

Midwives and herbal medicine

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Rachel Stout Allen Medicine Recipe Book, from the John Allen Papers (1815–1816 Papers), North Carolina State Archives Collection 1467.

As you read...

MIDWIVES

In the eighteenth century, women such as Rachel Allen were called *midwives*. They were important people in a community even if there was a doctor who lived in the village or town. People typically consulted a midwife, not a physician, about an illness or ailment. And in more remote parts of North Carolina, a midwife would have been the only medical expert available.

Midwifery was an exclusively female profession, and it was one of the few public roles available to women. One reason why women were the chief practitioners of medicine was that family health was the concern of wives and mothers, and so people thought it was natural that women learn the art of healing. Midwives were paid for their work and were sought after for their knowledge and skills. Although it was often women who called upon the midwife to help a sick child or husband, men would also ask midwives for help.

Midwives also helped women in childbirth. As they do today, midwives gave advice to pregnant women and prepare them to give birth. Midwives were also present at the birth and delivered the baby. A physician or doctor would only be asked to assist the midwife if there were complications that required surgery.

Physicians, who were always men, had different duties from those of a midwife. These men were educated at a university and were called in to set bones and to operate. Physicians would rarely administer medication and people who were sick would see an *apothecary* (similar to a pharmacist).

Most midwives learned their skills from a female relative such as a mother or aunt. Other women learned medical skills from male relatives who were physicians or apothecaries. We do not know where Rachel Allen learned her medical skills. That she chose to write down her herbal remedies suggests that she most likely passed her knowledge on to her children. Very few diaries or letters of everyday women such as Rachel Allen still survive, and the fact that her recipe book has been preserved shows us how important midwives were to their communities.



Figure 1. The John and Rachel Allen house, originally in Snow Camp in Alamance County, has been relocated to Alamance Battleground Historic Site.

- [1] To Make Green Salve take one pound of bores
Greese one pound of turpentine and melt it
together then take it of the fire take one ounce of Verdigreese¹
and pound it and Sift it then
put it in and Simmer it over the fire but not
to boil to be Sure put Something over thy
face while pounding Sifting and Stiring and
Stiring in the Verdigreese to take out proud²
flesh and dead flesh from old Sores and Clense them

• • •

- [2] To make ointment to Cure a burn or Scald
take of the tops of high RattleSnake³
in the Spring of the year and fresh may butter
and pound them well together then make it up in
Balls let it lie about six weeks then put
it in a kettle over the fire let them Simmer
Well then Strain them out keep it for use

• • •

- [3] A Cancer wort the Cure
take Blood wort⁴ the inner Bark of

Shoemake⁵ Root pound them together
Mix Sower cream & apply it to

• • •

- [4] The yaws⁶ or Countray Distemper is very Bad to Cure perfectly Especially when grown invitred this is the highest kind of Scurvy⁷ and the Symtoms of it are Eating, Ulcer⁸ in the throat or pallet and filthy Sores in other parts of the body having neer Resemblance to of the pox⁹ this unclean Diseas often yealds to Dr. Paps Remady or at Least may be Cept under by it:

Take one ounce of the Bark of Shoemake Root one ounce of the iner Bark of Spanish oak¹⁰ boil these together in two quarts of water till the decoction¹¹ Bee very Strong, of the Liquor drink a full pint milk warm and imeadiately after it half a pint quite cold and it will give thee powerful vomit the next morning take half a point of the Same Drink warm and the Same quantity again in the Evening and Continue So doing for Six weeks or two months only the Vomit must bee Repeated Every Seventh day, in the meantime gargle your throat and wash all you Sores and ulcers with the Same warm Liquor which aught to be made fresh Every two days Besides all this you Must Chew the Shoemake Root very often and Swallow the healing juice Every night before you go to Rest take two pills made of turpentine and Deers dung in Equel quantitys of Eating and Drinking Confine thysel from flesh¹² and from Strong Drink¹³ and bee very carefull of catching Cold

• • •

[5] A Receit¹⁴ for a Canser
take the bark of the root of Spanish
oak dogwood sassafras persimmon¹⁵ and the
shoemake that bares the berrys take
of these one pound each off the
north side wash them scrape of
the outside bark put them in a
pot cover it close boile it for half
a day then strain the liquer
then put it in a small pot and
bile it to it becomes a save
then put it away for use

. . .

