

The Earliest Doctors in Seneca County

[This Seneca County history article deals with some of the early doctors. Before beginning that story, however, I want to say what prompted me to choose this topic. Mrs. Alta Boyer of Lodi has very generously recently donated several books to the office of the Seneca County Historian. These books will greatly enhance the local history books collection available for public use here in the office. One of the books she donated is *Medical Organization and Medical Biography of Seneca County, New York*, written by Dr. Lester W. Bellows and published in 1926. Not being familiar with this book at all, I had to at least glance through it before I could place it on the shelf. Very quickly it became clear that its contents would be the basis for a brief but interesting history of the first doctors in this county. –Walt Gable, Seneca County Historian]

Unfortunately for the past several years since the closing of both the Seneca Falls Hospital and the Taylor-Brown Hospital in Waterloo, there have been few, if any, births here in Seneca County. That realization makes this account of the earliest physicians in the county even more poignant. To begin the story, the earliest physician in Seneca County was Silas Halsey. He had practiced medicine on Long Island prior to the American Revolution. In May 1792, he came with his slave to Lot 37 in the Military Tract township of Ovid. In May 1793, he returned with seventeen other family members, including sons-in-law and grandchildren. He was not, however, just a practicing medical doctor. He was a judge for the newly-created Onondaga County in 1794. He served in the New York State Assembly, representing first Onondaga County and then Cayuga County when that county was created in 1799. Following the creation of Seneca County in March 1804, he served as its first County Clerk. He also served in the New York State Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. Besides his medical and political activities, he was also a businessman. In 1794, he built the first sawmill and grist mill in what is today Seneca County. Prior to that time, the nearest mills were at Fort Stanwix (Rome) and at the outlet of Crooked Lake (Keuka Lake).

Another early doctor in the county was Alexander Coventry who settled in 1792 on 600 acres of Lot 11 and 300 acres of Lot 17 in what is now the town of Fayette. Although he intended to devote the rest of his life to his farm, which became known as Fair Hill, he repeatedly answered calls from the sick in that part of the county. In 1796, he resettled in Utica and resumed a full medical practice. He served as President of the New York State Medical Society in 1823, 1824, and 1825. His son Charles Coventry, Jr. was one of the founders of the Geneva Medical College.

James C. Baldwin was another early doctor, settling on Lot 11 in the town of Ovid in 1795. Later, he built a saw mill at Lodi Center. In 1801, he resettled in the town of Lysander in Onondaga County where he laid the foundation for the community of Baldwinville.

In 1796, Dr. Jared Sandford settled in Ovid, near to the home of Dr. Silas Halsey. He married Silas Halsey's daughter Sally Radley in 1801. Soon thereafter, he took over the large medical practice of Dr. Halsey, who, as discussed above, was devoting much of himself to politics. Dr. Sandford also took on some political responsibilities. In April 1804 (Seneca County had been created the previous month), he became the first postmaster for the town of Ovid. At the time of his death, he was the County Treasurer. As a doctor he was very successful, with a medical practice extending to Geneva and Waterloo to the north, and as far south as what is

today Watkins Glen. He traveled entirely on horseback, carrying medical equipment in one saddle bag and U.S. mail in the other saddle bag. It is believed that the exposure to the weather in his travels and his overwork led to an early death in August 1817, at the age of 42—a victim to the hardships of the pioneer physician.

With its being so easy today to phone a doctor's office or to go directly to the emergency room for medical treatment, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate the hardships these early doctors endured. We continue yet today, however, to look up to our doctors with great respect and to call upon them to play as active a role in community affairs as their time permits.