



Washington, Rush, Sweet & Burr



Abstract: Spinal manipulation began long before AT Still or DD Palmer developed their art and sciences in North America. The term 'bone-setting' was coined in 1510 in Europe and this skill was brought to colonial America by one famous family, the Sweets, making for interesting and humorous stories that included notable Americans from our country's early history.

Another link to our Founding Fathers includes a similar sentiment about medical freedom espoused by Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration that was shared by both DD and BJ Palmer in their early writings. Ironically, it was medical iatrogenesis that led to the death of our first president, George Washington, when a pupil of Dr. Rush was at Washington's bedside to perform bloodletting that attributed to his death.

Indexing terms: History; DD Palmer; Sweet family; Benjamin Rush; George Washington.

Introduction

No, this article is not about a law firm by the above name, but it is about a few figures and events from colonial America that are intertwined in an interesting fabric that have affected the history of chiropractic in one way or another, including the death of our first president.



Sweet Bonesetters

The art of manipulation certainly did not begin with either AT Still or DD Palmer. In fact, spinal manipulative therapy (SMT) has roots BC (before chiropractic) that reach back over 3,000 years ago to Imhotep, the Great Physician of the Pharaohs, who wrote of this healing art. (1)

In Medieval Europe the term 'bonesetters' was coined in 1510. This skill was an art taught via hands-on training, not in schools, and generally kept secret by family members. (2)

There are many stories of immigrants from Europe who brought this skill with them to North America. Among the oldest and most notable family of bonesetters were the '*Bonesetter Sweets*' of South County, Rhode Island, who carried on this tradition in colonial America that has made for many interesting anecdotes. (3)

Dr. Benoni Sweet, born in 1663 and died in 1751 at the age of 90, was also known as 'Captain Sweet' as he was called by his neighbours since in his early days he had been an officer in the British Army where *'his skill in bone-setting was of high repute in Rhode Island and in Eastern Connecticut,'* as reported in the New York Times on April 4, 1874 in an article *'Distinguished Bone-Setters.'*

During the Revolutionary War, his son, Dr. Job Sweet, born in 1724 and died in 1840 at the age of 80, was sent to Newport to set the bones of French officers, an operation their own doctors would not attempt. After the war, Colonel Aaron Burr, later Vice-President of the United States, sent for him to help his daughter, Theodosia, who had a dislocated hipbone.

Dr. Sweet journeyed to New York and there was greeted by Colonel Burr, their family doctor, and several other learned medical men. Rather reluctantly, Job was not happy about having an audience. They suggested that a specific hour - ten o'clock the next morning - be set for the procedure. After they had left the house, Job talked soothingly to Theodosia, who was in great pain, and explained to her his methods. When he had eased her fears, he asked her father if he could place his hands on her hip to locate the trouble.

According to the 1874 The *New York Times* article:

'When the surgeon had left the house, Sweet asked permission to make an examination of the case, saying "he'd like to see just what he'd got to do." Burr consented and the doctor, after some familiar chat with the little patient, which dissipated her fears, acquainted himself with the precise nature of the dislocation, and his hands compressed the limb more firmly, the sufferer gave one scream, there was a "click" as the bone came to its place, and the doctor said, with one of his droll laughs, "There now! I guess 'twon't be worthwhile for me to come back again after dinner." He would never tell what fee he received for the operation, but he said, "Mr. Burr paid him hansum— very hansum."'" (4)

After a few minutes, Dr. Sweet said to her, *'Now walk around the room,'* and much to the surprise of Theodosia and her father she did just that, and without pain. When the medical team arrived the next morning Job was well on his way back to Rhode Island and *'Theodosia's hip was properly set and on the mend.'*

In 1813 The *New York Times* carried another article about Dr. Stephen Sweet who was described as *'a heavy, powerful, and strong- armed man, and after placing his hands over the injured parts could at once detect the trouble and repair it in the twinkling of an eye... he had a fine knowledge of human anatomy, and in his time no learned surgeon in this country was held in higher and more universal esteem.'* (5)

The *Times* also reported an incident where highway robbers tried to rob Dr. Sweet, a crime they soon regretted:

It is related of him that while on a journey he once stopped over night in New York City, and was attacked upon the street by a party of three footpads, who were attracted to him by his countrified ways, his homely garb, and a satchel of money which swung from his saddle. They approached him on all sides. He dismounted with the rapidity of lightning, and seizing the first that came to hand hurled him to the ground, twisting his arms as he did so, and leaving him prone on the side-walk with both his arms out of joint. To the second he threw a leg out, and to the third both an arm and a leg. The fellows lay writhing and cursing in their pain about him, and after letting them suffer for a spell the sedate humorist slipped their joints back into place, read them a lecture, and let them go. (6)

The moral of this story is don't mess with a bonesetter or you might have a few of your own bones involuntarily disjointed.