[6] To Make Eye Water
Take half a point of Spring water, the bigness
of two hazelnuts¹⁶ of allom¹⁷ one Spoonfull of
hunney the bigness of a large heazelnut
of verdigreese boile all together and S¹⁸
it well Let it Settle and bottle it for use.

. . .

[7] To Make Hunney physick¹⁹
Take flower of sulphar ²⁰ one ounce Creame of tarter²¹ one ounce, powder of Jallep²²
Quarter of an ounce mix them in
Clarified honey to the Consistance of an
Electury²³ and take thereof Every morning
fasting as much as will ly on the point
of a Case knife to cure Bad Blood.

. . .

[8] For the consumption²⁴ take angillico²⁵ horseradish²⁶
allcom pain Each one Large handful put them
into an earthen pot with two gallons of Spring
Water cover it cloce Set it on the coles and
Stew it half away then Strain it and ad
thereto half a pound of fresh butter half a
pound of treacle²⁷ then Stew it 5 hours take in
the morning and at night half a point
milk warm.

• • •

- [9] A Diet Drink to be Wrought in Beer
2 handfulls of Water Cresses²⁸ 2 handfulls
of Sassafras roots 2 handfull of Nettles²⁹ 2
handfulls of Sasborelle³⁰
2 pounds of Lignumeity³¹ 2 hanfulls of
Burdock³² roots 2 handfulls of Sweet Bryers³³
rots all this infuse in 3 or 4 gallons of
Malt Beer – for the consumption

• • •

- [10] for the consumption take white turpentine
hunney and fresh Butter mix them all
together take the Bigness of a Chestnut
in the Morning

• • •

- [11] Clense the Blood take Vervine³⁴ Dittony³⁵
Sweet goldin rod³⁶ of each alike —(ripped)
and Sweeten it with honey & Drink

• • •

- [12] for deafness & busing in ye head peel a
Clove of garlick dip it in honey & peel
it in ye Eare at lying down
ye Eare Ach from worms drop in warm
Milk Brings them out or Juse of
Wormwood³⁷ which kils them
Nurse in the Eare drop in Juse of onions.

• • •

- [13] for Weak Eyes Wel the Eye lids Morning
& Evening with Campfire
to restore Strength after Rhematism³⁸
Walk in a Strong Broth Made of Cow heels.³⁹

• • •

[14] to clean the teeth Rub them With
ye ashes of Burnt Bread
for an Ulser in Bladder or kidneys
take decotion⁴⁰ of agrimony⁴¹ 3 times
a day
or decotion powder or syrup of horse tail.⁴²

• • •

[15] for an old sore leg take
parsnips⁴³ pounded boil in water
til soft thicken it with
Wheat Bran make a poltis⁴⁴ &
apply it

• • •

[16] Inflammation of ye Bladder a pain
in the Bottom of ye Belly a desire to make
water often & with difficulty the diet
light and thin ye drink cooling
Bleeding good⁴⁵ — ye Lower part
of ye Belly with warm water and
Emalient Clysters⁴⁶ frequently
Eating Small broths gruels⁴⁷ or mild herbs

• • •

[17] In a Raging fit of Stone⁴⁸ beat
onions into a pulp & apply them as
a poultis part to the Back & part to
Each Groin it gives Speedy ease in
the most Raching pain.

