

## Epilogue

In Judith Walzer Leavitt's article "A Worrying Profession': The Domestic Environment of Medical Practice in Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-Century America," she detailed the medical careers of two rural Wisconsin practitioners: Horace Willard and William Brisbane. The primary objective of this thesis was to provide some level of comparison between these two studies. Much like Leavitt, I too wanted to "explore some of the non-medical aspects of life that that provided the context in which much mid-century medicine was practiced. I [Leavitt] think we miss attaining a full understanding of medicine unless we study physicians in the family and home contexts in which they carried out their practice."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, my research pushed aside any discussions of nineteenth century medical debates. Instead, I focused upon Ellett's community, professional, and domestic identities. Each identity differed according to individual perspective. For example, within Ellett's home all three separate yet connected identities existed simultaneously. His marriage to Susan French occurred in part due to his elite social standing. The son of a wealthy Hanover County, Virginia plantation and mill owner married the affluent daughter of a Giles County, Virginia planter. If Ellett's family had been landless or yeoman, their matrimony would have been improbable. The community accepted Ellett for many of the same reasons that made the French family local elite members.

Within Robert Ellett's home he simultaneously served as a husband, father, and physician. Ellett saw himself as much more than just a small town physician. Surviving letters indicated that Ellett "spent long hours playing with his children," while "never showing anything but admiration toward his wife." Meanwhile, he would "always make

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Walzer-Leavitt, "A Worrying Profession': The Domestic Environment of Medical Practice in Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-Century America," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* Vol. 69 (1995), p. 1-2.

time for those around him in the community."<sup>2</sup> While at home, Ellett helped his wife by doing numerous domestic chores. By maintaining an occupation that kept Ellett closer to the home, his role within that home expanded further than the typical nineteenth century patriarch. In fact, patriarch would be a poor description of Ellett. Susan French frequently participated in conducting her husband's medical practice. Court records indicated that Mrs. French was her husband's equal when she cosigned numerous land transactions. Her letters to female friends and family members always portrayed Robert Ellett as the perfect husband, father, and dutiful physician.

The daily routine of country practitioners varied little across the mid-western and southern United States throughout much of the nineteenth century. Although Robert Ellett, William Brisbane, and Horace Willard practiced medicine in culturally distinctive regions, they each confronted similar daily problems. All three men graduated from medical schools. Each physician practiced medicine in a community different from their original birthplace. House calls constituted over 75 percent of their annual patient visits. During both day and night these physicians could be found traveling along rustic roads. Harsh Wisconsin winters complicated Brisbane and Willard's daily routine, while similar conditions in conjunction with sporadic downpours made rural Montgomery County roads virtually impassable. A majority of the surviving letters from each of these men related their daily travels and conditions in greater detail than any particular medical treatment or patient information. Collectively they operated within communities whose total population did not support any significant urban areas; although, each physician at

---

<sup>2</sup> Harriet French, Baltimore, Maryland, to Susan Virginia French Ellett, Christinasburg, Virginia, 29 August 1891 transcript in hand of Harriet French, Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia.

some point received medical training within a larger urban center. While the daily routines of these physicians were strikingly similar, several key factors differentiated Robert Ellett's practice from those discussed by historian Judith Walzer Leavitt.

Robert Ellett gradually collected a higher percentage of patient's fees than either Horace Willard or William Brisbane. This was surprising given the stereotypical images of poverty-stricken southwestern Virginia. Typically historians would assume that impoverished peoples gathered larger debts and were less willing to pay medical fees. Jefferson County, Wisconsin farmers, the location of physician Horace Willard, collectively earned almost \$3,000,000 annually. By comparison, Montgomery County farmers accumulated only \$667,378 annually. Although Jefferson County's population more than doubles Montgomery County's, the percentage of farmers out of the total population remained comparable.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, on average, a typical Jefferson County farmer, a potential Horace Willard patient, earned a greater income than most of Robert Ellett's patients. Despite garnering a larger annual income, Willard's patients acquired substantially greater debts accumulated from unpaid medical fees. According to Judith Walzer Leavitt, "[Willard] collected a maximum of 24 percent of his billed fees and much of this in kind rather than cash."<sup>4</sup> As shown in Table Four, Robert Ellett never suffered similar lows. In 1867 only 30 percent of his patients paid their fees in full. As time passed and Ellett's community identity heightened, that figure rose dramatically. By 1872, 89 percent of his patients regularly paid their fees. Therefore, perhaps the economic station of physicians' patients did not automatically determine a practitioner's

---

<sup>3</sup> *Historical United States Census Browser*, (<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>).

