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The Medical World of John Sevier

By Anthony Cavender*



A statesman, soldier, and pioneer, John Sevier (1745-1815) was one of the most celebrated founders of Tennessee. Born near New Market, Virginia, in 1745, Sevier settled in the far western reaches of North Carolina territory in the Watauga Valley in the 1770s. He served as lieutenant colonel in the Revolutionary War, with his most famous service at the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780. After the war, Sevier and others pushed for separate statehood for settlers living in Washington, Sullivan, and Green counties. During a series of conventions in the early 1780s, supporters for the State of Franklin movement adopted a constitution and chose Sevier as the first governor. Efforts to establish Franklin evaporated by 1788, but in 1790 Congress created the Southwest Territory and appointed Sevier brigadier general of the territory's militia. Six years later, in 1796, Congress admitted the state of Tennessee into the Union and voters in the new state elected Sevier as the first governor. He served six terms as governor and four terms in Congress, dueling with Andrew Jackson, and helped establish Tennessee as an important western state of the young Republic.¹

Beginning in 1790, John Sevier began keeping a journal to record his thoughts, travels, decisions, and observations about the world. Apart

* The author is a professor of anthropology at East Tennessee State University. He is the author of *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003).

¹ See, Carl S. Driver, *John Sevier: Pioneer of the Old Southwest* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1932); Oliver Perry Temple, *John Sevier: Citizen, Soldier, Legislator, Governor, Statesman, 1744-1815* (Knoxville, 1910); Kevin T. Barksdale, *The Lost State of Franklin: America's First Secession* (Lexington, KY, 2009); Robert E. Cornlew, "John Sevier," 838-40; Michael Toomey, "The State of Franklin," 337-38, all in *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West (Nashville, 1998).

from a few gaps in the original journal and History in portions of Sevier's installments in an accurate term to diary with personal recorded information. The journal also served as a book in which Sevier recorded information about his acquaintances, farming, animal husbandry, and domestic medicine. The journal also noted in considerable detail his expenses and the value of his goods.

Countless fields of study have drawn from Sevier's journal, but little has been given to the medical observations scattered throughout the entries. Of the medical history of the Southwest Territory, remedies for various ailments, and other observations that Sevier recorded, such knowledge as was gained from the doctors who were scattered throughout the field of medicine that existed in the Southwest Territory. Many men entered the field of medicine in the Southwest Territory.

² Nothing is recorded in Sevier's journal if he neglected to record his observations for years were lost or destroyed.

³ John H. Dewitt, "John Sevier," *Tennessee Magazine*, 5 (1915), "Tennessee Magazine," 5 (1915). The journal is available in *The John Sevier Journal*, ed. John Sevier, Jr. (Chapel Hill, NC, 1915) (marked by ellipses).

⁴ For more information on Sevier's medical observations, see Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*.



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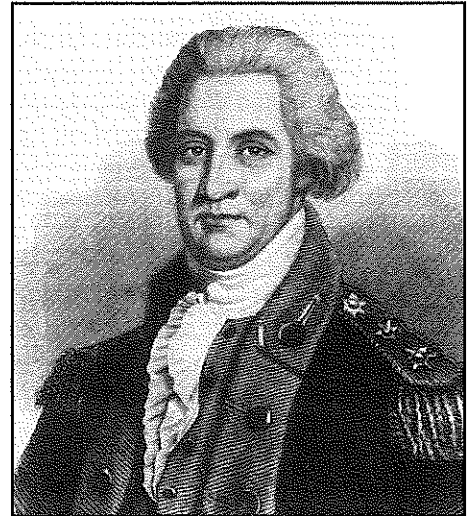
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from a few gaps, he maintained the journal until his death in 1815.² The original journal was deposited at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson. Historian John Dewitt transcribed and published portions of Sevier's journal in the *Tennessee Historical Magazine* in two installments in 1919 and 1920.³ However, "journal" is not an altogether accurate term to describe this intriguing document. The journal served as a diary with personal and daily details. On two occasions, for example, Sevier recorded information on dreams. The journal also served as a commonplace book in which he recorded useful information obtained from friends and acquaintances on topics related to farming, animal husbandry, weather, domestic medicine, and sermons.⁴ The journal also functioned as an impromptu ledger in which Sevier noted in considerable detail travel expenses and the exchange of money and goods.

Countless scholars in many fields of study have examined Sevier's journal, but little attention has been given to the medical remedies and observations scattered throughout the entries. Of particular interest to medical historians are the numerous remedies for man and beast and other observations on medical care that Sevier recorded. On the frontier such knowledge was essential because doctors were scarce and veterinarians did not exist. During Sevier's lifetime, the field of medicine was in disarray professionally. The few medical schools that existed varied considerably in the quality of education they provided. Many men entered medicine by apprenticing with an established physician



John Sevier, a statesman, soldier, and pioneer of Tennessee, maintained a personal journal from 1790-1815. The journal contained observations about the natural and medical world of the Early Republic. Lyman C. Draper, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes* (New York, 1929), 174.

² Nothing is recorded in his journal for the years 1791, 1792, 1808, and 1809. It is not known if he neglected to maintain his journal for these years or his recordings for these years were lost or destroyed.

³ John H. Dewitt, "Journal of Governor John Sevier (1790-1815)," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, 5 (1919): 156-94; John H. Dewitt, "Journal of Governor John Sevier (1790-1815)," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, 6 (1920) 18-60. An online transcription of Sevier's journal is available at, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/John_Sevier/Journal/. However, the editor of this website maintains that Dewitt's version of Sevier's journal was poorly proofread and transcribed, noting that it contains 214 gaps (marked by ellipses).

