

Brother Philemon Stewart as Church Family Physician: Re-imagining a Portion of His “toiling, stormy, industrious, valuable life”

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Abstract: Although Brother Philemon Stewart is perhaps best known for his part in the Era of Manifestations, he was also notorious for his opinionated and somewhat obstreperous personality, his volatile career of “promotion and then demotion,”¹ his single-minded pursuit of dietary “progressive reform” and his staunch support of nonconventional health regimes such as Grahamism and hydrotherapy (or water cure).²

Brother Philemon, however, also had a strong influence on the practice of medicine at New Lebanon: first, in his role as principal male instrument during the Era of Manifestations, and second, through his brief but little-known tenure as a Church Family physician in 1844.

Recent original research has uncovered new details with regards to this Shaker brother that may offer scholars a further understanding of his life and zealous personality. This presentation will focus on Stewart’s attempts to change medical practice at the Church Family Nurse Shop, and, through the use of contextual primary materials, seek to re-imagine a portion of his “toiling, stormy, industrious, valuable life.”³

Introduction

Brother Philemon Stewart—the Shaker many historians love to hate. Usually described as an irascible and opinionated soul who challenged elders and dominated eldresses, he is thought to have used his position as lead (male) instrument during the Era of Manifestations to enact his own politically motivated agenda. Priscilla Brewer, for instance, states that Stewart “may have been using the excitement of the revival to carve out a position of authority” and that he was “corrupted by the power newly bestowed upon him.”⁴ Jean Humez adds, “He may be seen as the internal critic, the malcontent who stays on to play the ‘loyal opposition,’ refusing to accept the economic and social realities of life in that particular era, but also refusing to be silent or leave the

community altogether.”⁵ And who can blame these authors for their negative comments? Indeed, contemporary Believers also had plenty to say, most of it surprisingly un-Shaker-like. For example, when Stewart left his position as second elder (First Order), scribes noted, “Resigns his commission ... smiles of gratitude,” and “P. Stewart leaves Eldership. (Joyful).”⁶ Elder Otis Sawyer of New Gloucester, Maine, observed that Stewart possessed “insatiable ambitions and [an] indomitable self will” and Elder Giles Avery went even further to note that Stewart “had set himself up as the Lord’s Prophet and he and the rest of the leaders in the Society had no faith in it. Neither had he any faith to believe that the writing and bringing forth of the Sacred Roll was dictated by any Angel, other than Philemon Stewart”⁷

Are these comments a faithful representation of Stewart’s personality? Was he really just a fractious soul and a victim of unbridled ambition? Perhaps. But then again, perhaps not. As in all things, the devil is in the contextual details. Each of us is a tangled collection of countless variables, and some are more complicated than others. And so it was with Brother Philemon.

What do we know?

In an attempt to understand the complex nature of Stewart’s persona, let us begin with a number of easily obtainable facts. Shaker diaries and secondary authors tell us that he was born in 1804 in Mason, New Hampshire, and was the third son of Jeremiah Stewart, a yeoman [landholder] in Lunenburg, Massachusetts. In February 1811, a six-year old Philemon along with his natural brothers Charles, age eleven, and Amos, age nine, were placed with Nathan Kendal, the Family trustee at the Shaker community of Canaan, New York. Within a month, they appear to have moved twice: first to Shirley, Massachusetts, and then to the Second Order of the Church Family at New Lebanon, New York.⁸

Brother Amos went on to have an exemplary career with the Society, becoming second elder of the Second Order (New Lebanon) at the young age of twenty-three; fourteen years later he was promoted to first elder, Second Order, and in 1849 he was appointed to the Ministry. Charles, in contrast, left the Shakers in 1836, some five months after his leg was badly cut by an adze. Brother Giles Avery noted that the “consequences [of the wound] are serious.”⁹ But it is

with Philemon that we are most concerned. In 1826 (the same year that Amos was named second elder), Stewart was made an associate to the Office deacons. However, with the reorganisation of the Trustee's Office in 1828, his role shifted to a lesser position: caretaker of the Second Order boys.¹⁰ As noted by Stephen Paterwic, "This pattern of promotion and then demotion would follow him the rest of his life."¹¹

Nonetheless, things were about to change. The year 1838 saw an intense wave of ecstatic spiritual enthusiasm sweep through the Society that featured trances, visions, spirit-communicated messages, and a wide range of inspired art, music, and dance. This period is known as "Mother's Work" or the "Era of Manifestations." It is impossible to know if Philemon made a conscious choice to become an "instrument" (one who communicates with spirits) in order to gain power within the Shaker hierarchy. What is known is that he received his first message from Mother Ann Lee on April 22, 1838. From there he began a precarious climb to influence and notoriety. Within three months he was moved to the inner circle (First Order) but by the end of the year was once again a caretaker of boys. Nonetheless, in early 1841 he was appointed as second elder, First Order and the following year began to receive visions that eventually formed his magnum opus, *A Holy, Sacred & Divine Roll & Book*. His star certainly appeared to be on the rise. Unfortunately, this peak was followed by a series of highs and lows punctuated by two relatively short periods of authority: first elder, Second Family at New Lebanon (1854–1858) and second trustee at Poland Hill, Maine (1860–1863). He died of diphtheria in 1875 at the age of seventy-one.¹²

What we may not know

What is less well known, however, is Stewart's brief tenure as a Church Family physician, which began in January 1844. This nomination begs the question: why would someone with no training, no experience, and seemingly no inclination for medicine be placed in this position? Perhaps there is more to this story than immediately meets the eye. In conducting research on the New Lebanon Church Family Nurse Shop, I discovered three previously unknown works that may cast a completely different light on this Shaker Brother—one that may change our understanding of Brother Philemon's history, personality, and potentially even his motivations.