<sup>4</sup> Leavitt, "A Worrying Profession': The Domestic Environment of Medical Practice in Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-Century America," pp. 13-14..

financial security. In this case, Robert Ellett earned a larger annual income despite visiting fewer and poorer patients.

**Table Eight: Robert T. Ellett's Unpaid Fees, 1867-1872<sup>5</sup>**

| Years 1867-1872 | Total Household Visits | % Unpaid Fees |
|-----------------|------------------------|---------------|
| 1867            | 358                    | 70            |
| 1868            | 365                    | 60            |
| 1869            | 373                    | 30            |
| 1870            | 356                    | 23            |
| 1871            | 328                    | 15            |
| 1872            | 362                    | 11            |
| 6               | 2142                   | 35            |

Another distinguishing factor between this case study and Judith Leavitt's was the apparent difference in male/female visitation rates. In Leavitt's study, she grouped together women and children in gathering quantitative data. Therefore, when she estimated that 53 percent of Horace Willard's patients were women and children, those figures inaccurately depicted his practices gender ratios. Meanwhile, males equaled only 18 percent of Willard's total business during a six-month period in 1852. Such figures provided further support to what historians understand about how nineteenth century medicine viewed women. They believed that women remained in a perpetual state of ill health throughout much of their lives. Therefore, women consulted physicians with a higher degree of regularity than men.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Ellett's practice suggested that while Judith Leavitt's figures might represent typical gender ratios, practices existed elsewhere that contradicted her findings. During a six-month period in 1861 Ellett treated 350 patients. Those clients lived in 126 different households. Within households that contained a mother, father, and at least two

---

<sup>5</sup> Ellett Family Papers.

children, over 90 percent of Ellett’s households, children consulted the physician with the highest frequency. One hundred and fifty-six of Ellett’s 350 patients, 45 percent, during that six month period were children. Within that group, the total number of male children outnumbered the females by a 94 to 62 margin.. Meanwhile, the number of adult males and females were roughly equivalent. Although, female visitation numbers did slightly outnumbered male visits. If these numbers took into account only the gender of each patient, the total number of males would be greater than females. Therefore, at least in this individual case study, women visited the physician less than men.<sup>7</sup>

**Table Nine: Comparison Based Upon Judith Leavitt’s Criteria<sup>8</sup>**

| Totals %       | Total # Visits | Women/<br>Children | Males     |
|----------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Horace Willard | 316            | 236<br>75%         | 80<br>25% |
| Robert Ellett  | 350            | 260<br>74%         | 90<br>26% |

**Table Ten: Comparison by Strict Gender Categories<sup>9</sup>**

| Totals %      | Total # Visits | Male       | Female     |
|---------------|----------------|------------|------------|
| Robert Ellett | 350            | 184<br>52% | 166<br>47% |

Robert Ellett practiced medicine from 1862 until his death in 1904. Although he remained in Montgomery County, his practice relocated on several occasions to various

---

<sup>6</sup> Leavitt, “‘A Worrying Profession’: The Domestic Environment of Medical Practice in Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-Century America,” p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> This information was gathered from Dr. Robert Ellett’s medical account ledger located in the Ellett Family Papers at Newman Library, Special Collections, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Ellett’s ledgers provided excellent gender descriptions. Beside each name Ellett wrote: “Mr.,” “Miss,” “Mrs.,” “daughter,” and “son.” From this information I cross-referenced those names with census records from 1870 and compared Ellett’s vague depiction with individuals living within that household. See Appendix C for a comparison between Horace Willard and Robert Ellett’s male/female ratios.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt, “‘A Worrying Profession’: The Domestic Environment of Medical Practice in Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-Century America,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* Vol. 69 (1995), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ellett Family Papers.

towns located within the county. Shortly after Ellett's death, Susan Ellett penned a biographical sketch of her deceased husband on the opening pages of the family Bible. When she reflected upon Ellett's many accomplishments, almost no mention was made of his forty year medical practice. Instead, Susan Ellett, who was always concerned with tracing her family bloodlines, focused solely upon Robert Ellett's military service. Ellett lived for over sixty years. During that time he spent four years in the Confederate Army. To his remaining family, as well as many in the surrounding community, those four years marked his crowning achievement. Nearly forty years had passed since the Civil War, yet Robert Ellett's fleeting military service remained the foundation of his community identity.

