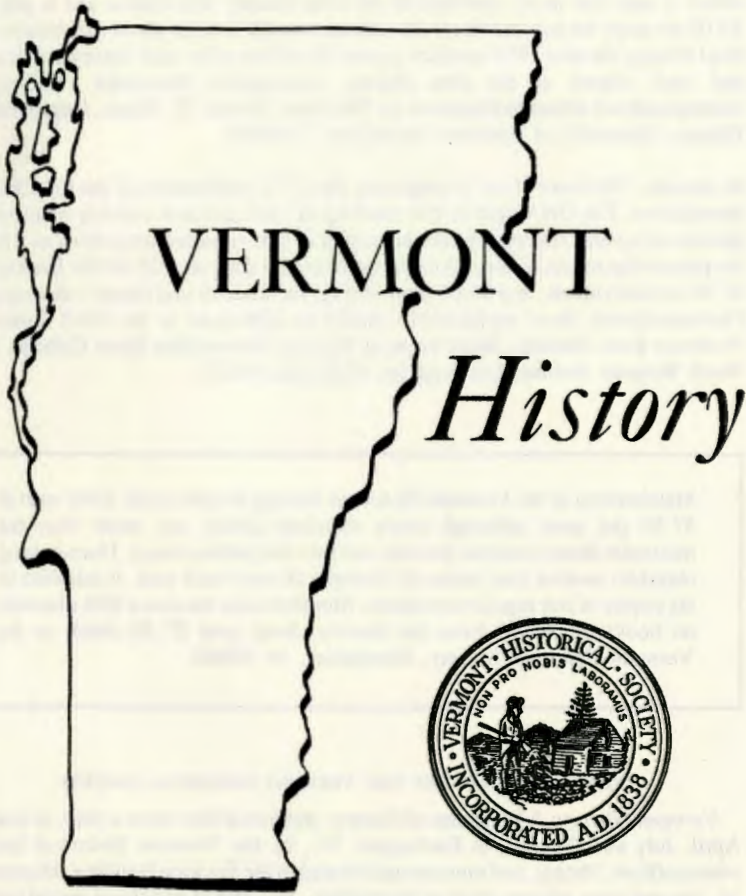


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He practiced medicine on man and beast, and also was a farmer, merchant, land developer, and (fortunately for us) a local historian. . . .

A Doctor's Life in Island Pond, 1873: The Diary of Harvey Coe*

By PORTER H. DALE

THE life of Harvey Coe, who practiced medicine in Island Pond 100 years ago, provides a fascinating study. Fortunately, Dr. Coe kept a diary and much information regarding Island Pond a century ago can be obtained from this source. The late George N. Dale, my uncle, had a copy of this diary which was reproduced in longhand by Darrell Morrissette in 1936. The original diary was loaned at that time by Mrs. Ernest Hill, a granddaughter of Harvey Coe's brother, Abner.

Harvey Coe was a remarkable man of many interests and accomplishments. He was born in Burke, Vermont, in 1807 and came to Brighton (Island Pond) in 1834. His grandfather was Oliver Coe, a native of Connecticut and a soldier in the Revolutionary War who died in the cause. Oliver's son, Abner, also a Revolutionary soldier, migrated from Winsted, Connecticut to Burke in 1800. His son, Miles, then age thirteen, came with him to Burke. Miles played a pioneer role in the early history of Brighton. The allotment of the first division of land in Brighton by James Whitelaw was in 1804; sometime soon after the second division of land in Brighton was made and part of it went to Miles Coe. Miles was the father of Harvey Coe, the subject of this paper. Dr. Coe's ancestry then is easily traced back to the Revolutionary War, and if time permitted it could be traced six additional generations to the Puritan, Robert Coe, who in 1634 at the age of thirty-eight, with wife and three children, sailed from England on the ship "Francis."

* This paper is slightly revised from an earlier version, delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Island Pond Historical Society on August 5, 1973.

Harvey Coe was one of nine children. He married Abigail Kilby on March 10, 1831, and became involved in town affairs soon after he moved to Brighton three years later. He represented his community in the Vermont Legislature in 1836 and 1837, being our sixth representative. He was our seventh Town Clerk. In 1849 he became the first Postmaster for the Town of Brighton, serving until 1853. As a pioneer in land development he often met with owners and buyers, usually at the Island Pond House, to conduct land sales. He was active both as a land agent and a surveyor.

