

William Beaumont: A Pioneer of Physiology

William Beaumont Army Medical Center in El Paso, Texas, was the first of several military and civilian medical facilities named for U.S. Army doctor William Beaumont (1785-1853). Beaumont was born into a large farming family in Lebanon, Connecticut, and was educated with his siblings in a local schoolhouse. His medical education was by apprenticeship with an established physician in Vermont. At the time, there were fewer than a dozen medical schools in the U.S., and most physicians were educated and trained as apprentices. In July 1812, he passed the Vermont medical examination and became a licensed physician.

In an age when no information traveled faster than the 4 legs of a horse, it is not known how much William Beaumont was aware of the events that led to the American declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812. It is equally unknown whether a sense of patriotism, youthful adventurism, or simply the need for a job drove Beaumont to join the U.S. Army in September 1812. Regardless of the reasons, he soon was under fire as a Brevet Surgeon's Mate with the 6th Regiment at the Battle of York in Canada.

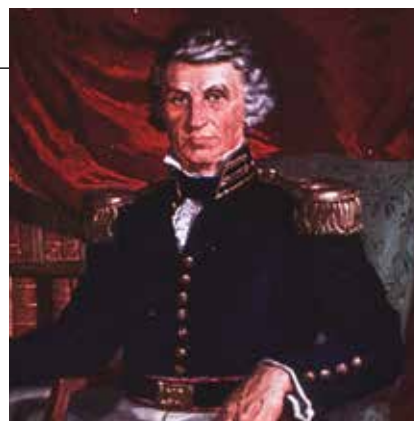
The retreating British booby-trapped their powder magazine, which exploded on the Americans

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and caused more casualties than the battle itself. Beaumont wrote in his journal, "The surgeons wading in blood, cutting off arms, legs, and trepanning heads to rescue their fellow creatures from untimely deaths." He also wrote that, "it awoke my liveliest sympathy" for his fellow soldiers; he worked for 48 hours without food or sleep. Beaumont saw additional action at Fort George and the Battle of Plattsburgh.

Beaumont left the U.S. Army after the war, but following a few years of civilian practice, he returned to active duty and was assigned to the northwestern frontier post on Mackinac Island, Michigan, the site of lively summer fur trading between Canadian trappers and American traders. In June 1822, a young Canadian voyageur, Alexis St. Martin, was accidentally shot in the upper left abdomen at close range with what we know today as a shotgun. Beaumont described the wound as the size of a man's palm with burned lung and stomach spilling out as well as recently eaten food. He thought attempts to save St. Martin's life were "entirely useless."

But Beaumont gave it his best, and St. Martin miraculously survived. The wound healed but left a gastric fistula to the abdominal wall. Over time, Beaumont realized that he was able to witness the previously mysterious functions of the gastrointestinal tract. For more than 10 years, Beaumont studied the physiology of St. Martin's fistulous stomach, leading to the publication of several articles and a book that earned Beaumont the reputation of at the very least the father of gastric physiology if not of American physiology.



Beaumont and St. Martin eventually parted ways. Beaumont pleaded with St. Martin to return for more studies, but with a wife and many children to support, St. Martin would not. Beaumont again left the U.S. Army to practice medicine in St. Louis, where in 1853, he slipped on ice and struck his head. Several weeks later at the age of 67, he died of his injuries. St. Martin died in 1880 at age 76, living almost 6 decades with a gastric fistula and fathering 17 children.

In 1921, the U.S. Army hospital at Ft. Bliss, Texas, was named for William Beaumont. The building was replaced in 1972 with a 12-story facility known as William Beaumont Army Medical Center. In November 1995, additional space was added for the VA health care center. In 1955, the William Beaumont Hospital opened in Royal Oak, Michigan. This civilian hospital has grown to a health care system with many facilities that include a school of medicine founded in 2011, all named for Beaumont.

For more detailed information on William Beaumont, read Frank TW. *Builders of Trust, William Beaumont*. The Borden Institute: Fort Detrick, Maryland; 2011. ●

About this column

This column provides biographical sketches of the namesakes of military and VA health care facilities. To learn more about the individual your facility was named for or to offer a topic suggestion, contact us at fedprac@frontlinemedcom.com or on Facebook.