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**What Did They Call It When They Died? A Study of the  
Listed Causes of Death in the Town of Hyde Park,  
Massachusetts, 1869-1900**

**By**

**Nancy H. Hannan**

The listed cause of death on October 1, 1880 for Peter O'Toole was, "Found dead in bed."<sup>1</sup> Peter was ninety years old. The secondary cause of death was "Old Age" and duration was "None at all."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Sturtevant as medical examiner made the pronouncement.

"Old Age" was a listed cause of death by many doctors in the 1800s and early 1900s in Hyde Park, Massachusetts. On March 8, 1889 Dr. Knight listed a Nancy A. Pearson, who died at the campground in Readville as dying of "Old Age" at ninety-five years, six months and eight days.<sup>3</sup> Another indomitable old lady died at 102, but not of old age: she died of "General debility." And Mathilda Vose died at 102 years, seven months and eight days from "Prostration." In 1869, Achanga Miller died of "Old Age" at age ninety-four years, ten months and eight days. The same year Clarissa Sumner died of "Old Age" at age eighty-two years, ten months and eight days, and also the same year Michael Lewis died of "Old Age" at age seventy-six years, one month and twenty-

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<sup>1</sup> Vital records -- *Death Certificates of the Town of Hyde Park to the year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park Year Ending January 31, 1890*. Press of the *Hyde Park Times*, 78.

seven days.<sup>4</sup> The one who probably did die of old age really was William Hanson who died at 112 years of age in 1883.

In 1869, eighteen men ran the town of Hyde Park with the help of three constables, one pound-keeper (who was also the town collector), three field drivers and three fire wards. There were 774 polls (men paying the voting tax), 460 houses, 115 horses and seventy-nine cows. There was a total budget of \$31, 986.88 and a population of about 3500 people.

This is a look at a micro history of the causes of death and the medical culture of this period from 1869 to 1912. There were anywhere between one to twelve listed physicians in Hyde Park between 1869 and 1912. There were Homeopathic Physicians listed and allopathic doctors, although they were not listed as such. There were listings of “Apothecary and Surgeon” and “Apothecary and Physician.” There were women physicians with M.D. after their names and there were women listed as doctors with no M.D. designation. There were women listed as “Electric and Magnetic Physician” and “Eclectic Physician.”

Listed causes of death for the Town of Hyde Park are found in two places. The hand-written death certificates for the Town are the most immediate and revealing. Death certificate forms issued by the state of Massachusetts were filled in and kept on file by the town. These hand-written death certificates, filed upon the deaths of the people of Hyde Park were kept in the town of Hyde Park until the annexation of the town by the city of Boston in January 1912. After being kept in various places including a stint in the basement of the Boston School Committee offices on Court Street in Boston, they were finally moved to the new Boston City Hall under the department of Vital Statistics. The hand-written reports are the basis of the town clerk’s “Reports of Deaths” filed in the *Town Reports* published by the town of Hyde Park each year, 1869 to 1912.

The town clerk extrapolated the information from the hand-written death certificates for his report in the *Town Reports*. Together these two sources provide the material for the information of the listed causes of death for this historical micro-period and to answer the question, “What were the causes of death in the late 1800s to 1912 for the Town of Hyde Park?” And more importantly “What did they call it when they died?”

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<sup>4</sup> *First Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park Year Ending February 15, 1869*. Lyman Rhodes, Printer, 29.

In the early days of the town, its small size made for chatty and more informative listings of causes of deaths in the *Town Reports*. As time wore on, the cause listings were briefer and less fulsome as more town departments demanded more space for more reports. The reasons for the listings of the causes of deaths began to include such things as “Nativity of the Deceased,” totaling of the number of deaths by age and the listing of deaths by male and female.

On April 22, 1868 the town of Hyde Park came into existence by an act of incorporation by the Massachusetts State Legislature. In 1869, the first year of the existence of the town of Hyde Park, *The Town Clerk’s Report of Deaths* began with a list of all those who had died. It was important to the town to know who had died during the year but more important for the citizens to know who among their friends and neighbors had gone.

This listing included the date of death, the name of the deceased, the age in years, months and days and the cause of death. These deaths were then broken down as to the “Nativity of the Deceased,” as to the “Causes of Death” and as to the “Ages” of all those who had died.<sup>5</sup>

By 1879, deaths were not listed first by name, age, etc. The number of deaths was first divided into males and females.<sup>6</sup> Then the deaths were listed by place of birth or nativity.<sup>7</sup> The next category of deaths was by ages.<sup>8</sup> Numbers dying each month were then listed.<sup>9</sup> Next the causes of death were listed alphabetically.<sup>10</sup> Finally, a listing of the year’s deceased were enrolled by date, name, age, and cause of death.

