

A Comparison of the Shaker Medicinal Herb Industries in Mount Lebanon and Groveland, New York.

By Paige Cross

The Shaker's English origins encouraged the production of homemade remedies. Up until the nineteenth century, the mother of an English household cared for her family. She produced medicines and used them to treat her ill family members. The Shakers followed the practices of their colonial counterparts, which were borrowed from English predecessors. They collected unfamiliar herbs from close-by fields and forests and learned from neighboring Native Americans.¹

During the early years of their American settlement, the Shakers gathered plants from surrounding areas, but soon they began cultivating their own plants in "physic gardens" to provide for their communities. This desire to nurture and nurse may have been inspired by Ann Lee, who had been overexposed to sickness during her time in Manchester.² The Shakers began producing surpluses in their personal gardens and so some settlements began to sell to non-Shakers. Soon they were importing various herbs from countries worldwide. In just a matter of decades, this seemingly small-scale, humble business became a large pharmaceutical market.³

The first Shaker herbal businesses began in 1821 in Harvard, Massachusetts, and New Lebanon, New York, out of both necessity and opportunity.⁴ The Shakers became highly respected in the medicinal community, and they earned a level of trust that remained unrivaled throughout their existence. Their business was profitable; in fact, "during the seventy-five years when it was at its height, the business at just five Shaker communities (Watervliet and Mount Lebanon, New York; Harvard, Massachusetts; Canterbury, New Hampshire and Union Village, Ohio) was averaging an aggregate gross of at least \$150,000 annually."⁵

Note: Woodcut illustrations are taken from [B.J. Lossing], "The Shakers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 15 (July 1857): 164-77; product labels are from the Hamilton College collection. The herbal medicine labels show some of the ingredients used in the recipes discussed; they are not the specific preparations that these recipes would have yielded.

The Shaker herbal business produced and used labels to identify their various products. Shaker physician David Meacham created numerous herbal remedies. These remedies were labeled with his initials, D.M. This distinctive seal was used on remedies well past his death in 1827. Outside consumers recognized it as a seal of approval.⁶

The Shakers were also skilled record keepers and, as a result, many of their recipes and related medicinal paraphernalia are available for study today. They kept account books, journals, catalogs and other meticulously written documents to record their recipes, prices, and related information.⁷ Their remedy labels, also an example of their attention to detail, contained medical indications, the name of the remedy preparer (often a physician), and other relevant information. In this paper I will compare medicinal preparations from manuscript recipe books compiled at the New Lebanon and Groveland settlements.

Sites: Mount Lebanon, New York

New Lebanon, New York (1787-1860), later called Mount Lebanon (1861-1947), is often considered “the largest ... most prosperous, and most influential of all the Shaker communities.”⁸ For the sake of simplicity, this Shaker settlement will be referred to as Mount Lebanon. At its height, the Mount Lebanon community spanned over six thousand acres and contained over one hundred buildings.⁹ As one of the first Shaker villages, Mount Lebanon stood out as an early success; many early Shaker communities struggled with food shortages because farming practices had not yet been refined. This was not the case for Mount Lebanon; by 1798, the Mount Lebanon Shaker settlement was “considered completely in ‘order,’” and the botanical medicine business was blooming.¹⁰

The Shakers at Mount Lebanon kept particularly detailed journals, diaries, and catalogs of their products. The first annual catalog was created in 1836. This book features 164 herbs, twelve extracts, four ointments, seven double-distilled and fragrant waters, and four pill recipes.¹¹

In later years, the catalogs would increase in numbers of herbs, extracts, ointments, pills, syrups, and other medicines. In 1851, the title of the catalog was quite thorough: *A Catalogue of Medicinal Plants, Barks, Roots, Seeds, Flowers, and Select Powders with their Therapeutic Qualities and Botanical Names; also Pure Vegetable Extracts, prepared in vacuo; Ointments Insipissated Juices, Essential Oils, Double Distilled and Fragrant Waters, etc etc., Raised, prepared and put up in the most careful manner by the United Society of Shakers at New Lebanon,*

*N.Y.*¹² The catalog reached new heights in 1876 when a three-page list of fluid extracts was added. The Shakers at Mount Lebanon produced other medicinal handbooks, too. For example, the *Price List of Medicinal Preparations* was published in 1874.