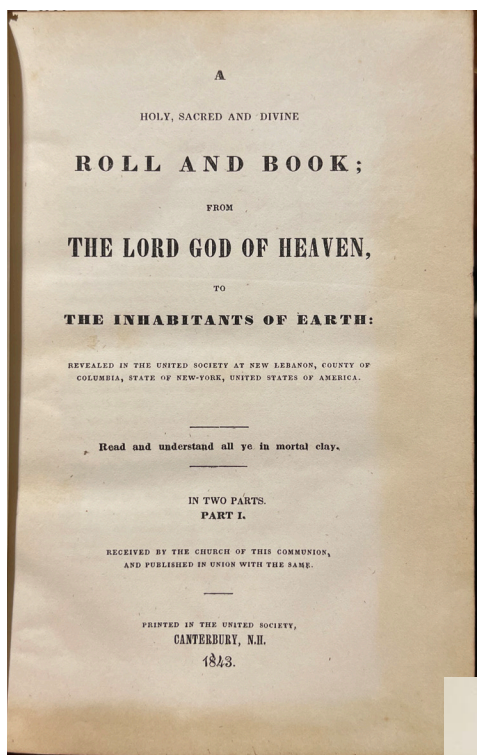
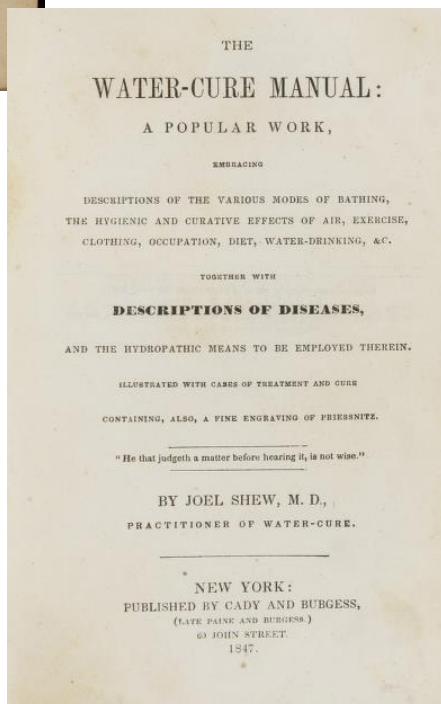


Fig. 1. Philemon Stewart, *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book* (Canterbury, N.H.: Printed in the United Society, 1843), title page. Collection of Hamilton College.

Fig. 2. Joel Shew,
The Water Cure Manual
(New York:
Cady and Burgess, 1847),
title page.
Archive.org



First, let's take a look at the forensic features of this case. I will begin with data taken from the *New York Daily Tribune* (Oct. 9, 1844), *The Water Cure Manual* by Joel Shew MD (1847), and *The Water Cure in America*, edited by H. F. Phinney (1848). All three works generally repeat the same testimonials. Here are the highlights:

They all recount cases of water cure at the New Lebanon Shaker community in 1844.

The patient in question was male, “very intelligent” and “practiced medicine latterly within the Society.”¹³

The patient also exhibited a fervent devotion to Grahamism, Apparently this diet was “all that kept him alive.”¹⁴

On discovering the water cure, the patient instantly began a rigorous regime that resulted in complete relief from his condition—notably, where years of contemporary medicine had failed.

The patient met with Dr. Joel Shew in 1844 and relayed his narrative of healing.

In 1844, the only brethren associated with the Nurse Shop were Barnabas Hinckley, Derobigne Bennett, and Philemon Stewart. Both Eliab Harlow and Garret Lawrence had passed away, and Abraham Hendrickson had retired almost blind with cataracts. Hinckley was also no longer in the running as he had been assigned to the role of deacon. For his part, Bennett showed no inclination for Graham's work or water therapy; rather his later drug store trade displayed a propensity for emetics, purges, and patent medicines.¹⁵ Therefore, there is little doubt that Stewart is our man. To recap:

His tenure as physician fits the period (1844), the place (New Lebanon), and the gender (male).

He appears to have been quite intelligent given his surviving literary contributions (*A General Statement of the Holy Laws of Zion Received by Inspiration from and with an Introduction by Father James*, and *A Holy, Sacred & Divine Roll & Book*).