⁴ For more information on the tradition of commonplace books in the South see, Kay K. Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine, 1750-1820* (Columbia, SC, 1999), 9-19.

for a year or two or simply reading the medical literature. Since there were no state licensing boards, most anyone could hang out a shingle and proclaim themselves a physician.

During Sevier's lifetime there was little distinction between popular, folk, and professional medical knowledge. As Harriet Simpson Arnow explained, in Tennessee "the teas, infusions, and poultices made from various plants were also prescribed by the most learned physicians."⁵ A lack of medical education and information continued well into the early twentieth century. In the Appalachian South, for example, John C. Campbell observed that some doctors were "intellectually and morally unfit to minister to the communities they served."⁶ Journalist Horace Kephart, who lived in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina in the early 1900s, stated that "a large proportion of mountain doctors know less about the human anatomy than a pig's. There are very many physicians in the back country who could not name or locate the arteries of the hand or foot to save their lives."⁷

The field and practice of medicine in the United States took many generations to gain credibility and respect. In the early nineteenth century many physicians came under attack for elitism, excessive cost of services, and the fact that many of their treatments did more harm than good. Some doctors, like John C. Gunn of Knoxville, produced domestic medicine books to enable people to cope with illness in a frontier environment and to "demystify" medicine and place it in control of the common man. Gunn's *Domestic Medicine* (1830) was immensely popular, with 234 editions of the book, the last appearing in 1920.⁸ Disaffection with allopathic medicine encouraged many to consider other healers such as practitioners of Thomsonian healing (known popularly as "botanics" or "steamers"), so-called "Indian doctors" (who purportedly knew the secrets of Native American healing), homeopaths, and hydrotherapists. The public also relied on a robust market of imported British and indigenous patent medicines. The wide and suspect range of medical information of the period made it imperative for each person to take responsibility for their own medical treatments. Or to paraphrase, using a common title of many of the early domestic medicine books, every man had to be his own physician.

Like other Tennesseans John Sevier had an interest in determining the best remedies, cures, and medical treatments for himself, his family, and his animals. His journal shows that he was astute about preserving medical knowledge that he gathered from conversations with others as well as from printed sources. However, Sevier was not a typical frontiersman. In many

⁵ Harriet Simpson Arnow, *Flowering of the Cumberland* (New York, 1963), 317.

⁶ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York, 1921), 206.

⁷ Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders* (1922; reprint, Knoxville, 1976), 301.

⁸ John C. Gunn, *Domestic Medicine, or Poor Man's Friend in the Hours of Affliction, Pain, or Sickness* (Knoxville, 1830).



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THIS BOOK
POINTS OUT, IN PLAIN LANGUAGE, FREE FROM DOCTORS' TERMS,
THE DISEASES OF
MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN,
AND
THE LATEST AND MOST APPROVED MEANS USED IN THEIR CURE,
AND IS INTENDED
EXPRESSLY FOR THE BENEFIT OF FAMILIES.

* IT ALSO CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF THE
MEDICINAL ROOTS AND HERBS
OF THE
UNITED STATES,
AND HOW THEY ARE TO BE USED IN THE CURE OF DISEASES
ARRANGED ON A NEW AND SIMPLE PLAN,
BY WHICH THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE IS REDUCED TO PRINCIPLES OF COMMON SENSE.

Why should we conceal from mankind that which relieves the distresses of our fellow-beings?

NEW REVISED EDITION—IMPROVED AND ENLARGED.

NEW YORK:
PUBLISHED BY CHARLES M. SAXTON, 205 BROADWAY
PHILADELPHIA—WM. GROVES & CO.
BOSTON—SAXTON & KELL.
1847.

In 1830, Dr. John C. Gunn of Knoxville published the first edition of his wildly popular *Domestic Medicine, which influenced medical practices and training throughout the nineteenth century*. John C. Gunn, *Gunn's Domestic Medicine, or Poor Man's Friend* (New York, 1947).

ways Sevier had as much, if not more, medical knowledge than many self-proclaimed physicians of the time. He gained that knowledge because he was literate and well educated by the standards of the time, travelled extensively and circulated in aristocratic circles in Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston, had a personal library and access to domestic medical books of the period, and occupied civil and military positions of considerable authority. The remedies he elected to record in his journal offer glimpses into his medical knowledge.

During his life, Sevier witnessed a significant transformation of the theoretical orientation of conventional medicine.⁹ Humoral theory, which asserted that blistering removes excessive phlegm (cold) from the body, was one of the common theories of the time. Other physicians, however, believed that blistering and the application of irritants were effective treatments for inflammation. As odd as it may seem, the notion was that creating a temporary inflammation on the skin with an irritant like a mustard plaster or Spanish fly powder or by cupping promoted the movement of blood away from an inflammation located deep within the body. In a journal entry for September 1796, Sevier noted that he was blistered for four days for an undisclosed illness, but possibly rheumatism or arthritis, by Dr. Chester in Jonesboro.¹⁰

By the mid-1800s, Dr. Benjamin Rush's vascular theory of disease causation, which focused on the blood, had largely displaced humoral theory.¹¹ Rush reasoned that too much blood in the body produced vascular tension; vascular tension produced inflammation; and inflammation produced disease. Thus, bleeding was no longer done for the sake of balancing the humors, but to remove inflammations. In his journal, Sevier mentions that he was bled by Dr. Chester in Jonesboro and that he bled himself and others.¹²

Sevier's remedies frequently employed substances for inducing or promoting sweating, salivation, urination, and defecation. These interventions originated in humoral medicine, but by the mid-eighteenth century their use was rationalized by miasmatic theory. Miasmatic theory maintained that disease was caused by morbid particles emanating from various miasmata (i.e., swamps, slaughter houses, latrines, garbage dumps). The morbid matter inhaled from the air entered the blood, poisoned the

body, and produced illness by promoting the body's morbid material from tradition in the Appalachians. The body every spring was to cleanse or thin the blood.