The most interesting aspect of Harvey Coe's life was his activity as a doctor. We know that he practiced medicine as early as 1842 from a reference in Abby Hemenway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*. We also know from his diary that he practiced as late as 2½ weeks before he died on June 8, 1879. This is a 37-year span. Medical knowledge at that time was often gained as on-the-job training. Hamilton Child's *Gazetteer of Caledonia and Essex Counties, Vt.* states that "although never receiving a thorough medical education, he became quite skillful in the use of medicines and assuming the title of M.D., he had quite an extensive practice in the town for several years." An experience which encouraged him in the field of medicine was an epidemic in the winter of 1842 and 1843. According to Hemenway's *Gazetteer*, this epidemic "baffled the skill of the best physicians for a long time and proved very fatal. In Brighton, many were attacked, but Dr. Harvey Coe, then practicing physician, having been fortunate enough to hit upon the right treatment, lost only one patient. Other physicians soon adopted his theory and many lives were saved."

The physician of 100 years ago had little to offer in terms of effective medicine. However, he showed an abundance of compassion and concern for his patient. He was less accessible than the present day physician because of communication and transportation deficiencies; but once he became involved with the care of a patient he spent much time, often many consecutive hours, and many visits attending the patient. For example, Dr. Coe attended Mr. Mosher for erysipelas on Christmas Day of 1870. During the next three days Dr. Coe made six visits occupying over twenty hours of his time.

His diary during the year 1873 was reviewed in detail and the following items and excerpts depict medical practice in Island Pond during that year.

January 2, 1873 — "I was called up to Joseph Rivers to attend a case of abortion of his wife, a hard case. I stayed all night."

January 9 — Dr. Coe treated a serious head injury of a boy who fell out of a tree and sustained scalp lacerations and unconsciousness. "I dressed this wound, took stitches and put on sticking plaster, fixed him up comfortable as I could. I was assisted by William Brown, the dentist." An entry in the diary

four days later indicated that the young man had not survived and was buried that day.

January 15 — “I was sent for to visit a sick man in Stovepipe City. I did not answer the call.” (It appears that the free choice of physician and free choice of patient was a principle then also.)

January 24 — Dr. Coe combined one pound of figs, one-half pound of raisins, two ounces of senna, chopping them together for a patient, “to save her from taking castor oil.”

January 26 — Dr. Coe treated Joseph Grindall for erysipelas of his hand requiring multiple visits over several weeks until the infection subsided. Today an infection such as erysipelas requires one visit and a prescription for penicillin with follow-up only occasionally necessary. Consider the saving in patient suffering, physician time and even cost in treating this illness today.

January 31 — Dr. Coe saw William Currier’s wife “sick with broken breast.” It is not clear what this illness was but it probably was either a ruptured abscess or cancer with ulceration.

February 3 — Dr. Coe extracted several teeth. He did this quite regularly in his professional work. This was within the province of the physician for many years to come. Dr. E. F. Norcross, who practiced in Island Pond until his death in the 1920’s listed his degrees as “M.D., D.D.S., Ph.G.” Thus he had degrees in medicine, dentistry and pharmacy.

February 6 — “Patsy Coffee was brought home with his right hand stove to bits by the cars [referring to railroad cars]. Dr. Adams, Robinson Brown, the dentist and myself to assist, removed three fingers.”

February 15 — “Mrs. Lafave is sick with quinsy sores in her throat.” Dr. Coe treated it with a paste of ginger cayenne and molasses to put on her neck. It becomes clear as one reads this diary that many of the infections at that time were streptococcal such as erysipelas and quinsy, easily treated today with antibiotics.

March 8 — Dr. Coe performed as a physician a dentist *and* a veterinarian. “I was called to the Norton Mills stable to dress one of their horses forelegs, badly cut by overreaching, gash eight inches long or more.”

June 14 — “This evening Luther Ladd sent for me to see his sick horse. I found it floundered [inflammation or soreness in the feet of a horse so as to cause lameness or disability]. It was caused by overfeeding, giving too much cornmeal and overworking it. It went to Lyndonville and back today a good fifty miles.”

