



*Nicholas Gesner*

## MEDICAL MATTERS IN PALISADES & PIERMONT

*Much of what follows is extracted from the diary of Nicholas Gesner (1765-1858), a farmer who lived in Palisades (then called Rockland) during the early 19th century. The task of transcribing and editing some 1600 pages was begun in 1958 by Alice Munro Haagensen who continued until she reached 100 (she lived to 105.) Later the project was completed by her daughter Alice Gerard and published in 2015..*

In addition to farming, Nicholas Gesner (NG) of Palisades served variously as surveyor, schoolteacher, lawyer and census taker. The portion of his diary that remains covers much of the period between 1829 -1850 and his ungrammatical and sketchy entries not only described personal activities, but served as an almanac and account book. In addition to notes about weather conditions and local gossip, particular attention was paid to prayer meetings of which NG was a frequent and enthusiastic participant. He recorded the subjects of sermons given in town by itinerant preachers, named those who attended or didn't, and described regional camp meetings which sometimes attracted hundreds, even thousands. Also the bitter rivalry between two opposing Methodist factions - "the Old Side" vs. NG's "Reformers" - was related in considerable detail.

Interspersed among all of this, and the subject of this essay, were fragmentary references to health matters which provide vivid insight from the patient's perspective about medical practice and practitioners during the 1830s and 1840s - a time when "bleeding, blistering, purging and puking" predominated. Occasional diary entries referred to certain local doctors (Jonathan Marvin, Samuel Perry, Abraham Verbryck, ? Barto, ?Wright) who might draw off blood or prescribe plasters and potions to family members. In a dire emergency physicians in New York City could be consulted and on one occasion in June 1832 when NG's son Herbert sustained a severe injury which led to amputation of his foot and then infection set in, he was taken across the river to the College of Physicians and Surgeons where a below the knee amputation was performed by Valentine Mott, the leading surgeon of the day, "with 8 or 9 students present." The competency of country doctors was limited and there was little uniformity

between their practices, except for their prescribing toxic drugs, e.g. calomel (mercury), laudanum (opium), cayenne pepper and other unpleasant remedies. Indeed, in routine cases it was difficult to distinguish “regular” doctors from quacks as was illustrated by the following diary entry from June 15, 1833:

*A pretended Botanist and Stranger passed my door to Day, pretended to cure Rheumatism and also the fever and Ague in 13 or 14 Hours and never to have it again. Also the Salt Rheumatism, the tooth ache in 2 Minutes with many other complaints. His upper lip was unshorn, had on it long hair. Said he had been educated a Regular bred physician in France, had been in Canada as much as 15 or 16 years Among the Indians there and had acquired a Knowledge of Botanical Medicine. I fancy his long lip beard was a Stratagem to make people believe he knew something and he could speak well; but instead of French I think he is Irish by tongue. I got a plaster of him for Jake 4 shillings. A man with him who carried his medicine.*

Although this stranger seems to have been an itinerant, several members of NG’s family were proponents of the popular Thomsonian movement, a gentler botanical alternative to the “heroic” style favored by mainstream practitioners, and usually their herbal remedies were tried before reluctantly calling a doctor. The following sequence from the summer of 1834 illustrates a typical doctor-patient relationship:

Aug. 9: [Exhausted after 4 days labour] *I gave up just before 12 having brought in One load of Hay from little field, grew very sick at the Stomach and much Weakness, the family having thought it best, sent for the Doctor...Doctor Hopson came in the evening to see me. He saw it necessary to Administer Medicine, I thought in short time the pain in My back seemed to diminish. This was Saturday evening (perhaps some laudanum) rested middling easy that Night.*

Aug. 10: *Dr. Hopson here early; saw me more favorable, Early in the afternoon [he] was going up in the point to see David Parsels arm, stopped in, Whether this will be counted I Know Not....This afternoon my pain (not by way of spasms)*

*increased to a great degree all round my body down each thigh and leg [sciatica] so as to render me really miserable, had draughts to feet Morning miserable.*

*Aug. 11: Doctor Hopson this Morning after hearing my situation the last Night left Physic - it appeared good as a purge however I was some easier before He came...This night I did sweat in an excessive degree, began to feel moist on the Skin before evening, the sheet under and over me was Wet as water as far as it could Spread...This seems natures effort for no medicine for this purpose has been administered , all the time very wet weather. My pain ceased with the sweating.*