The industry of creating and readying herbs for sale at Mount Lebanon was complex and tedious. Various buildings were erected to house individual aspects of the process. The Herb House, located in the center of the village, contained storerooms, drying rooms, and areas to press and pack herbs and roots. This massive building was constructed in 1832. The basement contained a horse-powered press that “turned out 250 pounds of herbs and 600 pounds of roots pressed into solid pound cakes wrapped in dark blue paper” daily.¹³ The Extract House served as a laboratory for the “cracking, steaming and pressing [of] roots and herbs.”¹⁴ Crushing mills cracked and crushed dried herbs and roots. Juices were extracted through boiling, and some were boiled in a vacuum pan, which was airtight and allowed herbal liquid to be boiled at low temperatures.¹⁵ The Finishing Room, located near the Extract House, was a building in which phials, bottles, and jars were labeled and packaged for sale. Various other buildings related to Shaker industry were erected at this settlement, including a Seed House and workshops for the Shakers’ well-known woodenware. A village store sold many of the Mount Lebanon Shakers’ unique products.





Mount Lebanon's settlement was distinctive in a number of ways. It was the first and only village to run a successful mail order business; this business began at the settlement's origin and lasted through the very end. Mount Lebanon also produced remedies designed for external use, a rarity in Shaker medicine. These external remedies were classified as either cosmetics or pain relievers. Examples of cosmetics include skin care, tooth wash, and hair restoration products. The Shakers at Mount Lebanon marketed a distinctive toothache pellet, which was invented by James Valentine Calver, a former Shaker. Calver left Mount Lebanon in 1871 to attend dentistry school and marry. He loaned his recipe to the Shaker community in 1890 and collected a portion of their profits.¹⁶ These toothache pellets were unique to Mount Lebanon Shakers and proved to be a large source of income.

Sites: Groveland, New York

The Groveland Shaker settlement was located originally on Sodus Bay on the coast of Lake Ontario. In 1836, the Shakers at this settlement were uprooted by canal plans drafted by New York State and essentially forced to move to Groveland, New York, a town eighty miles southwest of Sodus Bay. This small community grew to nearly two hundred members and two thousand acres during its sixty-six years of existence. Because this settlement was forced to start from scratch, its inhabitants were required to construct its buildings, most notably an atypical Shaker meetinghouse in 1841. Most buildings constructed from then on were heavily influenced by Victorian architecture.¹⁷ The Groveland Shaker settlement contained a dwelling house, broom shop, several barns, and an office.¹⁸

The Shakers at Groveland were blessed with nearly two thousand acres of fertile land; as experienced farmers, they exploited this land to its fullest.¹⁹ The Groveland Shakers were known for their broom, bonnet, mitten, cabinetry, and elaborate furniture industries.²⁰ There is little recorded evidence of this community's medicinal herb practices other than the one manuscript, which will be discussed later.

Despite their varied industries, the Groveland Shaker settlement was short-lived. They struggled to attract converts, endured poor leadership, experienced troubling weather, and suffered from many devastating fires. Ultimately, however, the Groveland settlement shut down for increasing and overwhelming debts. Numbers began to dwindle, and in 1892, the Groveland settlement became the fourth Shakercommunity to close.²¹

Medicinal Herb Remedies: Mount Lebanon, 1815

The Mount Lebanon Nurse's Shop Book, written in 1815, is 140 pages long and contains numerous syrup, pill, elixir, and powder recipes for headache, stomach pain, cough, and cancer, among other conditions. Five headache and four stomach-ache remedies have been deciphered and further researched in the following pages. Interestingly, many of the herbal ingredients do not seem to be linked to headaches and stomach aches; several herbal ingredients used in these recipes were utilized in other medical remedies. However, this specific manuscript contains impeccably detailed procedures and measurements, which is not common to all other Shaker medicinal manuscripts.

Many of these remedy recipes were rendered phonetically. In many cases, the exact components of remedies are ambiguous, so educated guesses were made to identify the precise ingredients.

