

Dee Morris: Homeopathy and Medford

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Trained by Samuel Tufts, Brooks was a staunch "allopathist" or traditionalist who believed in the conventional medicine of the day. In his sunset years, he was irritated by the arrival of a newcomer who had just opened an office near the Square, the young Dr. Samuel Gregg (1799-1872).

Especially annoying was his realization that Gregg had found a patron in Thatcher Magoun (1775-1856), Medford's richest ship builder. Dr. James C. Neilson, a Magoun relative and friend, was present when the merchant brought his protégé to meet the iconic Brooks.

He was astonished to hear the venerable physician sharply accuse Gregg of being an interloper and opportunist. "I refuse to leave!" was the quick retort.

It was said that the two rivals avoided further conversation.

Several years passed while the Dartmouth graduate's practice flourished on Main Street. He probably would have remained a respected physician of the old school if tragedy had not struck his own family.

In the 1830s the doctor's eldest daughter became seriously ill with little or no chance of recovery. Following the advice of Magoun, his early mentor, Gregg sought out New York's Federal Vanderburgh, a advocate of homeopathy which was a radical new alternative to accepted medicine.

Experimental in nature, the treatments were unorthodox because practitioners took into account the whole person rather than just responding to a set of symptoms. A key component focused on administering very small drug doses in large amounts of water.

According to the new “science,” the applications stimulated the patient’s innate powers of healing.

Sad to say, Gregg’s daughter succumbed to pneumonia after initially responding favorably to the holistic regimen. Thatcher Magoun Jr., the son of the ship builder, encouraged Samuel to explore homeopathy more fully, even lending him books on the subject.

By 1840 the doctor was an enthusiastic convert, which precipitated his relocation to Boston where he faced a storm of ridicule from the established medical community. Persevering, he carried his mission forward and became recognized by many as the “Father of Homeopathy” in Massachusetts.

Medford remained open to the controversial medical approach because Gregg’s replacement, Dr. Milton Fuller, was an ardent homeopathist. In a brilliant move, Fuller hired Magoun’s friend, Dr. James C. Neilson, as his colleague.

Meanwhile in the Hub, Gregg threw in his lot with other like-minded physicians in order to form the American Institute of Homeopathy in 1844. For a few years professional lines became blurred as some practitioners espoused both the established and the alternative styles.

By the end of the 1840s, however, traditional doctors had mounted an offensive by creating the American Medical Association which defined more uniform educational standards in the training of physicians. One of the society’s prime directives focused on the suppression of homeopathy on the grounds that it was irresponsible and unethical.

While the besieged system received mixed reviews in some parts of the country, it was favored by the educated elite of Greater Boston. Another stunning and highly controversial concept, the medical education of women, also began to gain acceptance in Massachusetts.

In 1848, Dr. Samuel Gregory established in Boston an institution for the

professional training of midwives followed next by the creation of the New England Female Medical College in the 1850s. Compatible with Gregg's work in homeopathy, the college enjoyed over 20 years of success until the 1870s.

Then the financially — faltering institution received a boost when it was merged with Boston University's new medical school. Both entities benefited. The older one owned a facility while the fledgling university was blessed with endowments.

As a co-educational enterprise steeped in homeopathy, this environment was perfect for Charlotte A. Rollins (1850-1951), who set her sights on becoming a physician. She was eager to begin her training.

At the end of 1873, the Boston University School of Medicine welcomed an initial cluster of 43 students, 20 of whom were women.

During a reform-based three-year program, students observed anatomical demonstrations, worked with microscopes and attended five daily lectures. Homeopathic remedies and theories were a significant part of the course load.

In 1876, "Abbie," already married to George A. Rollins, was fully involved in writing her thesis on pneumonia. At the conclusion of the academic year in 1877 she was in the school's premier graduating class.

First living in East Boston in 1878, Dr. Rollins was an active member of major homeopathic societies. When she was seriously ill in 1880, her husband was told that she had only a year to live.

Applying alternative treatments to her own case, she rallied and began a series of rapid professional moves that led from Worcester, Chelsea and Norwood over to Medford. In 1904, an opportunity presented itself. She purchased, in her own name, a large house on Magoun Avenue off Park Street in the eastern section of town. Here she made a home for George, held office hours in the afternoon and evening and, with the help of a small staff, could provide beds for a few patients.

It was entirely fitting that Charlotte was located on that particular street near the Mystic River.

At the beginning of the 19th century, this land had belonged to the same

Thatcher Magoun who encouraged Dr. Samuel Gregg. By 1885, the area had been surveyed and laid out in streets that were named for the ship builder, his family and his birthplace.

Among them were Thatcher Street, Magoun Avenue, Bradshaw Street and Pembroke Street. Dr. Rollins owned lots 39 and 40. She maintained her Medford practice for several years before moving to Boston and, finally, to Maine.

Retiring in 1927, she lived until her 101st year when she passed away in 1951. Charlotte had always credited her long life to the homeopathic lifestyle that she had learned at Boston University.

It is not known if she was aware of the property's Magoun connection. After 1914, her home became the Medford or Dearborn Hospital with Mrs. Hannah Abbie Dearborn in charge of the 40 beds.

It was a singularly fruitful time in the early 20th century for private health care to flourish in Medford because the establishing of Lawrence Memorial Hospital was still in the future. Mrs. Aceneith Sawyer, originally from Somerville, opened up an 18-room facility on the corner of Central Avenue and Park Street in 1905. There she nursed the enfeebled and the terminally ill.

Named the Sherman Hospital for the Aged and Incurables, it accommodated 66 patients, 21 of whom were charity cases. Harriet E. Reeves operated the Reeves Nervine Home on Boston Avenue while Eudora Whitney cared for patients at 10 Salem St.

These women, like Charlotte Rollins, believed in treating the entire person.

Medford's role in the early holistic health movement has yet to be explored. Thatcher Magoun's impact on the city's economy is well documented while his interest in alternative medicine is just briefly mentioned in out-of-print memorials to Dr. Samuel Gregg, the "Father of Homeopathy" in our State.

Dr. Charlotte Rollins, the 1877 graduate of Boston University, is noted briefly in vintage publications. There is much to learn about this veiled chapter of Medford history.

— *Dee Morris is a Medford historian.*