March 21 — Mr. and Mrs. Crop were both very ill with typhoid. The diary entries over the next few days are interesting. Dr. Coe spent many hours with them and had Dr. C. G. Adams in consultation. (Dr. Adams was probably

the only other physician in Island Pond to practice regularly during the same years Dr. Coe was practicing.) However, Mrs. Crop grew worse and died two days later. Mr. Crop in the meantime developed a complication and is described as "dangerously sick with typhoid pneumonia." Entries on succeeding days show him as unconscious and feverish, later delirious. He developed persistent hiccoughs, finally checked by the use of chloroform. Three days later he "had a sore break in his head discharging from his left ear. This accounts for his symptoms. He is now between fever and convalescence. I take courage in his case." All succeeding comments show steady improvement and on April 17 the patient is "up with clothes on for the first time in nineteen days." Mrs. Crop's death and Mr. Crop's protracted illness, both of typhoid fever, would not occur today.

May 1 — Dr. Coe saw John Bonnett's little girl with scarlet fever, and swelling of the neck. He had to travel part way on foot because "the snow was so deep my horse broke one of his tugs." On May 5 he lanced an abscess on the child's neck. Dr. Coe had to go on foot again because of snow. Note the date, May 5. An entry two days later sadly reports that John Bonnett's little girl had died. We see an indication of yet another streptococcal infection, today so easily treated.

August 29 — "I was called to Charlie Hill's at half past ten last night. He got most killed by the cars." The following day Dr. Coe reports improvement and writes, "He made a narrow escape with his life from the cars, his wagon was completely demolished. He had no broken bones."

December 15 — "Tonight I was called up to Joe Rollins to see his oldest girl sick. Abner [Harvey's brother] went with me to hold the lantern."

The illnesses treated by Dr. Harvey Coe present quite a different list from that seen today. The frequency of streptococcal infections was great and many died. He was often called to see patients with convulsions. Today epilepsy is largely controlled with suppressive medicine. Dr. Coe saw many accidents with lacerations, fractures and burns. These incidents have not changed but our treatment is infinitely better. He also referred to vague complaints which today would be given specific diagnostic terms. Examples are "bilious complaint," "summer complaint," "badly bloated," "sick with the slow fever," "bowel stoppage." Conspicuously absent from the list of illnesses was heart disease. There was only one reference in the entire 1873 diary to the possibility of heart disease. In fairness to Dr. Coe it should be mentioned that it was not until 1912 that James Bryan Herrick first described what is recognized today as a heart attack.

A list of medications used by Dr. Coe and his colleagues has been replaced by more effective agents. He relied upon "catarrhal snuff, Hall's bilious powders, chloroform, canker balsalm made from bark, quinine and

whiskey, quinine and sulphuric acid, Nichol's preparation of iron, bourbon and colombo and August flower medicine."

Although Harvey Coe's chief occupation was the practice of medicine, he spent much time on other endeavors, several of which have been mentioned. He could have been considered a farmer or a merchant, both on a small scale. Diary notes that indicate his farming activities include planting a field of grass seed and clover, planting two bushels of onions, thrashing out the beans and going to the Oswegatchie River to get some bushes to "bush the peas." On April 29 he cut a large tree and with six oxen and a sled took it to the mill. In June of 1873 he built a fence. This was a yard fence constructed of posts, rails and pickets. When it came time to paint the fence he went "to the Norton Mills store and bought twenty-five pounds of white lead and two gallons of linseed oil to paint the new fence."

His pursuits as a merchant were limited to two items, flour and cider. In November of 1873, two hundred barrels of flour arrived by rail. Dr. Coe sold 100 barrels to Arnold Ball of Lyndonville who was to open a flour and corn market there. Mr. Ball transported the flour, ten barrels at a time by two-horse teams from Island Pond to Lyndonville. Dr. Coe sold the remaining 100 barrels in small lots to individuals in Island Pond, Newark, East Haven and other towns. There were two brands, Golden Drop Flour and Brandon Mills Flour. The selling price per barrel varied between \$6.50 and \$9.50, probably depending on the brand. The wholesale dealer appeared to be Mr. R. C. Abercrombie who traveled between Portland, Montreal and Boston but always appeared and stayed with Harvey Coe for several days each time a shipment of flour arrived. Dr. Coe also retailed cider. In October of 1873 his cousin Dana left two barrels of cider for him to sell at 25¢ a gallon. On November 5, Dr. Coe records, "I opened a cider market and sold twenty-nine gallons today." This must have been a worthwhile adventure because one week later Dana brought four more barrels for the doctor to sell. On December 4, 1873, he sold seven gallons to my great-great-grandfather, Porter Hinman.