• • •

[18] To ease or Cure ye Stone take decoction
or agrimony Morning & Night
or of Camomile⁴⁹
or boil half a pound of parsnips in

a Quart of Water drink a glass Morning
& night & no other drink all day for
6 weeks
or take Morning & Night a teaspoon full of onions caleind into White
ashes in White wine an ounce
will often dissolve ye Stone.

• • •

[19] a Drink for any Inward Weakness
take Grounding and Yarrow⁵⁰ White plantain⁵¹
and Silverwort⁵² agrimony Bittersweets⁵³
Hartstongue Maidenhair Cinquefoylde⁵⁴
Strawberry Leaves and Cattsfoot leaves⁵⁵
take a Small hadfull of Each
and cut them Small and Boil in
three Quarts of Water Until it Comes
to two then take one pill Night and
Morning Milk Warm or more if
Necessary if the Cant all Be got
Such as can if Circum Stance
Should render it Difficult or unsafe to take
any of the yerbs on any account they
May be omitted polpadom is
Sometimes put in with Them.

• • •

[20] take Linseed⁵⁶ 2 Spoonfulls Liquorice⁵⁷ half an
ounce Stew them for Some houres then Strain
it take in difficulty of Making Water and
coughs and Compalints of y Brest
Emollient mucilagient⁵⁸ Liquor

• • •

[21] for the Quinsey ⁵⁹take Stalions
dung fresh Stewed in Sweet wort⁶⁰
or new Milk and thickened with
Wheat Bran Make a poltis &
apply it to the throat.

• • •

- [22] dissolve 2 drams of gum arabeck⁶¹ and 2 drams of Liquorice ball in ten ounces of boiling water when cool add 150 drops of anlimonial⁶² wine and one ounce Paregoric⁶³ take a table spoon full three tiem a day Shake the bottle before pouring out the drops.

What do the plants look like?

Photos and illustrations of many of the plants, minerals, and diseases Rachel Allen mentions are available in our multimedia library:

- high rattlesnake (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- verdigris (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- bloodwort (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- shoemaker (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- sassafra (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
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- sulfur (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
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- angeilica (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- singing nettle (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- dittany (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
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- vervain (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- wormwood (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- horsetail (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- parsnips (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- agrimony (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
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- silverweed (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- bittersweet (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- maidenhair (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- cinquefoil (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- yarrow (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- catsfoot (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- linseed (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- licorice (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)
- gum arabic (available at <http://www.learnnc.org>)

On the web

The Allen House

<http://www.nchistoricsites.org/Alamance/allhou.htm>

The house in which Rachel Allen lived has been relocated to the Alamance Battleground State Historic Site and is open for tours.

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Notes

1. *Verdigris* is the green coating that forms on copper, brass, or bronze when the metal is exposed to air or water. You may have seen it on a statue or on an old penny.

Verdigris is mainly copper acetate ($\text{Cu}(\text{OAc})_2$). It was traditionally made in vineyards, where acetic acid forms during the fermentation of grapes. The acetic acid was spread on sheets of copper, and the copper and acid reacted to form verdigris. Today, copper acetate is used as a fungicide (a chemical that kills fungus).

2. *Proud* here means protruding or standing above something else, so “proud flesh” is swollen flesh.
3. A plant (not actually a snake!) also known as Calathea, a plant native to South and Central America. It has broad green leaves. It is sometimes used as a diuretic.
4. Was commonly used as a laxative. Also helps to stop bleeding by helping the skin to contract — the origin of the name “blood wort.”
5. Sumac, as we call it today, is a plant native to North America. It can grow quite tall — about the size of small trees. The red berries were used to dye clothing.
6. A infection of the skin, bones, and joints caused by bacteria.
7. A disease caused by a lack of Vitamin C.
8. Ulcers are open soars that form in the lining of the stomach and esophagus. They are very painful.
9. A popular expression referring to syphilis. Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by a virus.
10. Also known as Southern Red Oak. Native to North America, it can be found from the southern part of New Jersey south to Florida. Native Americans used Southern Oak to cure indigestion, chapped skin, fever, and asthma.
11. Decoction is a process of boiling a substance to remove the water. For example, if you wanted to capture salt from sea water, you would boil it until the water evaporated and you were left with the salt. Allen is using “decoction” to refer to the substance left after the water is removed.
12. Meat
13. Any drink that contained alcohol.
14. “Receipt” (here spelled “receit”) was another word for recipe.
15. Sassafras is a tree native to the eastern United States. It has orange bark and usually 3 different types of leaves.