Against the Sick head Ake

Take hemp Seed Scorch it like Coffey Steep
it then drink half a pint
Then drink warm water until it pushes
you sufficiently²²

This simple recipe only references one herbal ingredient. Hemp seed is derived from the plant *Cannabis sativa*. Today, hemp is found in clothing, foods, plastics, and a variety of other products. It is famously recognized for its strong associations with marijuana. Historically, this plant was used centuries before the Shakers as an exhilarant and a powerful aphrodisiac. Overuse was thought to lead to weakness.²³ Despite the remedy's simplicity, the author included specific instructions on how this herb should be administered and even provided information on the desired medicinal outcomes.

How to drive pain from the head

Take treacle root a large handful
Bruise it moisten with Vinegar
lay it on the head Continue this
untill the pain is gone²⁴

This remedy also provides detailed instructions for administration. The primary ingredient, treacle root, has indistinct origins. Treacle is a British term, so it is not surprising that the Shakers used it, given their English origins. More specifically, treacle is a “generic name for any syrup made during the refining of sugar cane.”²⁵ Originally, treacle was a medicinal mixture with indistinct ingredients used as an antidote against venomous bites.²⁶ By the seventeenth century, this British antidote became recognized as an inexpensive candied root used as a sweetener, but the Shakers most likely adopted it for its medicinal uses in their headache recipe.

Head Ache Pills

Sinnaman Mace and Cloves

Myrrh Cubibs Saffan $\frac{1}{2}$ an oz

Each 3 oz allows Pulverize

these together²⁷

“Sinnaman” or *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* is a spice yielded from the bark of *Cinnamomum* trees. It is food preservative. Many Shaker societies used this spice, but did not list it in their catalogs.²⁸ *The Mount Lebanon Nurse’s Shop Book* does list it as an ingredient in this remedy, though, suggesting that this settlement was more detailed in its recording. *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* has been used as an ingredient in toothpaste.²⁹

Mace is the red covering on a nutmeg seed. Nutmeg, or *Nux muscata*, is described thus by *Hildegard’s Healing Plants*: “Nutmeg has great warmth and good temperament in its strength. If a person eats nutmeg, it opens the heart and purifies the senses and brings a good disposition.”³⁰

Cloves, or *Syzygium aromaticum*, was used medicinally as astringent, but also as an ingredient in cooking. Cinnamon, mace, and cloves are not indigenous to northeastern America, but were likely introduced to the area centuries before the Shakers arrived. Shakers also imported a lot medicinal ingredients themselves, which may account for the presence of these three foreign ingredients.

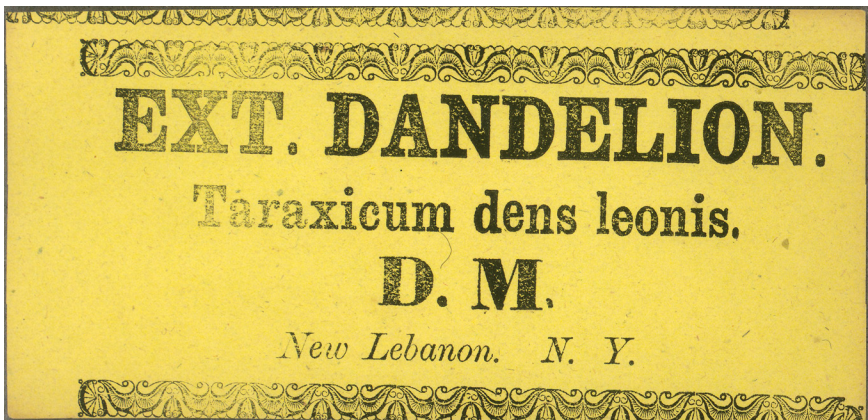
The second line, ‘Myrrh Cubibs Saffan’, probably refers to three separate components. ‘Myrrh’ belongs to the genus *Commiphora* and is a small fragrant thorny tree native to regions in Eastern Africa and the Mediterranean. It has been used medicinally as a resin for gums, but it is also a thickening agent.³¹ “Cubibs” is likely referring to piper cubebs, a plant native to Sumatra and imported to America. There is little evidence of its use as a medicine, but the Shakers seemed to use it often in their recipes. ‘Saffan’ references the saffron crocus, a flower native to Greece. It too had a wide range of medicinal uses. Shakers utilized it to treat menstrual cramps, scarlet fever, and measles, among other ailments.³²

FLUID EXT. CLOVES,
CARYOPHYLLUS.