The hand-written listings on the death certificates were learned pronouncements or wild guesses. They were succinct or rambling. The

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29; *Twelfth Annual Report of the town of Hyde Park Year Ending January 31, 1880*. Hyde Park Press of the *Norfolk County Gazette* 1880, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Twenty-First Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park Year Ending January 31, 1889* (Hyde Park: Randall & Langley, Printers, 1889), 19.

relatives of the deceased, the undertakers, the medical examiner or doctors, provided the listings of causes of death. The certificates were then copied by the town clerk for publication in the *Town Reports*. Sometimes the *Town Report* listing was different for the same person listed in the hand-written certificate.

Dr. Sturtevant, who was the medical examiner as well as a physician in the town, listed a female of seventy-three years dying by "Asphyxia," on the death certificate, but the *Town Reports* carry the same report as a "23 day old" female.<sup>11</sup> One finds the primary cause listed on a death certificate "Old Age" for an eighty-two year old female; the secondary cause was "Diarrhea of two weeks duration". The town clerk put down the cause of death "Old Age."<sup>12</sup>

Children, especially those under five years of age presented a puzzle to most of those writing the death certificates, doctors and laymen alike. For almost half of the death certificates of children five or under the lister was not a doctor at all but a family member or friend. Sometimes the death was given no cause in the certificate or in the *Town Reports*.

Mary Buck, or "Burke" as the printed *Town Reports* listed her, was five years old when she died on September 4, 1868, but no cause was listed on the death certificate or in the *Town Reports*.<sup>13</sup> In 1878, there were "2 Unknown" listed under "Causes of Death."<sup>14</sup>

In 1983, *The Boston Globe* had a report of infant deaths reporting that less than 100 years ago, the infant mortality rate in North America was "149 per 1000 births."<sup>15</sup> The infant deaths in Hyde Park for roughly this same period of time were very near this figure -- more than 10%. Some of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Eleventh Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park Year Ending January 31, 1879*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> *The Boston Globe*, 8 December 1983. This was in an article detailing the four simple and inexpensive techniques UNICEF plans to use to save lives of millions of children. Three of these techniques could have been used in the 1800's if the knowledge of their importance were known.

the listed causes of death, however, did not provide much insight into the real causes of death.

If children five and under were a puzzle, children one year and under were a conundrum. On August 9, 1868, Honora Wallace, fourteen days old died, and the listed cause of death was “canker.”<sup>16</sup> This is also known as thrush or Aphthae. Dr. W. Beach in his book *American Practice and Family Medicine* recommends along with other things “The mouth may be washed often with a decoction of sage, gold thread, and hysop, sweetened with honey with a little fine borax.”<sup>17</sup> He quotes another physician, “Among the vegetable productions of our country perhaps none excel the wake robin, or wild turnip, finely pulverized.”<sup>18</sup> These were rubbed into a paste with honey and put on the mouth and gums of the patient.

Johana (sic) O’Connell, one year, died of “teething.”<sup>19</sup> At first blush this would seem to be a spurious listing. But according to the section on “The Reformed Practice of Midwifery” contained in Beach’s book, “A great many children are taken off from teething. It causes heat and pain in the head, restlessness, and fever, and the gums are swollen and painful; it often occasions fits.”<sup>20</sup> The treatments recommended by Beach included scarification of the gums in extreme cases and diaphoretic powders as well as bathing the head and feet. The final word “A crust of bread is the best gum-stick.”<sup>21</sup>

Children under the age of one made up the largest number of deaths for most years between 1869 and 1912. In 1869 they were five out of a total of thirty deaths, in 1875 they were thirty-one out of 130, in 1895

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<sup>16</sup> Vital records -- *Death Certificates of the town of Hyde Park to the Year 1912* – deaths.

<sup>17</sup> Beach, W., *Beach’s American Practice Condensed, or the Family Physician: Being the Scientific System of Medicine; on Vegetable Principles, Designed For All Classes* (Boston: Sanborn, Carter & Bazin, No. 25, 29, 1855), 629.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Beach, 269.

they were 46 out a total of 192, and in 1905 they were fifty out of 245.<sup>22</sup> Typical of the listings are these: George Douglas Easton, eight months, eleven days old, died on June 14, 1868 of “Congestion of brain.”<sup>23</sup> James W. Schofield, eighteen days old, died of “atrophy” on August 22 1868.

Even surviving beyond the first year still left those making out the death lists puzzled at what to call it when children died. On August 1, 1868, Thomas Burke, two years old, is listed as dying of “worms.” A relative signed the certificate.<sup>24</sup> In November that same year, Newell Otis, two years old, is listed as dying of “fever.”<sup>25</sup> There was no cause given for the fever.

“Worms” as a cause of death for a two-year-old was a probable feeding problem or possibly cystic fibrosis. The person giving the cause of death information in this case was the next of kin. However, many of the causes of death in this micro-period of Hyde Park history were diseases which exist today and could be at least treated, and in some cases cured.

