

The Hospital at Ellwood Manor

By Robert Lookabill, Robert Epp, and John Kanaster in the Orange County Historical Society *Record*:¹

“Today Ellwood Manor is the only structure dating to the Battle of the Wilderness still standing on the battlefield. Although best known as the Union 5th Corps Headquarters for General Gouverneur K. Warren during the battle on 5-6 May 1864, the house has a long history dating back to the late 1790s. But it is the role Ellwood played the previous

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Ellwood Manor in April 2020. Photo courtesy of Bob Epp.

year, in early May 1863, during and after three of the battles fought in and around Chancellorsville, that has lately gained increased attention. During this time, Ellwood—also called the Lacy House on Civil War era maps—served as a field/convalescent hospital for the Confederate Army during those battles and for four to six months afterward.

“We know that Ellwood was part of the army’s field hospital complex from the diary of Captain John Wesley Melhorn. Writing in his diary on 5 May he penned, ‘Move to *Rev. Lacy’s House Hospital* nearby. I had been lying on a bunk. Some boys carry me over, where we have excellent quarters.’ The hospital was probably operational as early as 2 May. However, when the

Confederate Army prepared to move on 8 May after the fighting at Chancellorsville, the medical staff had at least 132 officers and men who were too severely wounded to be moved. The solution was to use Ellwood as a convalescent hospital. Ellwood was roughly three-quarters of a mile from the 2nd Corps Field Hospital headquarters at Wilderness Tavern and had its own kitchen, laundry and ice house.

¹ Robert Lookabill, Robert Epp, John Kanaster, “*The Hospital at Ellwood Manor*,” Orange County Historical Society *Record*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring 2020), 1-3.

“The use of Ellwood as a convalescent hospital is an excellent example of how the medical departments of both armies adapted to the difficult situations they faced. Dr. Harvey Black, 2nd Corps surgeon, wrote his wife on 10 May, ‘All the wounded have been left under the charge of Dr. Graham [John Alexander Graham] at Major Lacy’s house, a beautiful place, fine house and an ice house well filled.’ Dr. Lafayette Guild, Medical Director and Chief Surgeon for the Army of Northern Virginia, informed Dr. Samuel Moore, Surgeon General of the Confederate Medical Department, about the situation on 22 May. Guild wrote, ‘Most of the cases were comminuted fractures of the upper third of the thigh and thigh amputations. They were comfortably provided for with bedding, bunks, changes of clothing, medical supplies & dressings, surgeons, nurses, such provisions as could be obtained in sufficient abundance and were in my opinion better off than had they been removed to a crowded hospital.’

“While the field hospital at Wilderness Tavern is famous as the site of the amputation of Stonewall Jackson’s arm (and Ellwood Manor as the place where the arm was buried), the tavern probably also provided most of the supplies and beds for Ellwood’s hospital. A copy of the reimbursement invoice paying Wilderness Tavern owner William Simms states he was paid for ‘1000 pailings [sic] (for bunks)’ used in making the beds for the field hospital. As all the furniture had been removed from the house, by association, the beds were probably used at Ellwood as well. This is another example of adapting to a situation utilizing resources at hand...

”The only two identified hospital patients who survived the war are Captain Melhorn of the 10th Virginia Infantry, Company C and Adam Jehu Wilson, a member of Company L of the 4th Virginia Infantry. On 3 May 1863, Wilson was wounded and his right arm was amputated by Dr. Harvey Black. Following the war, he married and settled in Lewisburg, West Virginia, where he was a successful businessman. He named his youngest son Harvey Black Wilson.

“To date our research has not come up with a complete roster of patients; however, thanks to James Horace Lacy we have his list of soldiers buried on his property, most of whom died at Ellwood Hospital. Later Lacy and the Ladies Memorial Association had the bodies exhumed and most were moved to the Confederate Cemetery in downtown Fredericksburg. He identified 10 men of the 24 removed; the remaining graves are unmarked. Through various sources we have learned several additional names who could have been some of those unknown burials.

“As could be expected, reported casualty numbers vary depending on the source. Wartime official records are very inaccurate as whole units are sometimes omitted. On the aforementioned Simms receipt, Surgeon Coleman states that Wilderness Tavern

and the adjoining complex in the area treated 3,000 casualties. The point here is that of the roughly 3,000 patients treated at Wilderness Tavern, only 132 could not be moved on or about 8 May. This points to a very efficient and well run hospital system with very competent staff.

“Dr. Harvey Black wrote to his wife that the original number of patients was 250, but we tend to discount that figure as too high. As stated earlier, from Dr. Guild’s 22 May correspondence, the original number of wounded at Ellwood was 132 patients when the hospital was established on 8 May. In that same letter he mentions that by 22 May the number has been reduced to 90, and he goes on to say ‘...some few have died of their wounds and others sufficiently restored to a condition that would admit of their removal.’...On 6 June, Dr. Guild states, ‘Sixteen of the severely wounded, who could not be removed far from the battlefield of Chancellorsville, will be sent to Richmond tomorrow. Thirty will remain at Ellwood hospital, yet in no condition to be moved.’ The decline from 132 to 90 to 30 seems like a reasonable reduction in numbers given the severity of the wounds to start with. It took at least another 60 days for the remaining 30 most severely wounded to improve to the point that they could be transferred and the hospital could cease operations. The last death we are aware of occurred on 4 June.

“It appears the hospital was closed in August 1863...

“In conclusion we believe there are at least three important takeaways from the hospital experience at Ellwood:

- 1. Civil War medicine was better than most people think.** Dr. Jay Bollet in his book *Civil War Medicine* states that ‘the medical services responded remarkably well to the immense demands by achieving survival rates for disease and wounds not known in previous wars and by developing innovations that later became standard components of battlefield and disaster medicine.’ The medical corps made drastic improvements from the beginning of the war and many wounded veterans owed their lives to Civil War doctors and nurses. It appears probable that well over 100 of the 132 severely wounded soldiers at Ellwood recovered.
- 2. The 2nd Corps field hospital at Wilderness Tavern/Ellwood hospital was part of the second level of a three tiered system to ensure the best possible medical care for the wounded.** The first tier was the forward aid station just behind the firing lines. Here wounded were stabilized and shipped to the second tier field hospital where primary treatment was provided, to include surgery. From the field hospital the wounded would have been moved to general hospitals in cities such as Richmond, Charlottesville and Lynchburg among others. There were a number of ‘receiving’ hospitals, generally located on railroads, from where

patients were shipped on to general hospitals. The Exchange Hotel hospital at Gordonsville would be an excellent example of a receiving hospital.

- 3. Ellwood is a perfect example of adapting a civilian structure into a needed hospital.** Medical personnel on both sides had to adapt to the terrible nature of the war. There were few purpose built medical facilities in the Confederacy (Chimborazo in Richmond being the most notable exception) and Ellwood is an example of an existing building being adapted to meet a need for a hospital. Ellwood, along with tents and associated outbuildings, became part of a field hospital complex. Later it morphed into a convalescent hospital for the seriously wounded patients until they were well enough to be discharged or moved to general hospitals elsewhere.’ “