Finally, we consider Harvey Coe as the historian. He was a contributor of material to Hemenway's *Gazetteer*. His diary, however, has to be considered his major contribution. It contains items of historical interest as well as an account of day to day activities in Island Pond a century ago. It should be mentioned that Dr. Coe lived in the home of his brother Abner during the years that his diary was written. Dr. Coe's wife had died on February 6, 1861 at the age of 51. Sometime thereafter Dr. Coe moved into Abner's home on Derby Street just beyond the origin of Pleasant Street. Brother Abner was a carpenter who built several of the houses in Island Pond. He worked part time at the steam mill at the edge of the lake in the area now referred to as the

mill yard. Abner apparently also made most of the coffins in Island Pond. Dr. Coe often reported the death of an Island Pond resident in his diary followed by the remark that "Abner is to build the coffin." At the time of the diary, Abner's second wife, Mary Tyler Coe, was part of the household (Abner's first wife, Frinda, had died in 1861 at age 48). Mary and Dr. Coe had their differences. He wrote on July 6, 1873, "Mary is acting bad enough to make us sick of home. She did not get up this morning till 3 minutes past nine o'clock. She has been on a tantrum over two weeks."

On reviewing items of historical interest in Harvey Coe's diary, it is apparent that he was instrumental in enlarging the old Protestant cemetery on Pleasant Street. On April 20, 1870, he went to the village to see John Kimpton to buy some land to enlarge the burying ground. Two days later he handed the selectmen a petition "to enlarge the burying ground and to fence the same." They went with him to the cemetery and agreed to fence it. Three days later, Dr. Coe negotiated with Diamond Stone for fifty young maple trees for the graveyard. On April 26th, Harvey Coe, A. Parker and Horace Morse obtained these trees from Morse's land, hauled them by oxen to the graveyard, where "we four set out forty-six trees. I took four of the trees and set them out in my front yard. I done a big day's work." Coe was then 62 years old. As far as compensation for the cemetery work was concerned, he records "Mr. G. G. Waterhouse paid two dollars, David Whitcomb paid one dollar, S. D. Hobson paid one dollar, all to pay hired help setting trees in graveyard. Washington Noyes paid A. Parker two dollars for his services. I paid Horace Morse thirteen dollars for his services and trees. One dollar left for me for two days' service."

Dr. Coe records the burning of the first railroad depot in Island Pond. This depot had been built twenty years earlier in 1853, the year the Grand Trunk railroad was completed. Dr. Coe writes on March 11, 1873 "at six o'clock the depot took fire and burnt down." He indicates that there was a high wind earlier that same day and refers to it as "a perfect hurricane. I fled into John Cargill's and put up my team and took dinner with them." On the following day he states "we have had a big storm. The depot burned last night in a most favorable time it could have burned, as the wind had gone down and the buildings were covered with snow."

On November 10, 1873 he suggests that there was at least a temporary decline in the lumbering business in Island Pond. He indicates that the wages were cut ten percent at the steam mill. In the following month he noted that "Newall Jackson's camp hands are discharged, they have quit yarding lumber."

The railroad carried many immigrants through Island Pond. On April 18, 1870 Dr. Coe records such a train passing through Island Pond from Portland

to Canada with 750 immigrants. He stated that there were "some Germans, and some Scotchmen, rather smart-looking people."

Harvey Coe was one of the organizers of the first Congregational Church in Brighton, founded on February 28, 1852. His diary noted on August 25, 1870 that he "paid Gophet Dexter five dollars for pew rent in the meeting house." In 1873 on May 31st, he indicates that he attended the Congregational Society Meeting at the meeting house and "made the seats free by the voters present." Dr. Coe not infrequently referred to the specific scripture and sermon when he attended church. On June 8, 1873, Reverend Mr. Wheelock's text was from Isaiah, First Chapter, 18th verse "come now and let us reason together." He comments that it was a good sermon.

