

# Beloved Kincardine doctor served in nightmare role at Gettysburg

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Any student of the Civil War (1861-1865), knows of the Battle of Gettysburg.

All the American stories of destiny and lore of the bloodiest engagement ever fought on the American continent. Over 51,000 casualties, in three days July 1-3, 1863, 150 years ago this summer. What is not known, is approximately 3,000 Canadians also fought there. Mostly Union. Among them two doctors from Ontario. Dr. Solomon Secord of Kincardine, 20th Georgia, grand nephew of 1812 Heroine Laura Secord. And Dr. Francis Wafer of Kingston, 108th New York. Their regiments barely a mile away from each other across the lines. On the same day, same battle. Changing their lives forever.

## Civil War Medicine before Gettysburg

At the outbreak of war most doctors north and south had never done an amputation. Prof. Cheryl Wells, editor of Wafer's memoir; "A surgeon in the Army of the Potomac" notes, "The first time most picked up a scalpel was on the battlefield." American medical schools traditionally did not use cadavers. Most states forbade it. Citing the Protestant belief dissection of cadavers imperiled both body and soul. American doctors enlisted eager for battlefield experience. As the saying goes; "Be careful what you wish for". Amputation became the trademark operation of the Civil War. About 75% of all operations were amputations. Including over 15,000 at Gettysburg.

Secord and Wafer as products of Canadian Medical Schools were highly sought by recruiters. Canadian schools patterned on British and European systems were at the forefront of medical science. Curricula included surgical and



A photo shows Dr. Solomon Secord, late in life. With friend. Seated Right. (Courtesy June Daniel of Kincardine). (SUBMITTED)

dissection classes. As Wells noted. "Even though Wafer had just one year under his belt at Queen's, he was already more qualified than many practicing American Doctors." Secord with six years practice, was pure gold.

## Battlefield Medical Organization at Gettysburg

Both men arrived at Gettysburg, early morning, July 2nd. Secord on the Confederate right near Devil's Den. Wafer a little over a mile away on a dog leg, near the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. First day of battle, July 1st casualties had been staggering 15,000. On July 2nd, the butchers bill added 20,000 more.

Both Confederate and Union medical systems deployed nearly identical relay systems to recover wounded. As part of these systems Secord (Surgeon

and Wafer (Assistant Surgeon) had radically different experiences at Gettysburg.

As Assistant Surgeon Wafer's role at Gettysburg was to stabilize wounded and get them to hospitals in the rear. At Gettysburg this meant staying close to the fighting. Wafer recalled; "around 7am., the 108th was posted in support of a battery 1st US artillery commanded by Lieutenant (George A) Woodruff. This battery was planted in a clump of trees about one quarter of a mile left of cemetery hill." They did not have to wait long. "About the same hour - a thin straggling line of men in brown slowly advanced through a wheat field, about 3/4 of a mile in our front. These were the enemy skirmishes." Posey's Mississippi Brigade whom had deployed snipers. Hitting

men around Wafer: "Lieut. Robert Evans rolled over in the agonies of death... with one of the men assisting we moved the wounded man a few yards in the rear. He expired on my knee in about twenty minutes. It was said he was from Toronto."

Covered in gore, uniform dripping sweat, Wafer remained on the line until after sunset. A beautiful moonlit night, "About 10 o'clock all firing ceasing, the rattle of firearms was succeeded by sounds not so exciting but more melancholy, the familiar creaking of ambulances collecting the wounded.

## Pickett's Charge

Next afternoon, July 3rd Wafer found himself witness to Pickett's Charge. The climax of the battle. Turning point of war. Beginning of the end for the south. Treating wounded on the Frey farm behind the union center. Wafer watched spellbound and horror struck as a rebel wave 12,000 strong crossed a mile of field and broke into pieces against the Union line in front of him. He could not believe what he saw. "The elite of the Confederacy... their hope and pride, led by their best lieutenant... Drifted broken and hopeless across the fields. - artillery thundering in their rear mingled with the cheers of the victors."

## Secord - Death at Plank Farm

While Wafer experienced the horror of battle first hand, Surgeon Secord at the 20th Georgia hospital on Plank Farm, southwest of town, had his own front row seat to a nightmare. He was the man at the end of the line. Carrying the weight of life and death decisions that came with triage. Many he knew personally. Secord had about a minute to decide a man's fate. If hit in an arm or leg, chances were good, if amputation was within 24-48 hours. Otherwise

infection set in followed by death. A good surgeon like Secord could take a limb off in 10 minutes. But, if the man was gut shot or chest wound, they were set aside to quietly pass on. It was a simple and brutal process.

A surgeon with Secord at Plank Farm wrote: "The surgeons (looked like) butchers, with their blood spattered white shirts and navy trousers. To one side lay a pile of amputated, mangled limbs, stacked like cordwood."

Elizabeth Plank, in Gregory Cocco's "A Vast Sea of Misery"; recalled Confederate Medical Staff occupying her home:

"An ambulance arrived at the farm house and without any ceremony forced open the front door and carried in a wounded officer and placed him in the guest's room. "A Confederate officer said; " Now don't be frightened this house will be a hospital and you can expect many more wounded men here."

The 20th. Georgia lost 137 of 350 men. By July 3rd, 1542 wounded flooded division hospitals around Plank Farm. On July 3rd while Wafer sat witness to Pickett's Charge, Secord had been amputating 24 hours straight. Hearing only the sounds of the final moments of Pickett's Charge. Without seeing, Secord,

and all around him knew, their world had changed.

Endnote: July 4th, Wafer marched with the 108th in pursuit of Lee's retreat. Secord remained behind as prisoner to care for 20,000 wounded (6,000 Confederate, 14,000 Union). Both returned home to Ontario, practicing medicine for the remainder of their lives.

Paul Culliton is a contributing writer for *Esprit De Corps Magazine*, Ottawa and award winning documentary filmmaker. This story is an adaptation from "They Met at Gettysburg" a 3 part story running July - October in *Esprit De Corps*. He has a documentary in development on *Canadians in the Civil War*.

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Painting Francis Wafer. (Courtesy Queen's University Archives, Kingston). (SUBMITTED)