He adopted Grahamism the very day it was approved by the Ministry (September 6, 1835) and remained a lifelong advocate. As an instrument he also promoted a vegetable-based diet.¹⁶

He met with Dr. Joel Shew on at least two occasions (September 1844 and April 1845) and steadfastly supported the water cure until his death in 1875.¹⁷

Now, let us review his personal health history. According to the water cure testimonials, Stewart apparently

had been very scrofulous from infancy, and was considered incurable by different physicians of note. The scrofulous ulcers had been extremely bad, particularly at the neck. The disease latterly was called *scrofulous chronic catarrh*. He had taken much medicine from different regular physicians, regular courses of mercury, &c. The disease had by thus doctoring, been driven to the chest and stomach, and from thence to the head, where it remained fourteen years constantly growing worse.¹⁸

Phinney's work offers further information. Here we see Stewart as a scrofulous youth: at "fifteen or sixteen [he] was treated by the most skilful physicians" to no avail and the disorder shifted about his body until he was twenty-eight years old when it "seemed to mostly concentrate in the head, and soon assumed the type of a most rigid catarrh, causing most powerful and fetid discharges from the glands of the head, with almost continual sneezing at times, for hours together." Worse, his "bowels were constipated and wholly unnatural in their operation, being regulated only by means of medicine. Spirits greatly depressed, and life many times burdensome."¹⁹

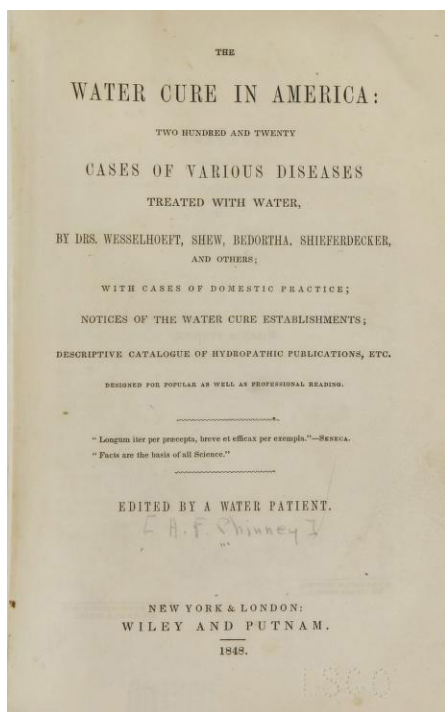
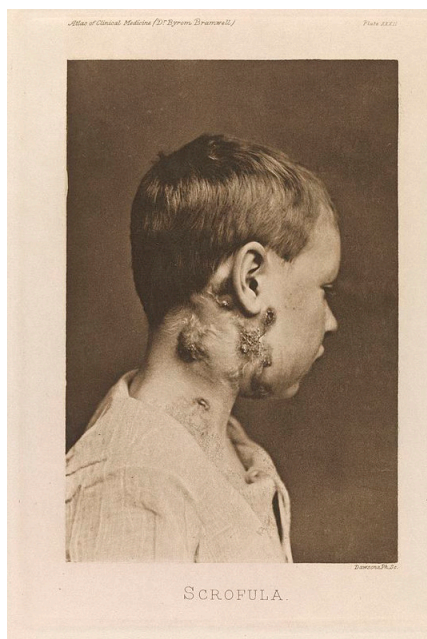


Fig. 3. H. F. Phinney,
The Water Cure in America
(New York: Wiley and
Putnam, 1848),
title page.
Archive.org

Fig. 4. Scrofula.
Scrofulous enlargement
of the cervical and
axillary glands.
Wikimedia.org



Scrofula

So, what was scrofula? Drs. Thomas and Hosack described it thus:

When it makes its appearance, it is attended with hard, unequal, or knotty tumours in the glands about the neck, and under the jaws. In the eyes, it creates inflammation; on the eyelids a soreness and small ulcerations; there is a thickness of the upper lip, the face is florid, the skin smooth and shining, and the belly swelled. The tumours do not suppurate readily or kindly, and in process of time their contents acquire a degree of acrimony; sufficient to irritate and corrode the surrounding parts. The matter in the abscess is thin, and mixed with a white curdy substance. After a time some of the ulcers heal, but other tumours quickly form in different parts of the body, and proceed on to suppuration in the same slow and imperfect manner as the former ones.²⁰

These authors added that scrofulous persons are “seldom robust, or able to endure much fatigue without having their strength greatly exhausted and their flesh much wasted.”²¹ Intriguingly, two other contemporary texts noted, “The scrofulous ... are more subject than others to hysteria and mental disorders”²² and “more than one-half of those who are subject to mental derangement are of a scrofulous constitution ... [for] scrofulous symptoms often alternate with attacks of mania.”²³

As a brief aside, scrofula still exists today. Now known as *Tuberculosis lymphadenitis*, it starts with a primary infection in the lung (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*), which spreads throughout the body via the lymphatic system and eventually penetrates the skin if the infection is left untreated. It can also lie dormant and appear at a later date. Modern treatment centers on antibiotics.²⁴

Historians frequently reference Stewart’s impatience and irascibility when they observe that he was unable to maintain a position or move up the Shaker hierarchy. In this he is often compared to his natural brother, Elder Amos, who was not only physically strong but also (as noted) successfully held positions of authority from the age of twenty-three. However, these allusions take on a different hue

when we take into account Stewart's forty-year trial of intermittent debility, suffering, depression, weakness, and possibly mental illness. Indeed, cognitive instability may underlie the following two quotes. The first from Elder Rufus Bishop: "Philemon S. has been rather unwell a few days, & last night he was so violently seized that he showed some derangement, but it was of a serious and religious kind," and the second from Stewart himself: "For my calling and situation is truly, in a very strait and dangerous place, when all circumstances are considered."²⁵

Why was Philemon nominated to the Nurse Shop?