Retired pediatrician John T. Bowers, Jr. M.D., examined some of the listing by relatives and doctors of infants and children’s deaths. He gave an educated guess as to the actual cause. His purpose was to determine what could be a real cause of death and whether treatment today could alleviate the condition or disease or effect a cure. With a caveat that this is only a look from afar depending on the symptomatic presentation of the death notices only, Dr. Bowers examined the following causes of death for infants and children taken at random from the *Town Reports 1869-1900*:

1. “Scarlet Fever Uraemia,” “Scarletina Auginosa,” “Scarletina Typhosa” are all listed as causes of death in this micro-period between 1868-1912. Dr. Bowers said that since these were all caused by a hemolytic streptococcal infection, today all would be treated with an antibiotic medicine.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *Town Reports* of 1869, 1875, 1895, and 1905.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1869.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

“Scarletina Typhosa” and “Auginosa” were probably severe Scarlet Fever. “Scarlet Fever Uremia” was probably “Glomerulonephritis.” These conditions, following Scarlet Fever, even today are a very serious disease and sometimes still result in death.

2. “Scrofula” and “Scrofulosis” are both caused by tuberculosis of the lymph glands, particularly those of the neck, which is a very serious condition. Treatment is available as it is for all forms of tuberculosis today.

3. “Cerebral hypermia” is probably a cerebral hemorrhage in a newborn and today is treatable, although it remains a very dangerous condition, if not life-threatening.

4. “Pemphigus neonatorum” is probably severe “staphylococcal impetigo” of the newborn and is treatable today but remains a very serious condition which still can result in death.

5. “Gastric catarrh” is probably “pyloric stenosis,” treatable by early surgery or “gastro-esophageal reflex,” either of these problems is treatable by early surgery.

6. “Capillary bronchitis” is probably severe bronchitis in the small bronchioles and is treatable today, even though it is a very serious disease.

7. “Hydrocephalus” is treatable today by early surgical intervention. “Brain congestion,” or “Brain Fever,” could be Meningitis or Equine Encephalitis. Even today about half the victims die of Equine Encephalitis.

Doctors practicing in this era of medical micro-history had little to work with in the way of medicines or diagnostic tools such as x-rays, CT scans or endoscopic procedures. For the most part herbal concoctions such as from the “H” section alone of the index of Beach’s book, “hellebore, hemlock, henbane, hoarhound, hops, horsemint, horseradish, hysop, Iceland moss and indigo”<sup>26</sup> were their arsenal for combating diseases. There were available also powerful drugs such as morphine and laudanum. Any or all of the above including all the other herbs were coupled with palliative methods such as warm or cold baths in water or salt water and were the

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<sup>26</sup> Beach, 791.

principal tools in their arsenals. Purging and emetics as well as bleeding were some of the methods of fighting disease. Some doctors also used arsenic and mercury to drive out the causes of illness.

In his "Early History of the Medical Profession", Ebenezer Alden, M. D., writes that almost all of the doctors practicing in Norfolk County (of which county Hyde Park was a part until 1912), in the early 1800s graduated from Harvard Medical School. One did graduate from Brown Medical School but only after graduating from Harvard College. One of the most educated doctors in early Hyde Park was Dr. Charles Edwards. He listed "M.R.C.S." after his name on one death certificate and listed "London, England" after his name on another.

Even with such competent doctors available, children died without a physicians' care. These children had listed causes of death given by relatives. These causes were such as "Boil on liver" for a seventeen day old female on March 10, 1872 and a cause of "First" (sic) for Charles H. Ellis, who died July 18, 1872.<sup>27</sup> Two month old Gertrude Rowland died of "Cold."

Doctors listed babies' causes of death ranging from "Water on the brain" for a two year old male on February 4, 1869,<sup>28</sup> to "serasmas" (sic. No meaning has been found for this term in any medical book or dictionary of the time or any other reference book. The best description of it is probably general debility) for a one month old infant who died on August 4, 1869,<sup>29</sup> to "congestion of the brain" for a one year old who died on July 2, 1869.<sup>30</sup>

Most deaths of young children in July, August and a warm September were caused by Cholera Infantum. Cholera causes "vomiting and purging, with griping, pain, cramps in the stomach, abdomen and extremities."<sup>31</sup> A

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<sup>27</sup> Vital records -- *Death Certificates of the town of Hyde Park to the Year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>28</sup> "First Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park," (Boston: Lyman Rhodes, printer).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

five month old died of “Cholera Infantum,” July 18, 1872.<sup>32</sup> In the report of 1876, there were ten cases of cholera infantum, most of these in the months of July and August. This disease was also known as the “bloody flux” or the “summer complaint.”