The remedies Sevier recorded in his journal reflect a theory about the cause of disease that was part of the medical establishment of the time. In his letter, Sevier expressed his concern about the physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, who was ravaging Philadelphia with an innovative air conditioning system. He believed the same system would be effective in preventing disease. The system for forcing fresh air into the room was based on the observation that in the fall and winter, a fire was necessary in the house to keep from effluvia that accumulated. The suggestion is prescient; the disease gained full acceptance.

The medical world of the time was concerned with animals. Human existence, transportation, and commerce were all possessed considerably by cows, dogs, and chickens. The treatments for horses were based on the affinity for the animal to the human.

This essay examines the remedies and examines the remedies that reveal about the theory of the remedies strike us as and observations in the medical knowledge of the time. The journal is arranged in a way that veterinary medicine is the focus. Within these illnesses includes Sevier's original spelling and

⁹ John Duffy, *The Healers: Rise of the Medical Establishment* (New York, 1976), 22-26; Charles E. Rosenberg, "The Therapeutic Revolution: Medicine, Meaning, and Social Change in Nineteenth Century America," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 20 (1977): 485-506.

¹⁰ Cora Bales Sevier and Nancy S. Madden, *Sevier Family History with the Collected Letters of Gen. John Sevier, First Governor of Tennessee* (Washington, D.C., 1961), 18.

¹¹ Elements of humoral theory are evident in folk beliefs that persist today such as the notion that sickness is caused by movement from the cold outdoors into a hot room, walking barefoot on a cold floor, working up a sweat and cooling off too quickly, or breathing cold air.

¹² Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 166, 167.

¹³ Sevier and Madden, *Sevier Family History*, 18.

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166, 167.

body, and produced inflammations. As illustrated in Sevier's remedies,
promoting the body's normal secretion processes was a way to jettison
morbid material from the body. It is worth noting that the common
tradition in the Appalachian South (and much of America as well) of purging
the body every spring with castor oil or Epsom salts and drinking various teas
to cleanse or thin the blood originated with miasmatic theory.

The remedies Sevier recorded in his journal align with conventional
theory about the cause and treatment of disease promoted by an emerging
medical establishment. A June 1800 letter to America's preeminent
physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, verified his faith in "official" medicine.
In his letter, Sevier expressed concern about a yellow fever epidemic that
was ravaging Philadelphia at the time, and he suggested the installation of
an innovative air conditioning system in hospitals that he believed would
be effective in preventing the spread of the disease.¹³ Sevier had devised a
system for forcing fresh air into a forge that he constructed in Tennessee. He
believed the same system could be applied to a hospital. His reasoning was
based on the observation that contagious diseases like yellow fever abated
in the fall and winter due to the cooler air, and also that good ventilation
was necessary in hospitals to eliminate "contaminated mists and vapors"
from effluvia that accumulate in a hospital setting. This seemingly modest
suggestion is prescient because decades later, when the miasmatic theory of
disease gained full acceptance, the ventilation of hospitals became a primary
concern.

The medical world of John Sevier embraced knowledge of the care of
animals. Human existence on the frontier depended on the food, labor,
transportation, and companionship that domesticated animals provided. He
possessed considerable knowledge of treating the afflictions of pigs, oxen,
cows, dogs, and chickens, but, for whatever reason, he elected to only record
treatments for horses. His devotion to "horse medicine" intimates a strong
affinity for the animal.

This essay extracts the medical information from John Sevier's journal,
and examines the remedies and other medical topics in terms of what they
reveal about the theories of disease causation of the period. Many of the
remedies strike us as bizarre and chimerical today. However, the remedies
and observations in Sevier's journal provide great insight into the collected
medical knowledge of the time. The medical information from Sevier's
journal is arranged by the two broad categories of human medicine and
veterinary medicine, with all remedies in the latter category relating to
horses. Within these categories, illnesses are arranged alphabetically. Each
illness includes Sevier's remedies or observations, italicized and with his
original spelling and punctuation, followed by commentary.

¹³ Sevier and Madden, *Sevier Family History*, 147.

Human Medicine

Apoplexy

Memo. A Mr. Sage has stated to the National Institute of France the efficacy of the flower volatile alkali in cases of severe apoplexy witness for forty years—on the first appearance of the disease, 25 or 30 drops of flower alkali in a spoonful of water poured down the throat and two slips of paper the edges wetted with volatile alkali introduced into the nostrils—after a short period give another dose. Speech and recollection generally return in one hour. If the alkali should occasion a vomiting—give 20 drops of the volatile alkali more in half a glass of wine—a certain cure.¹⁴

Commentary: In the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century, the term apoplexy referred to the sudden onset of paralysis, dimming of the senses, and sometimes unconsciousness. It frequently resulted in death. Today these symptoms would likely be diagnosed as a stroke. The "Mr. Sage" referred to was Balthazar Georges Sage, a physician, who wrote a monograph on the treatment of "asphyxies" in victims of drowning. Sage maintained that the treatment used for asphyxies, as described in the remedy above, was also efficacious in treating apoplexy. Sage's monograph was translated into English and published in London in 1778.¹⁵ Volatile flower alkali is an ammonia compound, otherwise known as a smelling salt.