It is unknown why Stewart was appointed to the role of physician; he had no experience, aptitude, or discernable interest in general medicine. Certainly he had minimal education and his "insatiable ambitions and indomitable self will" would have made for a very poor bedside manner.²⁶ In addition, contemporary journals do not credit Stewart with spiritual healing nor does it appear he received training in either patient care or the herb business. In fact, his move to the Nurse Shop seems to have caught other Believers by surprise. Diarists noted, "A peculiar change occurs in our family to day ... Philimon S went into the place of Physician!" and "Jan. 30, 1844-P. Stewart Doctor (Trying to be one)."²⁷

There are at least three possibilities which might explain this apparent nonsensical turn of events: first, as lead instrument Stewart may have tried to convince the Ministry that spiritual healing should play a dominant role in curing sickness—a return to the days of Mother Ann, if you will. Second, he may have hoped that he could increase the use of Grahamism in his capacity as Church Family physician. Or third, he may have been placed in this position for his own good. By 1844, Stewart was likely exhausted, which would have exacerbated his scrofulous condition. Clearly his previous two years had been exceedingly difficult: he had lost his position as second elder; suffered a period of "derangement";²⁸ continued to interact with spirits; published, distributed and traveled to other communities to introduce *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll*, and was heavily disappointed in its reception by the World. It was a cataclysmic fall from grace. Perhaps the Ministry (read: Elder Rufus Bishop) felt that a position at the Nurse Shop would offer an opportunity for Stewart to recover,

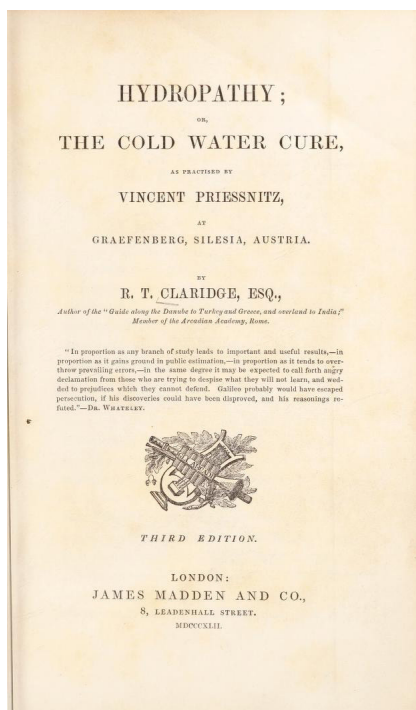


Fig. 6. Priessnitz portrait in
Joel Shew,
The Water Cure Manual
(New York:
Cady and Burgess, 1847),
frontispiece.
Archive.org

Fig. 5. R. T. Claridge,
*Hydrophathy, or, the Cold Water
Cure: as Practised by Vincent
Priessnitz, at Graefenberg,
Silesia, Austria* (London:
J. Madden and Co., 1842),
title page.
Archive.org



start over, and learn a new trade; however, no one could have foreseen that in less than five months Stewart would be consumed by his next all-encompassing obsession—water cure.

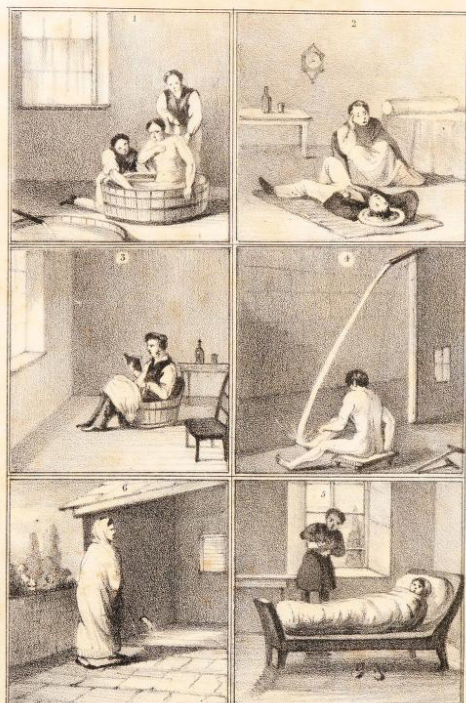
According to the testimonial in Phinney, the Church Family physicians were introduced to hydrotherapy on June 23, 1844, “when by mere accident Claridge’s work on *Water Cure* fell into our hands.”²⁹ Based on the practice of Austrian born hydropath Vincent Priessnitz (1799–1851), this 1842 text caused a sensation in both England and America. Stewart was then forty years old. Not unlike his immediate adoption of Grahamism in 1835, he took to this novel therapy with immediate zeal.