*Aug. 12: Doctor Hopson visited me this morning, considered the sweating would be of much service, admonished me to be careful and not venture outdoors too soon, left nothing to take, since I appeared so much better...In all this time eat little or nothing, using some brook Mint tea. But retained great thirst. However I felt quite comfortable in the forenoon.*

*Aug. 13: Hopson visited me Again to Day, thought I was doing well....Today I enjoyed a tolerably good Day as to sickness.*

*Aug. 14: I sweated the Bed shirt and Wet again the past night But not quite equal to Monday Night...Doctor again to Day.*

*Aug. 15: Hopson came in...left 12 powders to be taken at the interval of one hour this being in the afternoon. I had Grown worse taken with a smart chill [which] left me very sick. I have a constant and insatiable thirst.*

*Aug. 16: Doctor paid no visit to Day, concluded the 12 powders left on the 15th would terminate the fear.....[later] quite sick, light headed some.*

*Aug. 17: Doctors 8th Regular visit*

*Aug. 19: Doctor in this evening enquired into my state left no Medicine. Said he would call tomorrow and leave me some tonic Medicine for the Stomach; I expected he had done; this should not be called a Medical Visit.*

*Aug. 20: I am a little better...Doctor Hopson here about 11 o'clock this morning left some tonic Medicine. I had not expected him Again and therefore he Ought not to make charge*

*Aug. 22: I feel something better this morning*

Aug. 26: *I mowed Spread and Raked Some, with much fatigue and trembling*

For the next month NG continued to suffer intermittent weakness and fever, but what's most interesting about this narrative is his skepticism about the efficacy of Doctor Hopson's medicines and his frustration about being charged for what he believed were unnecessary home visits - ten of them over two weeks!

## **DOCTORS' FEES**

Exasperation with Dr. Hopson was evident again in the following sequence from 1835 concerning NG's wife Gracy who suffered from recurrent gastric symptoms:

*It starts as a "plague" in the stomach, fly's up in her throat, almost chokes her. Harsh medicine sends it down a Moment, but starts up again as though it would flee from the severity of the Stuff taken - large portions of the spirits of turpentine has been taken. Doctors medicine and every harsh attempt to destroy it has hitherto failed.*

Oct. 16: *Doctor Hopson came to see Gracy, she has a longtime complaint of Great distress at the Stomach, she thinks it is Worms, an empty Stomach she feels very bad, Weak faint, sickness at the Stomach; perceives a Crawling up in her throat. He thinks it may be Worms.*

Oct. 17: *Gracy bad last Night About 12 o'clock, she said she thought she could not live till Morning, thinks that she is devoured With Stomach Worms; she seems quite poorly for About one Hour...She took the Doctor's Medicine - a little Better this Morning.*

Oct. 21: *Gracy very ill this morning with her stomach, judges it to be Worms, she is very weak....Doctor Hopson to visit her this Morning, left some more Medicine, this is his 2nd visit to her*

Oct. 25: *Gracy is considerably better, Doctor Hopson was to see her friday... Which is his 3rd Visit, did Nothing for her*

Oct 29: *Doctor Hopsons 4th visit to see Gracy, came this Morning*

Gracy continued to suffer from *some live Animal on her Stomach, creeping up in her throat, half choking of Her...and giving her much Misery*. Again, three weeks later: *Gracy is much troubled with Some living Animal on her Stomach, wears her down a long time already, best part of a Year*. It's not clear whether Gracy really suffered from worms or from some other chronic ailment, but her self-diagnosis was plausible. *The People's Common Sense Medical Adviser in Plain English or Medicine Simplified*, published by R. V. Pierce, MD in 1889, had this to say about intestinal worms:

*The round worm, termed by naturalists ascaris lumbricoides, varies from six inches to a foot in length. It infests the small intestine and seldom migrates into the stomach or large bowel. Instances are reported, however, in which it has crept upward in the esophagus, larynx, nostrils and eustachian tube....The symptoms which the long worms occasion are frequently obscure. Thirst, irregular appetite, colicky pains, excessive flow of saliva, enlargement of the abdomen, itching of the nose, pallor of the face, offensive breath, disturbed sleep and grinding of the teeth are kA common symptoms...The passage of this species of worms from the bowels, or their ejection from the stomach, is the only positive evidence of their presence.*

Nov. 27, 1836: *Gracy quite ill 2 or 3 Days, especially in the Evening with her throat and Stomach is quite sore. It appears that her complaint is Worms, one came from her Mouth a few evenings Ago.*

