

The Medical Practice of Dr. Frederick G. Williams

Frederick G. Williams

Editor's note: The following comes from a forthcoming BYU Studies publication titled The Life of Dr. Frederick G. Williams: Counselor to the Prophet Joseph Smith, written by his great-great-grandson. A thoroughly researched documentary history of Frederick G. Williams and his immediate family, this book provides an intimate look at many significant events in the Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and pioneer Utah periods of Church history. The book and its accompanying documents also contain more detail about Dr. Williams's medical practice, including a list of 307 of his patients.

In the early nineteenth century, the medical profession was still rather primitive, but as the following information about Frederick G. Williams's practice shows, he was one of thirty practitioners in Kirtland's Geauga County. He conscientiously followed the methods and medications set forth in the medical treatise of Dr. Samuel Thomson. A frontier family doctor, Williams regularly assisted with childbirths, set broken bones, and treated various wounds and diseases, as the following materials intriguingly bring to light.

Frederick Granger Williams (1787–1842) was an important figure during the early days of the restoration of the gospel and the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He served as a missionary on the original mission to the Lamanites (1830–1831), was a personal scribe to the Prophet Joseph Smith for four years (1832–1836), was Second Counselor in the First Presidency for five years (1833–1837), and for twelve years was the principal doctor for the Saints in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, until his death in 1842.

Dr. Williams, as Oliver Cowdery wrote in a letter to Dr. Sampson Avard, was a botanic physician and followed the theories of Samuel S.

Thomson.¹ This is confirmed by Williams himself in his medical advertisements: “Vegetable Medicine, F. G. Williams, (Botanic Physician) Dr. Williams respectfully informs his old patrons and the public generally, that he keeps constantly on hand Dr. Samuel Thompson’s [*sic*] Vegetable Medicine.”² Nothing, however, is known about his medical practice until the early 1830s in Kirtland, where he is referenced in letters, journals, and biographies written and preserved by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Dr. Williams’s first biographer, Nancy C. Williams, tells us that Frederick was persuaded to study medicine around the time of the death of his sister-in-law Lovina, which came soon after she had given birth. Frederick’s younger brother, William Wheeler Jr., married Lovina Dibble in 1814. “March 23, 1816, a child was born to Lovina and William which died soon after birth and Lovina survived the baby by a mere four days.”³

Lovona’s [*sic*] sad death in childbirth, stirred Frederick, who had long wanted to become a doctor, to begin his earnest research into the medical profession. No doubt the anxiety for Rebecca’s safety, for she was then with child, spurred him on in his studies. They had selected a place for clearing to build a home a few miles south and east of Newburg, called Warrensville. This land was heavily timbered and he found in clearing it that his health was failing. Perhaps this had much to do with the necessity to give up farming as a profession and caused him to turn to the study of medicine.⁴

Nancy Williams indicates that Dr. Frederick G. Williams had been assisted in his medical research by Doctor Ezra Graves, after whom Frederick had named his second son.⁵ There is a corroborating nineteenth-century reference to Dr. Ezra Graves, who lived at the time in the same Ohio area as the Williamses. Speaking of the township of Bedford, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, the writer states: “Dr. Ezra Graves, who used to practice medicine here, was in Canada during the war of 1812, when he was required to swear allegiance to the crown or leave the country. He chose the latter course, and told his wife that she could stay there or go to the United States with old Ezra, just as she pleased. Said she: ‘I’ll go with old Ezra,’ and she came.”⁶ On April 30, 1810, Frederick had purchased 161 acres in Warrensville (next to Bedford) from his father for \$402.⁷

Paying Taxes as a Physician

Because the first time doctors had to register with the state of Ohio was in the late 1880s (and Williams died in 1842), there are no early government documents attesting to Dr. Williams’s medical practice. Nevertheless, there are two extant tax records for physicians and attorneys that list Dr. Williams among the tax-paying physicians. The first is found in the *Auditor’s Tax Duplicate*, Geauga County, Ohio, for the year 1836. The page is unnumbered, but follows page 342. Williams is one of thirty doctors listed in the county, and their

incomes appear to be rounded approximations. Eight had declared incomes of \$300 and paid \$1.50 in taxes; ten (including Dr. Williams) had incomes of \$200 and paid \$1.00 in taxes; three had incomes of \$150 and paid \$0.75 in taxes; and nine had incomes of \$100 and paid \$0.50 in taxes. There was no distinction made between botanical and orthodox physicians.⁸

As stated, the earliest extant references to Frederick’s medical practice come from biographies and histories written primarily by members of the Church living in Kirtland. The first comes in 1830, presumably some fifteen years into his medical career, and is found in Joseph Smith’s history of the first mission to the Lamanites: “This much accomplished, the brethren bound for the borders of the Lamanites, bade an affectionate farewell to the Saints in Kirtland and vicinity; and, after adding one of their new converts to their number—Dr. Frederick G. Williams—they went on their way rejoicing.”⁹

Medical Advertisement: Kirtland, Ohio, 1835

We are fortunate that Dr. Williams’s 1837 medical ledger has survived, and also copies of newspaper advertisements, which identified him as a Thomsonian botanical physician and listed the common diseases of his day together with their vegetable (herbal) cures as Dr. Williams prescribed them. The medicines he sold are listed as powders, pills, elixirs, cordials, drops, and ointments. Near the beginning, the advertisement also reveals that at that particular time (the last months of 1835) the doctor did not travel to visit his patients, but rather invited them to come to his residence for medical attention, where he kept a supply of organic medicines and herbs. The advertisement reads:

VEGETABLE
Medicine,
F. G. Williams,
(BOTANIC PHYSICIAN.)