At this time, standard treatment for scrofula included herbs such as hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), guaiacum (*Guaiacum officinalis*), sarsaparilla (*Smilax officinalis*), sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), bittersweet (*Solanum dulcamara*), and mezereon (*Daphne mezereon*), alongside improved diet and air, sea bathing, leeches, electricity, blisters, escharotics (to destroy tissue) and a wide range of chemical medicines. Thomas and Hosack noted, “The submuriate of mercury [Calomel] is by far the most celebrated of purgative medicines which have been employed in the treatment of scrofula.” This chemical was often recommended in conjunction with tartarised antimony (tartar emetic), opium, muriated barytes (barium chloride), arsenic, muriate of lime (calcium chloride), and caustic alkali (potassium hydroxide).³⁰

It seems that Stewart had been subjected to all of the above. As mentioned, he received “much medicine from different regular physicians, regular courses of mercury, &c,” which in turn drove it “to the chest and stomach, and from thence to the head, where it remained fourteen years, constantly growing worse.” It is therefore no surprise that when introduced to the work of Priessnitz he immediately “commenced water-cure upon himself” in June 1844.³¹

Claridge’s work included a protocol for the treatment of scrofula. It reads:

The douche is the principal instrument in this cure, with the aid of the sudorific process, energetically employed. Wrapping up in a wet sheet is highly desirable. The cold bath should be taken twice daily; the articulations, and the glands, if swollen, should be well rubbed, and



- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Das Wannenbad or Half Bath. | 4. Das Douchbad or Douch Bath. |
| 2. Das Kopfbad or Head Bath. | 5. Das Schwitzen or Sweating. |
| 3. Das Sitzbad or Sitting Bath. | 6. Going to the Bath after Sweating. |

Engraved Litho.

Fig. 7.
R. T. Claridge,
*Hydrophathy, or, the Cold
Water Cure: as Practised
by Vincent Priessnitz,
at Graefenberg, Silesia,
Austria* (London:
J. Madden and Co.,
1842), frontispiece.
Archive.org

Fig. 231.



WET-SHEET PACK.

Fig. 8. Joel Shew,
The Hydrophatic Family Physician
(New York:
Fowler and Wells, 1854).
Archive.org

bandages constantly employed. The glands of the throat and nose require frequent garglings, and sniffing water up the nose.³²

Stewart adopted a similar method. It is worth reading the complete description, as it not only illustrates his enthusiasm but also the lengths to which he would travel for a cure.

He used the cold wet sheet arranged to become quickly warm by the heat of the body, with head bandages, about one week. The sheets he remained in all night and took two or three baths daily, and drank from twelve to fifteen tumblers of perfectly soft water daily. He had by this time a crisis in the form of a feverish excitement of the whole system. He then moderated the treatment somewhat, and in about one month had another crisis in the form of a very large boil on the thigh, and also a large swelling in the groin, which a physician told him would never get well, and would be likely to kill him. He being well acquainted with the system, determined to persevere, although the opposition was great among his friends. In another month he had another crisis in the form of boils, some fifteen in number, on the right leg. One was as large as the “fist”, and which, at every dressing, on turning upon the side, emitted three streams of purulent matter at once. Different physicians declared he would certainly kill himself. The result is, that now the boils, all but one are healed; he has gained in flesh and strength, and is much better than he has been for twenty years. The pains from which he had suffered so much in the head are all gone. He takes no cold, whereas, before, he did not pass a single week without it.³³

Note the comment that he had “gained in flesh and strength”—this echoes the hypothesis that in contrast to the meteoric rise of his older and stronger natural brother Amos, Stewart’s poor health, weakness, and lack of stamina may have been a factor in his inability to be nominated for, or indeed keep a promotion.



Fig. 9.
D. M. Bennett,
*The Champions of the
Church: Their Crimes
and Persecutions*
(New York:
D. M. Bennett,
Liberal and Scientific
Publishing House,
1878), frontispiece.
Archive.org

Philemon as physician

So, how was Brother Philemon as a physician? It is difficult to say. If we take Shaker journals as our guide, the answer appears to be “absent.” Indeed, Shaker diaries show that during his tenure the Nurse Shop continued its established frontline protocol of emetics and purges unabated—methods Stewart abhorred. Perhaps he acted as a second to a more experienced Brother Derobigne Bennett? Or perhaps he used his time at the Nurse Shop to focus on his own symptoms rather than on the health of others? In any event, his sojourn as “physician” seems to have been short-lived. Although he joined the physicians in January 1844, an 1845 list of members and their occupations showed Stewart as a “Brush maker of corn” and Bennett as the sole (male) Church Family doctor. Moreover, Bennett’s autobiography stated that he was *the* physician at New Lebanon for “two years or more” (*italics mine*). And finally, when in November 1845 the ill health of the Second Family required extra medical assistance, the Church Family sent for Watervliet physician David Miller. There is no evidence of Stewart’s involvement at all.³⁴