For the Head

Take head bitterney and high
biterney blood wort madoni heir &
Dandelion roots make all into
a Sirrup – if inflammation in the
eyes dissolve of sugar in new milk
& wash the Eyes going to bed³³

Dandelion root was used in many Shaker herbal remedies. Dandelion is pervasive in northeastern America, but is actually native to Eurasia. Different parts of the plant had very separate uses. The root specifically was used to stimulate digestion and treat liver afflictions.³⁴ “Bitterney blood wort” was probably rendered phonetically and may refer to wood betony. Wood betony, *Pedicularis canadensis*, was used almost exclusively for headaches and anxiety.³⁵ It is native to regions in East Asia, Western Europe and North Africa. “Madoni heir” probably means maidenhair fern. Its botanical name is *Adiantum pedatum*. This plant is native to East Asia and was used to treat a variety of ailments, including coughs and other cold symptoms, asthma, the flu, and jaundice.³⁶



For the Sick Head-ach

Take 2 ½ inches blue flag root,
bruise it and put it to 1 gall
of Spring water, Strain it off
and add the same quantity of
Sale molass, and shake it well
together. Dose from 2 thirds of
ct table Spoonful to a whole
one, to be taken every morning
upon an empty stomach³⁷

Blue flag is indigenous to North America. It is known botanically as *Iris versicolor*. Historically, the root of this herb has been use internally to increase fat catabolism and topically treat burns, bruises, and sores.³⁸ The Shakers also used blue flag root to treat dropsy, liver, spleen, and kidney infections, as well as syphilis.³⁹ “Sale molass,” rendered phonetically, may mean salt molasses. Molasses has very few documented medicinal uses, but the Shakers were probably familiar with its properties because they used it often in cooking.



Stomach Pills

Take Rheubarb of Vitriolateed
Tartar of Each an ounce Gum
Gamboge a quarter of an Ounce
Powder them fine and wet them
With Molasses or the white of an
Egg form them into pills Soon after it is weet or
it will grow to hard dose 1 or 2
pills⁴⁰

Stomach Pills

Take Rhubarbe and Vitriolated tartar
of Each an ounce gum Gamboge
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz of an ounce pound them
fine together and form them into a
Mass with Mucilage of Gum
tragacanth⁴¹

Stomach Pills

Take Rheubarb and Vitriolated tartar
Each one oz. Gum Gamboge a
 $\frac{1}{4}$ of an oz. Powder them fine of
wet them with Molasses or the
white of an Egg and form them
into pills Immediately or it will
grow to hard Dose one or two
Pills as needfull before
Going to bed⁴²

These three very similar recipes for stomach pills were found just pages from each other in the *Mount Lebanon Nurse's Shop Book*. Though the handwriting on the actual manuscript reveals that these recipes were most likely written by separate authors, and though the directions differ slightly, all three recipes utilize the same key ingredients: rhubarb, vitriolic tartar, gum gamboge, and molasses.

Rheum officianale, or rhubarb, is a common cathartic. It has been used

medicinally to encourage smooth muscle contraction, specifically in the lower bowel, so its presence in stomach ache remedies is unsurprising.⁴³ “Vitriolated tartar” means potassium sulfate, a salt and common constituent of medicines.⁴⁴

Gum gamboge is a yellow pigment, originally used in ancient eastern Asia. It was used in paints throughout history. Gamboge, just like in this remedy, was commonly mixed with a gum: “Gamboge usually contains about 70% to 80% yellow resin, and 15% to 25% water-soluble gum. The remaining portion is composed of esters, hydrocarbons, wax, ash-residen, and vegetable detritus.”⁴⁵ It was likely used in this recipe to color the stomach pills yellow.

