

## Father and Son Treated a Century of Ills

By Eugene Scheel  
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"Like father, like son," the saying goes, for in years past a father's occupation was often passed on to his son. So it was with two Bluemont doctors, George Emory Plaster and his son, Henry Garnett Plaster. Combined, their years of medical practice spanned a century.

Born on a farm near Unison in 1826, George Plaster graduated from the University of Maryland Medical School in Baltimore in the late 1840s. He practiced for a while in Unison, then, according to his grandson, also named Henry, "he became a victim of the gold fever of 1849.

"Accompanied by 11 of his neighbors, he set out for California. They left Baltimore in a small sailing vessel, and it took the party six months to reach the El Dorado of California by way of Cape Horn," the southern tip of South America.

George Plaster's 1925 obituary continues the story: "He amassed a fortune in gold nuggets, stored them in strongboxes and prepared to leave for home. The night before he was to depart, however, bandits robbed him of every cent he had. Undismayed, he set out to work and made enough in a few months to return home and fulfill the promise to his mother that he would come back in two years."

Plaster resumed his medical practice in Unison and then moved to Snickersville, as Bluemont was known before 1900. Thomas Osburn, who chronicled 1850s life in that village, provided a brief glimpse of the doctor then. Writing in 1923, he noted the doctor's log office, which stands today.

"From here, he attended the sick of the whole community, taking his medicine with him in his little saddle bags," Osburn wrote. "He rode on horseback over the [Blue Ridge] Mountain and through the valley in all sorts of weather, never failing to respond to a call for help -- and in many cases, knowing he would receive no pay, either for his services or the medicine he supplied.

"In addition to being a first-class Doctor, he was a Gentleman 'of the old School' -- kind and courteous toward all, respected and loved by everyone."

Although the exact ailments Plaster treated are not known, his account books having been lost, mortality statistics for Virginia in 1850 indicate that respiratory diseases, especially influenza and pneumonia, accounted for 9 percent of known deaths among whites and 16 percent of known deaths among slaves.

A common remedy for these cold-weather scourges was sulphate of soda, dissolved in a pint of water, to be taken three times daily. If the remedy "operated too freely" -- the term for diarrhea -- a half-dose was specified. "Plaister for the Breast" was also used, an ounce apiece of mutton suet, beeswax, resin or turpentine and a wine glass of linseed oil, all applied to the chest and kept there for a day.

The same remedies were used for tuberculosis, then commonly called consumption. It was Virginia's leading killer in 1850, responsible for nearly 14 percent of known deaths among whites and nearly 11 percent of known deaths among slaves. Opium pills were given to reduce pain, and bleeding by leeches, a remedy since Biblical times, was still the main method of combating infection.

Plaster charged \$1 for a house call or office visit, a fee set by the state in 1851. For a daylong visit, his fee was \$5; a nightlong visit was \$8. Operations such as repairing a hernia or removing a tumor cost \$5; setting a broken bone or delivering a baby \$15; amputating a leg or arm \$20.

As the typical person earned \$1 a day, few could afford surgical procedures. Little wonder that in 1850, only 4.5 percent of whites and 6.7 percent of slaves died of "old age."

Three days after the South's victory at Bull Run, on July 21, 1861, Plaster enlisted in the Confederate 6th Regiment, Virginia Cavalry -- but not as a doctor, for he wanted to be at the front lines. Commissioned a second lieutenant, he was wounded, captured twice and promoted to captain for valor in hand-to-hand combat at the Battle of Brandy Station in June 1863.

Late in the war, at Five Forks, he was captured and interned at Johnson's Island prison in the Sandusky Bay of Lake Erie. Paroled at war's end, he walked the 350 miles back to Snickersville.

Shortly before the war, Plaster had moved his office to Glenmeade, still the family's farm, and affixed an office onto the home. There, in the late 1860s, he apprenticed Benjamin Franklin Young, who became Loudoun County's first African American professional. County clerks afforded him the title of "Doc Young" or "Dr. Young" in 1871 deeds.

Plaster's sympathies for freed blacks also extended to politics, for he represented Loudoun in the 1867-1868 "Underwood" Convention -- named for presiding Judge John C. Underwood -- that gave blacks the right to vote, provided for a statewide system of public education and led to Virginia's readmission to the Union in 1870.