Feb. 2, 1836: *I Paid Doctor Hopson's \$4.50 being in full, he was in front of house on his way to New York.*

When Gracy, suffered the same complaints in 1838, she was attended by a different doctor (Abraham Verbyck) who probably was no more successful but might have been cheaper. Like his mother Gracy, NG's son Jacob suffered from recurrent pains in his abdomen and right side: *violent spasms, apparently fainting or fit under the excessive pain in his side, his legs feet toes hands in the most awful condition with Cramps; a poor unfortunate Sufferer is he*. On October 4, 1832 Jacob consulted the long established Dr.

Abraham Cornelison of West Nyack but wasn't pleased with the visit. When Jacob failed to pay the bill, the doctor sued and more than a year later (November 6, 1833) NG intervened as mediator:

*I went to Nyack to settle Jacob Gesner's Bill of Medicine with Doctor Cornelison, he had a Summons served on Jacob Gesner for 10 shillings. Jacob Gesner considered this bill an extravagant Charge for a trifle of drops. Jacob Gesner had offered him pay at the time When he got the Medicine but he, the doctor, Refused to take it. The cost was 6 shillings 6 pence but the Doctor Agreed to take 6 shillings and the Cost 5 shillings = 11 shillings. This I paid. Jacob gave 8.*

Jacob continued to suffer from colicky pain and in 1834, young Dr. Hopson, then just beginning practice in nearby Piermont and presumably less expensive than Dr. Cornelison, was called to see him.

*Sept. 15: Jacob Gesner exceedingly poorly with his Side, attended with paintings and violent Cramps, and Seemingly several turns like fits, the neighbors called in and Some happened in. This was truly a Mournful sight; the extreme Agony, the faintings the Cramps and apparent lifeless turns could but excite the Sympathy of the hard-heartedest enemy truly a deplorable and pitiable condition... Doctor Hopson sent for came almost 10 at Nt*

Another example of NG intervening in settling a doctor's bill was described in the following entries made in 1841.

*Oct. 30: I drew up a paper for Peggy Concklin who is and has long been the object of sore affliction and excruciating pain With the Stone in the bladder, the Doctors Bill [Dr. L.B. Wright] with some Medicine was 115 Visits amounting to 118 \$ Brought in a few Days ago. The use of an instrument was almost daily necessary, a great sufferer — this paper Was to try to collect it for her in her Name...*

During the early 19th century, because invasive surgery to remove bladder stones was hazardous, a safer approach employed urethral catheters to crush the stone and then flush out fragments. Although 115 daily catheterizations seems like a remarkable number, probably Peggy's bladder stone, like a ball-valve, caused intermittent obstruction and the catheter pushing up and away provided temporary relief .

So who was Dr. L.B. Wright? During the 1850s advertisements frequently appeared in local newspapers proclaiming his "astounding cures." One that appeared in the *Rockland County Journal* (see HRVH, Jan. 15, 1859) modestly claimed Dr. Wright's Antidote was "the most potent remedy ever yet discovered." The liquid cathartic could be purchased at apothecaries throughout the county, including in Piermont, and cured several dozen conditions: piles, pimpled faces, hysterics, impotency, summer complaints, flatulence and was "a sovereign remedy" for female weakness. And yes, Dr. Wright's Antidote also was claimed to be "triumphant" for "gravel or stone in the bladder." One wonders why with such amazing efficacy that daily house calls and catheterizations for Peggy Conklin were necessary, and it's understandable that her husband was perturbed. Henry was able to pay \$29.18 for "Labour in Hay and Sundry other articles" and \$32 more was raised from the community making \$61.18. But this still was insufficient. As a compromise, Henry Concklin gave Dr. Wright a promissory note of \$18 bringing the total to \$79.18. The rest the Doctor "abated" promising "to Attend Peggy when necessary while he Remained in the neighborhood gratis." Presumably, Dr. Wright didn't plan to spend much more time in that neighborhood.

