

Growing Old in the World of William Penn

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Sooner or later the day comes when, looking into a mirror, we see the telltale signs of aging. Reactions will vary—from acceptance to dismay. Many people will attempt remediation. And this appears to have been the case in colonial days.

Wrinkles will be deepened by smiling, frowning, laughing, and other expressions that involve facial muscles. In addition, age-spots and rough areas will alter the skin color and texture. There was an 18th-century treatment.

To make the Face look Youthful.

Take two Ounces of Aqua-vitae [distilled beer], Bean-flower water, and Rose-water, each four Ounces, Water of Water-Lillies six ounces, mix them all, and add to them one Dram of the whitest Tragacanth, set it in the sun six days, then strain it through a fine Linnen Cloth, wash your Face with it in the Morning, and do not wipe it off.¹

Young eyes, unless blurred by illness, lack of sleep, or over-indulgence, are clear and bright. In colonial days, there were a number of home remedies to correct any dulling produced by age or other causes.

Eyes blear' d.

— Drop into them Juice of Crab-Apples.

Eyes dim or decay'd.

— Use Eye-bright Tea daily. Or, powder'd Eye-bright, both in Meat and Drink.

Dull Sight.

— Drop in two or three Drops of Juice of rotten Apples often.²

Another treatment startles people today.

To clear the Eyes.

TAKE the white of hens-dung, dry it very well, and beat it to powder; sift, and blow it into the eyes when the party goes to bed.³

We become far-sighted as we age. Eventually our arms are not long enough to hold printed or written materials at a readable distance. Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals to handle near- and far-distance vision. They do take some getting used to, but it's easier than juggling two pairs of glasses. There were also procedures to take care of more serious problems. Glaucoma and cataracts were thought to refer to one condition. A period encyclopedia stated: "... we must understand the words cataract and glaucoma are synonymous terms."⁴ The treatments were described. The description of the condition

that involved build-up of fluid within the eyeball is called glaucoma today; colonial treatment pierced the eyeball to drain off the fluid. Cataracts, films clouding the vision, were treated differently. If piercing failed to ameliorate the condition, the second procedure involved scraping off the film.⁵ Even thinking about undergoing either procedure, without any anesthesia, is unpleasant. Not everyone was willing to undergo this surgery.

[27 Jan. 1800] ... James Logan [junior, born 1728] came to, I was going to say, see us, poor man, that he cannot do, he has now a new hand to direct his steps, a molalo [sic] man, whom he thinks does better than Dan ...

[14 May 1800] James Logan and his guide were here before dinner, he appears rather wavering, and timorous respecting the operation on his eyes: poor Man! I pity him.

[17 May 1800] James Logan was here this Afternoon with a new guide—he seems to have dropped [sic] the idea of having his eyes couched.⁶

Hearing diminishes with age. If loss was caused by wax-buildup, there was possible remediation, still used today: drops of warmed oil followed by syringing. When the decline was caused by aging, no treatment would alter the condition.⁷

Teeth will lose whiteness or yellow over time. There were dentifrices to be used as we use toothpaste and mouthwash. Some of them were so abrasive they could cause severe damage.

A Liquid Dentifrice ... You must be careful not to have too much of the Liquid on the rag, for fear it should excoriate the gums or inside of the mouth. This Dentifrice ought not to be used about once every two or three months.⁸

Others, like the mixture of salt and sage were less damaging.⁹

Tooth loss today is often associated with aging. That was not the case in the 18th century. Elizabeth Drinker was losing teeth while a young unmarried woman.

[25 Feb. 1759] ... had one Tooth drawn, in the morning, and another attempted, suffer'd much thereby ...

[1 Mar. 1759] ... pull'd out a Tooth in the evening; which the toothdrawer had drawn, before and replaced.¹⁰

Implants are not a new practice. Missing teeth affected chewing, which often led to problems with digestion—food was either bolted [eaten hastily without proper chewing – Ed.] or pureed before eating. Inserting a newly pulled tooth might make eating easier. By the end of the century, people were paying "dentists" for preventive and remediating care.

Another aspect of appearance associated now with growing old is hair color. People of the better sort often wore wigs that were white or silvery gray. Those of the middling sort could use powder to achieve the fashionable color. Under the wig or powder, the hair might be gray because of age. People who wore wigs often shaved their heads but “natural” baldness was viewed with alarm. There were treatments that might have been effective—and then again, maybe not.

A Powder to prevent Baldness.

*POWDER your head with Powdered Parsley Seed, three nights every year, and the hair will never fall out.*¹¹

Gray hair did not always signal other problems associated with aging: “... my auburn Hair is grey but my person is as erect, my step as light and hand as steady as ever they were.”¹² Not everyone was able to move about easily, and names for the problem—arthritis, rheumatism, sciatica, lumbago, etc.—were not important. Benjamin Franklin’s sister, Jane Mecom, wrote, “My Daughter’s Gout or Rhumatism or what Ever it is, has not left her yet, but She can Just hobble about the chamber ...”¹³

There are references to “senior moments” and what today might be called dementia or Alzheimer’s.