In the 1882 *Town Report* there was a case of cholera morbus in fifty-one year Bridget Concannon and a case of bowel disease in ten year old George C. Wood. These two listings were lumped with eleven cases of cholera infantum. Close attention to the water supply and the practice of stringent measures of cleanliness usually brought the epidemic under control. However, each year still saw the reporting of cases of cholera infantum resulting in death.<sup>33</sup>

Winter saw little respite for little children. On February 14, 1872, a one year old died of “Teething.”<sup>34</sup> The same cause was listed in 1868, November 11, again with no doctor in attendance.<sup>35</sup> January 24, 1869, “Canker” (sic) was the listed cause for the death of a two year, thirteen day old little girl.<sup>36</sup> Causes of “Accidentally Burnt”<sup>37</sup> for Mary E. Mahoney one year and seven months old, and “dround” [sic] for ten year old Elizabeth Hayes were duly listed by the town clerk. All these cases had no doctor in attendance.

Causes of death of very young children listed by people unfamiliar with causes of death lead to speculation about real causes. The late Arthur J. O’Connor, M.D., speculated that some of these listed causes could be from child neglect or child abuse resulting in death.

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<sup>32</sup> Vital records -- *Death Certificates of the town of Hyde Park to the year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>33</sup> The recognition that all cases of cholera involve severe dehydration has led to the United Nations solution to the problem by four steps: Expanded immunization, oral rehydration-packets of sugar and salt plus other common substances, growth monitoring and breast-feeding plus supplementary foods.

<sup>34</sup> Vital records -- *Death Certificates of the town of Hyde Park to the year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Children were not the only people dying in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but for the early years of the town of Hyde Park they were the most numerous deaths recorded. The first year of Hyde Park *Town Reports* was 1869. This was a report of the year 1868 from April 22 until January 1869. The first town clerk's listing of deaths occurring in 1868 reflected deaths in the age group five years and below as representing the greatest number of all deaths listed. This was true until 1891.

In the late 1800s and well into the early 1900s tuberculosis became the leading cause of death among young adults of childbearing age. In the first year of the town, 1868, there were thirty recorded deaths of which five were consumption (a wasting away of the body especially as caused by tuberculosis of the lungs), almost twenty percent of all deaths. There were no other listings, which could be counted in with consumption as a cause of death. The ages of those dying from consumption ranged from eight months to eighty-four years old; with other deaths at thirty-four, forty-nine, and sixty-six. These five deaths represent twenty percent of all deaths for that year.

Ten years later in 1879, there were eighty-five deaths -- ten of these as listed from consumption.<sup>38</sup> But listings of Phthisis pulmonalis 1 (tuberculosis of the lungs) and phthisis 6 (tuberculosis of the lungs), should have been added into the total for consumption, as these are just other names for consumption. Out of eighty-five deaths then in 1879, there were seventeen deaths from tuberculosis of the lungs. Out of the total eighty-five deaths for the year, these seventeen deaths for 1879, as in 1869, result in twenty percent of all deaths caused by consumption. In 1879, however, the ages of those dying of consumption ranged from thirteen, sixteen, nineteen, twenty-two, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-three, thirty-five, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-six, sixty-five, to sixty-six and seventy-three. Young adults were being stricken down in large numbers. Lung diseases, lumped together, were twenty-eight out of eighty-five listed deaths.<sup>39</sup>

In July, 1880 the greatest listing of deaths from tuberculosis of the lungs occurred since the incorporation of the town:

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<sup>38</sup> *Twelfth Annual Report*, 1880, 46.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

July 5, 1880, "Consumption" was listed by F. L. Gerald, M.D.

July 6, 1880, "Consumption" was listed by C. C. Hayes, M.D.

July 7, 1880, "Consumption" was listed by W. S. Everett, M.D.

July 7, 1880, "Consumption" was listed by F. L. Gerald, M.D.

July 31, 1880 "Phthisis" (tuberculosis of the lungs) was listed by Charles Sturtevant, M. D.<sup>40</sup>

In 1886, the highest number of deaths for the first time was those twenty to thirty and the next highest number was thirty to forty years old. The cause most listed for these young deaths was "Consumption" or "Tuberculosis of the Lungs."<sup>41</sup> The leading listed cause of death for all ages was "Tuberculosis" in some form.

Three years later in 1889, of 173 deaths, consumption was lumped with pneumonia and other lung diseases to account for forty deaths,<sup>42</sup> and these listings were people in their young adult years. In this same year there were twenty-six "various other diseases." Usually the highest number of listed deaths in the first years of the town were those under one year, and the next greatest number was those between sixty and seventy years of age. Tuberculosis continued to be the leading cause of death of young adults, often times leaving young children not only orphans but also infected with the disease their parent or parents died of.

