

Midwives and Herbal Medicine ^[1]

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In the eighteenth century, midwives 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.

Rachel Allen (1760-1840) was a midwife who lived near Snow Camp, North Carolina in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We do not know where she learned her medical skills, but we do know that she chose to write down her herbal remedies, which 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.

Below are excerpts from Rachel Allen's writing that show how residents of the backcountry treated wounds, illness, and disease.

[1]

To Make Green Salve take one pound of bores
Greese one pound of [turpentine](#) ^[2] and melt it
together then take it of the fire take one ounce of [Verdigreese](#)
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 [proud](#)
flesh and dead flesh from old Sores and Clense them

[2]

To make [ointment](#) ^[3] to Cure a burn or Scald
take of the tops of [high RattleSnake](#)
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 wort](#) the inner Bark of
[Shoemake](#) Root pound them together
Mix Sower cream & apply it to

[4]

The [yaws](#) or Countray Distemper is very
Bad to Cure perfectly Especially when
grown invtired this is the highest kind
of [Scurvy](#) and the Sytoms of it are
Eating, [Ulcer](#) in the throat or pallet
and filthy Sores in other parts of
the body having neer Resemblence to
of [the pox](#) 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 inner
Bark of [Spanish oak](#) boil these together
in two quarts of water till the [decoction](#)
Bee very Strong, of the Liquor drink a
full pint milk warm and immediately
after it half a pint quite cold and
it will give thee powerful
vomits 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 be Repeated Every
Seventh day, in the meantime gargle
your throat and wash all you Sores
and ulcers with the Same warm
Liquor which ought 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 Equal quantities
of Eating and Drinking
Confine thyself from [flesh](#) and from
[Strong Drink](#) and be very carefull
of catching Cold

[5]

A [Receipt](#) for a Canser
take the bark of the root of Spanish
oak dogwood [sassafras](#) [persimmon](#) and the
shoemake that bares the berries 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 [hazelnuts](#) of [alom](#) one Spoonfull of
hunney the bigness of a large heazelnut
of verdigreese boile all together and [S](#)
it well Let it Settle and bottle it for use.

[7]

To Make [Hunney physick](#)
Take flower of [sulphar](#) one ounce [Creame of tarter](#) one ounce, powder of [Jallep](#)
Quarter of an ounce mix them in
Clarified honey to the Consistance of an
[Electury](#) 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 [consumption](#) take [angillico horseradish](#)
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 [treacle](#) 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 Cresses](#) 2 handfulls
of Sassafras roots 2 handfull of [Nettles](#) 2
handfuls of [Sasborelle](#)
2 pounds of [Lignumeity](#) 2 hanfulls of [Burdock](#) roots 2 handfulls of [Sweet Bryers](#)
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 [Vervine Dittony](#)
[Sweet goldin rod](#) 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
[Wormwood](#) which kills 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 [Rhematism](#)
Walk in a Strong Broth Made of [word](#) Cow heels.

[14]

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

[15]

for an old sore leg take
[parsnips](#) pounded boil in water
til soft thicken it with
Wheat Bran make a [poltis](#) & apply it

[16]

Inflamation 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 good](#) --- ye Lower part
of ye Belly with warm water and
[Emalient Clysters](#) frequently
Eating Small broths [gruels](#) or mild herbs

[17]

In a Raging fit of [Stone](#) 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 [Camomile](#)
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 [Yarrow White plantain](#)
and [Silverwort](#) agrimony [Bittersweets](#)
[Hartstongue Maidenhair Cinquefoylde](#)
[Strawberry Leaves](#) and [Cattsfoot leaves](#)
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 [Linseed](#) 2 Spoonfulls [Liquorice](#) 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 [mucilagient](#) Liquor

[21]

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

[22]

dissolve 2 drams of [gum arabeck](#) and 2 drams of Liquorice ball in ten
ounces of boiling water when cool add 150 drops of [anlimonial](#) wine and
one ounce [Paregoric](#) take a table spoon full three tiem a day Shake the bottle before pouring out the drops.

User Tags:

[herbal medicine](#) ^[4]

[history](#) ^[5]

[midwives](#) ^[6]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[7]

[Page](#) ^[8]

[Students](#) ^[9]

[Teachers](#) ^[10]

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- [The Rural World: North Carolina 1870-1920](#) ^[13]
- [Women in Antebellum North Carolina](#) ^[14]
- [Sour Stomachs and Galloping Headaches](#) ^[15], a digitized exhibition from the North Carolina Collection housed at UNC Chapel Hill

Artifacts:



[16]

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

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- [1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/midwives-and-herbal-medicine>
- [2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/glossary/turpentine>
- [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/glossary/ointment>
- [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/herbal-medicine>
- [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history>
- [6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/midwives>
- [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6>
- [8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page>
- [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/students>
- [10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/teachers>
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- [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/midwives>
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