In fact, one wonders if the Church Family physicians (particularly Barnabas Hinckley) anticipated the potential need for Miller's presence. In January 1844 Hinckley was replaced by a completely inexperienced Stewart—at roughly the same time as Miller resigned his post as elder due to the “burden which he has to bear as a physician.”³⁵ This move would have allowed Miller to serve his own community as well as New Lebanon. Moreover, his nearly three decades of experience would have come as a welcome relief, for Bennett possessed few tools with which to carry the Church Family's therapeutic burden: he had had some frontline training with Hinckley, minimal guidance from a “retired older physician” (Eliab Harlow or Abraham Hendrickson), and the use of “a very fair medical library.”³⁶ With all manner of illness presenting at the Nurse Shop and his alternate physician (Stewart) missing in action, this Shaker Brother bore an exceedingly heavy mantle of responsibility. It is possible this situation was one of the many that contributed to Bennett's apostasy in September 1846.³⁷

Bennett's decision to secede along with three other Believers resulted in severe perturbation. New Lebanon lost four members (two couples) who not only broke their vows of celibacy, but worse, went on to marry. Elder Bishop expressed his shock and horror: “This feels awful beyond description, & has caused many tears, & is such an occurrence as this family has never experienced before since we began to gather together in the year 1787.”³⁸ In addition, the event caused a dire situation at the Nurse Shop, for Bennett's position was not immediately filled; with Stewart long gone—brush making and working at the “Grt. [Great] Garden”—and no replacement in sight, the Church Family was effectively without a male physician for over three and a half months. Finally, in late December 1846, Brother Isaac Youngs reported, “Barna Hinckley reassumed his former station, in the physicians shop to occupy in that department: it is very necessary that some one should be in that place & we have suffered much inconvenience in so short a time since Derobigne went away; may we never have the like experience again.” Hinckley remained the sole (male) Shaker physician until his death in 1861.³⁹

Although the narrative provided by Shaker journals casts Stewart's time as a physician in a far from positive light, the previously discussed water cure testimonials paint quite a different story. These works speak of miraculous healings at New Lebanon through the use of

hydrotherapy in fevers, constipation, dyspepsia, consumption, kidney complaints, and “hereditary syphilis” Sadly, Stewart’s involvement in these cases is largely unknown. Nonetheless, the practice of water cure appears to have had quite an affect. Phinney’s book states,

In some families of our Society, where both males and females have mostly adopted the water treatment for all medicinal purposes, the short space of two years, such families have made great advancement on the side of health, and almost a universal omission of the use of drugs or medicine of any kind, other than pure soft water.⁴⁰

Brother Philemon’s impact

Despite his seeming failure as a physician, Brother Philemon still had a strong impact on the Nurse Shop in several non-medical ways. First, as an ‘instrument’ during the Era of Manifestations, he received spirit messages that deeply reflected his personal epistemology—that Believers should be self-sufficient and pure in body and soul as in the days of Mother Ann. This perspective was further illustrated in Stewart’s first written offering, *A General Statement of the Holy Laws of Zion” Received by Inspiration from and with an Introduction by Father James* (1840). Here he promoted a “complete separation from worldliness... abandonment of certain industries; the return to an almost exclusively agricultural economy; a stricter separation of the sexes and government of children; the prohibition of animal food and strong intoxicating liquors; plainness in personal adornment; and adherence... to duty and doctrine.”⁴¹ Edward Deming Andrews notes that this work not only gave rise to the Holy Orders of 1841 but also formed the basis of the new Millennial Laws of 1845.⁴² These rules affected all manner of Shaker life, including the Nurse Shop. Physicians now required ongoing elder oversight, and doctors from the World were completely prohibited unless the case was extreme. Books, pamphlets, almanacs, and newspapers were subject to elder approval. Alcohol, foreign tea, coffee, tobacco, and opium were also forbidden unless given as medicine from the physicians “in union with the Elders.”⁴³ Education was closely monitored as well:

No member but those appointed by the Ministry may study Physic, Pharmacy, Anatomy, Surgery, Law, Chemistry, etc. etc. And Phrenology, Mythology, Mesmerism, and such sciences as are foreign from Believers duty, may not be studied at all by Believers. The Ministry and Elders must be the proper judges, how far any of the studies allowable, may be prosecuted.⁴⁴

It is unknown just how rigorously these rules were adopted. Nonetheless, they likely contributed to the series of events that forced the Nurse Shop to change. Up until 1836 it had functioned on a semi-autonomous basis where physicians managed their own finances and Believers received treatment generally without elder approval. However, as of January 1836 medical personnel could no longer “deal in trade” and all transactions moved to the office of the trustees.⁴⁵ In a further separation of trade and care, the Church Family’s herb business moved from the First Order to the Second in early December 1844—less than a year after Stewart joined the physicians.⁴⁶ And with the new laws of 1845, Shaker doctors were humbled once more as the opportunity for outside education and independence virtually disappeared. Gone were the days of Brother physician Garret K. Lawrence: his ability to attend academic medical lectures, his interaction with World botanists and doctors and the close bond that he maintained between the Nurse Shop and New Lebanon’s burgeoning herbal enterprise. Shaker physicians would now keep within the community, make no decisions on their own, train on a self-taught basis, and narrow their focus to healing the sick.