DR. WILLIAMS respectfully informs his old patrons and the public generally—that he keeps constantly on hand
DR. SAMUEL THOMPSON’S VEGETABLE
M E D I C I N E,

In all its variety, and will furnish to those who may favor him with their attention, at his residence, unless otherwise employed.

From a long experience of the use of Dr. Thompson’s Medicine, and the unvaried success which has attended his practice, he feels that a lengthy commendation would be useless. He does not offer his services as a traveling physician, in consequence of other business, but will be ready to give advice, and furnish medicines to those who may favor him with a call, and attend on patients who may wait upon him at his residence.

The following is a list, in part of the different kinds of medicine kept for sale, with a short statement of their qualities and effects:

Vegetable Elixir. —Excellent for pain in the stomach and bowels, and Rheumatic complaints.

Pills. —For head-ache, bilious complaints, costiveness, dyspepsia, and difficulties in the stomach and livers.

Vegetable Powders. —Useful for a cold and foul stomach, violent colds, cough, sore throat, and to relieve from threatened fevers.

Vegetable Bitters. —For jaundice, loss of appetite, sickness in the stomach, head-ache, &c.

Botanic Ointment. —A certain cure for humors, corns, stiff joints, shrunk cords, stiffness in the neck, rheumatic complaints, swelling in the throat, chilblains, chapped hands, weakness and pain in the back, sores, ringworms, cuts and burns.

Olive Ointment. —Very useful for salt rheum, as many can testify.

Health Restorative. —Excellent to remove obstructions in the kidneys, for strangury, diabetes, and various female complaints.

Cough Powders. —Good for [w]hooping cough, and ulcers in the throat.

Peach Cordial. —One of the most valuable restoratives in dysentery, after the cause is removed, to give tone to the bowels and affect a speedy cure: it is also a sovereign remedy for all bowel complaints that have become torpid in consequence of taking drastic purges, diarrhea, or from any other cause.

A CERTAIN CURE FOR THE

I T C H,

however inveterate.

A few applications will entirely remove this troublesome disease, and by keeping it on hand, and occasionally applying a small quantity to the wrist, will prevent those who are exposed, from taking this disagreeable disorder. Travellers will find it their interest to furnish themselves with this valuable ointment. Price 25 cts.

—
COUGH DROPS AND PILLS.

Consumption is easily overcome in its infancy: it rapidly arrives, if neglected, at an unconquerable and terrific maturity. An obstinate, violent, and convulsive cough, is the invariable forerunner, when neglected, of the

PULMONARY CONSUMPTION,

which may be nipped in the bud by the timely administration of these medicines, which have been known to cure persons supposed to be far gone in consumption, and exhibiting all the appearance of approaching dissolution.

—
A SAFE AND SURE REMEDY FOR

T H E P I L E S.

The proprietor begs leave to recommend, (which he does with the fullest confidence,) one of the most valuable remedies known for this troublesome and painful complaint.

This remedy is perfectly innocent in its application, to all conditions, ages and sexes.—Full instructions will accompany each packet which consists of one box of ointment, and a phial of drops. Price 37½ for the whole, or 25 for the ointment alone.

—
**VEGETABLE ANTI-BILIOUS
 PILLS.**

The convenience of a cheap remedy, in the form of Pills, suited to the commencement of most of the indispositions to which we are liable, needs no comment.

Many diseases, in the forming stage, are arrested, by the exhibition of proper cathartic medicine, and the consequent suffering and expenses are thereby avoided.

All that pills can effect, in preserving or restoring health—and *that is much*—may be expected, and will be derived from the timely use of these pills.

They are peculiarly excellent in every variety of head ache, proceeding from a foul, acid, and bilious state of the stomach; and in all feverishness of the system, dependant on the same cause. In short, for every derangement of the stomach and bowels, requiring cathartic medicine, the Vegetable Anti-Bilious Pills admit no competitor.¹⁰

—
NERVE POWDER.

One of the most useful remedies for cramps of the stomach, and debility of the nerves; it is also good in hysterical, and hypochondriacal affections, and convulsions: it may be taken in all cases with perfect safety, without producing the least unpleasant sensation, or any deleterious effects upon the system.

—
FEVER & AGUE.