Although people used sassafras in the colonial period for medicinal purposes, it is not commonly used today. In fact the United States Food and Drug Administration has banned all consumable forms of sassafras except in very small dosages. It can cause permanent liver damage.

Persimmon is a dark orange-red fruit found on certain types of pine trees. The word comes from an Algonquin word for dried fruit, *pessemmins*.

16. Allen is using hazelnut as a form of measurement. People wouldn't have had standardized forms of measuring cups like we have today, so Allen is using a common object to help people know how much ingredients to use.
17. a white transparent mineral salt $AlK(SO_4)_2$
18. Probably "stir."
19. A laxative made from honey. Laxatives are medicines taken to help a person's digestive track. They initiate defecation.
20. Sulphur, also known as brimstone, is formed from volcanic material, is greenish-yellow in color, and looks like crystals. It is highly flammable. When refined into a powder, it can be used in medicine as a laxative, or to make a person sweat.
21. An acid derived from the grapes used to make wine. When it becomes a solid, it turns into white crystals. It is often used in cooking, but can also be used as a laxative.
22. Allen probably is referring to jollop, which is a general term for a strong liquor that acts as a laxative.
23. A medicinal paste made of other ingredients mixed with honey or syrup.
24. Consumption is now called tuberculosis, which is a bacterial infection that attacks the lungs.
25. Angelica is a plant with small white leaves. It is used to treat fevers, colds, coughs and other stomach disorders.
26. A type of root, commonly used today as a condiment. It is used in medicine as a diuretic, which increases urine flow.
27. A dark syrup made from sugar cane.
28. An herb which grows near, or in shallow running, water. It has small white flowers. Has a number of medicinal purposes, such as helping with coughs, or acting as a diuretic.
29. Nettles refers to a variety of different plants that have small green leaves and stinging hairs, such as the plant Stinging Nettles.
30. sarsaparilla is a vine native to South and Central America. In medicine, it refers to the root which is used as a tonic and to help keep people awake or alert.
31. Lignum Vitae is another name for the Guaiacum tree. It is a evergreen tree native to the Caribbean. The resin from this tree (a liquid substance, insoluble in water, excreted by some trees) has medicinal qualities. In folk medicine, it is used to cure respiratory problems and skin diseases.
32. A coarse plant with burs. It can be used as a diuretic, or to help cure skin problems such as acne, or to as a "blood cleanser" to rid the blood of toxins.
33. Sweet Briar is a type of wild rose. It was used to treat constipation, skin disorders, and could be applied in a paste to help stop bleeding from minor cuts.
34. Vervain grows along roadsides and in sunny pastures. It has small lilac colored flowers. It was often used to help alleviate fevers and pain ulcers.