Ague

Memo. Take three small balls of spiders webb for three mornings running in Lyquor or tea is a sure cure for fever & ague or dumb ague.¹⁶

Commentary: "Ague" refers to a feverish condition accompanied by chills and paroxysms; "dumb ague" is a fever without chills and paroxysms. In many cases, ague was synonymous with malaria. As odd as it may seem, the ingestion of spider web pills was an accepted cure for ague among regular physicians. Earlier in England and Scotland in the 1600s, doctors believed that one could ward off ague by wearing a spider wrapped in a cloth and pinned to one's clothing.¹⁷ In the folk medical tradition of the Appalachian South and other parts of the U.S., spider webs were used mainly to stop bleeding.¹⁸

¹⁴ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 42.

¹⁵ M. Sage, *Experiments Showing that Volatile Alkali Flour is the Most Efficacious Remedy in the Cure of Asphyxies* (London, 1778), 50-52.

¹⁶ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 41.

¹⁷ Fanny D. Bergen, "Animal and Plant Lore," *Popular Science Monthly*, 37 (1890): 249.

¹⁸ Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 98.



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Science Monthly, 37 (1890): 249.

Back Pain

*Memo. Take chery tree and dog wood
barks, & poplar root bark make a tea
of same, is good for pain in the back.*¹⁹

Commentary: The bark of wild
cherry, dogwood, and poplar trees was
more commonly used in Sevier's day for
ague and rheumatism, but some reports
indicate their value in treating the
kidneys.²⁰ It may be that the source
of the pain in the lower back was the
kidneys. Wild cherry bark was the main
ingredient in cough syrups and both it
and dogwood bark were once believed to
be effective substitutes for Peruvian bark,
the source of quinine.²¹

Burn

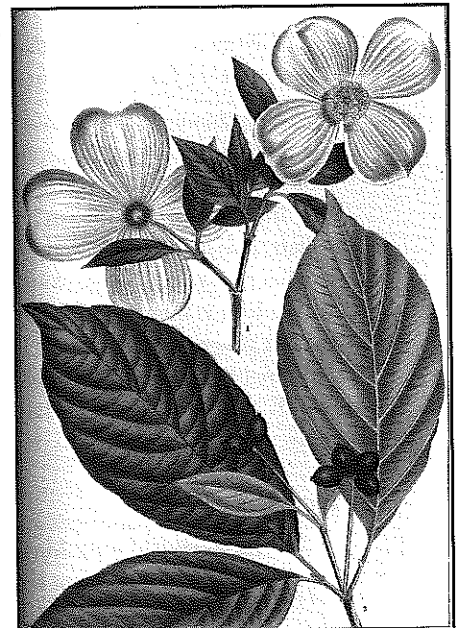
*—about 1 spoonful of sweet oil to the
youlks of four eggs well beaten up
together in form of plaster & renewed
is an excellent cure for bad burns.*²²

Commentary: Sweet oil, more often
than not, was olive oil. The use of eggs to treat a burn is a traditional Appalachian
remedy, except that in many cases only the white of the egg was used.²³

Cancer

*Blue Vitriol with half its Quantity of allum burnt into a powder
put to a Cancer wart is good to eat it out, must be changed every
six hours.*²⁴

*Cure for cancer. Boil west Turkey figs in new milk which will thicken
in boiling,—apply them broken or whole to the effected part which must
be washed every time dressed with some milk. Use a fresh poultice nixt*



*The extremely bitter bark of the Dogwood tree
was a frequent ingredient in remedies of the
Early Republic. Francois Andre Michaux, The
North American Sylva; or a Description of
the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada,
and Nova Scotia (Philadelphia, 1857), 1:176.*

¹⁹ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 38.

²⁰ John K. Crellin and Jane Philpott, *Herbal Medicine Past and Present, A Reference Guide to Medicinal Plants* (Durham, NC, 1989), 2:351.

²¹ Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 181.

²² Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 55.

²³ Cavender, *Folk Medicine*, 96.

²⁴ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 36.

*& morning & onst in the middle of the day, & drink one gill of the milk the figs are boiled in twice in 24 hours.*²⁵

Commentary: We cannot be sure that the lesions Sevier and others of his time identified as cancers were, in every case, cancers, but blue vitriol (copper sulfate, an irritant and mild corrosive) was a common treatment for "indolent" or "stubborn" sores and wounds, as was white vitriol (zinc sulfate, also corrosive).²⁶ In the Appalachian South, white vitriol was applied to what were called "open wounds" or "sores that will not heal."²⁷ The Turkey fig poultice is mentioned in several domestic medicine books published in the late nineteenth century.²⁸ The capitalization of "Turkey" is not an error; presumably, only dried figs from Turkey would do. A man of considerable wealth and prestige, Sevier had the opportunity and the means to obtain them. A gill is equivalent to one-fourth of a pint.

Diarrhea

Tea made out of the May apple root 1 wine glass 3 times a day is excellent for diarrhea or to half appetite.