Doctors listed tuberculosis by different names in the death certificates. Why did they call it by a different name? Dying of tuberculosis seems to have had a sinister identification for the deceased. Doctors varied in their listings of this loathsome disease. Some doctors used "Tuberculosis of the lungs" at this same time. Many different names were given for this same disease. "Phthisis," which is "Tuberculosis Pulmonalsis," was used sometimes alone and sometimes with "phthisis Pulmonalsis," which translated to "Tuberculosis of the lungs—lungs." Many doctors and most lay people giving information on the death certificates listed "Consumption" for "Tuberculosis of the lungs."

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<sup>40</sup> Vital Records -- *Town of Hyde Park to the year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>41</sup> *Town Reports Nineteenth Annual Report, 1887, 23.*

<sup>42</sup> *Town Reports Twenty-Second Annual Report, 1890, 77.*

The tuberculosis bacillus lodged in other places than in the lungs. According to the causes listed, it was almost everywhere in the body. From “Scrofula” and “Scrofulosis” (Tuberculosis of the lymph glands, especially the cervical or neck glands), to “Phthisis Abdominalis” (the abdomen), to “Consumption of the bowels.” In 1870 Amelia Snow died at forty years, nine months and twenty-one days of “Consumption of Blood.”<sup>43</sup>

Tuberculosis was the most frightening disease. No one knew how it was contacted except that those children of tuberculin parents many times came down with the disease. People understood that it was somehow contracted and was unceasing in its assault upon all parts of the body, even unto death.

People died of many other causes. Dropsy, Bright’s Disease and Diphtheria were used several times in each year’s filings. Joseph Wood, age seventy-eight years, eight months and twenty-two days, died March 7, 1885 of dropsy, which was a descriptive term for accumulation of fluid in the head, chest, abdomen and legs. Paralysis was another cause, which cropped up every once and awhile without any further description. There was no further description given for the paralysis that was given as the cause for the deaths of Mary Blaisdell and Eliza Fessenden, who died July 21, and July 24, 1885.

Causes listed in the *Town Reports* are not always indicative of the underlying causes of death. Most of the time, the town clerk would list the primary cause from the certificate, leaving the secondary cause (usually a long-standing disease) to go unnoticed. When F. L. Babcock, M.D., listed Amos Macomber of Readville as dying from “Rheumatism” as a primary cause and as a secondary case “metastasis to the brain,” on May 2, 1880,<sup>44</sup> the town clerk listed “metastasis to the brain.”<sup>45</sup>

Even with the completed death certificate some deaths remain a mystery. On September 4, 1868 Mary A. Burke, a five years, eight months and fifteen days old girl, died of “Cause unknown” as listed by a family member. Melvina Gridley, age twenty-two, has a death certificate with no cause listed. She died on February 23, 1869, with no person signed as

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<sup>43</sup> *Town Reports Third Annual Report*, 1871, 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, and *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 1881, 52.

filling in the form.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps one of the most inventive listed causes of death was that of "Senile Gangrene," which killed eighty-nine year old Margaret S. Kendall. Margaret McDermott, age seventy-six, died of "Cause Unknown (sudden death)." Both passed away in 1896.

Accidents and suicides were the smallest listed number of deaths. As the medical examiner, Dr. Charles Sturtevant signed death certificates for all these deaths. The listed causes were succinct and descriptive. On June 23, 1872, a seven year old male died, "Killed by jumping from the cars (railroad) while in motion."<sup>47</sup> On November 9, 1868 William Howe was "Killed by being run over on rail road."<sup>48</sup>

On March 3, 1873 John Regan died of being "Frozen."<sup>49</sup> Douglas Davidson on December 28, 1873 committed "Suicide by cutting throat."<sup>50</sup> In 1873, there were also three drownings, including one under the ice in January and \$5.00 had to be paid to "M. Underhill to find the body."<sup>51</sup> There were some peaceful deaths established by the medical examiner. Margaret Fagan was "Found dead in bed" as a listed cause of death on October 3, 1884, and so it was for forty-nine year old John F. Saunders on March 15, 1895.

There were two murder victims: Patrick Donnelly, at age fifty-three; one cause unknown for Nathaniel Crane, who died at 76, two accidents and a third railroad accident. Another murder was when thirty-year-old Charles W. Booth died of "a pistol shot in abdomen" and Douglas Davidson "Committed Suicide" at age 50.

A catchall listing of a cause of death was "Old Age." Some people were listed as dying of "Old Age" at seventy-eight -- Sarah Jefferson in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *Town Reports Nineteenth Annual Report*, 1874, 34, as well as *Vital Records -- Town of Hyde Park to the year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>51</sup> *Town Reports*, 1879, 47.