In conclusion, Robert Ellett's country medical practice gradually thrived despite functioning within a difficult social and geographic environment. Initially, Ellett's entry into Montgomery County society depended entirely upon his elite stature and adherence to their instituted "common interests." However, as time passed his identity became increasingly multidimensional. Ellett carefully crafted fruitful doctor/patient relationships by cautiously negotiating the domestic sphere. Patients and family members alike thought of Ellett as a healer and a "man of medicine." Meanwhile, Ellett sustained the financial growth needed to support his large family by holding numerous local patronage positions. Ironically, while Ellett's domestic relationships constructed his professional identity, that role was preserved by constantly manipulating positions gained through that trust. Therefore, country physicians depended upon much more than personal character in building their practices. Instead, successful practitioners in similar

social environments achieved stability by balancing a multidimensional identity that ultimately subscribed to both local and personal interests.





## **Bibliography**

### *Primary Sources*

#### *Government Documents*

Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, 1840. Hanover County, Virginia. Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Population Schedules of the Fifth Census of the United States, 1850. Hanover County, Virginia. Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Population Schedules of the Fifth Census of the United States, 1850, Hanover County, Virginia, Slave Schedules. Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Population Schedules of the Sixth Census of the United States, 1860. New Kent County, Virginia. Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Population Schedules of the Seventh Census of the United States, 1870. Giles, Montgomery, and Smyth County, Virginia. Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Population Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, 1880. Montgomery and Smyth County, Virginia. Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

U.S. War Department. The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. 128 vols. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901.

#### *Manuscript Collections*

##### Atlanta, Georgia

National Archives and Records Administration, Southeastern Division  
Confederate Service Records, Virginia, 1860-1865  
United States Manuscript Census, Montgomery County, Virginia,  
1870 –1900  
United States Manuscript Census, Smyth County, Virginia,  
1870-1900

##### Blacksburg, Virginia

Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Apperson Family Papers  
Black Family Papers  
Ellett Family Papers  
Account Ledger 1867-1872

Susan Virginia French Ellett Correspondences  
Patrick County Oral History Project  
Robert Foley Interview  
Alice West Fulcher Interview  
Jesse Shelor Interview  
Sally Slate Interview  
S.W. Dickinson Papers  
Account Ledgers 1888-1927, 4 Vols.

Christiansburg, Virginia

County Clerk's Office, Basement, Montgomery County Courthouse  
County Court Records, 1870-1900  
County Deed Index, 1880  
County Plat Maps, 1860-1900  
County Poor Records, 1870-1900

Richmond, Virginia

Medical College of Virginia Archives, Tompkins-McCaw Library  
Course Catalogues, 1858  
Matriculation Book, 1838-71  
Virginia State Archives  
Virginia State Department of Health Collection  
Virginia State Medical Examining Board Records  
Virginia State Board of Medicine  
Medical Registration, 1890-1930

Washington, District of Columbia

United States National Archives, Confederate Staff Officers File,  
Court Martial Trial of James Woodville.

*Secondary Sources*

Ames, Kenneth L. *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

Beaver, Patricia. *Rural Community in the Appalachian South*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986.

Blanton, Wynndham B. *Medicine in Virginia in the Nineteenth Century*. Richmond: Garrett & Massie, Inc., 1933.

Breden, James O. "Disease as a Factor in Southern Distinctiveness." In *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South* by Todd L. Savitt and James Harvey Young, 1-28. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.

- . "States-Rights Medicine in the Old South." *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 52 (Mar.-Apr. 1976): pp. 354-360.
- Brown, Bertram Wyatt. *Honor and Violence in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Cunningham, H.H. *Doctors in Gray: The Confederate Medical Service*. Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith Press, 1970.
- Cumming, Kate. *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*, ed. Richard B. Harwell. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959.
- Duffy, John. "A Note on Antebellum Southern Nationalism and Medical Practice." *Journal of Southern History* 34:2 (1968): pp. 266-276.
- . "Sectional Conflict and Medical Education in Louisiana." *Journal of Southern History* 23:3 (1957): pp. 289-306.
- . "Medical Practice in the Antebellum South." *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 25, No. 1 (1959): pp. 53-72.
- Hagood, Martha. *Mothers of the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939.
- Haller, John S. Jr. *American Medicine in Transition, 1840-1910*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.
- Houck, Peter, W. *A Prototype of a Confederate Hospital Center in Lynchburg, Virginia*. Lynchburg, VA: Warwick House Publishing, 1986.
- Keeney, Elizabeth Barnaby. "Unless Powerful Sick: Domestic Medicine in the Old South," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, 276-294. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.
- Kilbride, Daniel. "Southern Medical Students in Philadelphia, 1800-1861: Science and Sociability in the 'Republic of Medicine'." *Journal of Southern History* LXV: 4 (Nov. 1999).
- Leavitt, Judith Walzer. "'A Worrying Profession': The Domestic Environment of Medical Practice in Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century America." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 69 (1995), pp. 1-32.
- . *Brought to Bed*. New York: Oxford Press, 1986.

