

The Sibley and Watson Families and Rochester's Homeopathic Hospital

Marjorie B. Searl

On [April 26, 1894](#), Dr. M.D. Youngman of Atlantic City wrote to Emily Sibley Watson, then pregnant with her third child, advising her (at her concerned mother's request) of proper diet and care for the most optimal outcome: "Now common sense must be used in following such a diet one may do it with great safety for a few months but with all a good degree of health must be maintained. I also recommend 10 drops 3 times a day of tincture of cunicifuga diluted with plain water this is to be taken up to the time of labor and has worked wonders in my hands. I also advise after the 7th month anointing the abdomen with arnica cirate (to be had at all homeopathic pharmacies) this do on going to bed each night."

Youngman was a homeopathic physician in Atlantic City who had cared for other family members. His letter comes only a few years following the establishment of the first homeopathic hospital in Rochester whose existence was largely due to the financial and moral support of the Sibley and Watson families. While the role of homeopathy in health care remains controversial into the 21st century, in 19th century Rochester, homeopathy found a welcoming home, thanks in great part to the support of a large community of committed physicians and generous families. Not one, but two hospitals were built to care for patients who adhered to this type of treatment: Rochester Homeopathic Hospital (later Genesee Hospital) and Hahnemann Hospital (later Highland Hospital).¹



Homeopathic Hospital



rpf01089.jpg Rochester Public Library Local History Division

Hahnemann Hospital, courtesy Rochester Images Project

¹ Dr. M.D. Youngman in Atlantic City to Emily Sibley Watson in Rochester, NY, April 26, 1894. George Eastman Museum, Stills, Posters and Paper Collections, Moving Image Department, The Dr. James Sibley Watson, Jr. Paper Collection, Box C338 Letters to Mrs. James Sibley Watson 1.2.1894-5.17.1894. For the purposes of this essay, "homeopathic" will be spelled "homeopathic" except where the word is part of a quote.

Homeopathy was a branch of medicine that grew out of the theories promoted by Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843), a German physician. His practice led him to reject traditional medical treatments of the time and search for a new protocol based on the belief in the “law of similars.” From the Rochester Regional Health website, “The two major schools were the traditional practice of Allopathic medicine and the other being Homeopathic medicine. Whereas Allopathy treats the symptoms of an illness, such as an antibiotic for an infection or pain medication to relieve pain, and is based in science, Homeopathy is the practice of treating the cause of the illness, (rather than the symptoms), with natural remedies that would produce similar symptoms in healthy patients. The underlying premise is that the body’s natural systems fight disease rather than the use of drugs.”²

Rochester was an active center for homeopathy, attracting specialists who benefited from a strong County Homeopathic Society. The Society advocated energetically for acceptance of its members by the allopathic (traditional) medical community, which was reluctant to allow them privileges at Rochester City Hospital. The best solution seemed to be to open a hospital based on homeopathic principles. The first Homoeopathic Hospital was incorporated in 1887 and located on Monroe Avenue (currently 259 Monroe Avenue, formerly Sears Roebuck). A schism among the homeopaths resulted in the opening in 1889 of Hahnemann Hospital on Rockingham Street, by physicians who adhered more stringently to Hahnemann’s philosophy. By 1894, the hospital was sufficiently busy that a larger facility opened on Alexander Street at the former home of Freeman Clarke, a wealthy businessman and politician, who had died in 1887.



Stereographic image of the
Freeman Clarke home,
224 Alexander St., Courtesy
Rochester Images Project

rsg00005.jpg Rochester Public Library Local History Division

Prominent Rochester families were loyal patients of homeopathic physicians and actively supported their efforts to open a hospital. Among them were Hiram and Elizabeth Sibley and Don Alonzo and Caroline Watson, and their children and grandchildren. Over time, at least three generations of family members provided funds and leadership for the Homeopathic Hospital, later known as Genesee Hospital.

What led these families to homeopathy? Unfortunately, they do not discuss this anywhere in their correspondence. However, we do know that as early as the 1860s they were seeking remedies for ailments at spas and sanatoria that promoted rest, fresh air, moderate diet, and spiritual refreshment. Hiram Sibley’s travels in Europe included a stay at Aachen, Germany, at the Hotel Dremel, which had an attached bathhouse that drew from mineral springs. He described it, in his inimitable style, on July 21, 1865:

² <https://www.rochesterregional.org/about/history/rochester-medical-museum-and-archives/digital-exhibits/history-of-rochester-area-hospitals/rochesters-homeopathic-hospitals/> accessed May 6, 2017.