1868<sup>52</sup> -- but others who were listed as dying of "Old Age" were eighty, eighty-five, and eighty-eight years old. Hannah Goss died at eighty-two in 1878 from "Old Age."<sup>53</sup>

Eleanor M. T. Bertam died at thirteen from "Heart Disease" and Virgil H. Hewes died at seventy-nine of "Angina Pectoris." An eighteen-year old girl died of "Pyemia," which is presence of pus in the blood or blood poisoning.<sup>54</sup>

In the *Thirty-First Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park* for the year ending January 31, 1899, the town clerk began listing the names and ages of those who died but without any cause listed. This practice continued through the rest of the *Reports*. This makes it difficult to attach ages to specific causes of death and to track the increase of diseases killing a certain age group.

A synopsis was given each of these years of "The number of deaths from some of the well-known causes."<sup>55</sup> Also included was the nativity of those dying in any given year and a chart of numbers of those dying in each age group from stillborn to those between ninety and 100 of ages in increments of ten years. In the *Reports* for 1909, 1910, and 1911, the names of those dying were entered by month but still with no causes listed.

Arthur J. O'Connor M.D. , in general medical practice, late of West Roxbury, Massachusetts, was asked by the author to make an educated guess from the listed causes of some deaths as to what the real cause might be and whether treatment would be available now. Dr. O'Connor warned that it could be pure conjecture on his part as the listed causes were not clear in some cases, but he agreed to give his opinion on some.

These listed causes of death for people over the age of twelve were selected at random from the deaths as listed in *The Town Reports*:<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *First Annual Report of the Town of Hyde Park* (Boston: Lyman Rhodes, printer, 1869), 29.

<sup>53</sup> *Town Reports Eleventh Annual Report*, 1879, 47; as well as Vital Records -- *Town of Hyde Park to the year 1912* -- deaths.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Town Reports Thirty-First Annual Report*, 1899, 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Town Reports Nineteenth Annual Report*, 1887, 23.

1. "Ascites," could be Laennee's Cirrhosis of the liver in a thirty-seven year old male. Today diuretics would be used in treatment as well as a possible surgical shunt procedure.
2. "Haematuria," or blood in the urine, of a sixty-three year old male was probably renal carcinoma and a possible nephrectomy preceded or followed by radiation and or chemotherapy might be treatment today.
3. "Neurasthenia," a condition marked by fatigue, loss of energy, memory and feelings of inadequacy in a sixty-four old woman might well have been leukemia or at least anemia. If leukemia, treatment by chemotherapy might be used. Anemia would be identified as to type and source and treated accordingly with medication and/or nutrition.
4. "Asthemia" could be Muscular Dystrophy, then as now incurable, but ventilatory assistance might help as to symptoms.
5. "Adynamic Fever" with "Paralysis" is acute poliomyelitis (bulbar) again incurable. Ventilatory assistance might help. Now, the vaccines have practically eliminated poliomyelitis in the United States at least.
6. "Acute Mania" was probably Alzheimer's Disease for which there is even today no known cure, although much needed research and medical experience is being brought to bear upon the problem.

In 1886 there were fifty-three deaths under one year, thirteen from "Cholera infantum," and twelve stillborn births out of 145 total deaths.<sup>57</sup> In 1889, there were twenty-nine deaths under one year and again a high stillborn rate.<sup>58</sup> In 1899, there were a total of 222 deaths and forty-two under one year, plus eleven stillborn births.<sup>59</sup>

Life was surrounded by diseases known and of diseases unknown. In 1895 the contagious diseases listed by the Board of Health were diphtheria, scarlet fever, measles, typhoid fever and membranous (sic) croup. The Board, according to its report in 1886, had found a swine

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Town Reports Thirty-Second Annual Report, 1900, 37.*

<sup>59</sup> *Town Reports, 1889, Report of the Board of Health.*

owner who would pick up swill for residents. By 1889, the Board said that it spent most of its time “Placarding houses with contagious diseases (measles, scarlet fever, mumps) and draining wetlands.”<sup>60</sup>

In 1897, evidently the swine owner would no longer pick up swill because the budget for the Board of Health contained payments of “E.M. Cundall collecting swill, \$346.75, Mrs. F. Hukin, collecting swill, \$702.00, P. Anderson collecting swill, \$525.17, A. G. Mathews, collecting swill, \$498.70.” As well as, “C. J. Russell, burying dogs, \$3.00, H. Bryant burying dog, \$1.00, J. Minnis, burying dog, \$1.00.” And “Melvin & Badger, formaldehyde and lamp, \$38.75.” The Board of Health’s budget in 1898 also contained money paid for “burying dogs,” “collecting swill,” “posting notices” (contagious diseases) and for “formaldehyde and lamp.”<sup>61</sup>

Among questions raised by the citizens of Hyde Park was “What was Consumption and why did so many people die of it?” It was the most feared and most mysterious disease with no known cause and no sure cure or treatment. It attacked the body everywhere from the head, in sinuses and adenoids; to the lymph glands; to the lungs; to the abdomen; to the intestines and to the bones.