*Memo. The sirute of antomny from 8 to 12 grains taken at night in a little honey or sugar observing not to drink for two hours after you have taken the sirute is good for diarrhea.*²⁹

Commentary: In his journal, Sevier wrote that "Jones son & 2 daughters of Joshua Green died on the 29th with the flux."³⁰ Flux is an archaic term for diarrhea or dysentery. The first remedy appears confounding. From the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, mayapple was one of the more popular, and more powerful, purgatives.³¹ Why would one treat diarrhea with an agent that promotes it, and so violently? One line of thinking, the theory of secretions, advanced the notion that the body regulated itself naturally through such actions as urination, sweating, salivation, vomiting, and defecation as a way for the body to eliminate prurient matter that poisoned the blood and, in turn, the organs. The administration of a purgative in cases of diarrhea, therefore, was, so to speak, simply giving nature a helping hand, as was dosing with antimony (potassium tartrate), a powerful emetic.³²

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 210.

²⁷ Anthony Cavender, "Local Unorthodox Healers of Cancer in the Appalachian South," *Journal of Community Health*, 21 (1996): 359-74.

²⁸ See, W.W. Hall, *Health at Home, or Hall's Family Doctor* (Hartford, CN, 1876), 396.

²⁹ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 55.

³⁰ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1919), 188.

³¹ Crellin and Philpott, *Herbal Medicine*, 299-300.

³² Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 171.

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³³ Dewitt, "The

³⁴ Ibid., 44-45.

³⁵ Moss, *Southern*

³⁶ Charlotte Eri 1979) 34; W Treatise on the



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the United States. The use of "Turkey" is not an error;
it would do. A man of considerable
opportunity and the means to obtain
of a pint.

1 wine glass 3 times a day is
te.

to 12 grains taken at night in
to drink for two hours after you
tea.²⁹

wrote that "Jones son & 2 daughters
the flux."³⁰ Flux is an archaic term
which appears confounding. From the
history, mayapple was one of the more
common. Why would one treat diarrhea with
mayapple? One line of thinking, the theory
that the body regulated itself naturally
by eating, salivation, vomiting, and
excreting prurient matter that poisoned
the system. The administration of a purgative in
the past, simply giving nature a helping
hand (e.g., potassium tartrate), a powerful emetic.³²

of Cancer in the Appalachian South,"

doctor (Hartford, CN, 1876), 396.

Dropsy

Recipe for the cure of the dropsy, put into a stone, or earthen jug,
a gallon of stale Senna (?) cyder, together with a double handful of
parsley roots & hops cut fine; a handful of scraped horse radish; two
table spoonfuls of bruised mustard seed; half an ounce oxymel of
squills and an ounce of Juniper berries. The liquor to be kept warm
by the fire, twenty-four hours; to be often agitated and then strained
for use. dose for a adult, half a wine glass full three times a day, on
an empty stomach. The dose may be increased if necessary. After the
water shall be discharged the patient should use moderate exercise.
Subsist on dry nourishing diet & abstain from all liquors as much as
possible. (A proved cure).³³

Bohea tea. Recipe for cure of the Dropsy—about two large cupfuls
of the tea is to be infused in a quart of water, & during the day the
decoction is to be drank, & the leaves eaten at short intervals—a speedy
and quick cure.³⁴

Commentary: Dropsy is an abnormal accumulation of fluids (water
or blood) in body tissues or cavities, and for the most part corresponds
with "edema" today, which is often symptomatic of heart or kidney failure.
The first remedy is one that circulated among residents of East Tennessee
and Western North Carolina in the early 1800s. It is recorded verbatim in
the William Lenoir Medical Memorandum (1801-1839), a commonplace
book from the period, with the notation "Cure for the Dropsey; taken out
of an Almanac at Capt. John Coxes, 1808."³⁵ The DeWitt transcription
has "senna," a plant used for centuries as a purgative, whereas the Lenoir
document has the word "sound" instead. Both juniper berries and Bohea
tea (i.e., black tea) were popular diuretics and possibly helpful in treating
edema.³⁶ Bohea tea, the first processed black tea imported to the U.S. from
eastern China, was widely consumed in Colonial America. Oxymel is a
decoction of honey and vinegar to which squills (a plant indigenous to the
Mediterranean), has been added. The use of oxymel of squills as a diuretic
dates back to the Ancient Greeks.

³³ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 38.

³⁴ Ibid., 44-45.

³⁵ Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 88.

³⁶ Charlotte Erichsen-Brown, *Medicinal and Other Uses of North American Plants* (New York, 1979) 34; William Edmonds Homer, *The Home Book of Health and Medicine: A Popular Treatise on the Means of Avoiding and Curing Disease* (Philadelphia, 1835), 265.

Fever

*Memo. Mercury taken till the mouth turns sore a sure cure for the yellow or other Fevers.*³⁷

Commentary: Doctors and laypersons relied on various mercury compounds for medical treatments.³⁸ Of them all, calomel (mercurous chloride) was the most widely used, but it eventually fell from grace in the late 1800s because of its severe side effects and the fact that in most every application it was not effective.³⁹ The theory of secretions explains its use. Calomel produces an intense salivation and bowel evacuation by which, along with the fever itself, prurient waste is eliminated from the body.

Flatulence

*Memo. 15, 20, or 30 drops of the acid Elixir of Vitrol, 2 or 3 times a day. Good to expel wind & promote digestion.*⁴⁰

Commentary: The rationale of this remedy is unclear because most all vitriols were used topically in Sevier's day, as noted in the cancer remedy above. Exceptions were its ingestion for putrid sore throat and syphilis.

Flu

See Pleurisy.