### **THE PORTLY DR. CORNELISON**

NG may not have appreciated fees charged by the likes of Drs. Cornelison and Hopson, but they were among Rockland County's best and it's worth considering each of their stories in more detail. Abraham Cornelison (1755-1835) of Nyack did his medical training in New York City as a private student of a well-known and rather notorious physician Nicholas Romaine. By special arrangement the Trustees of Queen's College in New Brunswick issued diplomas to Romaine's students and in order to complete his



studies, Cornelison submitted a thesis titled *An Inaugural Dissertation on the Hooping Cough* which was dedicated to his mentor. After describing the clinical features, he concluded, “The cure of this disease is both difficult and tedious...When the contagion is present, and continues to act, we know not how to expel it from the system; neither do we know how to correct its acrimony.” He recommended “antiphlogistic” treatments - e.g. calomel, antimony, opium and Peruvian Bark (quinine) — and cold baths, “to brace the relaxed fiber, and give vigor and energy to debilitated systems.”

After receiving his degree and license in 1798, Abraham Cornelison wasted no time getting to work in Clarkstown (now West Nyack.) One local (Tunis Smith) would recall in his *Remembrance* that, along with eight others, “I was Nocolated for the small Pocks by Doctor Ab. Cornelison” The doctor was always neatly dressed and described as “portly” - in his maturity he weighed more than 300 pounds. According to legend, when he was called to make a house call, Cornelison first would fortify himself with a glass of whiskey - so did many other country doctors and alcoholism seems to have been an occupational hazard.

In 1816 Dr. Cornelison was asked to participate as judge in a “witch trial.” Jane Kaniff, known to the locals as “Naut,” was the widow of a Scottish physician and in her later years treated her neighbors with herbs and various folk remedies she’d learned from her husband. Naut was considered to be eccentric, perhaps because she had a black cat and a talking parrot. A historian (Green) writing in 1866 recalled,

*She was odd in dress, preferring parti-colors of wondrous diversity, queer in fashion of arranging her hair. She was unsocial in a neighborhood where every one knew each other, and morose or erratic when forced to meet people...From her deceased husband she had gathered a smattering of medicine and now, when placed where she could get at the herbs known to her Materia Medica, she made wondrous decoctions with which she treated such as came to her for aid and...with most excellent results.*

Some regarded old Naut as being insane, but others said that she was a witch who was influenced by the Devil. When strange things began to happen - like a cow suddenly producing no milk - it was decided to put the matter to a test. Some favored binding her head and foot and then throwing her into the mill pond to see whether or not she floated. If she drowned it would prove that she was *not* a witch! Cooler heads said that was too drastic and also illegal. Instead she was taken to a nearby grist mill and placed on one side of the great flour weighing scales; an iron-bound, wood-covered family Bible placed on the balancing side. The idea was that if she outweighed the good book, it would seal her fate as a witch. Dr. Cornelison, perhaps disturbed that he was losing potential patients to the witch doctor, agreed to serve as a not-so-impartial judge. It was a good thing for Naut that they didn't place the portly doctor on the other side! Naut Kanif was exonerated and later it was reported that she was allowed to return to the companionship of her cat and parrot. It was the last witch trial in New York State and one of the last in the country.

In 1829 Abraham Cornelison was instrumental in forming Rockland County's first Medical Society and was elected its president. But by then he was approaching the end of his long career and life and a newly arrived member, young Dr. Hopson was just getting started in Tappan Landing (soon to be renamed Piermont) where he would work for more than a half century.

### **DR. HOPSON OF PIERMONT**

James A. Hopson was born in South Carolina in 1809 and for unknown reasons moved at age 19 to New York City. Soon afterward he enrolled in a medical school near Utica (The College of Physicians and Surgeons of the Western District) graduating in 1833. Just when he arrived in the Piermont area is unclear (reports vary between 1828 and 1834, but his credentials weren't filed with the county clerk until 1837.) The New York & Erie Railroad began construction in 1832 on what would be the eastern terminus of a line to Lake Erie and, no doubt, the village's economic prospects seemed bright; the population was growing and Tappan Landing must have seemed like a good place to start a practice. Dr. Hopson's office was located along the "Slote" (ditch) - now known as

Sparkill Creek - and during the town's brief years of prosperity his practice flourished. He was well respected, appointed a trustee of the village and in 1877 served a term as president of the county medical society. (His home, built in 1850 still exists in Sparkill adjacent to Tallman State Park.) At a Flag Day rally in Palisades in 1861, the former Southerner made a fiery speech declaring that the time had come to draw the line on slavery: "Either we have a country great, glorious and free or we shall have anarchy and confusion." Although NG did not attend the event, he noted the doctor's participation in his diary: *Dr. Hopson, of whom it was said, exceeded them all* - a month later at a July 4 ceremony at the Baptist Meeting House, Hopson read the Declaration of Independence aloud. When economic hard times came to Piermont, during the 1860s and 1870s, the local population dwindled to the point that it was difficult to sustain a viable practice. The oldest of Hopson's nine children, Edmund who had followed in his fathers footsteps and shared the practice for several years, after serving in the Civil War, heeded Horace Greeley's advice for young veterans to go west to seek their fortunes. He prospected in the gold fields near Durango, Colorado for a few years but died there of an unknown cause at age 43.