My Dear Wife, You asked me to write when I reached here. As it is my habit to mind my wife, as a good husband always should, I am going to obey as usual. After many changes & a long ride I reached here at 1/2 past 9 O.C. last night. Today I have worked all day changing my rooms twice to get fresh air & looking up my doctor. He appears to be a man of sense and much experienced being about sixty-five years I should think. He speaks English well and says he has cured more English men of Rheumatism than would fill many hotels. He looked a little beat when I told him I was an American and that I wanted to be cured as soon as possible to go back to the U.S. to enjoy our Peace. I have taken my first bath today under his direction. The treatment is easy & even agreeable but this place will I fear tax my patience. Dull Dull about 20 or perhaps 30 old gouty Englishmen as morose as hedgehogs make up my society with the ugliest old hags for chamber maids you ever did see now I might as well kept that to myself for you never appear to sympathize with me under such misfortunes. ³

During the same period, his daughter Louise Sibley Atkinson, whose health was rapidly declining, sought help from Dr. Henry Foster at the Clifton Springs Water Cure, where she and her family often resided for weeks on end. Her devoted husband, Hobart Atkinson, wrote to Elizabeth Sibley a few months after Elizabeth would have received her husband's letter from Aachen:

Louise was quite sick last week considerable congestion of the spine and pressure upon the optic nerve which has left her sight affected so that she cannot see to read or write but the Doctor says that will all come out right again. The pupil of her eye is quite large so that it makes her farsighted. She is better now. She was only confined to her room two days - We have had a pleasant Fall and we ride once or twice every day. She will not be able to write you this time in consequence of this trouble with her sight. Dr. Foster says it all came from this trouble in the rectum and thinks when that is sound she will be well again. Mr. and Mrs. Watson came home from Glen Haven about two weeks since. They are all quite well and had a very pleasant summer. They had a cottage attached to the Hotel and Dr. and Mrs. Anderson were with them. They rowed boats on the lake every day and Mrs. Watson is better than she has been for many years. She could row a boat two miles without stopping. We are now staying in the Cure having rooms on the third floor - it is too much going up and down stairs for Louise but it is the best they could do for us and we must make the best of it. ⁴

While the "water cure" did not prove to be curative for Louise Sibley Atkinson, who died in 1868, perhaps these early experiences with natural healing treatments led these influential families and others to ally with the emerging homeopathic community in Rochester. In mid-19th century America, cure rates for allopathic medical treatments were hardly impressive, and in fact some data indicate that homeopathic treatments resulted in more favorable outcomes. Armed with this information, it may be that families that had the ability to be more discriminating about their health care were eager to align themselves with what was perceived as a more enlightened medical community.

³ Hiram Sibley in Aachen to Elizabeth Sibley in Heidelberg, Germany, July 21, 1865. Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester, Sibley Papers Addition, D.226 11:36. The "Peace" that he mentions is the cessation of the Civil War.

⁴ Hobart Atkinson in Rochester to Elizabeth Sibley in Europe, October 9-10, 1865. Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester, Sibley Papers Addition, D.226 11:36. Don Alonzo Watson was Hiram Sibley's business partner and an early investor in Western Union, an enterprise spearheaded by Hiram Sibley; Dr. Anderson was the first president of the University of Rochester. Glen Haven was another water cure facility, located on Skaneateles Lake, around 75 miles from Rochester.

Medical historian Edward C. Atwater M.D. has written a detailed history of the founding of the homeopathic hospitals in Rochester in his article "The Heyday of Homoeopathy in Rochester (1880 – 1920)".⁵ Of the initial involvement of the Sibley and Watson families, he wrote:

To fill board vacancies, Hiram W. Sibley and his brother-in-law James Sibley Watson were elected. For almost three decades, these men and their families became the financial sponsors of the Rochester Homoeopathic Hospital. This Sibley family (unrelated to the Sibleys supporting the Hahnemann Hospital) became prosperous in the years before the Civil War when the elder Hiram Sibley, father of Hiram W., amalgamated many small companies into the Western Union Telegraph Company. Probably the most affluent people in town (the elder Mr. Sibley reported income of \$100,174 on his tax return for 1864...they lived on the new East side where there was no hospital. Furthermore, the hospital facilities of the community were unavailable to them since their physicians were homoeopaths...An East side institution and one which would admit homoeopaths seemed a reasonable project for such a family.