Distress at the Stomach

Sarsaperilla Angellica white
Solomon Seal a little louage
Comfrey Roots Some Seeds
Powerdered boil the Roots Soft
in Earthen then take Sugar
Equal weight to the Roots
Slice the Roots lay a laying
of Roots then of Sugar Sprink
ling on the Seed Plenty in an
Earthen pot when the Roots are
all in the Pour the Liquor on
they were Boiled in Cover it
over with a Crust and Bake it
When baked Spread it on Puter
& dry it in a warm oven⁴⁶

Sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicauiis*), known also as dwarf elder, is a plant native to northeastern America.⁴⁷ Shakers used it in many of their medicinal herb recipes, including remedies for rheumatic infections, dropsy, and chronic skin problems. “Angellica white” is the plant *Angelica atropurpurea*. This type of plant served as treatment for heartburn, colic, and other stomach ailments⁴⁸ Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), a gum plant native to Europe, was used in treatments for diarrhea, dysentery, and coughs. It was also used as skin cream, relieving sores, wounds, and burns.⁴⁹

The recipe goes on to provide detailed instructions on how to prepare the roots of the comfrey and bake the remedy.

Medicinal Herb Remedies: Groveland, 1842

The Shaker community in Groveland was much smaller than its Mount Lebanon counterpart. The following four recipes were taken from *The Receipts of Materia Medica*, a small book written in 1842, which contains medicinal remedies. The recipes contain mostly measurements and ingredients and little instruction on how to prepare and administer the medication. The following paragraphs deconstruct the recipes for three headache remedies and one stomach-ache remedy. Again, many of the original recipes were rendered phonetically, so some elements of the recipes may not be entirely accurate.

Headach

2 oz. W. Helebore

2. oz. Bitterroot⁵⁰

This remedy merely lists the ingredients. Unlike the recipes from *The Mount Lebanon Nurse's Shop Book*, no preparation details are listed. “Bitterroot,” botanically known as *Apocynum androsaemifolium*, is recognized as a sudorific, diuretic, and tonic. The Shakers used this as treatment for liver problems, syphilis, and typhoid fever.⁵¹

‘W. Helebore’, probably refers to white hellebore or *Veratrum viride*. It is a yellow flower native to Europe and was used historically to treat pneumonia, typhoid fever, and itching.⁵² When used incorrectly, this herb can be fatal. It was commonly used in a famous Mount Lebanon remedy, “Norwood’s Tincture of Veratrum Viride.” This famous drug was produced for eighty years—a remarkably long time for Shaker remedies. An alkaloid in white hellebore suppressed the respiratory and heart muscles. During Shaker times, infections could not always be treated directly, so Shaker physicians sought to treat symptoms. As such, white hellebore was used often to nurse fevers. However, because it relaxed circulatory muscles and subsequently lowered heart rate, overdoses of this remedy proved to be lethal.⁵³

Scald head

1 tb. hogs lards

3 oz. snakeroot well pulverized if green

6 oz. to be steeped together two hours over a slow fire

Strain and it is ready for use⁵⁴

This remedy contains more detail than in the previous recipe listed, but it is still relatively sparse compared to the remedies found in the Mount Lebanon manuscript. Snakeroot is a common name for many different plants. This remedy probably references black snakeroot (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) or Seneca snakeroot (*Polygala senega*). Both are herbaceous perennial plants found in northeastern America. Black snakeroot is a narcotic and a sedative and Seneca snakeroot is an expectorant and diuretic. Hogs lard was likely used as a thickening agent.

Nervous headache

1 oz. oil rosemary

2 oz gum camphor

2 oz. hartshorn

1 quart alcohol⁵⁵

This is another example of a very simple recipe. Rosemary, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, is not native to North America; however, it was a very familiar plant in Europe, so it was most likely utilized during America's colonization. This plant was used for colds, colic, and "nervous conditions."⁵⁶ The alcohol and rosemary components of this recipe suggest that it may have been more geared toward anxiety, hence the title, "Nervous headache."

Gum camphor means comfrey, which again is a gum plant with a wide assortment of medicinal uses. Hartshorn is a term for the material that composes antlers of a male deer. Shakers produced many products, medicinal and otherwise, from the shavings of these antlers. Medicinally, physicians used hartshorn to treat a variety of unconnected ailments.

