

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## *Doctors, Do No Harm: Early Medical Training in Addison County*

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A large white house in Cornwall is often referred to as the 'Old Medical School.' The gable-entrance Federal stands on the east side of Rte. 30, across from the intersection with Ridge and Cider Mill Rds. Was there really a medical college in Addison County? The truth is an interesting tale of how doctors got their training before the age of modern medicine.



**The "Old Medical School" in Cornwall**

Most of the physicians practicing in early Vermont had minimal educations. Some had only had a few years in a country school, and served a short apprenticeship with a doctor, before hanging out their shingles. Middlebury's first medical man, John Willard, shadowed a doctor in his home state of Connecticut for a short time, but got most

of his education from a couple of standard books. His wife, education pioneer Emma Willard, later wrote that he took a dim view of, "many of the medical opinions of the books, [which] he quoted merely to ridicule."

Vermont had no medical school in its first decades. Physicians were in great demand, but it was not a lucrative profession. Doctors were always looking for new ways to earn revenue, and taking on apprentice students was one good method of supplementing their incomes.

In 1816, Dr. Frederick Ford, Sr., of Cornwall decided he could do well by setting up Vermont's first medical school. He built the house in Cornwall and began to take in students. The second floor still has a long hallway with a row of small bedrooms where the young men resided. Ford was probably well-suited to his role as a teacher. Historian H.P. Smith wrote that, "Dr. Ford was a man of a social turn, and was very fond of society...His laugh—peculiar for its manner and its heartiness—cannot be forgotten."

Doctors of this era had very little to offer their patients in the way of cures, usually restricting themselves to providing pain relief and reassurance. The more ambitious looked for a signature 'cure,' and Dr. Ford felt he had developed one which was dubbed to be 'peculiarly his own,' known as the "hydropathic system." It was, indeed, peculiar.

The hydropathic system was a method of treating fevers by dousing the patient in cold water. According to Smith, Ford would wrap the fevered victim in cold, wet sheets, and then begin "pouring upon them pailful after pailful of water." He was also known for "immersing his patients in casks of cold water." His most famous case involved "laying a child upon a snow bank, wrapped in a wet cloth and there applying the water."

Even in his own day, Dr. Ford's methods were controversial enough so as "to meet the opposition of his medical brethren, and to awaken the fears of his patients and their friends." He had a few supporters. Emma Willard wrote of the 'cold-water practice' that, "while some other physicians laughed," her husband, Dr. Willard, "saw that in particular cases there was great virtue in it." Perhaps this is the perfect example of the old adage, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Dr. Ford's home medical school prospered for awhile, but it never received any form of accreditation. In 1818, the Castleton Medical Academy began as one of America's first medical schools. Castleton's first charter did not allow the school to give degrees, so they worked out a plan whereby the fledgling Middlebury College granted their MDs. (In return, Middlebury students could take the Castleton medical course at a reduced rate). Middlebury College granted a total of 285 MDs before the Castleton Medical Academy won the right to grant its own. By the time they ended the Middlebury affiliation in 1827, Castleton was the largest medical college in New England.

The little medical school in Cornwall did not continue after Dr. Ford's death in 1822. His son, Frederic Ford, Jr., was the only one of his parents' twenty-two children to survive into adulthood. (Perhaps he was less fever-prone than the others). He followed his father into the medical profession, and Smith says he even "adopted his theory in regard to cold affusion in inflammatory diseases." His medical colleagues may finally have been wet blankets, as far as the wet blankets were concerned. The younger Ford is said to have given up medicine entirely soon after his father's death, preferring to stick to his 'agricultural pursuits.' Addison County's role in training young doctors was over.