Dr. Coe records several items indicating recreational and social events in Island Pond. In March of 1870 he went for a horse trot on the pond. He occasionally went fishing and in late August of 1873 states that he went to Hobson's Mill and brought back "sixteen nice suckers." Bears were apparently in surplus as he states in September, 1873 that his Uncle Almon Smith came home with a bear's head for the bounty. In November there was a turkey shoot at Cheney's. A Thanksgiving Eve dance at Clark Ladd's was attended by twenty-five couples. On Christmas Eve there was a Christmas tree event at Church. Oddly enough on the following day he makes no mention of Christmas Day and spent the day cleaning out his stovepipe and chimney as well as helping Abner make a ladder to unload flour from the railroad cars.

Abner's house in which Dr. Coe lived, was headquarters for various traveling salesmen and repairmen. During 1873 he refers to Mr. Brown, a clock tinker from St. Johnsbury Center; Mr. Moulton, the picture man, from whom the doctor bought four California views; Mr. F. W. Silsby of Lyndonville selling Florence sewing machines at \$55 apiece; Mr. Abercrombie, the wholesale flour dealer; and Mr. Crosby, the fruit tree man. Each stayed over one or more nights and boarded at the Coe home.

Items of economic interest are scattered throughout the diary. The going rate of interest on a personal loan at that time was 8 percent. The cost of food and merchandise in the completely different economic setting of 1873 seems low today. Two and one half pounds of veal cost 30¢, potatoes were 60¢ a bushel, corn 85¢ a bushel, raspberries, 2 quarts for 17¢, beef steak was 2 pounds for 40¢, a hind quarter of beef weighing 137 pounds at 8¢ a pound was \$10.96, bedstead castors were 25¢ a set. The latter purchase was from Gabriel Vallee, grandfather of Rudy Vallee. Services also seemed cheap. It cost 70¢ to have a horse's forward shoes set. As a surveyor, Harvey Coe received \$1.00 for an afternoon of work or \$3.00 for a full day. Wood was 90¢ a cord. Dr. Coe paid taxes for land in Brighton, Charleston, Ferdinand and Maidstone. It is not clear how much land he owned in each town, but he

paid \$14.36 and \$21.84 to Dearborn Morse, Brighton tax collector in 1873, one being for resident land and one for non-resident land within the town.

Finally, a few miscellaneous items from the diary are worthy of record. Land was being cleared in Brighton in 1873. On May 8 he writes that "the stump heaps were set afire in the pasture. The fire ran and I and Abner went and fit fire." The following month he went to the Dyer farm to watch the hands pull stumps.

The Town of Brighton at that time was in the enviable position of having surplus funds. Dr. Coe on June 5, 1873 writes "I see Porter Hinman. He and I and Levi Pinney are the trustees of surplus revenues of our town. Porter and myself are notifying those who we hold the notes, that we will meet them at E. Storr's office on Saturday to have their notes renewed if they wish to keep the money another year."

Local land disputes were settled by peers. On June 20, 1873 Dr. Coe, Aesop Doyle, and William Rosebrook were appointed arbitrators in a property line dispute. That afternoon the three arbitrators went to the lots and found the old line. The following day they all signed the award papers on arbitration.

Sunday was supposed to be a day exclusively for worship. On October 26, 1873, Dr. Coe visited brother Edward. "We found them all well. We stayed there till after supper. We had a good visit and a pleasant time with them, although it is the Sabbath Day."

Each generation has its own colloquialisms. In medical terms Dr. Coe referred to a patient doing well as being "smart." It was common for him to say after a delivery that "mother and baby are smart." On the other hand a patient doing poorly was often referred to as being "slim." An ominous prognosis was described as being "struck with death," as when Lottie Dowling was badly burned on July 21, 1873. Later in the day she died. On several occasions Dr. Coe recorded his days activities as "I chore around home all day." His fishing trip to Hobson's Mill was referred to as "going asuckering."

Harvey Coe then, indeed played a prominent role in the early history of Island Pond. His diary was apparently kept intermittently but is complete for certain years such as 1873. Dr. Coe's last entries in April and May of 1879, before he died on June 8, indicates he was having stomach pain, losing weight and being seen professionally by Dr. Adams. Dr. Coe died at age 72 and is buried in the old Protestant cemetery which he helped to enlarge and beautify nine years earlier. Anyone who has spent much time reviewing Dr. Coe's diary would have to echo the sentiments of Darrell Morrisette in 1937 after copying the original diary when he wrote at the conclusion of his work "I feel as though I have lost an old friend having spent so much time with him."