James Emmett Pomfret

James Emmett Pomfret was born March 26, 1826 in Preston, England. His father was John Pomfret and his mother was Sarah Emmett Pomfret. The name Pomfret developed because of a familiar way or habit of pronouncing Pontefract. The original Pontefract was a Lacy who came to England from Normandy, France, with William The Conqueror. As the house of Lacy prospered some members became earls of Lincoln and barons of Pontefract. The Lacys had constructed a castle in Yorkshire. It was built near a stream and the stream was spanned by an arched stone bridge built by the Romans but which had broken in two. Thus the Lacy's castle came to be identified as the place by the pont (bridge in French) and fractured or broken (also French derivation) or Pontefract. The family name became Pontefract and through generations the name Pomfret became adopted.

As a young man James E. Pomfret became a teacher in Preston, England. In 1843 his father died and that same year with the rest of his family he came to America to Amesbury, Massachusetts. In a short time Pomfret and his family moved to Lowell, Massachusetts. He took up teaching again and also became a writer, an editor and a pastor of the Universalist Church Society. In 1845 he married Almeda Chace. During his years as teacher and church pastor he became interested in medicine. Independently, Pomfret read and studied books, papers and texts of medicine. Fascinated by medicine he moved to Albany, N. Y. in 1857. He then attended the Albany Medical College. In 1858 he moved his family from Haverhill, Mass. to Albany. In 1859 he graduated and received his M.D. degree from Albany Medical College. Upon receiving his degree he was offered a position as an assistant in the office of Dr. James H. Armsby, who was a prominent Albany physician and surgeon. Pomfret remained with Dr. Armsby from 1859 to 1862 at which time he volunteered as a surgeon and went into the Union Army as Surgeon of the 113th Regiment New York Infantry. Shortly afterward the Regiment was ordered to Washington, D.C.

The trip to Washington was interesting. The Regiment was taken by steamboat on the Hudson River from Albany to Jersey City, New Jersey. The troops then boarded railway cars and were taken by train to Baltimore, Maryland. Now at this time, August 1862, the state of Maryland had not made up its mind whether to secede to the Confederacy or whether to stay loyal to the Union. The city of Baltimore was deeply divided in loyalties. The rebel citizens had been taunting, jeering and even throwing stones and other missiles at the Union troops as they marched from Baltimore's north station across the city to the south station. The 113th Regiment was held until night at the north station when most of the citizens had retired to bed. The Regiment then quietly and out of step with broken ranks proceeded across Baltimore to its south station. From there the men were carried by train to Union Station in Washington. The men then marched to the
Long Bridge which they crossed and arrived at their destination and their camp site for the defense of Washington. Within a very few days the 113th New York Infantry Regiment was changed in name and function to the Seventh Regiment New York Heavy Artillery. When it became evident that the Regiment would be in camp for an extended stay, Dr. Pomfret had his wife come down from Albany and she took up residence at a boarding house near the camp. The troops spent months of boring and frustrating drilling hoping for some type of military action in the so-called defense of Washington. No such action developed. The Regiment remained encamped there for well over a year. Dr. Pomfret fretted impatiently but was totally unable to find much clinical or surgical activity for himself.

Finally in 1864 the Regiment was marched to Bell Plain and the front. The Regiment had its baptism of fighting at Spottsylvania where it sustained its first casualties. From then on Dr. Pomfret was occupied with treating the wounded, removing shell fragments and bullets and with the amputation of damaged limbs. Many days were rather quiet while on others he labored long and exhaustingly. He shared the dangers and the suffering with the men. He was appointed Surgeon in Chief of the 1st Division, 2nd Army Corps. Though under shell fire numerous times he never received any injuries. Dr. Pomfret wrote many letters home from the front, numbers of which were very interesting and many which described simple daily army life. One interesting letter discusses the problem of fraternization between the enlisted men of both the Confederate and Union Armies. The officers of both armies tried to stop all friendly gestures between the two armies but human nature was still strong. On one occasion when there was a lull in the action with no active fighting or rifle fire, the Yanks cut down a large dead tree in the no-man's land between the two lines. The Yanks wanted the tree to fall toward their line but instead it fell so that the top branches reached almost to the Rebel rifle pits. Both the Rebel and Yankee privates came out and quite a serious argument developed over which soldiers would get which parts of the tree for firewood. It was finally settled by the Rebs getting the limbs of the tree while the Yanks got the main trunk. On another occasion two Rebel soldiers came out between the lines to get some firewood. They did not have an ax and hollered "Hey Yanks, will you loan us your ax?" The Yanks hollered back "Come and get it." The Rebs did so and cut some wood. They returned the ax and thanked the Yankee soldiers. Cold and dampness constantly troubled the men of both armies.