- . “‘Science’ Enters the Birthing Room: Obstetrics in America since the Eighteenth-Century.” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 70, No. 2. (1995) pp. 281-304.
- and Whitney Walton. “‘Down to Death’s Door’: Women’s Perceptions of Childbirth in America.” *Women’s Health in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Ed. By Judith Walzer Leavitt. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Maher, Sister Mary Denis. *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- McMillen, Sally. “Antebellum Southern fathers and the Health Care of Children.” *The Journal of Southern history* Vol. 60, No. 3 (1994): pp. 513-532.
- . *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997.
- . “Mothers’ Sacred Duty: Breast-Feeding Patterns among Middle and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South.” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (August, 1985): 333-356.
- McMurray, Sally. *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Meehling, Jay E. “Advice to Historians on Advice to mothers.” *Journal of Social History*. Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 1975): pp. 245-275.
- Mitchell, Martha Carolyn. “Health and the Medical Profession in the Lower South, 1845-1860.” *The Journal of Southern History*. Vol. 10, No. 4 (1944): pp. 424-446.
- Murphy, Lamar Riley. *Enter the Physician: The Transformation of Domestic Medicine, 1760-1860*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991.
- Noe, Kenneth. *Southwest Virginia’s Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Numbers, Ronald L. and Todd L. Savitt, eds. *Science and Medicine in the Old South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996.
- Postell, William Dosite. “The Doctor in the Old South.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Vol. 51. (1952): pp. 393-400.

- Rosen, George. *Fees and Bills: Some Economic Aspects of Medical Practice in Nineteenth Century America: Supplement to the Bulletin of the History of Medicine, No. 6*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946.
- Rosenberg, Charles E. "The Practice of Medicine in New York a Century Ago." *Bulletin of History of Medicine*, Vol. 41 (1967): pp. 248-281.
- Rothstein, William G. *American Physicians in the Nineteenth-Century, from Sects to Science*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.
- Savitt, Todd L. and James Harvery Young, eds. *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.
- Scholten, Catherine M. "'On the Importance of the Obstetric Art': Changing Customs of Childbirth in America, 1760 to 1825." *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3. (July, 1977): pp. 426-445.
- Shyrock, Richard H. "The Significance of Medicine in American History." *The American Historical Review* 62:1 (Oct. 1956): pp. 81-91.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in the Nineteenth-Century America." Micheal Gordon, ed. *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*. (New York: Free Press, 1978).
- Stowe, Stephen M. "Obstetrics and the Work of Doctoring in the Mid-Nineteenth in the Mid-Nineteenth Century American South." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 64 (1990): pp. 540-566.
- ."Seeing Themselves at Work: Physicians and the Case Narrative in the Mid-Nineteenth Century American South." *American Historical Review* (1996): pp. 41-79.
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwives Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Warner, John Harley. "A Southern Medical Reform: the Meaning of the Antebellum Argument for Southern Medical Education," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, 206-225. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.
- ."A Southern Medical Reform: The Meaning of the Antebellum Argument for Southern Medical Education." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 57 (1983): pp. 364-381.
- ."The Idea of Southern Medical Distinctiveness: Medical Knowledge and Practice in the Old South." In *Science and Medicine in the Old*

- South*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, 179-205. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.
- . *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820-1885*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Wertz, Richard W. and Dorothy C. Wertz. *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America*. New York: Free Press, 1977.
- Williams, Micheal Ann. *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991.
- Young, James Harvey. "American Quackery in the Age of the Common Man." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (March, 1961), pp. 579-581.
- . "Patent Medicines: An Early Example of Competitive Marketing." *Journal of Economic History* Vol. 20, No. 4 (Dec. 1960): pp. 648-656.