Stomach Pills

Tak

1 lb..... Lobelia seed Pulv.

1 ”.....Cayenne

1 ”.....Lady Slipper

1.4 ”.....Golden seal

2oz.Myrrh drops

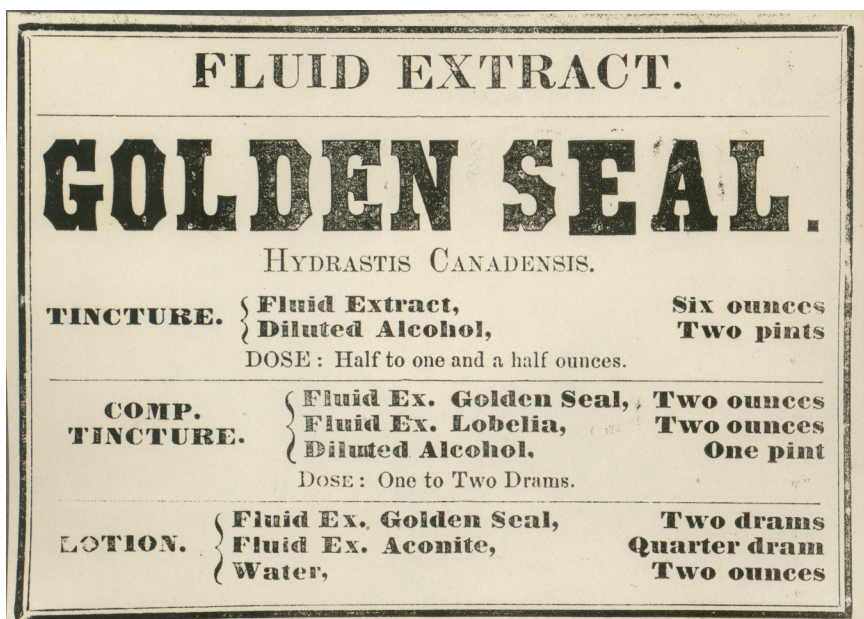
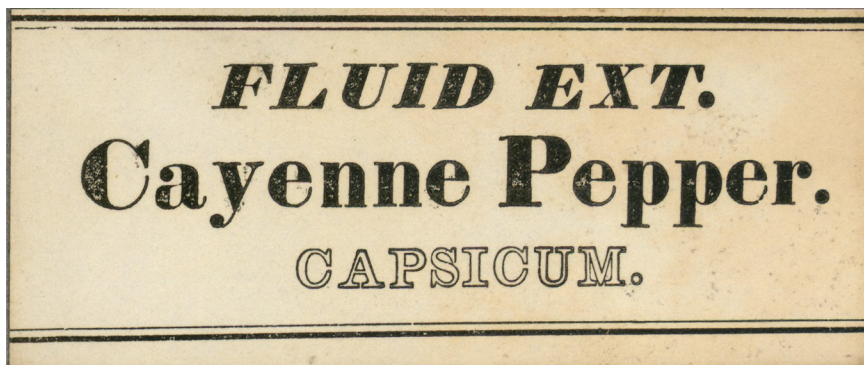
1 teaspoonfull of the Oil Pennyroyal to be put into the Myrrh drops to be cut before putting to the above mass. 1 table spoonful of Bitterroot 2 oz Slippery Elm wet with a little cold water and then add a little warm water to swell it also 2 oz. Wheat flour sifted to hold the mass together. This to be thoroughly mixed. Dose from one to six. For schirrosity of the Uterus one to be taken every night as it acts on that part while in bed⁵⁷

This recipe is more detailed than most recipes in this Groveland manuscript. The author indicated that the listed ingredients be mixed with additional listed ingredients. There are very specific preparation instructions. At the end, the author discusses how this recipe may be used for “schirrosity of the Uterus.” “Schirrosity” dates back to at least the late seventeenth century and means hardness of the womb.⁵⁸