Elizabeth Tinker Sibley [Mrs. Hiram Sibley], the family matriarch, has been credited over the years with the founding of the hospital thanks to a possibly apocryphal event. She was said to have witnessed a woman falling in front of her East Avenue home and, after dispatching the woman to City Hospital on the west side of Rochester, determined that the east side was in need of a medical facility and set about making that a reality. Whether or not that was the case, there is no question but that Mrs. Sibley dedicated her energy and her money to this cause. Her letters were peppered with references to the hospital and fund raising. In 1893, she wrote indignantly to her daughter Emily who was traveling in Egypt about the Freeman Clarke house on Alexander Street, to which the hospital was relocating:

Our meeting held in the Clark house was a pleasant affair, our board remains the same, John E. Beckley and F.C. (i.e., P. V.) Crittenden were added to the Governors – the Clarks took everything from the house that they could without taking the walls, gas fixtures even to the little one [illegible] (side lights) in the servants rooms, grates, in fact everything, the house looks bare enough.⁶

She was the first president of the Lady Supervisors, and her daughter's mother-in-law Mrs. Don Alonzo Watson was the first Vice-President. Each served until her death, Mrs. Watson in 1900 and Mrs. Sibley in 1903. Other family members served on the Board of Lady Supervisors, as well. Mrs. Watson's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Hiram W. Sibley (Margaret Durbin Harper), served as President of the School of Nurses, and as Watson descendant Harriet Granger Hollister wrote in her pamphlet "Lady Supervisors":

Mrs. Hiram W. Sibley, Mrs. William Eastwood, and Mrs. Martin Cooke were the first three presidents of the School, and during the early years all young nurses wishing to enter training applied directly to Mrs. Sibley.⁷

⁵ Atwater, Edward C. "The Heyday of Homoeopathy in Rochester." Monroe County Medical Society Bulletin (May 1975): pp. 165-177.

⁶ Elizabeth Sibley in Rochester to Emily Sibley Watson in Luxor, Egypt, January 23, 1893. George Eastman Museum, Stills, Posters, and Paper Collection, Moving Image Department, The Dr. James Sibley Watson, Jr. Paper Collection, Box C338.

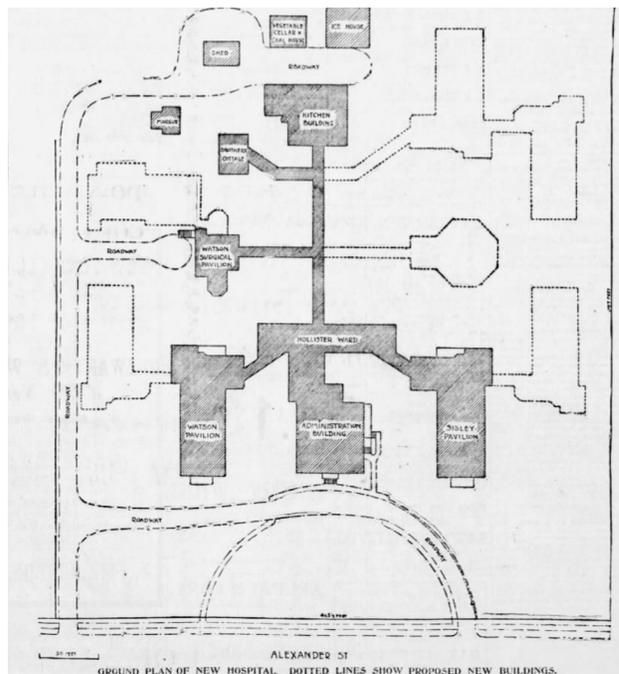
⁷ Harriet Hollister Spencer. "Lady Supervisors." Rochester, N.Y. 1939. The full title of the pamphlet is: "Being a Short and Incomplete History of the Labours of the "Lady Supervisors" in the Founding and Upbuilding of the Rochester Homeopathic, Later the Genesee Hospital. Compiled from Old Records, Early Newspaper Files, the Hospital Leaflet, and the Long Memories of Some of the Ladies Themselves." It is held by the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation at the University of Rochester.

