

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## Medical Practice in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Chatham County

### Dr. David Watson

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David Watson was born in 1794, the son of Robert Watson, who lived on Rocky River at the mouth of Meadow Creek. The Watson lands covered an extensive area near the present-day Rives Chapel Church. David Watson lived at the home place but also had 300 acres on Deep River at Gulf, and he traveled between the two locations during the fifteen years that he practiced medicine, visiting and treating patients along the way.

Recently I was made aware of an account book belonging to Dr. Watson. The original ledger is in the possession of family members who live in South Carolina, and a microfilmed copy of the account book is in the North Carolina Archives.<sup>1</sup> The account book is written in a beautiful, clear hand and gives details not only of date and name of patient but also conditions, diagnosis, treatment, and when possible, outcome. This detail would pass muster with today's demand for complete documentation of medical treatment. The book also gives a feeling for Dr.

\* A retired physician with a lifelong interest in medical history, Brooks Gilmore was reared in Greensboro but spent the summers in Chatham County, where his family has been since 1755. He and his wife Dawn spend a great deal of time at Gilmore Lodge near Rives Chapel Church, part of the original John Brooks land grant and the site of Cartersville, muster ground during both the Revolutionary War and War Between the States. Dr. Gilmore served on the CCHA Board of Directors in 1998 and 1999.

Watson's compassion and concern for his patients. The first entry in his ledger is dated 2 January 1840 and the last entry is for 17 October 1845.

### Education and Family

Little is known of the Watson family.<sup>2</sup> David Watson's obituary in the *Fayetteville Observer* states that he was a self-made man of humble parentage and limited education.<sup>3</sup> His account book, however, speaks of a degree of formal medical education, probably in Philadelphia where his two sons were sent to medical school.

He married Happy Burns in 1818. Of their children, only George W., Robert, and Jane survived to adulthood. Happy died in 1843, and Dr. Watson married Mary Farrar the same year. They had two children, James Edwin and Martha David.

1840		
Sept. 20 <sup>th</sup>	John Watson (Brother) to a visit to himself, to the most part of a day night, attention and laundry service, resident during that Period	\$ 3 25
	to 12 pills of Calomel & Opium and a large Blistering Plaster	75
" 22 <sup>nd</sup>	John Watson (Brother) to a visit to himself and 6 mercurial Pills	3 50
" 23 <sup>rd</sup>	John Watson (Brother) to a visit to himself to 6 mercurial pills with opium and a blistering plaster	3 50
" 20 <sup>th</sup>	John Watson (Brother) by his boy (Pempse) at night to a bottle of Carpenter's compound fluid extract of Buchu	2



When eldest son George W. Watson returned from medical school, he went into practice with his father. However, this lasted only one year, and George was sent to Haywood, in southeastern Chatham County. Watson considered George lacking in fiscal responsibility, making several entries in his account book to this effect. Dr. George W. Watson later moved to Texas and died there in 1852. Daughter Jane married Richard G. Frasier, a neighbor in Gulf.

A second son, Dr. Robert Watson, practiced medicine in southeastern Chatham until 1860, when he died at age 34. His wife Antoinette Headen, was sister to Catherine Headen, who married H. O. Dunlap. Antoinette died in November 1856 after having a child the previous August. Life was short in those days.

### 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Medical Practice

It is difficult to obtain a great deal of information about the practice of medicine in North Carolina in the nineteenth century. The practitioners during this period can be put in four categories with regard to experience, competence, education, and general qualifications. First were medical school graduates, with the M.D. degree. Next were preceptorial trainees, also with the M.D. (It was said that these were the boys who carried the doctor's bag for two years.) Less well schooled were apothecaries, who became pseudo-doctors, and herb women and the like, who prescribed a multitude of "medicines." In addition, there were outright imposters and frauds, pitchmen who attracted the ignorant and desperate.<sup>4</sup>

The North Carolina Register for the year 1823 lists six resident physicians in Chatham County.<sup>5</sup> They were Francis Farrell, William H. Strong, John Degraffinreidt, Thomas H. E. Degraffinreidt, Frederick Hill, and J. H. Hawkins. Dr. Abram Budd, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School who was brought to Gulf in 1833 to be physician to the Egypt coal mine, commented in his letters on the deplorable medical conditions in the area.<sup>6</sup> However, it must be remembered that the great changes in medicine in Great Britain and Europe were just beginning, and the advances in surgery, understanding of the infectious nature of disease, and other discoveries had not reached the rural areas of America. In my opinion, Dr. David Watson was practicing the best medicine for the period, and the documentation in his account book supports that conclusion.

Most of the cases that Dr. Watson treated were of an infectious nature, although this was not recognized at the time. The prognosis for serious cases was poor, as there was no specific treatment except quinine for malaria. Conditions were diagnosed as "bilious fever,"

"bilious pneumonia," "bilious pleurisy," for example, as most severe infections have some degree of jaundice present. The cases of "bilious remittent fever" were almost certainly typhoid fever, which was endemic in the area and caused many deaths. Dr. Watson reports one case of tertiary syphilis. Only two accounts of partial paralysis or stroke were mentioned – life expectancy was short and few people lived long enough to develop the conditions we now encounter in later life. Most children were not named until they were one year old, as so many died before their first birthday.