Gravel

*Cure for Gravel half pint of common plantain seeds, boiled in one Quart of new milk down to one pint—take a spoonful morning & evening of the decoction.*⁴¹

*Memo. Take horse radish and Garlic of each a handful! stew it down in three pints to one of water—bottle it up close—take two spoonfuls of the Liquid either night or morning. If this quantity does not effect a cure,—make use of the 2 & 3rd bottle—a sure cure for the Gravel.*⁴²

Memo. (Gravel) Take three drachms of powdered niter and dissolve in a quart of cold water and take half this quantity in the course of

³⁷ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 56.

³⁸ Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 194.

³⁹ Wayne Bethard *Lotions, Potions, and Deadly Elixirs: Frontier Medicine in America* (Lanham, MD, 2004), 111.

⁴⁰ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1919), 192.

⁴¹ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.



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⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁴⁵ Crellin and

⁴⁶ William T
1897), 173

a day and the painful complaint will be dislodged. It may be taken at any hour, but it is best after a meal. The greatest martyrs to this disorder have been cured by this simple medicine—(It is the gravel).⁴³

Commentary: "Gravel" is an archaic medical term for kidney stone. Like his contemporaries, Sevier believed that horseradish and spirit of niter, both diuretics, would enable flushing out the stones. A drachm is roughly equivalent to one teaspoon.

Pleurisy

To cure the pleurisy & fluency when the pain and fever Begins you must take three spoonfuls of honey and as much alloycospene as will lie on the point of case knife twice, and half that quantity of Indian turnips and as much allum as the size of a large pea & half as much fresh Butter as honey, Stew them on hot embers then every night take one table spoonful, very warm keep takeing that until the abscess breaks Make a small cake of Ry meal then split the Cake and put tar on it and lay it on the pain & follow the pain with new Cake every four hours. take Garlic & pound it put it on hogs lard and keep that to the soles of the feet & bleed moderately every three day & regularly & sweat every three Days with Sinicar snake root & keep the body open with castor oil.⁴⁴

Commentary: Pleurisy is an inflammation of the pleura (the outer lining of the lungs and the inside lining of the chest walls) and most commonly caused by a bacterial or viral infection. Traditionally, Indian turnip was used as a diaphoretic and expectorant, as was Seneca snakeroot.⁴⁵ It may be that the "alloycospene" is a misspelling of "elecampane," a plant used for hundreds of years in Europe for respiratory problems, particularly asthma. According to the English physician William Thomas Fernie, candied elecampane root was eaten in London for asthma and to ward off poisonous air.⁴⁶ It appears that one of the strategies for healing pleurisy was to expel prurient matter causing the inflammation through inducing salivation and perspiration. The application of the rye cake with pine tar (a rubefacient) served to create an inflammation on the skin which, according to some physicians, reduced an inflammation in another part of the body. Yet another therapeutic approach is evident in the use of garlic and bleeding. The application of a garlic paste to the soles of the feet is a humoral treatment. Garlic was considered "hot" and would counteract the coldness in the body caused by the accumulation

⁴³ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴⁵ Crellin and Philpott, *Herbal Medicine*, 263, 388.

⁴⁶ William Thomas Fernie, *Herbal Simples Approved for Modern Uses of Cure* (Philadelphia, 1897), 173.

of too much phlegm, the cold humor. Dr. John C. Gunn's immensely popular *Domestic Medicine* (1830) described a similar remedy, which he identified as "French," for the treatment of a cold.⁴⁷ According to America's most celebrated physician of the time, Benjamin Rush, bleeding reduced the vascular tension produced by too much blood in the body, which, in turn, reduced the inflammation of the pleura.

Rheumatism

*Take a handful of the inside bark of prickly ash 6 inches long the same quantity of red earth worms and about the same quantity of both those articles of the oil of hogs feet, & stew all slowly together until the worms are dissolved: strain out the sediment and anoint with the oil for Rheumatism.*⁴⁸

*Stew red pepper in hogs lard and anoint for the Rheumatism, is thought to be efficacious, and afterwards bathe in water wherein oats in the straw have been boiled, & wrap the straw around the parts affected when as warm as can be borne.*⁴⁹

*Memo. (Cure for the Rheumatism) Take as much flour of sulphur as will lay on the point of a case knife mix with honey, for nine mornings running—on the 7th bleed both feet on the inside after taking the sulphur & honey, infuse with the bigness of your thumb of seneca snake root, in one quart of brandy or whisky, drink a glass every night or morning as you may choose—take care not to catch cold.*⁵⁰

*Cure for the rheumatism—Make 1-4 poke berry juice, 3 parts whiske or some other spirits.*⁵¹

Commentary: Prickly ash was a relatively popular treatment for rheumatism in the late 1700s and it continued in use well into the nineteenth century.⁵² Sevier processed prickly ash bark for a salve whereas others prepared it as a tonic. So-called "red worm oil," made solely with red worms, was a treatment for rheumatism in East Tennessee and other parts of Appalachia as late as the 1940s. The active counterirritant in red pepper (capsaicin) is in many contemporary ointments and salves for relieving body aches and pains. Sulfur and honey (without snakeroot) was a common remedy. The pokeberry tincture mentioned by Sevier persisted in the folk medical tradition of the Appalachian South for decades and, though rare, remains in use today.⁵³

⁴⁷ Gunn, *Gunn's Domestic Medicine*, 206.

⁴⁸ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵² Crellin and Philpott, *Herbal Medicine*, 354.

⁵³ Cavender, *Folk Medicine*, 113.