*[1790] The hat of £1-15 for his [Thomas Sugart] prentice he turned over for Samuel Cope to pay me and I called on him for the money and he said he had sent it to me but I could not Remember any thing of it tho Rather agreed to allow it as I could not trust to my memory of Late.*¹⁴

*[3 Aug. 1771] I could wish ... that my Mother had some clever Body to take care of her in Sally’s Absence; as her Memory has failed her much, and she becomes every Day more and more unfit to be left alone.*¹⁵

Enquiry after an Old Dutch Woman

*...is between 70 and 80 years old, and being disordered in her senses, she went away in July last ... and hath not been heard of since ...*¹⁶

Having brought up some of the “symptoms” and problems of old age, it is time to consider some residents in the world of William Penn whose lives were active. “Margaret Jones [died] in her 86 year American Born has made to Meeting this summer horseback...”¹⁷ A Chester County farmer recorded his birthday activities for several years: 77th, digging potatoes; 78th, digging potatoes; 79th, sowing onions, planting cucumbers and melons; 80th, planting cucumbers, beans, and corn.¹⁸ He was 82 when he died. Mary Bradway, a former midwife, died “... aged just One Hundred Years and a Day. Her Constitution wore well to the last, and she could see to read without Spectacles a few Months since.”¹⁹ Jacob Jones might have exaggerated his age, but his movements were those of a younger man: he “told me he was near 84 years old Rides, Mount & dismount Quite Brisk very light on foot.”²⁰

The mother of Elizabeth Drinker’s husband’s first wife appears many times in his second wife’s diary; it recorded changes in activities and attitudes over time.

... she will be 78 years old next Decemr. And lives all alone as usual, she has been very busy all day ... starching her Curtains and cleaning her house, she does all her work herself, and lives neat and clean in her house ...

*[5 months later] ... was bemoaning herself, yesterday on account of her lonely, and as she now thinks dangerous situation—being quite alone and near 78 years of age, she yet does all her housework, she grows infirm compar’d to some years ago, she is fearfull she may fall in the fire, or down her cellar stairs bringing up wood &c and lay there without help, she is a little panic struck, and no wonder ...*²¹

A few years later, she wanted to move in with the Drinkers, but they were not comfortable with the idea:

*... we are growing old ourselves, and to have the care of one much older, is not desirable, but after all, how could we refuse her, she having no one besides that has any care for her ...*²²

She did move in, in December, and left the following August, unhappily but well able to afford another place.

It has been challenging to find people who lived beyond the traditional three score years and ten. Mortality tables and statistics as we know them did not exist. Church records and newspapers made information available—numbers of deaths and sometimes causes. But, ages were not given; they have to be teased out of diaries, correspondence, account books, and other records. Sometimes, what we would call an obituary was published in the want-ad section of a newspaper. That is where I found the following, a woman whose life I consider representative of the lives of many 18th-century women in the world of William Penn.

*On Sunday, the 14th of January last, died SARAH MEREDITH, aged 90. She was born in a Little Log House, where the City of Philadelphia now stands. (Her Maiden name was Rush) and there lived until she arrived to Woman’s State, when she was married to DAVID MEREDITH and soon after settled in the Great Valley, Chester County, about 28 miles from Philadelphia, then the westernmost settlement in the Province, being 6 Miles beyond any Neighbour, except Indians, who were very numerous, kind and inoffensive: on which Place she spent the remainder of her Days, and retained her Senses perfectly to the very last. She was Mother of 11 Children, Grandmother of 66, and Great Grandmother of 31, in all 108; and what is remarkable, the Chief of them are now living.*²³

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Notes

- 1 Hannah Woolley, *The Accomplish'd Lady's Delight ...* (London: Printed for B. Harris ... 1675; Xerox reprint by University Microfilms, International, Ann Arbor, MI, n.d.), pp. 177-178.
- 2 John Wesley, *Primitive Physic ...* 14th ed. (Bristol: Printed by William Pine ... 1770), pp. 68-69.
- 3 E. Smith, *The Compleat Housewife: ...* 15th ed. (London: Printed for R. Ware ... 1753; facsimile reprint by Literary Services and Production Limited, 1969), p. 329.

- 4 *Encyclopaedia Britannica ...* in 3 vols (Edinburgh: Printed for A. Bell and C. Macfarquhar ... 1771; facsimile reprint by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1979), Vol. III, p. 667.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 667-668.
- 6 *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. by Elaine Forman Crane, in 3 volumes (Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1991), p. 1271; p. 1300; p. 1303.
- 7 William Buchan, M.D., *Domestic Medicine: ...* [orig. pub. 1769; Philadelphia ed. 1771] A New Ed. (Boston: Published by Joseph Bumstead, 1809), pp. 310-311.
- 8 M. Bucholz, M.D., *The Toilet of Flora ...* (London: Printed for R. Nichols ... 1772; Xerox copy from The British Library, London), pp. 19-20.
- 9 Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife ...* [orig. pub. 1615], ed. by Michael R. Best (Kingston, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), p. 20.
- 10 Drinker, op. cit., pp. 22-23.
- 11 Bucholz, op. cit., p. 46.
- 12 Quoted in Richard S. Harrison, *A Biographical Dictionary of Irish Quakers* (Dublin: Four Corners Press, Ltd., 1997 & 2008), p. 88.
- 13 *Letters of Benjamin Franklin & Jane Mecom*, ed. by Carl Van Doren (Princeton: Published for the American Philosophical Society by Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 288.
- 14 Samuel Trimble, "Accounts 1771-1794" (Unpublished manuscript in The Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA), n.p.
- 15 *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. by Leonard W. Labaree et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press), Vol. 18, p. 195.
- 16 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 18 November 1772, p. 1.
- 17 Joseph Price, Diary 1788-1828, transcribed by Mary Keim. (Manuscript in the Lower Merion Historical Society; available on-line: <http://www.lowermerionhistory.org/texts/price/index.html>), 1790. p. 13.
- 18 Benjamin Hawley, "Diary, Chester County, 1769-1782" (Unpublished manuscript/typescript in The Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA), p. 224; p. 243; pp. 252-53.
- 19 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 5 January 1730.
- 20 Price, op. cit., 1791, p. 10.
- 21 Drinker, op. cit., p. 1225; pp. 1239-1240.
- 22 Ibid., p. 1242.
- 23 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1 February 1770, p. 3.