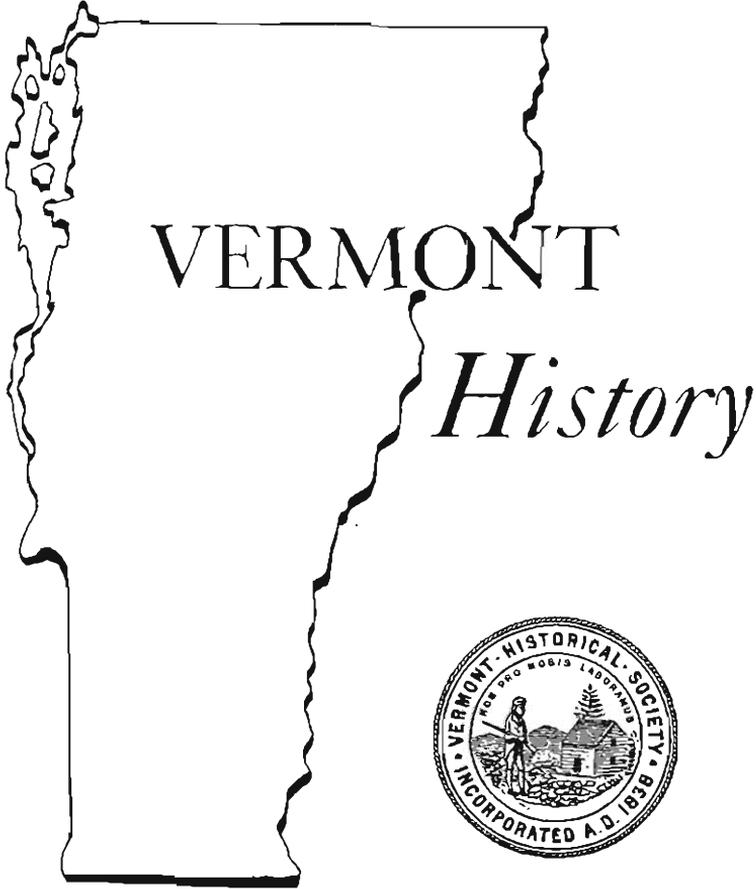
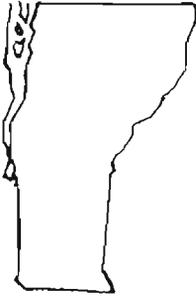


Fall 1976

VOL. 44 No. 4



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Two brief essays about this medical fad of the
mid-19th century. . . .

Inspiration and Perspiration: Vermont and the Thomsonian Cure for Illness

I.

Samuel Thomson and the Indian Remedies He Learned in Jericho, Vermont

By CHARLES T. MORRISSEY

AT Jericho, Vermont, in the winter of 1807, a self-styled physician with only a few months of formal training, Samuel Thomson, claimed he had cured about 28 persons who were suffering from dysentery. Thomson's treatment consisted of "red pepper steeped in a tea of sumach leaves, sweetened, and sometimes the bark and cherries, to raise the heat and clear off the canker, which had the desired effect." Those who were strengthened by this tea were placed over steam and then put to bed. Steam played such an important function in the Thomson treatment that he and his disciples were characterized for several years by their critics as "steamers." Thomson became prominent as a notable *bete noire* to much of the medical profession of his time.

Born in Alstead, New Hampshire, in 1769, Thomson was the eldest son of a farmer named John Thomson. The father moved to Jericho after Samuel was born. Because Samuel disliked farming he frequently explored

the woods and fields, and in his adult years he claimed that he had discovered a species of lobelia (also called Indian tobacco) at the age of four when his father sent him looking for cows. He also learned from an elderly "root and herb" healer about the medicinal properties of herbs that could be found in the New England woods. Possibly this old woman who conveyed local folklore to him about roots and herbs was an Indian, or had been closely associated with Indians. Much of the hostility directed toward Thomson by the physicians of his era was due to personal distaste for the way he practiced medicine, not because of doubts about the curative powers of the remedies he prescribed. He was persecuted by doctors until his death in Boston in 1843, and at one time he was imprisoned for six weeks. The court trials in which he was involved created a wide sensation in his day.

But a book entitled *American Indian Medicine* by Virgil J. Vogel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970, pp. 583; \$12.50) points out that North American Indians had long practiced what Thomson had claimed to have discovered. The Iroquois in present-day New York state relied upon lobelia as a curative, and early white settlers adopted it as an expectorant, emetic, and diuretic. "Long before Samuel Thomson adopted lobelia as his special remedy," writes Vogel, "the various species of this plant were used in colonial times by Indians and whites for emetic, cathartic, and other purposes." Vogel adds: "While Thomson had no direct contact with the Indians, his remedies and methods of treatment, especially sweating, suggest primitive inspiration, and the old woman who tutored him may have had some earlier contact with the red men." A copy of Vogel's book is in the Library of the Vermont Historical Society.

