

19th Century Illness

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During the 19th century, the Nelsons and their relatives living at Long Branch and Rosny had their fair share of lethal illness and accidents. These sicknesses and health problems were not unique to the family, or even the Shenandoah area. Rather, the region is a microcosm for the various afflictions of the 19th century.

Hugh Mortimer Nelson, his wife Adelaide, their two children, Hugh Jr. and Nannie, and Adelaide's mother lived in the plantation house at the time. Letters from the late 1850's between Adelaide, Hugh Jr. and Nannie, who attended school in New York at the time, reveal a number of familial health problems. Prevalent ongoing issues included Nannie and her father's teeth troubles, for which they visited a dentist in the North to get their teeth filled,¹ and the fading health of Adelaide's mother, treated by a drug they called the "colonel."²

The letters also included various other illnesses both at home and in New York, including vague sicknesses of cousins, Hugh Jr.'s ear and headaches, and Adelaide's sporadic headaches. The measles were also a common ailment, which Hugh Jr. contracted in May of 1857, as do two other boys at Rosny, "little Jim" and "little Isham," the latter of which also later had typhoid fever.³ Both of these illnesses were common at home in Long Branch and away during the 19th century. This was also true of tuberculosis, known as consumption at the time, of which Nannie reported one of her classmates dying.⁴ Additionally, many letters included a relative suffering from a "disease of the heart". From a cousin at Rosny to a relative in Charlestown, this nondescript illness was common among the family.⁵

Adelaide and Nannie not only discussed sickness, but also commonplace dangers. Husband and father, Hugh M., was almost killed in a carriage accident from a scared horse.⁶ Although he managed to control the animal, everyday activities could kill. The state of 19th century technology presented many challenges to health. Adelaide warns her daughter on multiple occasions to not catch cold by washing her hair, given the lack of a fireplace to dry it at school in the winter.⁷

These exchanges between mother and daughter are not the only proof of the abundance of illness and danger at the time. Cousin to the Nelsons and soon-to-be wife of POW and minister George Washington Nelson, Mollie Scollay included details of sickness and health to George in her letters to him during his imprisonment. These reports ranged from her illnesses to a wheat machine crushing Hugh Jr. leg, showing the danger of new farming equipment.⁸

Thomas Nelson Jr., a boy attending school at Rosny, also received telling letters of his

¹ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, March 18th and 28th, 1857.

² Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, June 5th, 1857.

³ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, May 16th and 25th, 1857 and June 6th, 1857.

⁴ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, April 28th, 1857.

⁵ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, May 4th, 1857.

⁶ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, March 31st, 1857.

⁷ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, April 6th, 1857.

⁸ Mollie Scollay to George Washington Nelson, December 20th, 1863 and June 3rd, 1864.

family's health during the late 1850's into the 1860's. In 1856, his father, Robert Nelson Sr. wrote to tell him that his godmother died from the aforementioned "disease of the heart."⁹ In one 1858 letter to his mother Susan, Thomas wrote that a young boy at Rosny named Buck died of consumption, and in another he reported that his Uncle David died of a "disease of the heart."¹⁰ Similarly, two years later, Thomas wrote to his father stating that a man was recently found outside, frozen with the doctor stating cause of death being "the disease of the heart."¹¹ Thomas also included details about the injuries of the boys at Rosny in letters to his parents, which included a young boy killed by a horse and a boy who broke his arm falling down the stairs.¹²

Throughout various illnesses, a strong faith in God helped the Nelsons and their family. The connection between God and dealing with misfortune is explicit in Mollie's letter to George when describing how Hugh Jr. responded to his amputated leg, stating that he "stands the pain wonderfully and bears his loss with Christian resignation."¹³

During the mid-19th century, as evidenced by the letters above, disease ran rampant, and the cause of many illnesses—bacteria—had yet to be discovered. Medicine at the time did not treat the cause, but rather the symptoms of sickness. Doctors sought to treat what they called "miasmas," which were created by bad air and rotting matter, through purging the body of vomit, sweat, and urine and thus eliminate the bodily "overstimulation" caused by fevers and other symptoms.¹⁴ Other treatments of diseases included chloroform, morphine, and ether, all of which acted as painkillers. If they could wear down or relax the body, the doctor believed he was curing the patient.

As for the frequently mentioned disease of the heart, 19th century doctors connected it with "dropsy," short for hydropsy, which entailed the "present of abnormally large amounts of fluid in intercellular tissue spaces of body cavities." "Cardiac dropsy" was the name of obstruction of blood through the heart, lungs, or liver, and was a major symptom of heart disease.¹⁵

The largest advancement in medicine at the time was Edward Jenner's smallpox vaccine, which produced a weaker version of the disease in order to create immunity. However, other similarly potent diseases were treated through other means, such as isolation to prevent their spreading. The existent and role of bacteria in illnesses was not discovered until the last couple decades of the 19th century, which helped doctors understand and better treat sicknesses such as tuberculosis.¹⁶

⁹ Robert Nelson Sr. to Thomas Nelson Jr., November 16th, 1856.

¹⁰ Thomas Nelson Jr. to Susan Nelson, April 26th, 1858 and May 27th, 1858.

¹¹ Thomas Nelson Jr. to Robert Nelson Sr., November 27th, 1860.

¹² Thomas Nelson Jr. to Robert Nelson Sr., April 4th, 1861.

¹³ Mollie Scollay to George Washington Nelson, December 20th, 1863.

¹⁴ Wheat, T.A. "Medicine in Virginia During the Civil War." *Medicine in Virginia During the Civil War*. Accessed June 29, 2015.

¹⁵ "Nineteenth Century Diseases." *Nineteenth Century Diseases*. Accessed June 29, 2015.

¹⁶ "19th Century Diseases - 1876 Victorian England Revisited." *19th Century Diseases - 1876 Victorian England Revisited*. Accessed June 29, 2015.