The same *Times* article recounted another interesting aspect of the Sweet's children who honed their skills on their farm animals:

'From their early childhood they practiced their gift upon every fowl and animal upon the farm, and it was no unusual thing to go into the barn-yard and find the hens reclining composedly on their backs, with their legs dropped over, or a cat or calf in the same predicament. A quick movement of the hands in replacing the joints, and the animal would get up and walk away as though nothing had happened.'

DD Palmer also wrote how '*Old Dr. Sweet*' learned his trade:

'The "Sweet Bone-Setters" live at Sag Harbor, a small town situated at the east end of Long Island, New York. The Old Doctor has been dead for several years, but his children, Steven, Charles and Mary, still follow the business of bone-setting. Many amusing stories are told about the Old Dr. and how he got the knack or talent of setting bones. He replied: "Don't know; just came to me all of a sudden one day when I had caught chicken and was about to kill it, and the first thing I know, I'd pulled a bone out of place. In putting it back I pulled another out of place, and I pulled another out of place in putting that back. Then, when I'd got 'em all back in place, I got an idea I'd learn how to set bones and give up farming. So I practiced uncoupling and coupling up the bones of my dog until I learned the right twists for setting all the different bones. Guess I took that dog apart high onto a hundred times, on and off. He got so used to it that he seemed to enjoy it, and I do believe he missed the exercise when I let up on him.'" (7)

Chiropractic college interns today are fortunate they don't have to use farm animals to practice their adjusting methods.

Hopefully the next generation of practitioners will understand they are descendants of many brave innovators from many continents through the centuries. Most of all, the new artisans should never forget over 12,000 chiropractors were arrested over 15,000 times for helping keep alive this great healing art in America.

But the question remains, will the next generations be as dedicated? Just as our Founding Fathers must have had a stronger backbone than couch-potatoes today, does the next generation of DCs have the same mettle as these chiropractic forefathers?

Washington & Rush

If you have never visited Mount Vernon, George Washington's estate on the Potomac River just a few miles from our nation's capitol, you have missed a beautiful setting, a new museum, an interesting tour of his home, and a bit of history that escapes nearly all about the death of our first president.

Although most homes along the Potomac River are just above water-level, Mount Vernon resides over one hundred feet above the river creating a view that is spectacular and immense. On a clear day, it seems you can see forever with a view of the meandering Potomac that is breathtaking.

I can see why General Washington settled there. It also gives you a feel for our first president; as the tour guide told us, George had a saying, '*A view without water ain't a view worth looking at.*' I love it and can imagine George and Martha sitting in their rocking chairs on the veranda overlooking the river and enjoying the tranquility of the countryside.

Historians tell us that George was not an intellectual on par with Jefferson or Madison; instead, he was a leader like John Wayne. He was an imposing redhead in his youth who stood 6' 3" (190.5cm) tall, a towering figure in his day.

After eight years as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and two terms as President, Washington had little time to enjoy his estate. By the time he had retired, he lived only two more years before he unexpectedly died at age 67 in his bed on the second floor of Mount Vernon on December 14, 1799. (8)

But it was neither a peaceful nor heroic end to a storied career.

The most popular theory is that a sudden inflammation of the throat stopped his breathing; in today's medical parlance, he succumbed to an upper airway obstruction caused by bacterial epiglottitis. (9)

Before I visited Mount Vernon, I had read in the Smithsonian magazine about his fascinating life story on the bicentennial celebration of his death. I recall when the tour guide mentioned he had died of a severe sore throat, I felt compelled (no, not me) to inform her, '*According to the Smithsonian magazine, the sore throat didn't kill him as much as the excessive blood-letting.*' (10)

Apparently that didn't set well with her as she shot back at me, '*That was an accepted medical procedure in those days.*' If looks could kill, I would have died in George's bed, too.

True, but nonetheless, her defensive attitude was rather awkward in front of the other tourists, and by then my wife was tugging on my arm to '*just shut up.*'

At Mount Vernon you can see the bedroom as it was when he died, staged with blood-letting implements. (11) '*Tis well,*' he reportedly whispered as he died. His beloved Martha died just two years later of a broken heart as she never slept in their bed again. (12)

Most interesting is that Dr. Benjamin Rush, considered one of our Founding Fathers as a signer of the *Declaration of Independence*, the Father of American Psychiatry, and a surgeon in the *Continental Army*, may have attributed to Washington's death because one of Rush's students was at Washington's bedside. (13)

Like many allopaths at that time, Rush was a proponent of blood-letting. He was convinced that all diseases were essentially caused by fever - the roots of the '*bad blood*' mindset that still prevail today.

Just as hundreds of thousands of Americans today are injured or die from clinical iatrogenesis, the example of Washington's death illustrates that even our most notable president was not immune from medical mistakes. Perhaps soon spine fusions will also rank alongside bloodletting as a once-popular but today decidedly a controversial medical procedure.