A nursing position—the Margaret Harper visiting nurse—was provided by Mrs. Hiram W. Sibley from 1891 to 1915 in memory of her mother Margaret Durbin, the wife of publisher Fletcher Harper. In 1903, the younger Mrs. Sibley assumed the position of President of what had been the Board of Lady Supervisors, now the Board of Supervisors, upon the death of her mother-in-law, Mrs. Hiram Sibley. One sixth of the honorary members of the Board of Supervisors of 1939 were Sibley or Watson descendants.⁸



rpf00957.jpg Rochester Public Library Local History Division

Nurses at Genesee Hospital, Rochester N.Y., ca. 1910, courtesy, Rochester Images Project



Plan showing the Homeopathic Hospital wings, “Homeopathy’s New Home” *Democrat & Chronicle*, 11/17/1894.

Both families provided ample funds for bricks and mortar. By 1894, the new campus on Alexander Street consisted of the Sibley Pavilion, the Watson Pavilion, the Hollister Pavilion, and the Watson Surgical Pavilion. Notable was the Brothers’ Cottage Contagious Pavilion, donated and expanded in 1902 by Mr. and Mrs. Hiram W. Sibley in memory of Hiram and Durbin, their two sons who died of contagious diseases:

The aim of Mr. and Mrs. Sibley has always been to provide the best that skill and modern science can contribute to the aid of suffering humanity, in whatever has to do with the care and treatment of the sick, without the useless display or unnecessary trappings.⁹

⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹. *Democrat and Chronicle*, “Dread Disease Loses Terrors,” June 12, 1902.

¹⁰. *Democrat and Chronicle*, “Homeopathy’s New Home,” November 17, 1894.

Furnishings and permanently endowed “free beds” were donated by the families, two in memory of Louise Sibley Atkinson and Elizabeth Louise Averell, Emily Sibley Watson’s sister and daughter. Gifts of cash were regular and ample. Upon the opening of the new hospital, the Sibley and Watson families contributed funds to retire the debt of \$30,000 that the hospital faced when the buildings and equipment were completed.¹⁰ In 1898, Emily Sibley Watson committed funds to expand and modernize the maternity ward, which opened to the public on January 25, 1900.¹¹

Even the youngest family members were enlisted to support the hospital. An 1890 article in the Democrat and Chronicle recorded that “A legerdemain entertainment will be given this afternoon at 4:30 o’clock by Masters Sibley Smith and J.G. Averill [sic] at No. 6 Sibley Place, for the benefit of the Rochester Homeopathic Hospital. A small admission fee will be charged.” Both Sibley Smith and J.G. Averell were Sibley heirs.¹² A hospital children’s club encouraged small donations on the occasion of birthdays.



Homeopathic Hospital Birthday Union
Membership card for
James Sibley Watson, Jr., 1900
Courtesy George Eastman Museum

Dedication to the common good was characteristic of this period in Rochester’s history. Contemporaneous with the founding of the Homeopathic Hospital was the creation of Rochester’s first city park, Highland Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. The University of Rochester was expanding on the Prince St. campus. Museums were still to come, but the Rochester Art Club had been founded a decade before the hospital was built. George Eastman, a supporter of both homeopathic hospitals, was on his way to establishing Rochester as the image capital of the world. The Sibleys and the Watsons would see a changed medical environment in 21st century Rochester—not a worse environment, but one that is radically different. Homeopathy has lost its place as a credited practice; Genesee Hospital, formerly the Homeopathic Hospital to which the families gave so much of their time and money, stands no longer. However, every good cause must be launched by people with heart and vision. Their legacy—concern for high-quality medical care available to all regardless of income—remains an aspiration to which many outstanding physicians and generous donors remain committed in Rochester.

¹¹ Democrat and Chronicle, “To Have a New Maternity Ward,” November 8, 1898.

¹² Democrat and Chronicle, “Town Talk,” June 6, 1890.