Philemon and reform

Jean Humez observes that Stewart was a “tireless campaigner for what he called “progressive reform” in the body” where “poisons and impurities should be purged out and a plainer, *more natural, and more ascetic regimen* instituted to keep any further pollution from entering in” (italics mine).⁴⁷ This regimen manifested as a fervent adherence to the dietary work of Sylvester Graham (1794–1851) and a zealous commitment to water cure.

By all accounts, Stewart was an early adopter of the Graham system, for he commenced the new regime September 6, 1835—

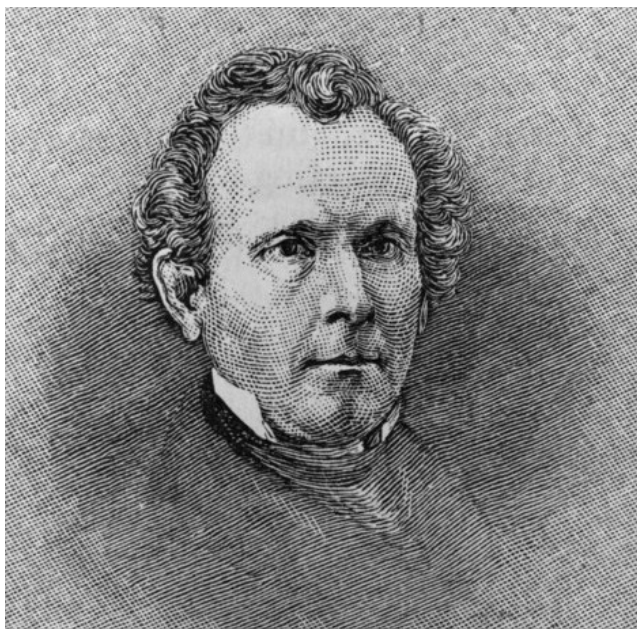


Fig. 10. Sylvester Graham. Wikimedia.org

the very day it was approved by the Ministry.⁴⁸ Previously, Believers had enjoyed a wide range of foods such as well-seasoned meat, fish, bread, vegetables, fruit, herbs, desserts, and all manner of condiments alongside cider, coffee and tea. Indeed, Brother John DeWitt recorded a packed lunch in 1835: “bread and butter, pye, strawberry sauce, fried potatoes, fresh meat, stewed beans and green tea sweetened with loaf sugar.” By contrast, Graham eschewed any foods he deemed to possess a stimulatory nature, such as meat and meat-based products, spices, alcohol, and tobacco. Instead he promulgated simply prepared meals comprised of vegetables, fruit, water and bread made from unbolted flour. Perhaps the Graham system appealed to the Shakers given its emphasis on sexual self-restraint and avoidance of what Graham defined as “stimulating and heating substances” so as to “abstain from connubial commerce and preserve the entire chastity of body.”⁴⁹ And although most of the brethren returned to a meat-based diet within the year, Stewart avidly held steadfast. Brother Giles Avery noted,

Philomon is taken suddenly sick with the fever altho' he has been living upon the Graham diet for a long time: but I suppose that it never was intended to put disease into oblivion only verbally, at least, & tho it has been talked out of existence many a time it still seems to be visible.⁵⁰

Interestingly, during the Era of Manifestations the spirits had much to say on the subject of food and drink as well. Jean Humez observes that the instrument who communicated the 1841 ban on animal foods (especially pork), alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and foreign teas was in fact Stewart.⁵¹ This appears to be a strong example of a personal epistemology conveniently sanctioned by an accepted (albeit otherworldly) authority. And it seems that Brother Philemon never slackened in his fight for these dietary reforms. Even into the early 1870s he continued to insist that the Ministry reinstate the strict dietary regime set thirty years before; indeed, his revelation foretold that “nine tenths of [Zion’s] present diseases Physically speaking are the natural outgrowths of her improper modes of Cooking to pamper an improper and perverted habit and Appetite.” According to Stewart, “If the Leaders in Zion will not cease the use of Tobacco, Animal Flesh, Tea and Coffee, and all Spiritous, stimulating Drinks ... their days as an Organized Body of the Lord’s People are numbered.”⁵²

But it was in water cure that Brother Philemon’s zeal especially shone. It’s worth repeating the timelines: Stewart became a physician in January 1844. In June of that year, he was introduced to the work of Priessnitz and immediately embarked on a four-month intensive trial. And that September he met Dr. Joel Shew, the marketing pioneer who brought hydrotherapy to America.

