

This treasures lost, who a tongue
can speak the smart,
her mourning parents feel,

“This treasures lost...”

Mention death

in Deerfield and our minds are likely drawn to events like the famous French and Indian Raid on Deerfield in 1704, when 47 Deerfield residents lost their lives during the raid, and on the trek to Canada, of the 112 taken captive, an additional 21 perished. Mortality is often told through battles, raids and skirmishes, the treaties signed, and the peace restored, but for those living in Deerfield in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was the everyday loss of family and friends that most frequently drew their attention. There often was fear of conflict, but disease was the persistent threat to a family's well-being. It was a common subject of children's poems, doctors' warnings, pastors' sermons, and families' laments. The story of John (1739–1806) and Persis Sheldon (1747–1829) and their children provides a lens into how death informed life in Deerfield in the early 19th century.

Dr. Stephen West Williams, writing in 1842 about disease in Deerfield, claimed that, “. . . the croup in infants, the dysentery, the scarlet fever, and other species of fevers, and the consumption, may be said to be the most prevalent complaints.” He was well aware of the dysentery epidemic that

The family in life and death in Deerfield

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took several infants and young children only a year before, and of previous ones going back 100 years. Scarlet fever also was greatly feared in the Connecticut River Valley, as elsewhere, and periodically took the lives of several children during epidemics in Deerfield and nearby Valley towns. However, it was the consumption that was probably feared most. It afflicted people of all ages and status, it did not arrive as an epidemic, instead appearing seemingly at any time and place, and, when most serious, leading to a slow decline in an individual's health, even ultimately to death.

Today, we recognize that most of what our ancestors referred to as consumption was pulmonary tuberculosis, a respiratory infection caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. In Stephen West Williams's day, and that of his physician father William Stoddard Williams, the infectious cause was not well understood. It would be many years before the cause was definitively attributed to a contagious germ, and the bacterium isolated. So, for a family with someone afflicted with consump-

tion, there was not only the grief of illness and potential loss, but also the stigma associated with what some thought was an inherited disease, a sign of a “weakness of constitution,” leaving the possibility that one's children might inherit the disease and become consumptive as well.

John Sheldon's great-grandfather, Ensign John (1681–1713), was one of Deerfield's earliest residents and builder of the Old Indian House; John himself was the grandfather of famous town historian George Sheldon. His wife Persis was the daughter of David Hoyt and Mercy (Sheldon) Hoyt. They lived in the Sheldon family home on the street, and John farmed the family acreage. Their family began with the birth of David in 1770. Over the next 24 years seven more children were born, making a total of five sons and three daughters.

What befell John Sheldon's family in the first decades of the 19th century was not unique to Deerfield, the Connecticut River Valley, or North America for that matter, but it was a dramatic example of how illness, death,

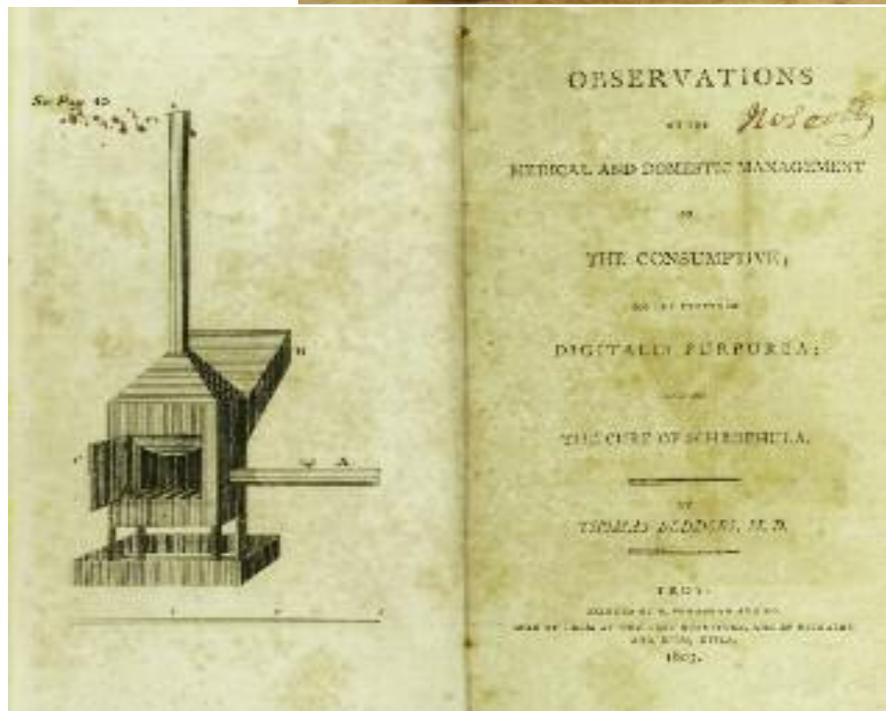
RIGHT: Early 20th-century photograph of the Sheldon house on Lot 3, Deerfield. The agricultural structures behind the house may differ little from the outbuildings that supported John Sheldon's farming activities.