Thomson's theory of disease was based on the assumption that all ills were produced by cold, and any treatment which increased inward heat would hasten recovery. His success with lobelia and vapor baths was so great that he conceived the idea of selling rights to practice his system, and Thomsonian societies were formed throughout the United States. But many of the agents he employed were dishonest, and his life was made miserable by their misdeeds.

However, another student of his controversial career, Arthur N. Alling, writing in the *Dictionary of American Biography* in 1936, said of Thomson that, "Without question he was sincere, and he exhibited great courage in withstanding the persecutions of his opponents." Since many of his critics believed that bleeding a patient would cure a disease, Thomson's emphasis on lobelia and baths had a worthwhile effect. Alling concludes that, "The significance of his work lies not in any contribution to medical science but in the strong influence that he created against the prevailing prac-

tice of his day, in which bleeding, calomel, and opium were the ruling remedies.”

Thus Thomson’s use of local herbs and other remedies probably were adapted from long-standing Indian knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants in our forests and fields, and his practice of medicine, despite his vehement critics, had a beneficial impact on changing the medical customs of his time.

II.

A Patient Boiled Alive (Or: Why Jehiel Smith, a Thomsonian Physician, Left East Randolph, Vermont, in a Hurry)

By WESLEY HERWIG

PRESENT DAY residents of Randolph are fully aware of the importance of Gifford Memorial Hospital and the role it has played in our town’s history in this century. But perhaps few are aware that Randolph had a hospital — or at least so it was called. — 72 years before Dr. Gifford founded the institution which bears his name.

The hospital to which I refer was located in the village of East Randolph, once Randolph’s largest and most important business center. Its full name was the Thomsonian infirmary and Insane Hospital, and it existed from 1836 to 1841. The hospital closed — or rather was closed — by local and county law officials because of an incident which quickly cast it in the role of a chamber of horrors instead of an institution devoted to bringing relief to the ill.

The East Randolph hospital was owned by Dr. Jehiel Smith, a practitioner in the Thomsonian school of treatment following the precepts of healing as advocated by Dr. Samuel Thomson and which became rather widespread during the early 19th century.

Dr. Thomson assumed that the human body was composed of four elements — earth, air, fire, and water, and it was his theory that only vegetable remedies could cure its ills. He and his followers were in constant running arguments with the traditional practitioners of the time, and he argued that his treatments were far ahead of the blood-letting and remedies used by the “Calomel doctors,” as he referred to them.

Dr. Smith, ten years in the Thomsonian practice, came to East Randolph from Strafford, Vermont. It would appear that his residence in Strafford had created suspicion in some regard; an old certificate in the manuscript collections of the Vermont Historical Society reads as follows: "April 11, 1835. This may certify to whom it may concern that we have never seen the least thing in the appearance or conduct of Mr. Jehiel Smith which has caused doubt in our minds as to his good Christian character, and therefore we are free to say that so far as our knowledge extends all of the evil reports about him and Mrs. Wallis are wholly false." This was signed by S. McArthur and Mercy McArthur and witnessed by J. Burnham and J.S. Moore. A similar certificate, dated on the same day in Vershire, states "that if we have ever said anything calculated to injure the character of Mr. Jehiel Smith of Strafford it has been in a joking and foolish manner, for we can truly say that we never had any reason to suspect the good character or intentions of Mr. Smith, and therefore believe all the evil reports in circulation about him to be entirely false."

The next year, 1836, Smith appeared in East Randolph, and with considerable advertising in state newspapers and by widely circulated posters he announced that he was opening his hospital. His advertisements proclaimed that he wanted to receive patients from a distance and to have a fair opportunity to make a thorough application of the "best botanic medicine to be found in all the vegetable kingdom, aided in its operation by medicated vapor bathing."

He further informed the public that he had spared no expense to furnish conveniences and accommodations for the sick, with the best of nursing, in order to mitigate human suffering as much as possible. He felt confident no one would ever have reason to regret having received his medical attention, or have any just complaint whatsoever.

Dr. Smith used his extensive advertising to criticize the regular medical doctors of the time. He stated that he was a firm believer in using such remedies as *Thomsonia Emitica* and *Lobellia Inflata*, which he pronounced as "entirely safe and of superior efficacy, all the bugbear stories of the M.D.'s to the contrary notwithstanding!"

