly essential for the successful conduct of his corps.

Hospital Huts

How to care for the wounded, the sick and the dying was an immediate problem. It was natural that this should start at Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. First an ambulance and tobacco warehouse there were used as hospitals but these were suited to the needs of the Army. Accordingly Doctor Moore became a pioneer in a new type of building. Under his direction so-called "hospital huts" were erected and it is with this type of hospital building that his name is connected for he seems to have originated them. Buildings of undressed planks, and of a size to accommodate at least 32 patients, were easily and quickly constructed. Each building, or hut, constituted a complete and independent ward. Fifteen to twenty such buildings constituted a division, and three or more divisions made up a general hospital. The construction permitted easy segregation of contagious diseases, particularly smallpox, as one of Doctor Moore's greatest struggles was to prevent the spread of this disease in the Confederate Army was said to be "one of the most brilliant achievements of the medical corps."

For the site of the most famous base hospital Doctor Moore chose Chimborazo Hill, just outside Richmond, where the water supply was excellent and the drainage good. Dr. James B. McCaw was chief in command. It had 350 beds, or wards, each holding 40 to 60 patients. The long, low buildings were separated from each other by streets. A wide boulevard ran around the outside of the institution. Chimborazo became the largest military hospital in the world at that time and has gone down in the annals of wonderful hospitals as 76,000 patients were treated there during the four years of its existence.

As to the personality of the man who was the main spring of this most efficient medical department, from the first Doctor Moore was known as a strict disciplinarian. This doubt resulted from his 26 years spent in the U. S. Army where discipline was rigid. A weaker man, one with a sensitive nature, could not have achieved the success which all observers concede to his department. A writer says of him, "Four years of Civil War, bitterly, desperately, mortally fought, developed all the resourcesfulness, ability and the achievement for which Moore is known in the field of medicine."

In an address at Columbia, S. C., November, 1889, delivered before the Association of Confederate Surgeons of South Carolina, Doctor Porcher says of this disciplinarian, "Within his domain, which was an extensive one, Surgeon General Moore had absolute power, with the fiat of an autocrat: the Emperor of the Russias was not more autocratic. He commanded and it was done. He stood in terror over the surgeons, whatever his rank and where ever he might be— from Richmond to the trans Mississippi and to the extreme and remote verge of the Confederate States. And though appearing to be cold and forbidding, we do not think that Surgeon General Moore was cruel, arbitrary or insensible to conviction. We have ourselves experienced some of his stern rulings, which were all tenderly compensated for."

Remained in Richmond

The war over, Doctor Moore took the oath of amnesty and continued to live in Richmond, where he had spent the war years. Since his finances were sufficient to support himself and his family, he never practiced medicine again. As he had spent the four war years most usefully in his profession, he continued to reside in Richmond. His position was that of a very active citizen in public affairs. He served on two boards and always took his duties seriously. One board was the Executive Committee of the Virginia Agricultural Society where he rendered valuable service and he was said to be a striking figure at the State Fair exhibitions.

He was also a member of the Richmond city school board from 1877 until his death. It is said of him that every morning, with military precision, he went to the office of the city superintendent for consultation. He advocated the teaching of vocal music in the schools; his reason seems to have been more medical than musical as he said that "singing is good for the soul." He was also the instigator of a series of eye tests in the schools, with the purpose of having pupils with defective vision placed where they could see in reference to blackboards and windows. On the day before his death he was at the superintendents office as usual and talked with great interest of plans for the forthcoming high school commencement.

After a day of normal activities he was seized with a fit of coughing and died May 31, 1897. At his death, his personal effects were placed on his grave. A Confederate badge was pinned in his coat lapel and a Confederate flag laid across his chest. Thus in death he bore the emblems of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy which he had served with such singleness of purpose and distinguished ability. He was buried in Richmond.