In October, Brother Aaron Bills reportedly took a “course of the Hydropathyin system under the immediate directions of Dr George Curtis (Professor of Hyderopathy in the cold water hospital)” and three months later a “hydropathian bath” was completed for the Sisters in the wash-house.⁵³ Certainly, the speed with which it grew may indicate some form of promotion; the words “agitated” and “much conversation” in the passage below appear to agree:

A new method of cure & prevention of diseases has been agitated among us the season past, by much use of



Fig. 11. Joel Shew. Wikimedia.org

cold water, by drinking a great deal, bathing showering, taking cold water sweats! Cold water pukes – etc etc. It is said to have been practiced in some parts of the world, with wonderful success, for surpassing all the greatest skill of Physicians of the old way – It is a subject which makes much conversation among us, and excites much pleasantry & many remarks; they fancy it is a sure & wonderful cure all or preventative of nearly or quite every form of disease, or infirmity to the exclusion of every other kind of medicine. The 2^d order go into it, rather more than the 1^s they have a nice bathing place for the brethren & one for the sisters and they have used but very little medicine for some months past.⁵⁴

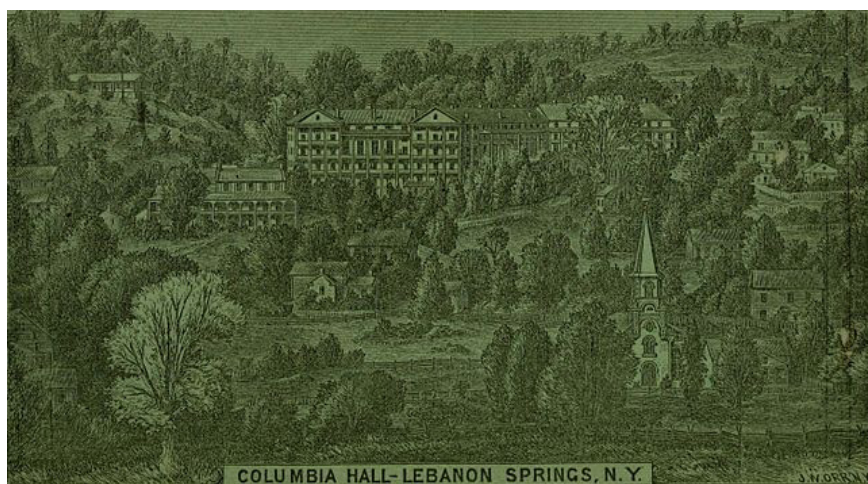


Fig. 12. Lebanon Springs Water Cure Establishment. Wikimedia.org

Was Brother Philemon's miraculous cure at the centre of this craze? Was he the catalyst that introduced hydrotherapy to New Lebanon? It seems quite possible, but ultimately we may never know. He evidently made an impression on Dr. Joel Shew, however. Stewart's testimony was not only preserved in *The Water Cure Manual* but the two men met on at least two occasions: New York (October 1844) and at New Lebanon the following spring when Shew was "on business concerning purchasing the situation at the [Lebanon] Springs in order to set up a water cure establishment." This wildly successful enterprise opened in October 1845.⁵⁵

Stephen Stein notes that Stewart "was a strong advocate of the Water Cure and dietary regimens and a sharp critic of patent medicines, including those the society was now producing."⁵⁶ Is it possible that his distain for medicine stemmed from his long-suffering bouts with scrofula? Could his position as principal male instrument have influenced the New Lebanon elders to shift the herb business from the First Order to the Second? Again, these answers are unknown. Nonetheless, forty years of debility and a myriad of failed conventional treatments (including mercury) quite likely provoked Stewart's general distrust of doctors—certainly those of the World but potentially Shaker physicians as well. Yet Brother Philemon's support for hydrotherapy continued the rest of his life. Indeed, during his

final illness he apparently felt so strongly in water cure that he refused regular treatment. He believed “medicine of all kinds is poison” and water alone had the power to heal.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Believers and historians have often treated Brother Philemon harshly in their respective works. His irascible personality, his blunt stubbornness, and his seeming abuse of power make him an easy mark for criticism. And there is little doubt that his zeal and devotion often waylaid his ambitions, particularly in his propensity to ignore obedience and common sense. However, as we have seen, perhaps there is more to the story. One wonders what might have happened had Stewart not been “very scrofulous from infancy.”⁵⁸ Would he have become principal male instrument? Would *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll* have been received and published? Conversely, would he have followed his natural brother Amos into the Ministry?

For almost 150 years this Shaker Brother has been remembered in a relatively one-sided and most unfavorable light. But perhaps with the help of new evidence, this narrative can be re-imagined. Eldress Anna Dodgson once wrote that Stewart endured a “toiling, stormy, industrious, valuable life.”⁵⁹ In fact, this description may best illustrate the complicated and very human individual Brother Philemon undoubtedly was. For despite his opinionated personality and inability to advance within the Shaker hierarchy, his effect on the daily lives of Believers was both profound and enduring. As an instrument he received spirit-derived messages that gave rise to two monumental works: *A General Statement of the Holy Laws of Zion* “Received by Inspiration from and with an Introduction by Father James (which in turn strongly influenced the Millennial Laws of 1845) and *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll*. And as a physician, Brother Philemon pioneered the use of water cure on himself and quite possibly introduced this form of therapeutic care to New Lebanon. Ultimately this is a tale of an anti-hero. Regardless of his early life, apparent ability for self-sabotage, and against all expectations, his legacy is still a remarkable achievement.

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