In his treatment, Dr. Watson followed the Philadelphia–University of Pennsylvania model of the use of strong, even harsh, measures.<sup>7</sup> These types of treatment were not regarded as curative or as panaceas but as auxiliaries to restore the natural balance and expel bad humors. Some examples follow.

- Laxatives, purges, and enemas were frequently used. Mercurous chloride in the form of calomel, blue pills, or blue mass was a favorite if harsh laxative.
- Opium in the various forms of laudanum and dover's powder was used to relieve pain and to treat chills and fever.
- The use of phlebotomy or bleeding was mentioned only rarely in the account book. It was used when it was thought the condition was due to a hyperactive state of the arteries.
- Herbs such as rhubarb and squills are noted. The bulb of the squill plant contains a cardiac glycoside similar to digitalis.
- Cupping and mustard-pepper plasters were used as counter-irritants. In cupping, a glass cup with a burning substance such as cotton was inverted over the skin and a vacuum was produced, which drew out the bad humors. The plasters were counter-irritants to stimulate the body. We know today that they cause a release of a substance that blocks pain transmission. One can purchase *capsicum* (pepper) plasters today in Chinese grocery stores.

### Dr. Watson's Account Book

As did most doctors of his time, Dr. Watson carried on the function of our modern pharmacies. The patient would send a family member, friend, or servant to Dr. Watson's home with the patient's complaint, and medications would be given.

[21 January 1840]

Jordan Watson by & for his girl Bets to a Gallipot of Iodine ointment .50

[25 September 1840]

Gabriel Fooshee (by his son George) for his son Andrew to 8 fever Powders of Cal. & Dovers powder & 15<sup>gr</sup> Sulph. quinine 1.25



1842

Jan 16<sup>th</sup> William May to a visit to himself  
 (at Wm P. Taylor's Plantation) in an attack  
 of acute Dysentery 1.50  
 and 8 Doses of Calomel & Gov. Powder 50  
 " 20<sup>th</sup> William P. Taylor (by William May)  
 for extracting a tooth for boy Archy 50  
 " 17<sup>th</sup> Brooks Harris to a visit to his, Elomann  
 Oanner (she died the night before at  
 10 o'clock for this no charge " "  
 " 18<sup>th</sup> John A. Philips to a visit to his wife 2.50  
 and 20 Doses of Quinine (20<sup>gr</sup>) 1  
 " 19<sup>th</sup> William Attrib Burn, for his wife  
 to medicine, as follows: In a small box  
 containing a mercurial cathartic in Pills 25  
 to a large box containing 50 antibilious  
 Pills 75

[13 March 1840]  
 Timothy T. Brooks to a call to  
 see his wife & to the introduction  
 of a Pessary in a case of  
 Prolapsus uteri. 2.50  
 [5 June 1840]  
 John Goldston to a visit to  
 himself . . . in an advanced  
 Stage of Fever. 1.00  
 To a Consultation with Dr.  
 Wm. Hamlin his attending  
 Physician, & Dr. [Isaac Brooks]  
 Headen, to the most part of  
 a day & nights attention & to  
 Sundry Services rendered  
 during that period 4.00  
 To a large Blistering Plaster  
 to cover the whole Scalp, &  
 a dose of Col. Camphor &  
 Dovers Powder .75  
 To an ounce vial of Essence  
 Peppermint .25  
 and to a dose of Calomel,  
 Camphor, & Dovers powder  
 for a black Girl .25

[24 January 1842]  
 David Mitchel by himself for his wife in a  
 case of Globus Hystericus to 96 pills of Gum  
 Assafoetida, Gum Aloe, & Opium 1.25

Dr. Watson's accounts of visits to patients are more  
 extensive:

[25 February 1840]  
 Richard Frasure To a visit to himself in an  
 attack of Erysipelas of the face 2.00  
 to a paper of oxymurios Hydrargysi, to  
 form mercurial Solution & a portion  
 of Sugar of lead, .75  
 To Bleeding & a dose of Calomel .75

[Ditto]  
 Richard Frasure to a visit at night 2.50  
 to 2 oz. of Nitras Argenti to use in form  
 of Solution externally in erysipelas 1.50  
 and 20 antibilious Pills .50

[28 November 1840]  
 Harris Tysor To a visit to his daughter Sarah  
 Ann in the advanced stage of Nasal Hemorrhage.  
 She was in Articulo Mortis and expired in 11  
 hours after my arrival. She had been bleeding  
 48 hours before I saw her without any  
 interruption 3.25  
 [Treated with] Kresol Solution and a  
 longitudinal Sinapism [a type of skin plaster]  
 to apply to the spine .50  
 and to Sundry Services rendered -- --