### **NICHOLAS GESNER's LATER YEARS**

Entering his seventies, NG continued to engage in farm labor although diary entries suggest that he was feeling the strain:

June 30, 1837: *I am Very ill with my back and pain through My body, left side. Mostly, Kidney for upwards of 5 Weeks.....I am very much Afflicted with pain in Small of the back, but the seated pain seems in the left kidney.*  
Aug. 21, 1838: *I am ill with pain in the back and round my Whole body.*

Perhaps NG suffered from lumbago (low back pain) or even kidney stones but, typically, within a few days he would be up and back to farming or some stressful activities. In 1841 the still spry 76 year old walked over to Piermont, about six miles roundtrip, to view the new railroad works at the end of the "long pier." During the summer of 1850, by

now in his mid eighties, NG reported feeling *excessively bad and painful....some days little better and then Worse.*

June 11: *I am extremely Afflicted with Rheumatism, Shoulders, hips, legs, can Scarcely stir for 3 or 4 weeks, especially for the latter part of the time,; can't get in or out the bed, walk, stand or Sit without continued Misery.*

June 21: *It darts it pains, then in one place, then another, sometimes by Moving a finger or just moving My hand excites a Miserable pain in the Shoulder, and so of Any other part. My whole body seems as if bruised to pieces, and the least Movement of any place or part gives the Severest acute pain, leaving the parts with a Serious pain sometimes More than a day. At present I cannot and for 10 or 12 days get in the Bed, nor out, dress or undress without Suffering immensely — At night a great sufferer.*

July 9: *I am Wonderfully afflicted, continues painful and suffering.*

That summer NG was visited several times by Dr. James J. Stephens, a well known physician of Tappan (described in Bayley's history of Rockland County as "of the Manor born" but eccentric and "neglectful of personal adornment.")

July 16: *Doctor Stephens the 5th visit, Just in. Gave Another Medicine to Rectify the Stomach, the first Guaia Stopped a While, linament Brandy to be continued.*

(guaia or guaiacum was a popular homeopathic resin.)

July 18: *I continue bad with Rheumatism, Much pain.*

July 20: *I seem some Afternoons better.*

But that was NG's last diary entry. We presume that Dr. Stephens was paid, grudgingly, and Nicholas Gesner lived on for another eight years, dying at age 93 in 1858.

## **MEDICINE IN TRANSITION**

Medical practice in Rockland County was a microcosm of what was happening elsewhere. Early in the 19th century there were bitter rivalries between orthodox

“Regulars” and a melange of distinctly unorthodox “Irregulars. In truth, neither camp could claim superior results — neither were particularly effective — but, at least, the remedies of homeopaths, hydropaths, herbalists et al were less obnoxious than those of the traditionalists. In 1833, Dr. Moses Hasbrouck of Nyack, probably the most well respected doctor in the area and then president of the Rockland County Medical Society, in addressing his colleagues noted, “Our profession presents the remarkable spectacle of an art sinking in public estimation and in the confidence of its own practitioners, while the science on which it is founded is applauded for the conquests it is constantly making.” Nevertheless, he expressed “abiding confidence in the curative matters of medicine,” which even if it didn’t necessarily cure directly, at least “put things in condition for nature to cure.” Dr. Hasbrouck remained devoted to “the true faith” - i.e. aggressive bleeding, emetics and cathartics in “full dosage.” However, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries orthodox medicine was confronted by other challenges than which system worked best. There were dramatic new discoveries - e.g. bacteriology and germ theory, radiology, anesthesia - medical education was transforming to a more science-based model, there was increased enthusiasm for specialization, the locus of care was shifting from home to hospital and all of these effected how medicine was practiced. There continued to be conflicts between traditionalists and forward thinkers and much of this was exemplified by the careers of three later physicians of Palisades and Piermont whom, in closing, I’ll describe as being representative of their times.

