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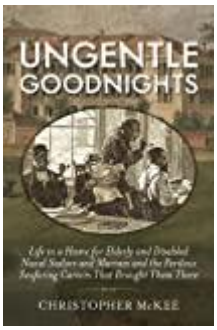
Christopher McKee. *Ungentle Goodnights: Life in a Home for Elderly and Disabled Naval Sailors and Marines and the Perilous Seafaring Careers That Brought Them There.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018. Illustrations. 352 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59114-573-8.



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"An enlisted sailor's pay was comparatively small. There was little opportunity for him to save a nest egg in anticipation of illness and old age. The life a sailor led—voyages to sickly climates, storms, battles—was one fraught with the possibility of illness and injury, and it aged him prematurely. For many, long absences militated against the formation of a family life to which the Marine or sailor could retreat in his final years." All such reasons argued, in the words Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard wrote in 1827, "that the disabled and aged seaman, who has worthily served the country until his strength is exhausted, should have an asylum where a comfortable subsistence may be found for his last days" (p. 35).

There is no shortage of studies on the creation of pensions, land grants, and soldiers' homes for US Army veterans in the nineteenth century, especially veterans of the Civil War era. Sailors and marines, however, are a different story. In comparison to their army comrades, we know much less about the disabilities they struggled with and the debates on how best the nation might care for them.

As the quote above from Christopher McKee's book explains, sailors and marines were particularly vulnerable to accident and illness and the consequences of their disabilities were made worse by the roving life they led. Family ties were often strained if not broken and the decks of US ships were populated by many immigrants whose ties on the quarterdeck might be secure but were much less so on the nation's soil. McKee's study of the Naval Asylum in Philadelphia attempts to fill a gap in scholarship on the kinds of disabilities experienced by sailors and marines and to show one attempt by the US government to provide for the needs of those too ill to support themselves.

McKee's task is clearly a difficult one as the men he is studying left fragmentary records of their lives. Much of his research comes from the archives of the Naval Asylum, which are housed at the National Archives and contain a database of sailors and marines admitted to the institution as

well as information on the asylum itself. In common with the procedures for army pensions, sailors and marines were subject to an examination prior to entry into the asylum to determine the cause and extent of their disability. These examinations constitute brief medical sketches of the Naval Asylum's residents. McKee focused his research on the period from the asylum's opening in 1831 to the end of 1865 but does not explain this choice of years for his analysis. Presumably it was made based on the data available in the archives and the knowledge that post-Civil War veteran disabilities have been more widely covered. McKee does note in his introduction that technology changed enough in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century navy to make comparisons between naval and marine veterans in the early nineteenth century and those who served at the end of the nineteenth century more difficult. So perhaps in this case the shift from a sailing navy to a steam navy was his main factor for focusing on this earlier period of naval veterans.

The book wisely begins with the most complete record available, of the planning and construction of the Naval Asylum itself. The introduction and the first few chapters focus on the design and location of the asylum. Built on a plot of land along the Schuylkill River, the asylum was on the edge of Philadelphia when it was first built. The city, however, quickly grew up around it. The asylum also was forced to expand quickly as the number of inhabitants increased over the years. McKee shows a floor plan of the original building that included both the naval hospital and the asylum in one building, but gradually these facilities were separated from each other.

Among the more interesting details of McKee's analysis of the building are the number of stairs inhabitants would have been required to navigate to participate fully in the life of the asylum. Inhabitants lived on the first and second floors of the building with dining and laundry facilities located at ground level. To move between levels, inhabitants would have had to make their way up and down multiple staircases at numerous times of day. This design detail seems odd given the physical disabilities of many of the asylum's inhabitants but could perhaps be explained by the planner's interest in the aesthetics of this public facility. Since public money was being spent to construct it, there would most assuredly have been pressure to create a facility that seemed worth the expenditure. The classical design of the building would thus serve as a visible reminder of the nation's largesse toward its needy veterans.

The other interesting detail of McKee's analysis of the asylum's design is the privies located at the end of the hall on each level. He notes that "these had been traditional privies—simple seats with the human waste falling through brick flues into deep pits or wells below the Asylum building." Due to the porous nature of brick, however, this design had to be adapted to prevent staining of the building's walls and eliminate odors inside. To achieve this goal, McKee explains, "a Philadelphia carpenter-mechanic, Oscar C. M. Cains,... devised an ingenious system of pipes and primitive flush toilets" (p. 25). This not only eliminated the problem but also made the asylum's inhabitants among the first residents of Philadelphia with quasi-modern indoor plumbing. Unfortunately, McKee notes, the plans to this system are lost, but it does make for an interesting narrative interlude.

From this initial part of the book, McKee then moves on to explore some of the fragmentary narratives of the men who lived in the Naval Asylum. His chapters move in both a thematic and a chronological way, examining the various groups of sailors admitted over the years and the types of disabilities they had. This section of the book is the hardest to follow as McKee does his best to fill in the gaps in each sketch of the inhabitants. What develops is a picture of physical disability among former sailors and marines due mostly to the nature of life on a nineteenth-century sailing ship.

Hernias caused by heavy lifting and broken bones due to falls from the rigging seem the most common physical ailments among the inhabitants. Some chronic illness from diseases contracted during service are also noted. Interestingly, there are few documented cases in McKee's book of combat-related injuries although many of the ships these sailors and marines served on saw much active service. Aside from physical disabilities, McKee documents instances of mental deterioration due to old age, primarily dementia, and multiple cases of chronic alcoholism.

McKee shows that dismissal and reentry to the asylum were common. One of the more well-documented cases analyzed is of Davidge Griffith Ridgely who applied for admission to the asylum three times. All three of his stays are marked by conflicts with authorities at the facility. Inhabitants of the asylum were generally allowed to come and go from the facility during the day at will, provided their disabilities did not prevent them from leaving or they were not under guard for some violent infraction. Ridgely made full use of this privilege and strained the tolerance of the facilities' managers. In Ridgely's eyes, he was a man persecuted by authority, but the asylum records suggest a man suffering from an addiction to alcohol and rapidly declining in physical health as a result. Ridgely's records not only indicate a pattern of readmission, common for many asylum inhabitants who left, but also highlight the inconsistencies of the records. McKee notes that "Ridgeley's appointment as a beneficiary at the Asylum ranked him as seaman, [but] there is no evidence in any surviving muster roll that he ever achieved that rating" (p. 75). There are also tantalizing accounts from newspapers about his imprisonment for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to the US government in Maryland in August 1862, but nothing more is known about Ridgely after that date. He last appears in the historical record while imprisoned in Fort Delaware. After that, he seemingly disappears.

The main value of McKee's book is that it provides a comprehensive examination of the wide variety of disabilities sustained by sailors and marines prior to the US Civil War and the efforts made by the federal government to aid those veterans. McKee challenges the assumption that veteran injuries are solely combat related. He also exposes societal values about support networks that made it hard for someone with a disability to remain an active part in their communities in the nineteenth century. Family was the main resource the disabled had to rely on for support followed by their local community. In many cases, the sailors in this book lacked both and thus found themselves in the asylum, which attempted to mimic the quasi-familial atmosphere of the ships on which they served. In addition, ***Ungentle Goodnights*** sifts through and analyzes a body of data that would otherwise be intimidating for a scholar attempting to understand the unique experiences of these veterans in relation to their army counterparts. Future scholars of nineteenth-century naval and marine veterans will find this book of great use for that reason.

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