



# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 39, No 8

Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to [pjhowes@verizon.net](mailto:pjhowes@verizon.net)

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The next Board Meeting is Tuesday, Sept. 13 @ 2:00 P.M., Jericho Historical Center, 90 Old Main Street, West Dennis

## Colonial Medicine at the Manse

The town of Dennis would not be known as Dennis if not for the existence of the influential man, Rev. Josiah Dennis. While much is known about this leader of the Congregational Church, his wife, Bathsheba remains more of a mystery. At the Manse, we are exploring ways to spotlight her important and fascinating role as a healer in the town (then part of Yarmouth) during the mid-1700's.

In colonial times, physical illness and ailments of the soul were, in many cases, believed to be related. Our ancestors were suspicious folk. For example, headaches and seizures were often attributed to spiritual malaise, an imbalance of "humors" or even demonic possession. It is no wonder that Josiah as a reverend of the Congregational church would choose Bathsheba, a skilled healer, as his wife. Together, they could minister to the spiritual and physical needs of their congregation.

Medicinal herbs were grown alongside food in every colonial family's garden. There were specific rules to ensure harvesting occurred at a plant's most potent. For example, it was believed harvesting at night during a full moon or harvesting before a plant flowered would capture plants at their peak of potency. Recipes incorporating these ingredients healing, known as "receipts", would be written down and passed on to future generations. Women as wives and mothers managed the health of their families with these tinctures, decoctions and poultices made from a variety of herbs, spices and minerals. Local healers, like Bathsheba Dennis, would be consulted for more serious or lingering maladies.

In the colonial era, physicians were expensive and not as readily available. There were very few regulations in place, therefore, the "profession" was rife with quackery. Their skills were not necessarily any more effective or sophisticated than those of local healers. Because

the tools of their trade got the job done quickly, barbers and blacksmiths also served the medical needs of the people. These tradesmen regularly performed amputations, tooth extractions and the ever-popular bloodlettings.

The Native Americans introduced the settlers to a host of useful and edible plants indigenous to this area. The settlers also adopted gardening and cooking methods from the local natives. Where would we be today without popcorn and clambakes?

African healing practices also had an influence on folk medicine. Slaves had their own ideas and methods of addressing illness and injury. It is even postulated that viable seeds from Africa were incidentally carried over in the straw that was laid down in the holds of ships. This melting pot of knowledge and experience expanded the repertoire of all healers in the colonist, slave and the Native American communities. This convergence of multi-cultural knowledge was beneficial to all.

The docents at the Josiah Dennis Manse gave visitors a glimpse of Colonial "physick" practices by whipping up an old-time remedy similar to one Bathsheba might have had in her apothecary. Comfrey and mint salve has been used for hundreds of years to ease musculoskeletal pain and skin rashes, promote wound healing and speed the healing of broken bones.

Comfrey was also known as "boneset" or "boneknit". It is a plant indigenous to England. Because of its many and varied uses, the seeds were brought over with the settlers. Allantoin is now known to be the active ingredient in comfrey leaves and roots. It is a substance proven to help skin cell regeneration. It also reduces inflammation. Most of us are familiar with mint. There are endless varieties, one of which was indigenous to the Cape Cod area.

All good Colonial remedies start in the garden. In the mid-18th century, creating these remedies would have taken a lot of effort. First,

comfrey and mint were harvested, tied together with twine and hung over the keeping room hearth to dry thoroughly. After about a week, the leaves were crackly to the touch. The leaves were ground up coarsely. Then each ingredient was placed in its own dark colored crock and moistened with fish oil (We used coconut oil). The goal was to extract the plant essence in as high a concentration as possible, so very little oil was used. Then, in the same way sun tea is brewed, the crocks were put out in the sun and left to steep.

After a few days in the sun, the oil was strained to remove the solid plant matter from the oil. (Extraction of the plant essence could also be accomplished by simmering the crushed leaves and oil over the fire. Thank goodness we used modern conveniences!) The comfrey remains were most likely placed in the garden as they were, and still are, known to have great benefits to the soil.

Beeswax or animal fat was used as a base for the salve. After thorough mixing in of the plant oil decoctions, a pale, lichen green ointment resulted. It helped various skin conditions or insect bites. It promoted wound healing and was even used for bone fractures. It is grand to imagine Bathsheba Dennis in the West Parlor trading similar cures with the townspeople, perhaps accepting eggs, meat, milled grain or services in exchange for her products and counsel.

The effectiveness of many herbs and plants utilized by Colonial healers is still recognized today. Both pharmaceutical and beauty product manufacturers still incorporate many natural ingredients into their products. Many ingredients in old-time remedies are effectively used today. Take a look at some product labels. You will be surprised at how many ingredients you find listed that were used by our ancestors right here on the Cape hundreds of years ago.