In 1838, the Smith Thomsonian hospital in the East village made the claim in a Montpelier newspaper that of all the invalids at the infirmary in the past two years none had died and many had been cured, and others relieved "in proportion of the extent of their perseverance in following his instructions."

By 1840, Dr. Smith seemed to be quite well established with his hospital, and by then he was publishing his own four-page newspaper, which he titled the *Thomsonian Beacon and Hygeist*. The newspaper contained tes-

imonials from former patients, articles and wonders of Thomsonian medicine, and the usual blasts at regular physicians.

In the issue of his newspaper dated October 20, 1840, Dr. Smith listed the following diseases as among those he could cure at his infirmary: apoplexy, epilepsy, palsy, vertigo, catarrh, colds, colic, cholera, cholera-morbus, cramps of all kinds, fever & ague, small pox, chicken pox, measles, surfiets, plague, involuntary vomiting, inflammation of the stomach and bowels, bite of a mad dog or any poisonous animal, jaundice or liver complaint; all diseases of the skin, diabetes, gravel, ruptures, venereal diseases, leprosy, bleeding of the stomach, lungs and nose, bloody urine, rheumatism, female complaints of all kind, gout, scrofula, cancer, canker, rickets, piles, lock jaw, itch, dysentery, dispepsia, St. Vitus dance, mercurial disease, Calomel ulcers or fever sores, convulsions, insanity in all its forms, and others.

This paper also proclaimed that charges were reasonable. Board and washing were \$1.50 to \$2.00 weekly, medical attendance and medicine was \$1.00 to \$2.50 per week, with a reasonable charge added for nursing for those confined to their beds and "for extra trouble and expense in violent cases."

Dr. Smith seemed to be better accepted in East Randolph than he had been in Strafford. He was a moderator of the Universalist church in East Randolph, and active in community affairs. But in 1841 something happened which brought an abrupt closing of the doctor's hospital.

On July 19, a Mr. Jona Sherburn entered the institution for treatment for rheumatism. Aside from this Mr. Sherburn was reported by friends to have been in good health. But apparently he had read or heard of Dr. Smith's wonder cures, and he decided that he would like to rid himself of his rheumatic ailments.

Dr. Smith prescribed one of his vegetable steam baths as being just what Mr. Sherburn needed. The patient heeded the practitioner's advice and agreed to the treatment, and was given doses of vegetable-powder and put into the steam bath device.

But something happened to Mr. Sherburn in the vegetable steam bath and on July 23, 1841, five days after he entered the hospital, Mr. Sherburn was dead. In fact, Mr. Sherburn was so dead that someone in East Randolph thought the authorities should be called in to see just what had happened, before Mr. Sherburn was whisked off to the cemetery.

Called to investigate the situation was Orange County State's Attorney, William Nutting of Randolph Center, the early lawyer and educator who built the house of brick at the north edge of the present-day campus of Vermont Technical College. In looking through some early papers of Mr.

Nutting's which were in the house when it was owned by Herbert Allen, I found the report which Mr. Nutting wrote on this matter. So intrigued was I by the report that I began digging back into history to learn more about Dr. Smith and his hospital. The report, of which I have the original, reads as follows:

“Examination of the body of Jona Sherburn, July 26, 1841. Head swelled to double size — black, tongue out, eyes stand out of sockets, blood running from the nose, blistered in various places. One hand a complete blister, thighs blistered, one leg seemed par-boiled, no feature of the face or body that would be recognized, a number of blisters on the inside of the stomach and intestines, nothing in the stomach except vegetable powder, perhaps a quart of that kind of stuff in all the body. Inside of stomach appears to be ironed over as with a hot iron as likewise is the lower parts of the intestines, probably scorched with hot drops of Cagerin pepper.”

There are further descriptions of poor Jona Sherburn's remains, but I think the foregoing is enough of the report to give a sense of how he fared in the treatment. Nutting also stated in his findings that Sherburn went to Smith on Monday afternoon and “Smith finished him off on Thursday afternoon of the same week.”

Needless to say, this episode marked the end of East Randolph as a medical center. Apparently Dr. Smith avoided — or evaded — criminal charges, and left town hastily. His name does not appear as Universalist moderator at the annual meeting of that church in January, 1842. Just where he went, and what his later role in life was, will require more research than I have done to this point. The whole Thomsonian theory apparently collapsed about that time, and there are reports of similar cases where patients of other Thomsonian doctors were cooked alive. In any event, the Thomsonian movement seems to have cooked its own goose.

So there we have Dr. Jehiel Smith — surely not a man to be remembered like so many other doctors of Randolph who have been faithful, kind, and able. Instead, Jehiel Smith was probably a charlatan — but at least he is remembered now as one of the people woven into the cloth of which local history is made.