A specific and lasting cure of intermittent fevers, of Fever and Ague, But a short time has elapsed since this most remarkable medicine has been brought before the public, as a certain and most effectual cure for this truly dreadful disease, the Fever and Ague. It is hailed by those who have tried it, and is justly regarded as the “friend to the afflicted.” for what an amount of time, and money, and comfort does it save to such of the suffering? The unparalleled and universal success which has ever attended a punctual and regular use of the Tonic Mixture, in all cases of Fever and Ague, warrants the proprietor in engaging to refund the price to all those who have taken the medicine in strict accordance with the prescribed directions, without having been perfectly cured.

The following is one of the many who cheerfully testify to the wonderful benefits they have received from his most effectual remedy.

—

I hereby certify, that I have taken Dr. Williams’ Vegetable Ague Drops, after having been afflicted more than 7 months, and after trying many of the popular medicines for the same, and found immediate relief, and an effectual cure. I am happy to add, that my system is not in the least impaired from any effects produced by said medicine.

FRANCIS BARLACOME.
 Kirtland, September 25, 1835.¹¹

Dr. Williams Grew His Own Medicinal Herbs

As was common with nineteenth-century households, there would be a garden near the home for kitchen vegetables and spice herbs. In the case of a botanical doctor like Frederick G. Williams, there would also be a herbarium where he would raise his own plants for medicinal purposes. In a work largely prepared by D. P. Hurlburt but published under Eber D. Howe's name, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville: Telegraph Press, 1834), there is a passage, although critical in tone, confirming that Dr. Williams had not one, but two, herb gardens, one on each side of his Kirtland home. The reference comes with the mocking of the revelation received by Joseph Smith Jr. in Kirtland on February 27, 1833, commonly referred to as the "Word of Wisdom," which speaks of things that should not be ingested and those that should, including the "wholesome herbs God hath ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man."¹²

We are next told that every wholesome herb, God ordained for the use of man!! and we should infer that the writer or the recording angel had been inducted into the modern use of herbs, by the celebrated Doct. F. G. Williams, who is associated with the prophet and the nominal proprietor of a monthly paper, which is issued from the Mormon kennel, in Kirtland. F. G. Williams is a revised quack, well known in this vicinity, by his herbarium on either side of his ho[u]se; but whether he claims protection by right of letters patent from the General Government or by communion with spirits from other worlds, we are not authorized to determine, but should conclude he would be adequate to dictate the above mockery at revelation and rigmarole, in relation to food for cattle, &c.¹³

Medical Advertisement: Quincy, Illinois, 1839

An announcement of Dr. Williams's medical practice four years later in Illinois discloses that he diagnosed the patient's condition by an examination of his or her urine. The notice also makes reference to the American Indians' knowledge of useful medicinal roots, which botanical doctors often noted. The advertisement first appeared in the *Quincy (Illinois) Whig* on Saturday, August 24, 1839. At the end of the notice was the date when it was first published and an indication that it was to run for six months: "aug 24—6m."

F. G. WILLIAMS—*Indian and German*
ROOT DOCTOR.

WHO distinguishes disease by an examination of the urine. Office on Hampshire street, opposite the American Tavern.

Dr. W. would notify the citizens of this county, and the public at large, that he has located himself in the town of Quincy, Ill., and is now prepared to attend to all who may favor him with their patronage, by practising on

the Indian and German System of distinguishing disease by an examination of the urine, and that he will always apply vegetable medicine which are perfectly free from all those deleterious effects which are always the result from the use of mineral medicines. Dr. W's medicines are procured from the field and the forest, carefully selected and prepared in such a manner that he can recommend them to the afflicted to operate in harmony with all the laws of animal life, removing disease by restoring all the execrations and secretions of the system, dislodging all the worn out matter which by its being retained in the system, produces disease and death his medicines are peculiarly calculated for the cure of liver complaints, dyspepsia, fever, fever and ague, affection of the lungs and kidneys, weakness of the stomach, loss of appetite, indigestion, costiveness, nervous affections, coughs and colds, rheumatism, impurities of the blood, fever sores, ulcers, white swellings, cancers, general female debility, and the whole train of diseases that effect the human frame. He will warrant a perfect cure in all cases of cancers, white swelling, fever sores, ulcers and scroffula, in all their various forms, together with every old sore of any kind whatever. His charges will always be moderate, and the terms for medicine cash or good notes, with approved security.

N.B. In all inward complaints patients are requested to bring or send some of their urine in a clear vial, taken immediately after rising in the morning.

Dr. W. has settled his present location on the Mississippi, that people living at a distance may be benefited by his remedies, which may be sent any distance on the river by water conveyance. All those living at any considerable distance from Quincy, who wish to try the virtue of Dr. Williams's vegetable remedies can send any number of cases by one person, and save a vast expense and time. aug 24—6m¹⁴

Known Medical Procedures Performed by Dr. F. G. Williams

Doctor Williams's medical ledger lists names of patients (often with the date of the service), the fees charged, and if the fees were collected; he (or his wife, Rebecca, who may have kept the books at times) also adds a brief comment, especially if the form of payment was in goods or services.¹⁵ There is virtually no mention, however, of which diseases were treated, which medications were prescribed, or which medical procedures were performed. For that information, we must rely on his medical advertisements, on Thomson's *Materia Medica*, and on the written accounts of others.