Rise of the Medical Bastille

Although blood-letting was a bad idea, Dr. Rush had many good ideas that were ignored and could have prevented much of the medical mess we experience today. He spoke of bigger issues in health care, such as his foresight of the impending medical Bastille that we face today.

Dr. Rush warned of the rise of a medical monopoly:

Unless we put medical freedoms into the Constitution, the time will come when medicine will organize into an undercover dictatorship ... The Constitution of this Republic should make specific provision for medical freedom as well as for religious freedom. To restrict the practice of the art of healing to one class of physicians and deny to others equal privileges constitutes the Bastilles of our science. All such laws are un-American and despotic. They are vestiges of monarchy and have no place in a republic.

What mischief have we done under the belief of false facts and false theories! We have assisted in multiplying diseases; we have done more, we have increased their mortality.

Conferring exclusive privileges upon bodies of physicians and forbidding men of equal talents and knowledge from practicing medicine within certain districts of cities and countries are

inquisitions—however sanctioned by ancient charters and names - serving as the Bastilles of our profession. (14)

Certainly that day has come - the rise of an 'undercover dictatorship' - that has stymied free enterprise on a level playing field to find new ways of filling health care needs of Americans. Indeed, the medical societies and the *American Medical Association* seem more concerned with defending an entrenched, competition-free position for their members than with promoting free enterprise and innovation.

Dr. Rush's sentiments were most likely never known by both DD and BJ Palmer, but his sentiments were certainly shared opinions.

DD Palmer noted in 1910 the '*entrenched, competition-free position*' of the medical society:

It is a pity that the medical professionals are possessed of arrogance instead of liberality; that instead of encouraging and fostering advanced ideas, they stifle and discourage advancement; that they only adopt advanced ideas when they are compelled to do so by public opinion. (15)

The medical society as an 'undercover dictatorship' was the subject of BJ Palmer's book, *An Invisible Government*, perhaps the most scholarly work of his career according to noted historian Joe Keating, PhD. BJ offered a scathing indictment of organized medicine's efforts to monopolize health care. BJ believed '*maliciousness based on prejudice*' was at the heart of the medical trust, whose main goal was to control the marketplace, not necessarily to improve health care by whatever means possible. (16)

In 1949, *Harper's Magazine* (17) declared the AMA the '*most terrifying trade association on earth*', hell-bent on creating a monopoly that jumped into bed with the tobacco industry to fund its war chest to fight all other health professions, such as homeopaths, naturopaths, osteopaths, and especially chiropractors who were accused of quackery and practicing medicine without a license, all were bogus charges to inflame the public with misinformation and fear.

Conclusion

Obviously the intransigence of the medical profession has not changed over the past centuries. If anything, it has entrenched itself as the fourth branch of government, but this branch is unelected, self-appointed, and rules with an iron-fist control over all health matters, a medical monopoly, or as Dr. Rush suggested, '*an undercover dictatorship*'.

JC Smith

MA, DC

Columnist

jcsmith@smithspinalcare.com

Cite: Smith JC. Washington, Rush, Sweet & Burr [Column]. *Asia-Pac Chiropr J*. 2022;2.6. URL apcj.net/papers-issue-2-6/#jcsmithWashington

References

1. Hadler, NM, Stabbed In The Back; Confronting Back Pain In An Overtreated Society, University of North Carolina Press, (2009):6-7
2. Sanan, Abhay MD. Rengachary, Setti S. MD, "The History of Spinal Biomechanics," Neurosurgery 39 (1996): 657.
3. McPartland, Martha R., "The Bonesetter Sweets of South County, Rhode Island," YANKEE, January 1968.
4. "Distinguished Bone-Setters," NY Times, April 4, 1874.
5. "Suing a Natural Bone-Setter," NY Times, December 17, 1883.
6. Ibid.
7. Palmer, DD, The Chiropractor's Adjuster: The Text-Book of the Science, Art and Philosophy of Chiropractic (Portland, Oregon: Portland Printing House) (1910): pp. 543-49.
8. Foote, Timothy, "George Washington Slept Here," Smithsonian magazine, December 1999.
9. Morens, DM: "Death of a President," The New England Journal of Medicine, Vol 341(24), December: pp. 1845-1849.
10. Foote, Timothy, ibid.
11. <http://www.fandm.edu/benrush/who-was-benjamin-rush>
12. Foote, Timothy, ibid. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/George-Washington-Slept-Here.html#ixzz1uBJauZER>
13. URL <http://www.fandm.edu/benrush/who-was-benjamin-rush>
14. Booth, ER, History of Osteopathy and Twentieth Century Medical Practice, Cincinnati: Caxton Press, 1905 (1924): 312. 15 Palmer, DD ibid, pp. 549.
16. Palmer, B.J, An Invisible Government, 2d Ed. Published 1917 By The Universal Chiropractors Association in Davenport, Ia . p. 16.
17. Mayer, M., "The Rise and Fall of Dr. Fishbein," Harper's Magazine, 199/1194 (Nov. 1949): 81.