During this period, if living were difficult, how was it to be sick and die? And how were the people left, doctors, family and friends to know how to answer when the death certificate and survivors crowded around asking, “What was it? What was his cause of death? What did she die of?”

What would they call it when they died?

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<sup>60</sup> *Town Reports Thirtieth Annual Report*, 1898, 83.

<sup>61</sup> *Town Reports*, 1899, 95.

## Index 1

Death Certificate Used by the Town of Hyde Park 1868-1912

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS  
RETURN OF A DEATH

To the Clerk of the Town in which the Death occurred.

1. Name\*
2. Date of Death
3. Sex, and whether single, married, or widowed
4. Color
5. Age
6. Disease of Cause of Death
7. Residence
8. Place of Death
9. Occupation
10. Place of Birth
11. Name of Father
12. Name of Mother
13. Birthplace of Father
14. Birthplace of Mother
15. Place of Internment
16. Signature of undertaker or other person making the Return

Death at \_\_\_\_\_, on \_\_\_\_\_, 18\_\_.

\*If a married woman or widow

(W) White, (A) African, (M) mixed White and African. If of other Races, specify what.

Be very particular to fill all Blanks.

## Index 2

Reverse of Death Certificate  
Town of Hyde Park, 1868-1900

The undertaker of other informant is requested to report the facts – together with the Physician’s Certificate of the Causes of Death – to the Town clerk, before the internment.

In case of an internment of taking place, without the Certificate of Registry of the Clerk of the Town in which the Death occurred, (or the deceased resided,) having first been obtained, the person having charge of such Internment must Forthwith Give Notice thereof – or report these facts – to said Clerk.

## Index 3

The listed causes of all deaths for the first year of the Town in 1868 as listed in the 1869 Town Reports were:

Consumption	5
Cancer	3
Fevers	3
Paralysis	3
Brain diseases	3
Old Age	2
Croup	1
Dropsy	1
Other Diseases	7
Accident	2
Total	30

The “Other Diseases” were worms, canker, cholera infantum, atrophy, unknown, tumor and teething. The accidents were drowning and a railroad accident.

Ages of those dying 1869 were

Under one year	5
One to five	6
Five to ten	1
Ten to Twenty	1
Twenty to Thirty	4
Thirty to Forty	2
Forty to Fifty	2
Fifty to Sixty	4
Sixty to Seventy	2
Seventy to Eighty	1
Eighty to Ninety	1
Ninety to 100	1
Total	30

#### Index 4

The doctors available in Hyde Park at this time were for the most part educated and practiced a high degree of competent medicine. Most were men. In 1876-77, there were eight physicians listed in Hyde Park. Charles Sturtevant, Thomas F. Sumner, Willard S. Everett, Francis L. Hayes, C. L. Edwards, and the only women, Sarah F. Newton M.D. (Mrs. Lincoln) and Mary Worey, M.D. (should have been Morey).<sup>62</sup>

Some other women were listed as “doctors” in the Hyde Park Directories but no listed as physicians. All the physicians did not have M.D. after their names, but it seems that the designation of “physician” meant a certified doctor. Some women practicing alternative medicine not recognized by the regular medical establishment and such were referred to as “Electric and Magnetic Physican” or “Electric Physician.”

Mehitable Sunderland was the only person practicing as a doctor in the Fairmount section of Hyde Park from its founding in 1856. She

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<sup>62</sup> *They Hyde Park, Dedham, and Norwood Directory for 1876-77, Boston*, compiled and published by C. W. Calkins & Co., No. 286 Washington Street, 1876. In parenthesis Ms. Newton was listed in 1876 as Mrs. Lincoln. In later years she was listed by maiden name, Sarah F. Newton, M.D.

was never listed as a doctor in the town directory, but newspaper accounts mentioned her as a doctor who cared for many of the early Hyde Park residents.<sup>63</sup>

Two of the doctors were listed as homeopathic physicians, Charles Sturtevant and Thomas F. Sumner. It is likely that all the rest were allopathic doctors, although they were not listed as such. Willard S. Everett was listed as an apothecary and physician. Francis L. Gerald was listed as physician and surgeon. One of the doctors listed was a woman, Sarah F. Newton (Mrs. Lincoln). She was listed as physician continuously from 1876 to 1888.<sup>64</sup>

Some other women were listed in town directories as “doctor” but with no listing as “physician.” Angelina Hamilton was listed as a doctor but with no M.D. after her name. In the *1879 Hyde Park Directory*, Mrs. Delphina Dearborn was listed as an “Electric and Magnetic Physician” who “offers her professional services to the sick either at their homes or at her rooms at 50 Fayette Street, Boston, Massachusetts.”<sup>65</sup> Mrs. S. M. Hall was listed in the *1879 Hyde Park Directory* as an “Eclectic Physician” also practicing from 50 Fayette Street in Boston. Augusta Soloman was listed as a physician at 31 Central Avenue in 1901. These were women doctors who practiced an alternative form of medicine not sanctioned by the Commonwealth.