### **C.R. AGNEW**

At mid-19th century among several wealthy New Yorkers who purchased summer homes in the area was Dr. Cornelius Rea Agnew (1830-1888.) In 1852, the same year he graduated from Columbia University’s College of Physician and Surgeons, Agnew was appointed surgeon-general of New York State. During the Civil War he was active on Frederick Law Olmsted's United States Sanitary Commission, serving on a hospital ship during the Peninsula Campaign. Immediately after the war he purchased Hillcrest, the former home in Palisades of famed botanist John Torrey and, although his professional work was entirely in New York City, Agnew was active in local affairs. He helped establish the Presbyterian Church, worked to improve the school system and on

July 4 1876 he read the Declaration of Independence at a Liberty Pole ceremony (just as Dr. Hopson did in 1861.)

C.R. Agnew was an early specialist in diseases of the eye and ear and for more than two decades was a national leader in medical education. He was a prolific contributor to medical literature and in an article published in *The New York Medical Journal* ("The Limits of Medical Ethics," Oct. 1, 1882) took on a contentious matter which concerned country practitioners as much as academics like him. When the American Medical Association had organized in 1847, it issued a code of ethics which banned consultation by its members with their "irregular" competitors. But during the 1870s Dr. Agnew led a rebellion by an elite group of New York specialists (some of whom benefited financially from such referrals) who convinced the state medical society to issue its own "new code" of ethics which differed from the AMA's "old code" mainly by deleting the no consultation clause. New York's revision didn't distinguish between different categories of medical care - as it said, "The term physician may be applied to anyone who publicly announces himself to be a practitioner of this art." In response, at the next annual AMA meeting, the New York delegation was denied participation which led to further bickering among themselves. Dr. Agnew insisted that he was conservative and of "the old school" and argued that orthodox doctors understand the "fallacies of homeopathy and evils of quackery." However, he viewed alternative systems of practice to be "more an error than a sin." He argued that doctors should be permitted to follow their own consciences without being held to binding codes: "Leave members of a liberal profession free to go as advocates of truth wherever called....If a patient in the hands of an ignorant pretender, under whatever trademark, calls in consultation a competent practitioner, it is a step in the right direction." In C.D. Agnew's high-minded opinion, such a patient would benefit from the services of enlightened and properly motivated physicians - of course, specialists like him also would benefit. (For more on this see John Harley Warner, "The 1880 Rebellion Against the AMA Code of Ethics" in *The American Medical Ethics Revolution*, ed. Robert Baker, JHU Press 1999.)

## **CUSHMAN HAAGENSEN**

In 1941, some eight decades after C.R. Agnew came to Palisades, another celebrated physician C.D. Haagensen (1900-1990) moved there with his family. Like Agnew his main theater of operations was Columbia-Presbyterian, but sometimes he provided care for his neighbors - notably Mary Lawrence Tonetti whom he attended during her final days in 1945 when she was dying of leukemia in her home in Sneden's Landing.

Born in North Dakota of Norwegian stock and the son of a country doctor, Cushman graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1925. After completing an internship at Boston City Hospital, he contracted tuberculosis and took the conventional three year "rest cure." The time was well spent. Not only did his lungs improve, but this turned out to be a most productive period: the first year mostly he rested and read; feeling better, the second year, he took the sea air as doctor on a cruise ship. On one trip he spotted a comely young woman returning home after a visit to Europe and arranged to have her seated at his dining table — by the end of the voyage they were engaged. Much of the third year, the young marrieds spent in Europe based at a villa in Florence. In 1929, refreshed and with his intellectual horizons expanded, Cushman reentered medicine and three years later began a lifetime of work at Columbia P&S and affiliated hospitals.

Cushman Haagensen was such a monumental figure that a brief discussion of his surgical career seems appropriate. He was a strong proponent of radical mastectomy for breast cancer, an approach developed during the 1880s by famed Johns Hopkins surgeon William Halsted. Some fifty years later Haagensen assumed Halsted's mantle and, in time, was called "the first breast specialist." When his textbook *Diseases of the Breast* appeared in 1956 it became a classic - and by the time the the third edition appeared, grown to more than one thousand pages, the author was age 86! The premise of radical mastectomy was that every cancer cell must be removed if "cure" is to be achieved. After nearly a half century personally following more than a thousand patients, Dr. Haagensen maintained that a woman who opts for less "is risking her life." Like Halsted, Haagensen insisted on meticulous technique, some described it as elegant. It was necessary to take the time "to do it right" meaning a minimum of five

hours, sometimes much longer and nurses and surgical assistants dreaded the exhausting procedures. In time, resistance grew against radical mastectomy which many surgeons considered unnecessary, disfiguring and insensitive to psychological trauma experienced by patients. George “Barney” Crile, Jr. of the Cleveland Clinic, a leader of the opposition, promoted simple mastectomy or lumpectomy which Dr. Haagensen characterized as “human experimentation.” A surgeon who performs these lesser approaches “is nothing less than a coward.”