35. Dittany is a plant which grows approximately one meter high. It has white, purple, or pink flowers. It can be used as a diuretic and to help with menstruation.
36. Goldenrod is an herb plant with bright yellow leaves. It was sometimes used in healing wounds, tuberculosis, and other respiratory disorders.
37. The wormwood plant's leaves contain absinth, which was used to treat stomach pain, bloating, gas, heartburn, and indigestion.
38. Rheumatism referred to a range of ailments including achy joints and bones, as well as severe arthritis.
39. The hoof of a cow.
40. Decoction is a process of boiling a substance to remove the water. For example, if you wanted to capture salt from sea water, you would boil it until the water evaporated and you were left with the salt. Allen is using "decoction" to refer to the substance left after the water is removed.
41. Sometimes called "church steeple" because of its shape. The plant is green in color with rough stems that grow 1 to 2 feet tall and spiky, yellow flowers. It was used widely in folk remedies as a diuretic.
42. Horsetail is a long green hollow plant, similar to a willow. It grows in water or wet sandy areas. It was often used to help stop bleeding and to heal ulcers.
43. Parsnips are root vegetables that resemble carrots but are paler in color.
44. A poultice is a moist, usually heated, paste that is applied to the skin
45. Bloodletting was practiced for centuries. It involved cutting the patient, usually in the arm, to remove blood. People believed that a person could create too much blood, or that the blood could become poisonous, and a person would fall ill. A medical practitioner needed to relieve the body of poisons or to let out the excess blood. They believed this would return the normal "balance" of the body and cure the patient. It is hardly ever practiced in modern medicine because it is now considered very harmful to a patient.

See the explanation of the "four humors" in this excerpt from Poor Richard's Almanack.

46. Emollient is a descriptive term for a substance that will soften or relax skin and muscles. Clyster is an archaic term for enema, which is a procedure where warm water is injected in to the rectum.
47. gruel is a watery oatmeal.
48. Kidney stones are created from mineral deposits that line the kidney. Normally, these minerals are expunged from the body in urine. When the kidneys do not properly function, these minerals build up and form small stones. Eventually, the body passes these stones, which is quite painful.
49. Chamomile is a plant similar to daisies. Today, it is usually taken in the form of tea. It is used to treat indigestion, anxiety, and insomnia.
50. A plant that grows in almost any climate and type of soil. It is now considered a noxious weed because it spreads quickly and chokes out other plants. It was used in herbal medicine to induce perspiration, or sweating.

51. Plantains look very similar to bananas. They are much more starchy and are sometimes made into flour and used in making pancakes and bread. They can also be left to ripen and eaten like a fruit.
52. Also known as silverweed. It grows 2 to 5 inches long. The leaves are covered with white hairs (hence “silver”weed) and the flowers are yellow, like buttercups. It can be boiled in water and used to help alleviate soar throats. It is also used to help with stomach aches and indigestion.
53. Bittersweet is a vine that can grow up to 10 feet tall. It has star shaped purple-pink flowers. When ingested, the herb has a mild necrotic effect which helps people stay alert. It also functions as a diuretic.
54. Hartstone is a fern that can be used to prevent heartburn, and strengthens the liver and spleen. It also can act as a laxative and diuretic.

Maidenhair is a fern that was usually used to help with coughs and other serious respiratory problems.

Cinquefoil is a herb native to North America. It has strong astringent qualities, which means it causes the body tissues to contract. It was often used to help stop bleeding.
55. Catsfoot is an herb plant with pink and purple flowers. It also has astringent qualities.
56. Linseed oil is also known as flaxseed oil. It is still recommended today as a supplement that is good for the heart.
57. Licorice plant is related to beans and peas. Its sweet juice can be extracted from the plant and used as flavoring. It is an expectorant, meaning that the plant helps clear up mucus and saliva in the respiratory system, helping to relieve coughing and other respiratory ailments.
58. Mucilage is a sticky paste made from plant matter. While it does not have any medicinal qualities, mucilage is mixed with herbs that do have medical value, essentially acting as a *vehicle* to carry the medicine into the body.
59. Quinsy is an inflammation of the throat.
60. It is ground malt or grains, used for making beer, but before fermentation has begun.
61. Gum Arabic is derived from the sap of acacia trees. It can be used to help with oral hygiene, soar throats, diarrhea and to help with problems in the kidneys.
62. Antimony is a silvery-metal that is found in nature. It causes vomiting.
63. Paregoric is a medicine made from opium (which is derived from poppies).

About the author

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