[7 June 1840]  
 John Goldston visit to himself (16 miles) 6.50  
 to the administration of a stimulating injection .35  
 To 8 powders of Calomel, Camphor &  
 Dovers Powder, & 10 doses of quinine (15<sup>gr</sup>) 1.75  
 and to sitting up with him & attending to him  
 closely all night & Sundry services rendered 3.00

[13 November 1840]  
 Aaron Burke to a visit to all 4 of his Children in  
 malignant sore throat [diphtheria] (14 miles)  
 one of them Dying & died in a few hours 5.50  
 to 4 emetics of Ipecac & a blistering plaster .75

[3 February 1841]  
 Redin Bryan to a visit to his man Frank at  
 night in a case of Biliary Colic and found him  
 in the arms of death (he died in one hour  
 after I saw him) to the administration of a  
 stimulating enema, to a dose of Calomel & opium,  
 and a large sinapism, for the visit, medicines and  
 services which I rendered I charge him nothing

[9 August 1842]  
 Capt. Thomas Cole to a visit to his child at  
 night, (3 years old, girl child.) in the arms of  
 Death from a Spinal injury, & 4 sinipisms 4.00  
 & consultation with Dr. McBryde,  
 for this no charge -- --

Dr. Watson had surgical and orthopedic skills. Sur-  
 gery was limited to wound repair, incision and draining  
 of abscess. Fractures were treated. He was called in



difficult childbirth cases when the midwife could not deliver the child.

[15 January 1845]

*John A Johnson To a visit to his boy John (at night) in a case of fractured femur. 2.00*  
*To setting the fractured bones, to making Earles bedstead, and applying Physics*  
*Apparatus as modified by him from Desault, which took from 8 O'Clock at night until 5 O'Clock in the morning, to complete the whole of these operations 10.00*

Dr. Isaac Brooks Headen, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, was a Chatham County physician who lived on the north side of Rocky River when Dr. Watson was on the south side in the same area. In October 1840 Dr. Headen became ill with typhoid fever and was treated by Dr. Watson with what can only be called heroic measures.

[24 October 1840]

*Dr. I. Brooks Headen to a visit to himself from John Watsons in an attack of Billious Remitting fever -- -- to venisection [bleeding], to the administration of Sundry enemata, to 6 doses of Muriated Tincture of Iron and 12 doses of Calomel & Ipecac -- --*

[26 October]

*. . . to a visit to himself to the administration of 2 Stimulating enemata, to shaving the head & applying a blister [plaster] to it and 15 mercurial Pills -- --*

[28 October]

*. . . to a visit to himself at his fathers, to 2 days & nights attention -- --*  
*to various medicines & sundry services rendered during that Period. -- --*

There were return visits on 30 October, 5 November and 9 November. Dr. Watson did not charge his fellow physician.

Dr. Headen died in 1852. His account book is in the Perkins Library at Duke University.<sup>8</sup> It lists only date and name for treatments, giving nothing like the information in Dr. Watson's account book.

### Conclusion

Dr. Watson made his visits day and night by horseback, buggy, or wagon. He treated black and white alike. He never used the word slave, but "black" or "Negro." The last entry in the account book is in November of 1845. Not long afterward, Watson suffered a debilitating stroke and died eighteen months later, on 8 September 1847, at his Deep River plantation. Care and compassion were valued, even if the doctor's medications could do little against the conditions and diseases he was treating.

### Notes

1. Dr. David Watson, Account Book, 1840-1845, (microfilm), North Carolina Archives, Raleigh.  
I am indebted to John H. Emerson of Cary, N.C., who called my attention to the existence of the account book. Dr. Watson treated several of Mr. Emerson's ancestors and their servants.  
The original ledger was found when the H. O. Dunlap home near Sandy Branch Church was demolished. Dr. Watson's daughter-in-law and H. O. Dunlap's wife were sisters.
2. Information about the family is taken from Jane T. Hedgepeth, "Frasier/Watson Family Bible," Lee County Genealogical and Historical Society [Newsletter], Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1992, p. 27; personal communication, John H. Emerson; and research notes by James Vann Comer.
3. *Fayetteville Observer*, 28 September 1847.
4. Dorothy Long, ed., *Medicine in North Carolina*, Vol. 1 (Raleigh: North Carolina Medical Society, 1972), p. 53-54.
5. Colin McIver, comp., *North Carolina Register and United States Calendar, for the Year of Our Lord 1823* (Raleigh, N.C.: [C. McIver], 1822), p. 55.
6. Personal communication, James Vann Comer.
7. See for example, Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), a comprehensive medical history. References to Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, "the founding father of American medicine," and his practices are found on p. 257, 266, and 319.
8. Dr. Isaac Brooks Headen, Account Book, 1848-1852, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham.  
Again we thank John H. Emerson for calling our attention to this account book. Dr. Headen is buried in the Headen family cemetery on the Zeb Ferguson Road in the Rives Chapel area. Inscribed on his stone is the statement that he was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. The cemetery is overgrown, and part of Dr. Headen's monument is on the ground.

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