Cushman Haagensen was an outspoken perfectionist who clung to his beliefs. He continued to see patients into his eighties, charging only \$25 per office visit regardless of the patient’s ability to pay. Many of his patients were devoted to him; so were many of the next generation of physicians. As one former pathology resident recalled, “He kept us on our toes.” Although Dr. Haagensen was authoritarian, a cult of personality evolved among young surgeons for whom he represented the finest traditions of their field; a reincarnation of Halsted himself. (For more on this, see Barron Lerner’s *The Breast Cancer Wars*, 2001.)

During the 1970s controversy raged about the significance of so-called ductal and lobular carcinoma in situ. The prevailing belief was that these were dangerous lesions that warranted breast amputation. Based on their own extensive experience, Dr. Haagensen and some of his colleagues at Columbia argued that the name for the condition was “misleading and unfortunate” because it implied that the lesion was cancerous and warranted breast amputation. In 1978 they suggested a more appropriate term “benign pathological-clinical entity” for which the best approach was watchful waiting. In 2015 the controversy about carcinoma-in-situ continues, but current data suggests that the scales are tipping in favor of Cushman Haagensen’s more conservative approach.

But this “old school” doctor could be prescient in areas that had nothing to do with breast disease. Shortly after the Haagensens moved to Palisades, Cushman published a book *A Hundred Years of Medicine*. Although it revealed an impressive range of



knowledge it was a rather conventional recitation of famous events, but the book's last chapter, called "The Doctor's Dilemma," addressed societal challenges during the late 1930s which remain relevant today. Despite objections from the AMA, in 1927 an independently funded study group, the Committee on the Costs of Medical Care, was formed to investigate the medical expenses of American families. After several years of deliberation they concluded that group practice and group payment was the best way to go. AMA spokesman Morris Fishbein called the report "an incitement to revolution" and the battle raged throughout the 1930s. Because certain features of the proposed plan involved government involvement, the president of New Jersey's medical society warned that "federalized medicine" would lead to "federalization of all our economic and social life." What we got was social security and disability insurance during the New Deal; then voluntary Blue Cross-Blue Shield plans; later Medicare and Medicaid and, still later, "Obamacare."

Cushman Haagensen had a different perspective from the majority of his medical colleagues. His daughter Alice Gerard suggests it may have reflected his early experiences in Europe and the influence of English friends. What follows is paraphrased from the last chapter of his book which was published in 1943.

*The doctors' dilemma today is how best to utilize our vast modern armamentarium of medical knowledge for the benefit of society....Medical care costs so much that most of the people cannot buy it. Our modern medical knowledge, which can so often accomplish what in a previous century would be regarded as miraculous, is only partly used....While physicians ponder their modern dilemma, a new voice is heard. It is the social consciousness of a new individual right, the right to adequate medical care....The health of every individual is a social concern and responsibility...The insurance principle is beyond doubt the best way of meeting the cost of medical care because it makes saving money for this purpose compulsory and because it distributes among the many who are insured the excessive and fortuitous burden of large medical expense that falls upon the few....Freedom from lack of adequate medical care*

*will be, it is hoped, one of the fundamental freedoms of our future democracy....A way of lowering the cost of medical care, as well as of improving the quality, is for physicians to form groups...organized in close associations with, if not actually within the walls of a good hospital, for we have seen that the hospital is the workshop of the modern physician....The spirit of medicine goes beyond shallow economic distinctions. It is the stuff of life itself that physicians deal with - and this is too precious a material to be given or taken away on a monetary basis. It is because most people know this that there is hope that they will one day succeed in making adequate medical care available for everyone.*

Cushman Haagensen's wise voice from the past anticipated medical matters that continue to challenge today. The more things change, the more they are the same. One thing is certain though - Palisades and Piermont were populated by some colorful characters.