1. Assisting with Childbirth. Dr. Williams assisted Mary Bailey Smith, Samuel Smith's wife, in the delivery of her first child on October 27, 1835:

Tuesday [October] 27 [1837].—In the morning I was called to visit at Brother Samuel Smith's. His wife was confined and in a dangerous condition. Brother Carlos went to Chardon after Dr. Williams. I went out into the field and bowed before the Lord and called upon Him in mighty prayer in

her behalf. And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, "My servant Frederick shall come, and shall have wisdom given him to deal prudently, and my handmaid shall be delivered of a living child and be spared." The doctor came in about one hour afterwards, and in the course of two hours she was delivered, and thus what God had manifested to me was fulfilled every whit.¹⁶

Although there is no section specifically labeled childbirth in Thomson's *Materia Medica*, there is ample information given to aid the physician. Under "Red Raspberry" we read:

Raspberry leaves may be used freely as a substitute for imported tea, (thea Chinensis) with no apprehensions of danger. It is the best thing for a woman in travail of any article I know of. In such cases it should be given in strong tea, with a little of No. 2, sweetened. It will bring on the labor pains regularly, and reduced the irregular pains to order and regularity, thus affording rest to the patient in the intervals. If the pains are untimely, it will quell them. If timely and lingering, give more of the tea, with a larger quantity of No. 2, and umbil, or nerve powder. This will assist the natural functions of the body, and thus hasten the labor. And if this is given, in the intervals the patient will be quiet, and rest in the same proportion as the labor pains were severe. Thus the woman's strength and courage are kept up, and she is ready to meet the next attack, thus continuing till the child is born. (605)

The section continues with a discussion on what to do in case of complications.

In the lengthy section titled "Human Systems" (211–484), which includes the muscles, bones, veins, organs, and so forth, there is a very detailed description of female anatomy (including illustrations), explaining each part and, whenever pertinent, noting the differences that exist when in a state of pregnancy, together with graphic descriptions of the reproductive organs (317–23). There is also a detailed section on the "Human Foetus" (323–29).

In the section entitled "Diseases and Herbal Treatments" (691–824), the volume includes a treatment called "Women's Friend":

Take of poplar bark five pounds; unicorn, cinnamon, golden seal, and cloves, each half a pound; four ounces of cayenne and eight pounds of sugar. Let them all be made fine and well mixed. This is an excellent article in female weaknesses, to prevent abortion and to be used at the cessation of the menses.

A teaspoonful may be taken in a gill of hot water. (707)

There is also a section entitled "Remedies Worthy the Attention of Females" (737–39), which includes "Mother's Relief," a treatment that "will strengthen and invigorate the constitution before childbirth so that the mother will pass the time of labor with little danger, and will be less liable to

take cold after confinement” (737). Also listed is a treatment for “Falling of the Womb, or Prolapsus Uteri” (738); a treatment “To Prevent Sore Nipples or Breasts” (739); and another to treat hysteria: “Hysterics usually occur in women over fifteen years of age. . . . Sometimes the patient laughs and cries in the same breath; beats her breasts and shrieks, although not entirely deprived of consciousness” (810–11).

2. Setting Broken Bones. Dr. Williams set the broken arm of the ten-year-old step-son of Ebenezer Page in June 1838 in Far West, Missouri.

The following June he [Ebenezer Page] married Hannah Peck, a poor widow, who lost all she had in Jackson Co., Missouri, at the time the church was driven from Independence. She had four boys, the eldest was about ten years old. A short time after their marriage, while at meeting, the oldest boy fell and broke his arm. Brother Page then called on F. G. Williams to go with him home to dress the boy’s arm. After it was done the stepfather told him he could not remunerate him, but was obliged to call him in. The doctor replied that he was aware of the fact, and should make no charge, but would have charged two dollars had he been in good circumstances.¹⁷

In Thomson’s *Materia Medica*, the author devotes a section to the human skeleton and lists the body’s many bones (230–31); he focuses specifically on setting a bone in the foot (744), but not in an arm.

3. Stitching Wounds. Doctor Williams’s medical practice included sewing up wounds, as we learn from Hyrum Smith’s accident with an ax. Joseph recorded:

[Wednesday, February 10, 1836.] At four o’clock, called at the school room in the Temple to make some arrangements concerning the classes. On my return I was informed that Brother Hyrum Smith had cut himself. I immediately repaired to his house, and found him badly wounded in his left arm, he had fallen on his ax, which caused a wound about four or five inches in length. Doctor Williams sewed it up and dressed it, and I feel to thank God that it is no worse, and I ask my Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ to heal my brother Hyrum, and bless my father’s family, one and all, with peace and plenty, and eternal life.¹⁸

In Thomson’s *Materia Medica*, the author has this to say about sewing up wounds:

Take according to the size of the wound, one, two, or three threads of sewing silk, (the white is best) about six inches in length, well waxed; place the thread through the eye of a darning needle, if there be no surgeon’s needle at hand; pass the needle through from within the lips of the wound under the skin, and have it pass up through the skin about half an inch back of the edge of the orifice, being particular to include the full thickness of the skin, which is from an eighth to a quarter of an inch, in the different parts. Draw through the ligature, until the middle of the thread rests in the middle

of the wound; then detach the needle, and thread it with the other end of the silk; then commence in the wound below the skin and bring it out in the same manner on the opposite side. The stitch being complete, the tying of the ends of the ligature in a single or sliding knot completes the work. The second or third stitch may be taken in like manner, if necessary. (778–79)

There is a caution about how tight the stitches should be and what to do should the wound become inflamed: “[The stitches] should never be tighter than barely sufficient to cause the edges of the wound to touch each other gently. The strips of sticking plaster and the bandage should take off from the rest of the wound all pressure or excessive confinement of the sore. If the parts become swelled or inflamed, the stitches should be cut immediately; or as the parts adhere together so as not to need them, the thread may be cut and drawn out” (779).

4. Treating Burns. Another procedure performed by Doctor Williams, according to his first biographer, was the dressing of burns and peeled skin caused by hot tar, as in the case of Joseph Smith in Hiram, Ohio, in 1832. We read in Nancy C. Williams’s biography that Frederick and his wife, Rebecca, attended to Smith’s wounds all night: “One vivid tragic memory Rebecca left to her descendants was when on the 24th of March, 1832, the mob tarred and feathered him [Joseph Smith]. She related how she and the Doctor worked all night over his bleeding body and how in places, in removing tar, the skin peeled off with it. The babies and Emma were also cared for by them.”¹⁹

In Thomson’s *Materia Medica*, the author provides the following guidance for burns: “BURN OINTMENT. Take of beeswax and Burgundy pitch and melt them together; then mix sweet oil until the compound has the consistency of ointment. APPLICATION. This salve will ease the pain of a burn almost immediately on its application, for which purpose it is very valuable. It is also good for fresh cuts, or wounds and bruises of the flesh” (732).

5. Treating Cholera. Probably the most feared disease Doctor Williams treated was cholera, as in the outbreak that occurred in Missouri during Zion’s Camp in 1834. The writer quoted below is James Henry Rollins, a resident of Missouri and a member of the Church. Among those who perished in that outbreak was Algernon Sidney Gilbert, who had established a store in Missouri, as he had with his partner, Newel K. Whitney, in Kirtland. Williams later handled the estate of Sidney Gilbert and treated the widow Gilbert as his patient.

I will now pass over the interval from May 1832 to June 1st 1834, at which time the first heralds of the Camp of Israel, namely, the two men, Amasa Lyman and Almon W. Babbitt, came to the hill farm, which was occupied by Sidney Gilbert. They told of the near approach of the Camp, also, of the

escape from the mob at Fishing River. A day or two after this the camp arrived. Joseph the Prophet and William his brother, with Dr. F. G. Williams and several others, stayed at our place, and, the majority of the camp going down Bush Creek some three-fourths of a mile from us to the farm of John Burk, where many were stricken with Cholera and died. There were five died at our house, namely: William Weeden, a brother Judd, Jessie Smith a cousin of Joseph, Sidney Gilbert and Phoebe Murdock. During this time of sickness I was sent by the Prophet and Dr. Williams to Liberty for medicine and by Joseph the Prophet to brother Partridge's, Morley's, and other places with dispatches or word to other brethren who lived at a distance from the camp of Israel. Having a pony to various places where I was sent during the time of this terrible scourge.

Rollins speaks of how quickly the disease overtook people, seemingly healthy one moment and dead the next:

George A. Smith and Jessie Smith both being my age were out in the road with myself trying to get a ball from a pistol which had got wet at Fishing River. We were all three very merry and were laughing a great deal, when Jessie said: "We ought not be here making so much noise while there are so many of our brethren sick and dying, we don't know how soon some of us may be taken." We then opened the gate and went into the east door of the house. In a short time after entering the house this noble boy was stricken with Cholera. Joseph and his brethren worked over him, but, fever took hold of him, and with all their attention it seemed to avail nothing, and he died, laying on the floor of our largest room. We wrapped him up in his bed clothes and carried him through a terrible thunder storm and laid him in a grave that had been dug, covering him with his mother earth. The same as the other two who had died previous, without any coffins. Joseph took the death of the noble boy very hard, as he undoubtedly had been entrusted with his care by the boy's parents. At this time Joseph was reprimanded of the Lord for trying to stay His hand and I think the Lord told him at this time that he would smite him if he tried more to stay his decreed afflictions as promised, before they arrived. About this time the camp was disbanded and I bade goodbye to Joseph and his brethren as they took their departure for Kirtland and its vicinity.²⁰

Joseph Smith Jr. adds:

The cholera continued its ravages for about four days, when a remedy for the purging, vomiting, and cramping, was discovered; viz., dipping the persons afflicted in cold water, or pouring it upon them, and giving them whisky thickened with flour to the consistency of starch.²¹ Whisky was the only kind of spirits that could be procured at this place. About sixty-eight of the Saints suffered from this disease, of which number fourteen died, viz.: John S. Carter, Eber Wilcox, Seth Hitchcock, Erastus Rudd, Algernon Sidney Gilbert, Alfred Fisk, Edward Ives, Noah Johnson, Jesse B. Lawson, Robert McCord, Elial Strong, Jesse J. Smith, Warren Ingalls and Betsy Parrish.²²

Dr. Williams also treated cholera victims in Cleveland, with the blessing of the leaders of the Church: “August 21 [1834].—Doctor Frederick G. Williams returned from Cleveland and told us concerning the plague, and after much consultation, we agreed that Dr. Williams should go to Cleveland and commence administering to the sick, for the purpose of obtaining blessings for them, and for the glory of the Lord. Accordingly, we (Joseph, Frederick, and Oliver,) united in prayer before the Lord for this thing. Now, O Lord, grant us these blessings in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”²³

The author of Thomson’s *Materia Medica* devotes considerable space to his “Philosophical Theory” of the causes of “The Asiatic Cholera” and the reason for its transmission to the settlements along the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri rivers in 1832 (752–59). In another section, he describes the symptoms of the disease:

VOMITING AND PURGING—Cholera Morbus. The attack of this disease is generally sudden. In some cases it is brought on by pain, lassitude and acid eructations; at other times it commences by vomiting and purging, the purging not usually commencing first. The matter ejected, besides the undigested food, if any, is bile, varying in color from its natural yellow to a green, brown or black, and mixed with mucus. After continuing a considerable time, the discharges assumes, perhaps, the appearance of the washings of fresh meat. It is frequently attended with spasm in the abdomen and extremities, and the patient’s strength is soon exhausted. In violent cases, collapse succeeds, and unless relief is obtained, death in a few hours puts an end to the sufferings of the patient. (803)

Thomson next offers his treatment for the disease. “TREATMENT. This disease may generally be relieved by a single dose of composition or hot drops. If this does not answer, bathe the feet in hot water and take an emetic, or a thorough course of medicine (Nos. 1 through 6), if required, which is generally effectual” (803). He then lists the treatment used by the regular practitioners, for the sake of comparison: “Regular Treatment.—Bleeding, blistering, calomel, opium, and carbonate of iron, ice water internally, and ice externally.” The dreaded water-borne disease of cholera continued to plague people living on the Mississippi and trekking west along the rivers of the Great Plains.²⁴

6. Treating Venereal Disease. Although the reference is veiled in a euphemistic phrase, Doctor Williams, it would seem, treated some patient (or patients) for venereal disease, which he listed as “Bachelor Delight” in his medical ledger, page 33. There are a total of twenty-five separate billings, totaling \$41.87, which was paid off on August 1, 1839, with the notation “Sundries to balance.”²⁵

In Thomson's *Materia Medica*, the author shares the particulars of his first case of venereal disease, in which his patient was a woman:

While practicing in Exeter, I had a patient (a woman from Portsmouth) who had the venereal, in consequence of a bad husband. She had been attended for nearly a year by the doctors in Portsmouth, who had filled her with mercury for the purpose of curing the disorder, until the remedy was worse than the disease. Her case was alarming and very difficult; she was brought on a bed, being unable to sit up, and seemed to be one mass of putrefaction. I proceeded with her in my usual way of treating old disease where the system has become generally disordered, by giving medicine to promote perspiration, steaming to throw out the mercury and to restore the digestive power, and in three weeks she returned home, entirely cured. (526)

He goes on to state: "This disease is very easily cured in its first stages, by a common course of medicine, being nothing more than a high stage of canker seated in the glands of the organs of generation; and if not cured, communicate with the glands of the throat and other parts. Under the fashionable treatment, there is more difficulty in removing the mercury from the body of one in this situation, than in curing a dozen who have not taken the poison" (526).

In the section entitled "Venereal Disease—Syphilis," Thomson explains the disease:

Syphilitic poison being applied to a part which is soft or covered with a mucous membrane, or otherwise where a puncture of the skin exists, produces an ulceration or inflammation of the part to which it was communicated. This disease may remain local, or it may run into a constitutional affection. When local, it shows itself in form of inflamed ulcers, ash color, and with a disposition to spread rapidly over the adjacent parts.

When constitutional, the fluids throughout the whole system are tainted, and other parts of the body besides the genital organs are liable to break out in obstinate ulcers, or a sort of scrofulous affection; and in this form of the disease, unless arrested by efficient medical treatment, it sooner or later proves fatal. (821)

Thomson then proceeds with the treatment and the procedure for administering the antidote: "Courses of medicine should be used two or three times in the course of a week, and the tincture of lobelia taken at intervals, to keep the stomach sickened. The evacuation of the bowels should be regular and daily. This course will generally relieve all distress. Then make a wash of the lobelia and yellow lily root. This tea may also be used as injections for the penis or per ani with good success."