Index 5

The figures in this chart are taken from the Reports of Deaths by the Town Clerk for the years listed as published in the Town Reports for the Town of Hyde Park 1869-1891.

YEAR	UNDER ONE YEAR	UNDER FIVE YEARS	ALL DEATHS
1868	14	6	30

<sup>63</sup> From newspaper clipping in the possession of her great-granddaughter, Elizabeth Freeman. These clippings are undated and probably date from either her ninetieth birthday celebration of the ninety-first in 1898 or 1899.

<sup>64</sup> *They Hyde Park, Dedham and Norwood Directory for 1876-7, Boston.*

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Hannan, *Doctors Carpenter, Builders, Chiefs: Women of Hyde Park* (Hyde Park, MA: Albert Publishing House, 1986).

1869	16	12	57
1870	27	12	77
1871	34	10	95
1872	41	16	108
1873	16	18	132
1874	39	26	130
1875	32	21	136
1876	39	26	137
1877	21	14	88
1878	25	8	85
1879	20	20	111
1880	22	13	107
1881	33	14	132
1882	23	11	118
1883	30	23	143
1884	22	20	110
1885	35	11	131
1886	53	12	145
1887	33	15	143
1888	33	14	133
1889	53	14	173
1890	41	19	176
1891	37	15	162

In the chart above, the second largest listed cause of deaths for all ages was “consumption”. The first, including all deaths from one year was “failure to thrive” or Serasmus or General Debility.

## Index 6

In June, 1884, John King, M. D. wrote a speech for the National Eclectic Medical association Annual Convention in Cincinnati attacking this attempt at regulation by “old school” doctors to drive unschooled medical practitioners out of business. Some of the practitioners in Hyde Park were of the eclectic or homeopathic persuasion, who would have been barred by these statutes.

Dr. John King resents this regulation and says “many of our citizens have, for various and good reasons, entered into medical practice without having obtained diplomas.”

He poses a hypothetical instance, of a very sick patient the ‘regulars’ (doctors who have medical school training) have despaired of. At last an alternative doctor appears.

A last ray of hope brightens the countenances of the despairing relatives,... they ask not concerning his science, his Latin or Greek, his acquaintance with the classics, his alma mater, his diploma, nor his methods of practice...<sup>66</sup>

The alternative doctor treats the patient and, of course, the patient recovers his health all because of the attentions of the “irregular” doctor. Most of the regular doctors of the day in Massachusetts and Hyde Park practiced Allopathy. They believed in medical treatment by orthodox means using drugs to alleviate the symptoms of the disease.

## Index 7

In 1842, W. Beach, M. D. published *Beach’s American Practice condensed, or, the Family Physician: Being the Scientific System of*

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<sup>66</sup> John King, M. D., “Special Medical Legislation,” June, 1884. An address delivered before the National Eclectic Medical Association at their annual convention, held in Cincinnati. Copies of this address and that of Ebenezer Alden, M. D. (above) were printed by popular demand. Copies of these two are in the archives of the Hyde Park Historical Society, Weld Hall Hyde Park Branch Library, Hyde Park, Massachusetts.

*medicine; on vegetable principles, designed for all classes.*<sup>67</sup> It was revised into sixteen editions the last in 1855. This 785 page work was an attempt to introduce to the public as well as to the medical community the new (new in 1842 to 1855, the dates of his work and its revisions.) “Reformed medicine” which is close to Allopathy practiced by many of the doctors in Hyde Park between 1868 and 1912. Dr. Beach wanted to deter the doctors who purged, bled and gave noxious doses to patients.

By the late 1800’s, many states were passing legislation to regulate the medical profession. They were seeking to require some common education and training for all doctors before being licensed in the state. Beach’s book speaks to this regulation and especially to the barring of methods of treatment, which had resulted in terrible consequences. He speaks especially to the terrors of the mercury treatment for various diseases.

#### Index 8

Interestingly, Beach in his work of *American Medicine* does not list Cholera infantum as a separate disease of childhood, but includes in the list of adult complaints. He lists three causes of cholera infantum

1. A great degree of heat.
2. The impure air of crowded cities.
3. Dentition or teething.

But the most common cause in children is, unripe fruit.<sup>68</sup>

He goes on to say to his mostly rural readers “This disease is very seldom met with in the country, where the air is salubrious; but in cities it produces annually a most frightful mortality.”<sup>69</sup> He also gives a stirring description of what happens to the child’s body in the throes of cholera infantum.

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<sup>67</sup> W. Beach, M.D. *Beach’s American Practice condensed, or, the Family Physician: Being the scientific system of medicine; on vegetable principles, designed for all classes.* (Boston: Published by Sanborn, Carter & Bazin, 1855).

<sup>68</sup> Beach, 412.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*