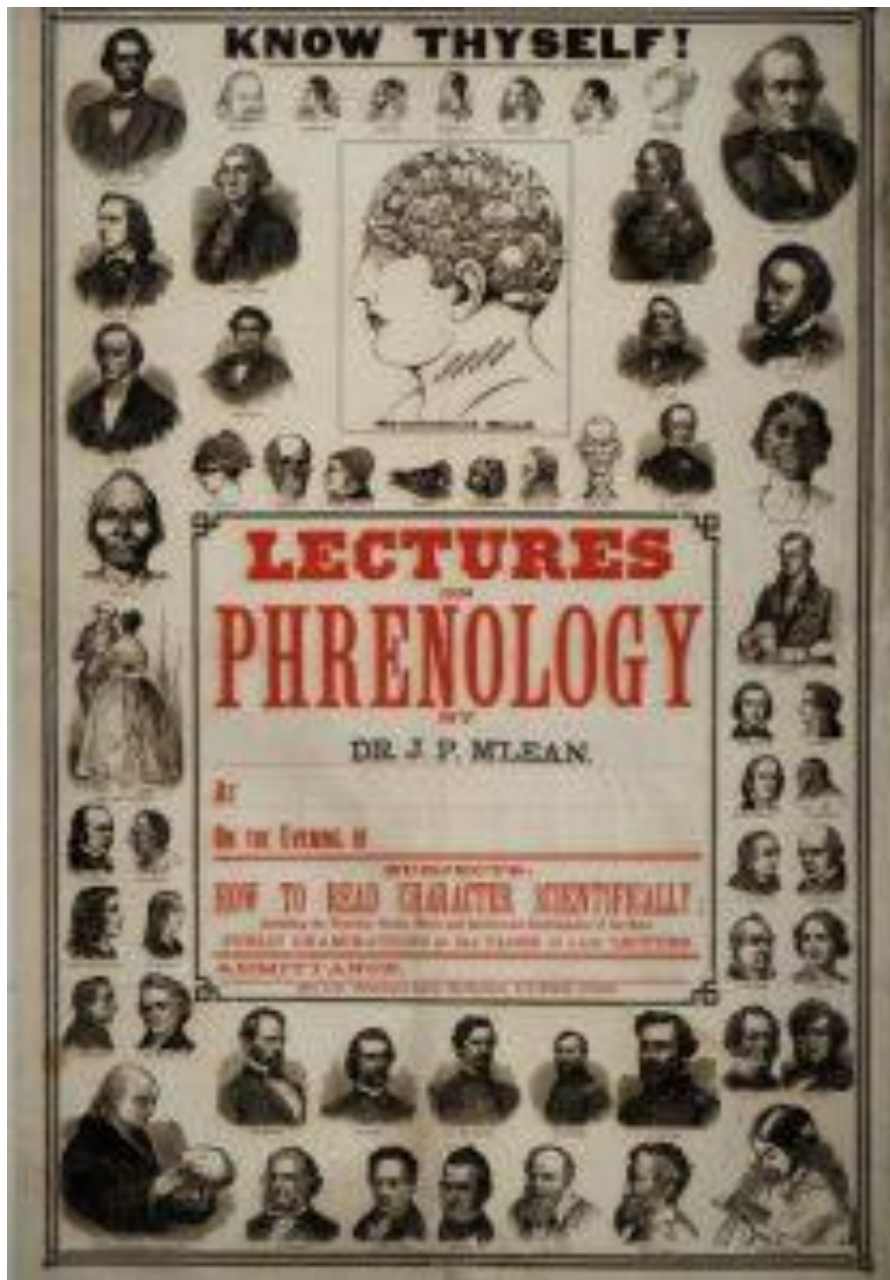


Phrenology and the Civil War

By Kate Duffy

Jenkin Lloyd Jones yearned for mail. A Union soldier camped in Alabama in the muddy March of 1864, he missed his family and often felt a sense of gloom. When at last Jones received a package from home, he rushed to his tent and tore it open. Inside he found small but precious gifts: a pair of socks knit by his mother; a diary from his brother; and issues of the *Phrenological Journal*, his most cherished periodical, bound up with calico.

The whole so impressed me with the scenes of home and its endearments "that I could hardly refrain from tears," he wrote.



Poster for a lecture on phrenology, Courtesy of the New York State Library

Jones, like many Americans in the mid-nineteenth century, took an interest in phrenology. Devotees of this controversial science believed that the shape of one's skull reflected the form of the brain and therefore revealed inner character. Practical phrenologists examined the contours of their clients' crania to chart propensities like "alimentiveness" (appetite and digestion), "philoprogeneritiveness" (love of family), and "constructiveness" (mechanical ingenuity).

Though phrenologists suggested that people naturally had different strengths and weaknesses of character, self-improvement remained a possibility. If a person recognized deficiency in a particular organ, they could exercise it like a muscle, and in time it would grow.

Before the Civil War, phrenology played an ambivalent role in debates about race and the conflict over slavery. On one hand, phrenologists tended to believe that white men had the most highly-developed intellects of all groups. On the other hand, they also thought that people of other races had the potential to advance. George Combe, a renowned phrenologist, compared the skulls of free African Americans living in the north to their enslaved counterparts in the south. He claimed that the skulls of free people were better-developed, suggesting that freedom itself had "brought the moral and intellectual faculties into more active employment." Over time phrenology became associated with the antislavery cause. Reformers of many kinds, including temperance advocates, suffragists, prison reformers, and educators, found phrenology congruent with their visions of social progress.

Beyond reform circles, phrenology had broad appeal, and mentions of the practice appear in accounts of daily life during the war. Sarah Emma Edmonds, a woman who famously disguised herself as a man to enlist in the Grand Army of the Republic, recounted her war experiences in a memoir. As she told the story, she volunteered to become a spy for the Union, but first she had to undergo a phrenological examination. She passed when the examiner found that she had the qualities needed for espionage: her "organs of secretiveness, combativeness, etc., were largely developed."

Other soldiers debated the impact of war on their phrenological characters. In Virginia prisoners of war ruefully considered their sleeping conditions. Emaciated and covered by thin garments, they slept on the floor and used boots for pillows. Some anticipated phrenological damage from the boot-pillow, while others "allowed that it would improve our fighting qualities by an enlargement of that organ."

