

# THE SLEEPING PORCH

Tuberculosis is an ancient disease still in existence, and outbreaks affected people in Europe and the United States into the mid-twentieth century. Untreated, the disease often leads to death. It spreads easily by coughing and sneezing, and symptoms include struggling to breathe and coughing blood. In nineteenth century Peacham, the disease was known as “consumption”. In the 1880’s, it became known that tuberculosis (also called TB) is caused by “germs”, or bacteria, and people began to believe that fresh air could help those suffering from the disease. Some cities printed “Do **N**ot Spit on the Sidewalk” on paving bricks. In the countryside, porches or rooms with additional windows were added to houses. These provided places for sick people to rest during the day and a place for everyone to sleep at night.

The Historical House, built in 1820, served as a school until 1835, when it became a private home. At some point, the house was renovated to include a short, enclosed porch on the south side— perhaps a sleeping porch. Although the fresh air did not provide the hoped-for cure for TB, there are now medicines that help people recover, and the disease is no longer widespread.

## HILLCREST LODGE

Tuberculosis, an ancient disease, spreads easily and constituted a feared worldwide pandemic into the twentieth century. Once it was discovered in the 1880's that TB is caused by "germs" (bacteria), people began to believe that fresh air could cure those stricken by the disease.

By the late nineteenth century, Vermont began a state-wide tourism campaign to attract visitors, promoting its pure air and water, as well as its healthy food. This reputation attracted Miss Ella Genevieve Prentiss, a nurse who came to Peacham with a patient. Charmed by the village, she bought an acre of land in 1908 on which to build Hillcrest Lodge as a summer camp, hoping to attract "convalescents, children, or those desiring restful out of door living and home cooking." The screened porch dining room and broad terrace were designed for wholesome air flow. One guest wrote of its "million-dollar view", a phrase that Miss Prentiss advertised, promoting the glorious views of the Presidential and Franconia Ranges.

The lodge was open until 1928, at which point it was bought by Professor and Mrs. **E**dwin C. Kemble of Harvard, and the house remains in his family. A medicinal cure for TB was discovered in 1943.

## BAYLEY HAZEN ROAD BENCH VIEW

If you look south across the valley to the farms on the opposite hill, you are looking at a trail of an Abenaki seasonal migration route from the summer fields along the Connecticut River to the winter hunting grounds in the mountains.

In 1776, Jonathan Elkins and his son were the first year-round European settlers in Peacham, following the Abenaki trail from Haverhill, **N**ew Hampshire to this location. This trail became the Bayley Hazen Road, a major road for early settlers and a military road during the Revolution. Elkins described his home here as a popular lodging for Abenaki and Europeans alike.

Unfortunately, these early settlers carried with them the viral disease known as smallpox. Found as early as 3rd century BCE in Egypt, the disease spread worldwide. It ravaged communities of Native peoples across this continent, often killing entire villages before European explorers even made contact. It is estimated that the disease killed at least 50% of the population.

In the case of the Abenaki, the epidemic led to a changed way of life. Many of the shrinking communities chose to band together and moved northwards to Quebec. Other families stayed in Vermont, regrouped, and remain here to this day.

# THE OLD CEMETERY

If you examine some of the earliest stones of this old central cemetery in Peacham, you will find a few listing a date of death in 1811. In this year, the highly contagious bacterial meningitis known as “spotted fever” swept through the young and prosperous town. Once a person is infected with this disease, symptoms are swift and dramatic. Untreated, a person can develop brain damage or even die within 24 hours.

Over one fourth of the deaths recorded in Peacham for a decade happened in this year, most in the month of March. Hardly a single family in the town was left untouched. Sometimes whole families fell ill, and many young children died. One of the saddest stories is of the family of Captain Luther Bailey: nine people were ill, and five deaths occurred in one week.

The town appropriated \$40 (over \$1,000 today) “to obtain from abroad a physician for advice and assistance in time of the present alarming sickness.” However, the illness was not understood, as bacteria and “germs” were not discovered till later in the century. Today, treatment for spotted fever is available through use of antibiotics and vaccinations.

# THE FIRE HOUSE

If you look at the front of the Peacham Fire House, you will note the outlines of two buildings flanking each side. The one on the left is actually a schoolhouse, the third one for the Peacham Corner District. It was built in 1835, and when no longer needed, it was incorporated into the design of the new town fire house. If you were to enter the small door on the left and climb the stairs, you'd find a classroom with chalkboards still in place!

Education has long been important in Peacham, with records of the children of early settlers being educated in private homes and then in one-room schoolhouses. In early Caledonia County organization, Peacham lobbied hard to get the Grammar School (high school), to which boys and then girls were soon admitted.

However, it was not easy being a child in early Peacham. In addition to being expected to work long hours both for one's family and in school, children faced mortal danger from the transmission of diseases ranging from croup to measles to typhoid to whooping cough. Records from the first minister of the Congregational church reveal that from 1800-1838, half the deaths were of people under the age of 10. **E**pidemics were less frequent once basic principles of hygiene— clean water and food— were understood and adopted.

# DOCTORS IN PEACHAM

In the early years of life in Peacham, medical science was not well developed. Home remedies were the rule, and doctors were called only when they had failed. People lived in fear of epidemics of many diseases, which often swept through town and affected whole families.

Once medical training became standardized in the nineteenth century, the list of resident physicians in Peacham became a long and honorable one. Many Peacham young men followed training by attending lectures at Dartmouth Medical College and then apprenticing with doctors living in Peacham.