Three years later, at 47, Plaster married Sallie Meade Taliaferro (pronounced Toliver), who was half his age. A native of Loch Lomond in Stafford County, she was the granddaughter of Martha Custis, who was married to Daniel Parke Custis and, after Custis's death, George Washington. Sallie Plaster's great-great-grandfather was George Mason, author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, model for the Bill of Rights.

In 12 years, nine children were born to the Plasters. The first child died just short of his first birthday and was buried at the gate to his father's office at Glenmeade. The others reached adulthood. In 1879, Loudoun voters elected Plaster to the General Assembly. He was the first Loudoun physician to hold a state office and was remembered by a colleague for "eloquent speeches and a keen analytical mind."

But with five young children at home and a growing practice, Plaster retired after one term. His obituary noted, "He had progressed from a young doctor to the 'old doctor,' " and through reading and exchanges of letters to professors at colleges became a walking encyclopedia. "Young boys and girls came to him for help in their schoolwork. Young men and women consulted him about their troubles. Older men and women sought advice about almost everything. He drew up deeds for them, he wrote wills for them and he told them how to invest their money."

Plaster's medical practice ceased when his son's began in 1899. His fifth child, Henry Garnett Plaster, born in 1879, had entered Richmond's Medical College of Virginia at 16 and graduated at 20. In presenting Henry Plaster's diploma, Dean Hunter McGuire said: "It is a rule of this institution not to award the degree of Doctor of Medicine to any student under 21 years of age, but in the case of this young man, I have no hesitation in breaking that rule."

To distinguish the two Drs. Plaster, the new graduate was known as "Dr. Henry" or "the young doctor." He took over his father's office at Glenmeade but installed a new type of opaque glass in what he called "the treating room." Still wary that disease might enter the house, he kept a single outside entrance to the waiting room.

One of his patients, Frances Carpenter Huntington, recalled that another doctor asked him to treat a woman whose appendix had ruptured. The other doctor "felt she had only one-ten-thousandths of a chance of survival, but Dr. Plaster, with daring born of his own skill, made ready a kitchen table, which so often had to serve him as an operating table, and performed the then-unknown operation of inserting a drainage tube. "That woman, and the 10 children later born to her, like hundreds of others owed their lives to his skill."

Huntington also related that Henry Plaster liked to tell how he saved premature babies by drafting neighborhood women to take turns in holding "the tiny mites of humanity" close to the blaze of an open hearth.

Dr. Henry's son recalled hearing his father talk about using the kitchen table for obstetrics: "There was nothing special about the table, but kitchens were the warmest and lightest part of the house and had water. He never lost a child or mother in childbirth. That was something he was most proud of.

"My father was also an early user of sulfa drugs. It was the new miracle drug of the 1930s. Blood poisoning was a big risk on a farm, and you put it on a cut to keep the infection down."

Huntington's overall assessment of Henry Plaster strongly resembles Osburn's remembrances of the elder Plaster a century before:

"Dr. Henry drove his horse [named old Ben] and buggy day and night along winding roads in the indispensable tradition of the country doctor. When the snow was too deep for his buggy wheels, Dr. Plaster strapped his black bag on his saddle and fought his way over the snow-blocked roads to the farmhouse or log cabin."

A connection with Henry Plaster to the present medical profession came in the late '40s, when Hamilton's physician, Joseph Rogers, was completing his residency at Doctor's Hospital in Washington. "I was his doctor," Rogers recalled, "and saw him every day. He loved to talk about Loudoun County and about his father in the Civil War. My grandfather, Samuel E. Rogers, also served in the 6th Virginia Cavalry, also was captured and also walked home from prison at Elmira, New York."

Henry Garnett Plaster died in 1949. His father's 1925 funeral at Ebenezer Cemetery had been attended, according to his obituary, by "five aged Confederate veterans, the last of Captain Jackie's company."

Dr. Henry's service at the same place featured the black choir of the First Baptist Church of Bluemont. Softly, they sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "Carry Me Back to old Virginia."

Eugene Scheel is a Waterford historian and mapmaker. George Emory Plaster, pictured about 1860, charged \$1 for an office visit or a brief house call. Henry Garnett Plaster, a second-generation doctor pictured about 1910, made rounds through the area with his horse, Old Ben, and buggy.

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