In the section under "Ointments for Piles, Poultice and Wash for Venereal," Thomson supplied further details for dealing with syphilis, and how the treatment may be delivered:

Simmer together two ounces of the toad lily root (*Hermercallis flava*) two ounces of green emetic (*lobelia inflata*), and a piece of white vitriol (*sulphate of zinc*), about the size of a walnut, finely pulverized, in half a pound of fresh butter; strain off, and you have an excellent remedy for syphilitic sores.

A wash may be made of the same articles that will destroy the irritation at once. It may be injected in form of decoction into the penis in bad cases with great advantage. (733)

Other Medical Procedures and Medications

In addition to the above conditions and diseases known to have been treated by Dr. Williams, there is in his medical ledger, under Samuel McBride on page 83, a reference to vaccination and, on page 170, several entries for Hyrum Kimball in 1840 that hint of several more medical procedures and instruments—including syringes, teas, washes, and astringents—all of which are likewise found in Thomson’s *Materia Medica*. For vaccines, Thomson writes under “Kine Pox—Variolae Vaccinae”: “Vaccination ought not to be performed during the progress of the eruptions, or in a bad state of health” (784). Under “Enemas, or Injections,” he writes:

When the uterus or urinary passages are affected, injections may be given to these parts by means of the appropriate syringes. The quantity to be used as an injection of the bowels should be from a gill to a pint.

Syringes of all sizes, and for all the different purposes, should be kept on hand for every practitioner. (698)

Prominent Patients of Dr. Williams

Among the 307 persons listed in the medical ledger under Dr. Williams’s care, the youngest identifiable patient is Henry Wood, a twelve-year-old boy, and the oldest is John Young, a seventy-four-year-old man. Most of the leadership and prominent members of the Church were under his care, among them the special witnesses of the Book of Mormon, including two of the Three Witnesses (Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer) and four of the Eight Witnesses (Jacob Whitmer, Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith).

Dr. Williams also cared for the majority of the members in the original quorums of the General Authorities. These included two members of the First Presidency (Joseph Smith Jr. and Sidney Rigdon); eight members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (David W. Patten, Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, Luke Johnson, William B. Smith, Orson Pratt, John F. Boynton, and Lyman E. Johnson); four members of the seven presidents of the First Council of the Seventy (Leonard C. Rich, Zebedee Coltrin, Lyman R. Sherman, and Sylvester Smith); and the first Presiding Bishop of the Church, Edward Partridge.

Other early General Authorities under Dr. Williams's care included John Smith, Assistant Counselor in the First Presidency; John Corill and Titus Billings, counselors in the Presiding Bishopric; and James Foster, Salmon Gee, Henry Harriman, and Albert P. Rockwood, presidents of the First Council of the Seventy. Also included are well-known people such as storekeeper and bishop Newel K. Whitney and hymn-writer and newspaperman W. W. Phelps, plus a variety of lesser-known tradesmen, bishops, and high councilors.

There were twenty-one named women under Dr. Williams's care in the ledger, of whom six are listed as widows, nine as married women (generally identified by the title *Mrs.*), and seven as single women (usually identified by their first names). It would appear, however, that not all of Dr. Williams's female patients are identified by name, and we assume his service to them appears under the husbands' names. For example, we know Dr. Williams treated Mary Bailey Smith in childbirth. Her name, however, does not appear in the ledger, but that of her husband, Samuel H. Smith, does.

Conclusion

Frederick G. Williams became a doctor during a period of transition; he practiced before modern science had given physicians a basis for proven treatments against disease. Nevertheless, he was said to be successful at treating cholera. This, perhaps, because the Thomsonian treatment, unlike the "heroic," included steps to rehydrate the patient with herbal teas. We now know that the primary cause of death from cholera is dehydration, even though the bacterium that causes the disease is transmitted from contaminated water.

Since the days of the first Greek practitioners of the healing arts, doctors could do little more than diagnose illness, stitch up wounds, and set broken bones. At the close of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, there was not only a proliferation of medical quackery in vogue but also, happily, a rapid and steady increase in scientific knowledge and the dissemination of sound medical treatments. However, when Dr. Williams began his practice, the orthodox doctors still relied primarily on toxic chemicals such as calomel and on bloodletting, two procedures that were more harmful than the illness itself and that often inflicted death. The milder herbal treatments of the Thomsonian physicians may not have always been any better grounded scientifically, but they at least posed no added health risks. Dr. Frederick G. Williams may not have devoted himself full time to a career in medicine until later in his life, perhaps as late as 1839 in Quincy, Illinois. In Kirtland he had had a sufficient patient base among the members of the Church to succeed at making a living solely

from medicine, but his many other Church-related responsibilities took precedence. Frederick most likely practiced medicine on a need-only basis, while he engaged in other pursuits to provide for his family, such as farming, clerking, and teaching.