*Thank you to Anja Sweetland of Harwich for generously sharing her healing spirit, knowledge and fresh herbs.*

Ingredients to look for:

Aloe	Licorice
Bayberry	May apple
Calomel	Mint
Castor oil	Parsley
Cinnamon	Pinkroot
Comfrey	Rose hips
Horehound	Sage
Ipecac	Sassafras
Lavender	Tansy
Yarrow	

*Lisa Parker*

### **Problems With a School Teacher**

I wish not to cast reflections on or to underrate the morals of our teacher, but in looking back to those days of which we are now writing I have often thought since that it may be – although it was not known at the time – that he might have been an imbiber in that beverage which when taken too freely will not only dethrone one's reason, but at last will bite as a serpent and sting like an adder. I will not say such was the case with our teacher, and as many years have passed since then and he long ago having departed this life for that mysterious future that awaits us all I think it just as well that his name should be withheld from being made known, for I would not cast reflections upon any man's character whereby the public might be influenced to entertain a wrong impression by a mere pretence, for that would be unjust and criminally wrong, but as I have said the man was not liked by the school.

I will mention one little incident that I well remember that occurred between the teacher, an overgrown boy and myself. It was midwinter, snow and ice was the earth's mantle to more than a common degree, traffic was greatly impeded for quite a long time – so much so that it was unpleasant and difficult for some of the scholars, those that live or whose homes were furthest away, to get to school, let alone being late. School being let out at twelve o'clock the scholars until one p.m. were at liberty to go to their dinners and return, being cautioned not to be late regardless of wind and weather.

There was a boy in our school aged twelve or perhaps thirteen years, large for one of his age, clumsy, awkward, harmless and inoffensive, who was one of those that lived farthest from school, and on one of those very blustering days came in a few minutes late, and of course had to be reckoned with for his disobedience against the rules of the school. As the boy entered the room the teacher in a stern voice called a halt "Have you not heard from me more than once? What are the rules of this School? Seeing that you act like one too careless or heed-less to obey, I will put you in remembrance, hoping that from this time forth you will feel like obeying your master".

The boy with a broken voice and quivering lip begged to explain, but no; his piteous wail had no effect in softening the ire of his obdurate and unreasonable (would be) Instructor; taking his Ferule (the instrument of torture) from the desk, demanded in an ugly tone of voice, hold out your hand; taking the boy by the finger tips with left hand he began to belabor the lad right mercifully, until (seemingly) he thought it quite sufficient for that one – during this time, all eyes were centered on Teacher and boy; and although the whole School must have been in sympathy with the poor lad, no one dared as yet to interfere; as for myself I will say; that from my youth up, I always have been one of a quick temperament and had I used a little more caution through this journey of life; but when brought face to face with a harmless and innocent boy, being maltreated without a just cause by a grown up man, I think now as I thought then, that to meddle and to interfere in such a case, would not only have the approval of the many, but a just reason in any Court of Equality in this our Country; my feelings were up to fever heat, as the second demand was made for the other hand.

I could not remain longer, in my seat, to witness over again another cowardly and unreasonable outrage, on a weak inoffensive boy; as the stick was about to be applied to the second hand, Instantly, I was on my feet, and with an earnest and fearless protest denounced in strong terms this act of punishment; and demanded that the lad should be let go to his seat, and using the very words that I then used,

(do not strike that boy another blow), stood there erect and somewhat excited ready for whatever might come; with a growl he ordered me to be seated. Not until the boy is let go to his seat I answered; lowering his hand to his side, and giving the lad a slight push with the ferule, told him (the boy) to go to his seat.

With eyes ablaze with excitement, he paced the floor forward and back for a minute or two, and finally without a word in any way to me, thought perhaps, that discursion was the better part of valor, went on as usual with the cares of School; gradually he softened down, and in a few days, was more than his former self; I believe that the little tangle we had, had made a better and wiser man of him.

The news of this episode traveled like wild fire as the saying goes, and soon, not only our District, but adjoining districts as well, knew all about it; among the young element, I was a hero; of course my Father did not uphold me, and cautioned in his, mild pleasant way to be careful not to bring a reproach on my name, that might perhaps prove a stain or a black mark through my life.

*Howes, Joshua Eldredge, "Memories of the Past", pp45:47*



The **Music 'n More**, first of its kind, event held on August 6<sup>th</sup> was a success for the Rose Victorian Fence Fund. Our thanks to everyone who participated in the planning, set-up and breaking down, bakers and last but not least - the attendees. Without each of you it would not have happened. Our thanks also to the spectacular band "Sound Dunes" for the lively, danceable music which was enjoyed by all.

The "RV" Team

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**Saturday, Sept. 10,  
10 A.M.-4 P.M.**  
**Village Garden Club of Dennis  
Flower Show**  
"Through the Ages"  
1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum  
*77 Nobscusset Rd., Corner Whig St.,  
Dennis Village*

**Saturday, Sept. 24, 1-4 P.M.**  
**Autumn at the Manse**  
Our annual "Fall for the Arts" celebration.  
See this historic Dennis landmark home.  
Refreshments.  
1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum

**Saturday, October 8, 12-3 P.M.**  
**Apple Pie Contest**  
Ladies & Gentlemen: Is your apple pie recipe  
worthy of a Blue Ribbon?  
Let our panel of judges decide.  
For more information and entry forms contact  
Dawn Dellner at 508-237-6954 or  
dawn.dellner@comcast.net

1801 Jericho Historical Center & Barn Museum  
90 Old Main Street, West Dennis

**Saturday, October 29, 12:00 P.M.**  
**Dennis Historical Society's  
Annual Meeting and Luncheon**  
Featuring "Phyllis and Josh Remember"  
Liberty Hall  
Main St. & Upper County Road