Dr. Pomfret was present at the siege of Petersburg, Virginia when Union troops dug a tunnel over 500 feet long and planted an enormous mine, over 8,000 pounds of explosives, beneath the Confederate lines. The enormous explosion, one of the largest ever known at that time, resulted in the Battle of the Crater. The explosion accomplished nothing and substantial Union losses were sustained. Dr. Pomfret had been working steadily and over long hours. He heard the explosion
and felt the quaking of the earth beneath his feet but he was unaware of the plan, the intent of the huge mine and did not know the significance of the explosion until well after it had occurred. The Doctor wrote many letters home all written in beautiful descriptive wording. Many of these letters are filed in the Archives of the Albany Medical College.

During the fall and winter of 1864-1865 Confederate resistance in the Shenandoah Valley melted away until March 1865 when Jubal Early's force was destroyed. Then the Northern Army of the Shenandoah was united with the Army of the Potomac under Grant. Dr. Pomfret then became attached to Grant's Army of the Potomac with which he continued to serve until mustered out of the army. Because of losses, particularly heavy during the siege before Petersburg, the 7th Regiment, New York Heavy Artillery (the Albany Regiment) was withdrawn from service on February 22, 1865 and sent into garrison at Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Pomfret's affection for the 7th Regiment and his high regard for the men can be understood from a letter he wrote on June 7, 1864. He wrote "You have no idea how close and dear the regiment is getting to be. Its baptism of blood; the hungry marches; its heroic bearing all make it dear. What commends the regiment is the suffering of its sons. It is terrible but grandly borne. I hear no complaints, no regrets, no murmuring, no impatience. Oh they are noble fellows. No regimen has more fully contributed than our own Seventh." Dr. Pomfret became a Brigadier General and was mustered out of service in August of 1865.

Dr. Pomfret returned to private practice in Albany and was appointed as a surgeon at the Albany Hospital. Shortly after his army discharge, he received the appointment of Surgeon General of Governor Fenton's Staff. He began teaching at Albany Medical College in 1867 he was elected Professor of Physiology. Having been appointed to several committees concerned with both the planning and the actual ongoing construction of the new State Capitol building in Albany he spent numerous wearisome hours with the committees on evenings and weekends. The committee work for the State Capitol plus carrying out various projects requested by Governor Fenton occupied an inordinate amount of time for Pomfret. He took dinner with Governor Fenton rather frequently. Because of so many outside activities his practice suffered somewhat from neglect, and in his diary on January 1, 1868 Dr. Pomfret stated that he must attend better to his practice. Also on that same day, Dr. Alfred B. Huested, who had married Dr. Pomfret's daughter Margaret, came into his office to work together with him. The early months of 1868 were busy ones, but by June and July Dr. Pomfret seemed to have lost some of his usual energy. During the summer months he began to complain of headaches. During the fall of 1868 the pain of the headaches became more severe. As the pain became agonizing his physical condition deteriorated. He died February 22, 1869 at the age of 43 years. An autopsy revealed the cause of death as a large brain tumor of a frontal lobe.
Funeral services for Dr. Pomfret were held February 24, 1869 at St. Paul's Church in Albany. A large crowd of mourners filled the church and included members of Albany County Medical Society, of the Staff of Albany Hospital and Albany Medical College, as well as friends and former patients. Many messages of sorrow and condolences were presented at the funeral and moving tributes from a number of groups were received. Members of the Masonic Lodge participated at the services while a large group of officers and members of the Seventh New York Artillery Regiment accompanied the body to its final resting place in the Albany Rural Cemetery.

Dr. Pomfret was survived by his wife Almeda Holloway Chace. He was also survived by a daughter Margaret Pomfret Huested, another daughter Ann Kent Pomfret and a son William Chace Pomfret.

Dr. Pomfret was a remarkable and a very talented gentleman with a superior intellect. He was a treacher, minister, an author and editor, as well as a physician. He did all things well and had a high degree of skill in surgery and medicine. He was dignified and reserved, mild in manner and very much the scholar. He was rather proud of being a member of the committee which gave final approval to the "million dollar staircase" as it is called and which is now in the State Capitol in Albany. Dr. Pomfret accomplished more in his relatively short life span of 43 years than most men do in their allotted time of three score and ten years.

There is now a Huested Scholarship Fund at Albany Medical College established through the generosity of Stephanie C. Huested. This fund is set up as a memorial to Dr. James Emmett Pomfret, Class of 1859, to Dr. Alfred Birch Huested, Class of 1863, Dr. Benjamin John Singleton, Class of 1904 (Uncle of Stephanie Singleton Huested's first husband Harry H. Singleton) and Dr. Lester C. Huested, Class of 1933, husband of Stephanie. There is a small exhibit in the Archives of Albany Medical College with memorabilia, diplomas, letters written during the Civil War, newspaper clippings and momentos from the Huested family. This gracious act on the part of the Medical College is appreciated.

Lester C. Huested, M.D.

Great grandson of
Dr. Pomfret.