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Sick Headache

Cure for the sick headache—take a
tablespoonful of Magnesia, and half a
teaspoonful of ginger mixed with a lump
of sugar in a tumbler three parts full of
water when the chill is off. Sit for a quarter
of an hour in agreeable warm water with
your feet, & apply a napkin wrung out of
cold water to the temples of the forehead,
whichever is most effective.⁵⁴

Commentary: Magnesia (magnesium
oxide) ameliorated the nausea and vomiting
associated with a sick headache, as did ginger.
Both are commonly used today for the same
purposes.

Snakebite

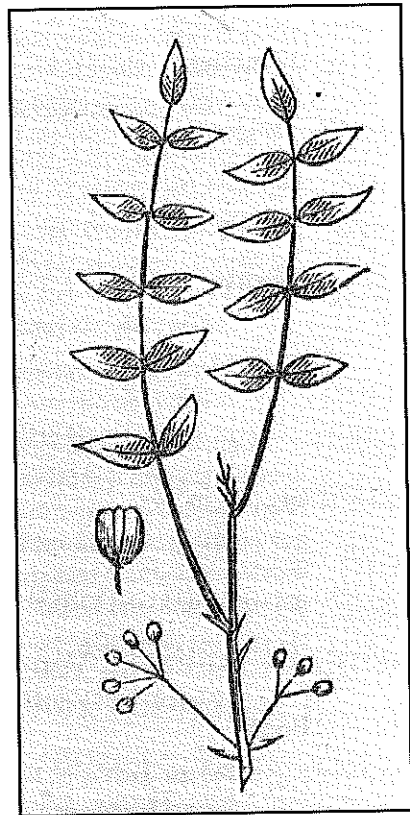
Cuckceld bur leaves boiled in new milk
good for snake bite. The gaul of the earth
bruised and infused with new milk good.⁵⁵

Commentary: Cocklebur and gall-of-
the-earth (also known as snakeweed and
rattlesnake root) were well-known in Sevier's
time as effective snakebite medicines.⁵⁶ Sevier
does not make it clear, but other sources
indicate that these decoctions were both
ingested and applied directly to the bite.

Sore Eyes

Memo. Boil Cammomile in new milk, to
a strong decoction, bathe with it as warm
as can be bourn, three or four times a day
good for inflamed sore eyes.⁵⁷

Commentary: "Sore eyes" likely meant conjunctivitis, an inflammation
of the eye caused by a virus or bacterium. Chamomile tea was considered



The bark of the Prickly Ash was used as
a stimulant and tonic in many nineteenth
century treatments. O. Phelps Brown,
The Complete Herbalist, or the People
Their Own Physicians, by the Use of
Nature's Remedies (Jersey City, NJ,
1872), 138.

⁵⁴ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 50.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁶ Erichsen-Brown, *Medicinal Uses of Plants*, 396; Crellin and Philpott, *Herbal Medicine*, 163-65.

⁵⁷ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 39.

good medicine for a variety of ailments in Sevier's day, most of them gastrointestinal. Failure to locate other reports on the use of chamomile for sore eyes suggests that it may be idiosyncratic.

Vomiting

*Memo. Beef tea a certain cure for vomiting &c.*⁵⁸

Commentary: It is uncertain whether beef tea is an antiemetic, but it no doubt was of benefit in rehydrating the body and restoring electrolyte balance.

Worms

*Seneca snake root powdered very good for worms in children.*⁵⁹

*Memo. Oil of turpentine in small doses have recently been discovered to destroy the tape worm.*⁶⁰

Commentary: The appearance of Seneca snakeroot in several of Sevier's remedies suggests a panacea status. He also used it for worms in horses (see "Botts" below.) It may be that others at the time used it as a worm medicine, but probably not as much as turpentine and Jerusalem oak which were widely used in the Appalachian South as a folk remedy for roundworms and pinworms until the 1940s.⁶¹

Veterinary Medicine

Botts

*Boil one quart of N. Milch half away, with a half pound old bacon therein (good to cure the botts on a horse).*⁶²

*Red precipitate as much as will lie on the point of a pen knife rolled up in butter is the best thing for botts in horses. When rolled up must be put down the horses throat as far as possible.*⁶³

*Memo. A handful of white shoemake roots, Two spoonfuls of tarr, three spoonfuls of honey, add one quart of new milk, boil it down to one pint with which drench your horse, good cure for botts.*⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁶¹ Cavender, *Folk Medicine*, 91, 93; Crellin and Philpott, *Herbal Medicine*, 269.

⁶² Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 27.

⁶³ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.



Commentary: Bots (or as it is spelled today, bots) refers to an aggravating and debilitating infestation of the botfly. The botfly lays its eggs in the hair of the horse, usually around the mouth, under the neck, or on the forelegs. Sevier's bots remedies address the primary problem with bot infestation: the larvae migrate into the mouth and from there to the stomach and intestines where they attach and feed for three to seven months, creating blockages in the passage of food and damaging the linings of the stomach and intestine. It is not clear if the first remedy is for topical or internal use. In the second remedy, "red precipitate," is mercurous oxide, in use today primarily as a disinfectant and fungicide. It may have been an effective agent in killing the larvae, but likely had some negative side effects. As noted earlier, "shoemaker" is the sumac plant. "Tarr" is a sticky distillate of pine wood that has a long history of use in veterinary medicine as an antiseptic.