Lobelia seed comes from the plant *Lobelia inflata*. The seeds specifically create both antispasmodic and emetic symptoms. More specifically, this plant was used to treat cramps, convulsions, asthma, and pneumonia, as well as a slew of other medical ailments.⁵⁹ Cayenne, clearly referring to cayenne pepper, is most known for its cooking uses. However, cayenne has been used medicinally frequently in history, and was known for its positive role in the digestive system.⁶⁰ Lady’s slipper, or *Cypripedium acaule*, was a plant typically used to treat anxiety. It is also an antispasmodic, however, so it may have stomach-calming properties.⁶¹ Goldenseal, or *Hydrastis Canadensis* was viewed as an invaluable medicinal herb, used to treat stomach aches, liver disease, mouth ulcers, nasal congestion, and fever.⁶² Myrrh, again, probably was used as a thickening agent. Slippery elm, *Ulmus rubra*, was used to treat inflammation in many body systems, including the stomach.⁶³

“Oil pennyroyal” refers to the herb pennyroyal, *Hedeoma pulegioides*.

This herb was especially useful in the treatment of menstrual pain. This remedy was most likely written to treat menstrual pain because of the use of the primary herb and the specific instructions, which reference the uterus.



Conclusions

The details found in the manuscripts from Mount Lebanon and Groveland reflect the settlements' levels of prosperity. Not only did Mount Lebanon contain the central Ministry, but also it became the largest Shaker settlement, reaching its height in the mid-1800s. It was known for having the largest acreage of herbs under cultivation.⁶⁴ The Mount Lebanon Shakers established infirmaries, maintained extensive botanical gardens, and employed renowned physicians. These physicians kept and created numerous manuscripts, including *The Mount Lebanon Nurse's Shop Book*. These doctors also recorded their daily activities in journals, which evidence the settlement's advancement. The Mount Lebanon Shakers devoted several buildings to the production and sale of herbal remedies. Individuals from the entire settlement sustained this large enterprise: men, women and children not actively tied to spiritual duties were expected to participate in the various industrial operations.

The Mount Lebanon Shakers even produced and sold medicines invented by non-Shakers. Because they meticulously planted, grew, and harvested their own herbs, the Shakers were able to duplicate these recipes in bulk, often producing higher-quality products.⁶⁵ The Mount Lebanon Shakers created remedies original to their site, including the famous "Shaker Asthma Cure" and "Shaker Hair Restorer."⁶⁶

The Mount Lebanon site endured many fires, which destroyed buildings and stockpiled dried herbs, roots, and extracts, as well as buildings integral to the production of the herbal medicine industry. Nevertheless, the Mount Lebanon Shakers persisted, continuing to deliver quality products to the public, as indicated by Shaker almanacs. Business only dwindled when the Shaker movement began to ebb, and officially closed when the Mount Lebanon site shut down in 1947.

The Groveland settlement was not nearly as large or extensive. In fact, *Receipts of Matera Medica* is perhaps the only written evidence of the production of herbal remedies at this site. Groveland did sell many other products, which they profited from greatly, but there is no documentation of them ever selling their herbs. Their infirmary staff most likely made the herbal remedies for Groveland Shaker use only.⁶⁷

The remarkable medicinal herb production at Mount Lebanon starkly contrasts the small-scale production at Groveland. This is evidenced in the very recipes themselves; the Groveland recipes in general are shorter, contain less detail, and utilize fewer ingredients than those found in the

Mount Lebanon manuscripts. The Groveland Shakers were decidedly less involved in this industry, and therefore less accomplished than their counterparts at Mount Lebanon.

Notes

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32. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Medicinal Herbs*, 173.
33. "Herbal Formulae Used in the Infirmary," 44.
34. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Medicinal Herbs*, 144.
35. Ibid., 131.
36. Ibid., 147.
37. "Herbal Formulae Used in the Infirmary," 100.
38. Lewis and Elvin-Lewis, *Medical Botany*, 344.
39. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Medicinal Herbs*, 144.
40. Ibid., 17.
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43. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Medicinal Herbs*, 170.
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47. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Herbs*, 226.
48. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Medicinal Herbs*, 127.
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51. A. B. Miller, *Shaker Medicinal Herbs*, 131.
52. Ibid., 153.
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