Two doctors in particular who developed reputations as fair, honest men became well-loved members of the community: Dr. Shedd, who practiced from 1807 until 1851, and then Dr. Parker, who served as a physician in the Civil War and practiced in Peacham from 1854-1898, sometimes traveling between houses on snowshoes. Both doctors married local women, served as mentors to aspiring doctors, and became active in village affairs.

The Dr. Luther **F**. Parker House and its immediate neighbor to the north, the Dr. Shedd House, were both built in 1826 and anchor the famous row of Greek Revival buildings in Peacham.

# 1918 INFLUENZA

Influenza, or “The Spanish Flu”, is the pandemic that seems most familiar today as we grapple with COVID-19. Called “Spanish” because it was first reported by newspapers in Spain, it appeared in a mild form in the spring of 1918 and then returned in a far more deadly form in the fall. Symptoms included fever, coughing, and fluid-filled lungs. Many died, particularly the young. Soldiers on army bases in training for World War I were among the first to get sick, and scientists studied them to try to discover what was causing the disease. The first influenza virus, however, was not isolated until 1933 and researchers worked quickly to develop vaccines. Viruses, however, are still difficult to control today.

By October of 1918, recognizing that the disease could not be controlled, officials closed schools and banned gatherings. Although families tried remedies ranging from using Vick’s VapoRub (rapidly in short supply) to gargling with baking soda to wearing garlic to eating lemons, doctors could do almost nothing to help their patients other than to recommend washing hands and using gauze face masks. **W**hen the pandemic finally ended, it was because those who had survived had developed immunity. The virus simply could find no new targets.

# THE RICHTER STORE

When you stand on the front lawn of the library and look across the road, you are facing one of the oldest sets of buildings in Peacham. It has housed a shoe shop, general stores, the Town Clerk's office, the library, and the post office. It was also the stop for the stage from the railroad station in Barnet. The oldest part, now housing the Peacham Craft Guild, was established as a general store by John Christian Frederick Richter, a German immigrant who operated it for 40 years until his death in 1933. The store served as a meeting place and sold all necessities, including patent medicines.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was an unregulated market in "patent medicines". These formulas, available without a prescription, were developed by entrepreneurs with no pharmaceutical training. They claimed to cure ailments ranging from fevers to depression to cancer.

Patent medicines also served as an underground source of alcohol. During the nearly uninterrupted prohibition in Peacham from 1853 until the repeal of the 18th Amendment in 1933, alcohol was always available. Store patrons could purchase elixirs up to 40 proof, about half the strength of rum or gin!

# THE CIVIL WAR

This monument on the top of the Town Green honors the service of Peacham's fallen soldiers during the Civil War. Of the 170 young men who enlisted, 47 perished of disease. Rampant illness spread throughout camps due to overcrowding and poor sanitation, and records show that many of the Peacham soldiers died of typhoid fever and chronic diarrhea, which are easily transmitted through bacteria in polluted water and contaminated food. Still others died of consumption (tuberculosis), a lung disease spread simply by coughing. Some soldiers died soon after enlisting; others became infected during winter in camps, where they lacked adequate shelter and nutrition.

A significant factor that contributed to this high number of deaths was the status of medical knowledge at the beginning of the Civil War. Not only did doctors know little about the importance of sterilizing equipment prior to surgeries, leading to large numbers of deaths even in those with minor wounds, but they also knew little about protocols for the care of those suffering from disease. Doctors did not understand the importance of careful handwashing, for example, before traveling between patients. A soldier was more likely to die of typhoid fever than in combat. An effective vaccine for typhoid was not introduced for military use until 1896.

## JONAS AND CHARLES VARNUM

At the time of the Civil War, America was still mostly rural, and soldiers from both sides came from farms. Many had not been exposed to classic childhood illnesses such as measles, which is usually a severe disease in adults. **L**iving in horrendous unsanitary conditions in camps, where latrines were often placed near streams used for cooking water, many soldiers contracted these diseases and died. Others survived but later succumbed to other illnesses due to their weakened immune systems.

Jonas and Charles Varnum were twin brothers born in Peacham on June 6, 1843. They both attended Peacham Academy and then enlisted together on September 16, 1862, serving in the Co. F, 15th Vermont Regiment. Both died in the war, Jonas on account of sickness in 1863, and Charles in 1865, the night after he was paroled from Libby Prison near Richmond, Virginia, where he was a prisoner of war. We don't know the exact cause of Charles's death, although he would have suffered greatly in prison from lack of adequate food and shelter and medical care. According to Peacham town records, Jonas died of "liver complaint". This phrase was used to describe a variety of illnesses caused by contaminated water and food. He was discharged due to illness and died back home in Peacham.

## HERD IMMUNITY

Here you will find a gravestone listing Catherine Young. A single housekeeper born in Scotland, she died of influenza in 1921, when she was nearly 90 years old. In fact, after researching all available town records and death notices from 1918-1921, it appears that Peacham may have only lost two citizens to influenza. Interestingly, this low rate of deaths from the flu pandemic is similar in other remote villages in Vermont (such as Fletcher, which has no recorded deaths from the flu). Current thinking suggests such villages were protected indirectly by “herd immunity.” That is, the disease was so virulent in the rest of the country, affecting so many individuals at a high rate within a small span of time, that every survivor was immune, and there were no contagious people left to carry it to Peacham.

This doesn't mean that citizens were not highly worried about the contagion at the time, as evidenced by columns in local papers. Here is a children's rhyme created at the time of the 1918 pandemic:

*I had a little bird;  
Its name was Enza.  
I opened the window  
And in-flew-enza!*

*She tasted of life's bitter cup  
Refused to drink the potion up  
But turned her little head aside  
Disgusted with life's taste and  
died*

–Poem inscribed on the grave  
of a three-month-old in the Old Cemetery