Poll Evil

*Memo. The white flowered amert is very fine for a Polleville in creatures or any rising or pains in a person—make it into a poultice.*⁶⁵

Commentary: Whether an error in transcription or a misspelling by Sevier, "Polleville" is probably "poll evil," an inflammation and/or infection of the bursa in the poll of a horse (i.e., the upper part of the back of the neck just behind the skull). The meaning of "white flowered amert" is unknown, but before and during Sevier's time common treatments were bathing the poll with vinegar, applying a poultice of bread, milk, and wine, and, if an abscess formed, lancing and washing the lesion with white vitriol.⁶⁶

Slobbers

*Memo. A cure for the slobbers in horses, occasioned by clover—rub underneath the tongue the under Jaw well with common salt onst or twice the disorder is in the tongue in the under jaw.*⁶⁷

Commentary: Excessive, frothy salivation, or slobbers, is not caused by the clover itself, but by a fungus on the clover that produces a mycotoxin called slaframine. The ingestion of other plants (i.e., burdock) that contain chemical irritants also cause slobbers.

Scratches

*Memo to cure the Scratches. an equal Quantity of Wine, oil & Lime, made into a poletice & left on 24 hours at a time.*⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Rosemary Brookman, "Folk Veterinary Medicine in Upper East Tennessee," in *A Tennessee Folklore Sampler*, eds. Ted Olson and Anthony Cavender (Knoxville, 2009), 67.

⁶⁷ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 49.

⁶⁸ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1919), 182.

Commentary: Also known as "greasy heel," "mud fever," and "dew poisoning," scratches is a dermatitis that affects the deeper layers of skin in the heel and back pastern of a horse's foot. It is caused by the wetting and drying of the skin from prolonged periods of working in muddy areas. In severe cases a fungus infection develops. The "oil" mentioned in Sevier's remedy may be the previously mentioned patent medicine, British Oil. More

recently reported folk remedies for scratches in East Tennessee employed carbolic acid, muriatic acid, and a red oak bark poultice.⁶⁹



The Black Gum was often used for making wagon wheels, and smaller personal implements like a toothbrush. Francois Andre Michaux, *The North American Sylva; or a Description of the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada, and Nova Scotia* (Philadelphia, 1857), 3:28.

Thumps

Salt and pepper good for the Thumps in horses Dissolve it in water. The inside Barke of B. gum good.⁷⁰

Commentary: Thumps is a term widely used in the horse world in reference to a kind of hiccup, or in scientific terms a synchronous diaphragmatic flutter. In extreme cases, the hiccup sounds like a cough; in other cases, there is no intense hiccup, but one can hear and feel a faint thump in the horse's abdomen. The most common cause of thumps is dehydration and associated electrolyte imbalance. Giving the horse salt (sodium) and black pepper (potassium and magnesium) may have worked in restoring electrolyte balance. "B gum" is likely the black gum tree. According to the folk medical record, its only use was a twig for making a toothbrush or snuff applicator.

Worms

Memo. Take a single handful of the white shoemake root bark, boil it in water till it is strong & little more than a spoonful then take out the root & add a spoon of tarr & a spoonful of honey & mix it well together, then put to it a pint of new milk & Drench the horse—a sure cure for worms—a sixth part, for a child—or half as much for a grown person, or nearly as much as for a horse—proved and a certain cure.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Brookman, "Folk Medicine," 68.

⁷⁰ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 28.

⁷¹ Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1919), 192.



Commentary: worm, pin worm, kind of worm, worms suggest vermifuge of h use of pine tar used for treati

Yellow Water

Memo. Water, three on root bark horses t the men The ab ...⁷²

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⁷² Dewitt, "The

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Commentary: Of the many species of worms that afflict horses—round worm, pin worm, lung worm, thread worm, tapeworm—it is not known what kind of worm Sevier treated. Sevier's use of sumac root for both bots and worms suggests that it has anti-parasitic properties, but the most common vermifuge of his time, as previously mentioned, was Jerusalem oak. Also, the use of pine tar aligns with turpentine, another pine distillate once widely used for treating worms in humans.

Yellow Water

Memo. Take 1 oz. of mercurial ointment, boil the same in one gallon of Water, skim off the Grease and mix the horses food twice a day for three or four days—then make a decoction of dogwood and poplar root bark, or rattle weed, mix the food with the decoction—when the horses tongue & mouth begins to become moist & you may forbear the mercury.

The above cure for the yellow water which only in a fever in the horse.

...⁷²

Commentary: A paper delivered by Richard Peters in 1808 to the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture was the first recognition of yellow water as a distinct disorder in horses. Peters describes yellow water as a scourge afflicting the horse population in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Symptoms included shivering, lowering of the ears, jaundiced eyes, stiff hind legs, and signs of wanting to defecate but an inability to do so. In advanced cases, the horse falls to the ground in paroxysms, hoofing at the ground with its hind legs thereby forcing its body to spin around in a circle. In rural Pennsylvania, the disorder was called "the circles." Peters recommended bleeding a gallon of blood the first day and a half gallon a day for three or four days, blistering to the point of producing suppuration, purging with calomel, drenching with a decoction of black snakeroot and peach leaves, and an enema of brewer's yeast.⁷³ Horse autopsies done by Peters and others suggested inflammation of the liver as the cause. Veterinary medicine today does not recognize yellow water as a distinct disorder. It is unknown whether Sevier encountered yellow water with his horses and if the remedy he recorded was his creation or borrowed from someone else.

⁷² Dewitt, "The Journal of John Sevier," (1920), 39.

⁷³ Richard Peters, "On the Yellow Water of Horses," *Modern Veterinary Practice* 57 (1976): 208-212; *Memoirs of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture* 1 (1808): 139-55.