MIDDLE: The south kitchen in the Sheldon house much as it would have appeared while John, Persis, and their children lived there while tending sick family members. The wooden adult cradle, made in Deerfield c. 1730-80, provided comfort for sick and infirm older children and adults. Museum Collections Fund. 2011.14.6



BELOW: Frontispiece/title page of the first American edition of Dr. Thomas Beddoes' book on treating consumption, illustrating the type of stove recommended when confining the patient. Historic Deerfield Library.



and loss permeated everyday life for family members and their friends. It also exemplifies family and community practices surrounding illness and death and how people moved through this cycle of transition and mourned their losses. In the case of Persis, this meant overseeing the burial of husband John and five children in less than 14 short years of the early 1800s. While not unique, this great a loss in one family, over such a short time, was somewhat rare.

The litany is staggering to contemplate. First, son William died in November of 1802 at the age of 29. Daughter Persis was the next to succumb in October of 1804, age 19. She was followed by daughter "Marcy" in July 1806, age 25, and father John himself on August 3 of the same year, age 66.² That would not be all; mother and now widowed Persis witnessed her son Epaphras' passing in 1807, and 19-year-old daughter Polly, married on her deathbed to Henry R. Sheldon, passed in June of 1814. In each case the cause of death was consumption. One can imagine a household constantly in fear of death; a household of patients in steady decline, attempting to care for each other and to maintain some semblance of dignity in their community. A prominent family of successful farmers brought down by this terrible disease. The widow Persis would live for another 16 years and die in 1829 at age 82, apparently free of any symptoms of consumption.

William Stoddard Williams was the family doctor, and related to the Sheldon family through marriage, his wife Mary (Hoyt) Williams being Persis's sister. He made frequent visits to the John Sheldon household to treat family members. There was not much in Dr. Williams's medical bag for the effective treatment of consumption. He could alleviate pain through medication; he recommended an elixir containing *Digitalis purpurea* (foxglove), as did the famous English physician

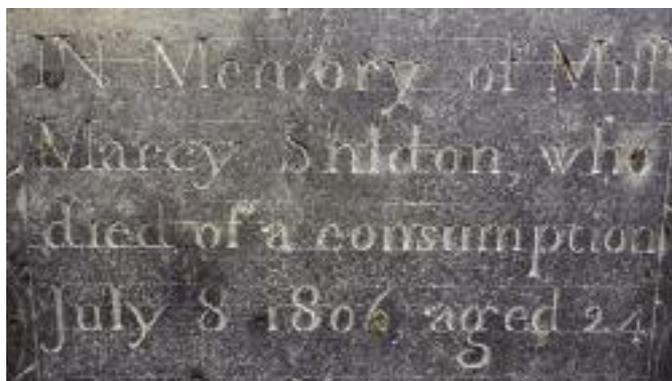
Thomas Beddoes for treatment of consumptives, but the patient needed rest, warmth, proper nourishment, and clean air to breathe for any chance at recovery. In a house full of consumptives, there was little chance to escape the constant air-borne exposure to the cause. In those times families were prone to desperate measures in treating their consumptive children. At one point daughter Marcy was placed in a bed in the cow barn in hopes the moist air might be restorative. A small stove was placed near her cot for warmth. This, also, followed a recommended treatment of Dr. Beddoes.

During the time Dr. Williams was treating the Sheldon family he took on an apprentice, Amos Amsden. Beginning his apprenticeship in June 1802, young Amsden took a strong interest in the family. Having been in school with Marcy at Deerfield Academy four years earlier, he had become sufficiently enamored of her that he wrote to her parents in 1803 requesting "...the Gift of your Daughter" in marriage. But the Sheldons had concerns, and no marriage occurred. After Amos's apprenticeship he moved on to take up his own medical practice in Sullivan, New York, but stayed in con-

tact with the family. In June 1806 he wrote a letter to Marcy on learning of her poor condition and mentions also that of her father, signing it "From your best and sincerest Earthly FRIEND forever." Both Marcy and John passed shortly thereafter. And, finally, in July 1807 he wrote to mother Persis on having learned of her son Epaphras' imminent passing, which happened that September. He concludes the letter by commenting on his own fortunate good health, having survived his own near-death experience with consumption, and on the fact that the citizens of Sullivan are so healthy "that I have but little business to attend to in the line of my profession."

By this time Persis had no doubt become all too accustomed to the home visits from town ministers, and

the condolences and rituals accompanying funerals in the front parlor. But these were not necessarily intimate rites. David Hoyt, grandfather of the young Persis, noted in his diary that at her funeral "not less than 200 walked in procession to the grave." Burials took place at Laurel Hill, the "new" cemetery established in 1803, the lengthening row of stones offering testimony to her ongoing misfortune. Unlike some families, who tried to hide consumption from their friends and relatives, there was no hiding it for the Sheldons in Deerfield. While they selected substantial gravestones and accorded each one with a caring epitaph, John and Persis also acknowledged the cause of death on the stones of their daughters and sons with the simple phrase, "who died of a consumption."