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1. Oliver Cowdery to Dr. S. Avard (in the original, the name is spelled Avord), December 15, 1835, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., microfilm of holograph, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

2. *Kirtland (Ohio) Northern Times*, October 2, 1835, 3. Also found in the issues dated October 9, 1835, and December 2, 1835.

3. Nancy Clement Williams, *After 100 Years* (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1951), 48–49.

4. Williams, *After 100 Years*, 50. The only source Nancy C. Williams gives for Dr. Williams's medical training and practice is a description of the rural doctor's life from Elliot Howard Gilkey's *Doctors of Ohio*. She knew Dr. Williams's son, however, Dr. Ezra G. Williams (also a surgeon), who in 1889 became her father-in-law. He had been a frontier doctor in Quincy, Illinois; St. Louis, Missouri; and Salt Lake City, Utah. For a short time after her marriage to Frederick G. Williams (Ezra's eldest son), Nancy, a young sixteen-year-old bride, went to live with her in-laws in Ogden, Utah. Her husband had assisted his father medically and became a de facto rural doctor himself in the Mormon colonies in Mexico, where he went to live with his two wives in 1889. Although Frederick G. Williams (II) undoubtedly received some help from his father, he was most likely trained on the job. Nancy herself would have been a witness to his activities and perhaps assisted as a midwife and with other duties and practices. Her father-in-law died in 1905, her husband in 1918.

5. Williams, *After 100 Years*, 52.

6. Gertrude Van Rensselaer Wickham, ed., *Memorial to the Pioneer Women of the Western Reserve*, 5 vols. (Cleveland: J. B. Savage Print, 1896–97), 4:679.

7. The property was found in lot 41, range 11, of township 7. See Land Records, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Deeds and Mortgages, vol. 1, 46–47.

8. *Auditor's Tax Duplicate*, Geauga County Courthouse, Chardon, Ohio. A similar tax record for 1837 also lists Dr. Williams among physicians and attorneys paying taxes in the county.

9. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:125 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). Williams is addressed as "Dr." or "Doctor" in *History of the Church* a total of eighteen times. He is referenced many more times with the title of president, brother, or simply by name.

10. I am indebted to Dean Morris, herbal specialist in Springville, Utah, for supplying the spectrum of herbal treatments for bowel activity from mildest to strongest: aperants or apurants, bulk fiber, laxatives, cathartics, and purgatives. See 10th *U.S. Pharmacopeia*, *King's American Dispensatory*, and John Gerard's *Herbal*.

11. The advertisement appeared in three of the extant four issues of the *Northern Times*: vol. 1, no. 27 (Friday, October 2, 1835); no. 28 (Friday, October 9, 1835); and no. 36 (Wednesday, December 2, 1835). Vol. 1, no. 42 (Wednesday, January 13, 1836), is missing pages 3 and 4 where the advertisement would normally appear.

12. Doctrine and Covenants 89:10.

13. Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, a Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834), 229–30. This quotation has an obvious typographical error in the original that I have corrected with a bracketed *u*. Undoubtedly, Howe meant “house” and not “horse.”

14. The 401 words in 54 lines of the advertisement appeared in the Quincy *Whig* twenty-five times in succession from August 24, 1839, to February 8, 1840 (the newspaper incorrectly printed February 7 on its masthead), with no variations except its location on the page.

15. Frederick G. Williams, Medical ledger, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. The most common forms of payment were promissory notes, sundries, and cash. Named payments in goods and services included copies of the Book of Mormon, wood, stones, leather, crockery, a sink, a sofa, three mats, a barrel of flour, a quart of linseed oil, a coffee pot, general labor, the mending of a gig, working on a wall, blacksmithing, and shoemaking.

16. *History of the Church*, 2:292.

17. Ebenezer Page, “For Zion’s Reveille,” *Zion’s Reveille* 2, no. 13 (April 15, 1847): 55.

18. *History of the Church*, 2:393–94.

19. Williams, *After 100 Years*, 65.

20. “Reminiscences of James Henry Rollins,” typescript, 4–6, Church History Library.

21. Could this have been Dr. Williams’s own remedy for cholera?

22. *History of the Church*, 2:119–20.

23. *History of the Church*, 2:146.

24. See Patricia Rushton, “Cholera and Its Impact on Nineteenth-Century Mormon Migration,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 123–44.

25. Judging by the euphemism Bachelor Delight, it is rather obvious that Dr. Williams was treating venereal disease, which he listed separately in its own account and not as part of the regular entries in the ledger under individual names (to maintain confidentiality?). Since there are no names listed, we can only wonder if these cases involved just Mormons or if they included non-Mormons as well. Judging by the large number of entries, twenty-five, it was either recurring in a few individuals or affected several people or some combination of both. Since the relatively high balance of \$41.87 was paid off late in 1839, should we assume these entries are all related to cases in Missouri, a frontier state? I wonder if one of the reasons Dr. Williams was rarely maligned by the non-Mormons or apostates (as were Joseph and Sidney) was because those individuals knew the doctor had incriminating information on them.