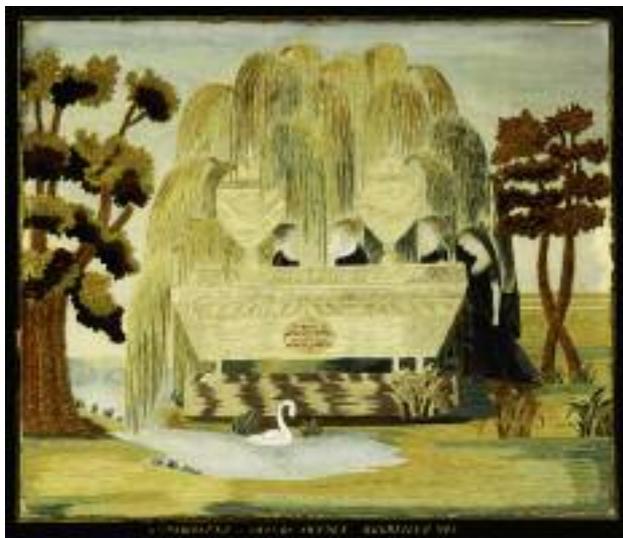


LEFT: 1806 Marcy Sheldon gravestone at Laurel Hill Cemetery.

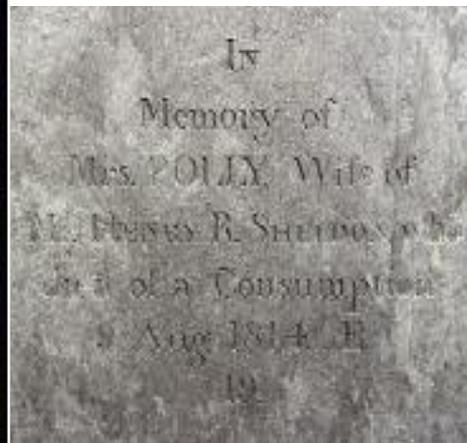
BELOW: Row of Sheldon family gravestones—all six died of consumption.



Needlework mourning embroidery done by Amanda Amsden, 1807. Polychrome silk embroidery, watercolor, and paper on plain weave silk ground. Pictorial needlework depicting mourning scenes were popular projects for girls attending academies in the early 19th century. They could be made at the time, or in advance, of a loved one's death. Museum Collections Fund. 2006.32.1



Detail from Polly Sheldon gravestone, 1814, Laurel Hill Cemetery, Deerfield, Mass.



Mourning practices in the early 19th century did not reach the heights of rituality and material expression that would follow in the Victorian era, but each loss was marked with black clothing for the mourners and probably some black crepe around the door. Mourning jewelry had long been in fashion in England and America, and perhaps Persis and other women wore a brooch with an image of an urn, or inlay of black jet, while in mourning, or a pendant with a lock of the deceased's hair. However, funerals in this period were meant to be simple affairs, without showy jewelry, elaborate ceremony, or great expense. A simple, wooden coffin was traditional.

By New England standards, Deerfield was a healthy place to live in the early 19th century, but death was still widespread and a common fact of everyday life. Children and adults were subject to a long list of infectious diseases that pose little or no threat today. This led to what some historians have referred to as a culture of mourning and loss, in which expressions of loss were ubiquitous. School

children often practiced their penmanship writing phrasings and poems on losing a friend or family member. While a student at Deerfield Academy, daughter Persis kept a commonplace book in which she practiced her penmanship with such lines as "Bloom awhile then fade and die." Women both young and old found artistic expression through commemorating the loss of a loved one, or by representing a stylized scene of mourning. These took many forms, including painting and needlework, and many were produced in Deerfield in the early 19th century. Several examples exist today in local collections. A notable piece from the Sheldons' era is an 1807 embroidery done by Amanda Amsden, cousin to Amos, in memory of her father Asahel.



Mourning pin or brooch made of gold and enamel. The motif of a white urn beside a gold-colored willow tree signified death, and bereavement on the part of the wearer. 62.055

Imagining The Street in 1810, with its large homes and successful farming families, it is easy to forget that death was never far away. John and Persis Sheldon provide us with a close-up view of just how mournful that street could be at times. Their experience with tuberculosis was, indeed,

extraordinary, but other households also had their share of tuberculosis and childhood illnesses. Most families well aware of each other's hardships, noticing who was missing in church each Sunday. In the lives of John and Persis we might also be seeing a larger pattern occurring in the early 19th century. In general, young women had a slightly higher chance of dying from tuberculosis than young men. Could it be that the loss of so many daughters in the Sheldon family was due to the fact that they were most directly and repeatedly exposed while caring for father John, and their sick sisters and brothers? Those bitter losses finally came to an end in 1814, with youngest daughter, Polly, passing after being married to Henry R. Sheldon of Charlemont on her deathbed. Her epitaph expresses the family's powerlessness in the face of the disease:

*If prayers or tears could Polly save
She ne'er had found an early grave*

ENDNOTES

1. Alan Swedlund is the author of *Shadows in the Valley: A Cultural History of Illness, Death and Loss in New England, 1840-1916* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2010). Much of the book focuses on life and death in Deerfield and surrounding towns in Franklin County.
2. Baptized as Mercy, she was called "Marcy" by her family.