

# WILSON MUSEUM BULLETIN

Spring 1997

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## JOSEPH LOWE STEVENS

One of the most interesting and comprehensive collections in the museum's archives is that of Dr. Joseph Stevens, a physician who served the families of Penobscot Bay for nearly sixty years. His books, diaries, letters and papers offer a glimpse into the past when doctors, indeed, made house calls, traveling on foot, horseback, buggy or boat, in all kinds of weather.

Joseph Lowe Stevens, the eldest of six children, was born in Gloucester, August 15, 1790, to Zachariah and Elizabeth Lowe Stevens. At age twelve, he was sent to Phillips Academy, Andover, MA., to be fitted for college, then graduated from Harvard College in 1810 and from Harvard Medical School in 1814. In March, 1814, he served as ship's doctor, first, on the privateer *Orlando* then, out of Newport, on the brig *Yankee*. The latter vessel when the war closed was said to have been the most successful of all American cruisers. Her prizes numbered forty, of which thirty-four were ships or brigs; that is, of the larger classes of merchantmen then used. The estimated value of themselves and cargoes 3,000,000 is to be received with reserve. [Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812. Alfred T. Mahan. 1903.] The number of British war ships along the American coast made this fifth trip for the *Yankee* especially risky and although eight prizes were taken, only the Portuguese ship *San Jose Indiano* reached an American port. With her cargo she sold for over a half million dollars. Dr Stevens' account of this three-month cruise was made in a small pocket almanack and, in 1919, it was published in the *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections*. Vol. XII. No. 3 - the original is among the Stevens' papers in the museum. With his small share of the prize money he purchased a gold pocket watch for \$150.

On March 25, 1815, Dr. Stevens paid \$50.00 for passage from Boston to New Orleans on the ship *Marmion*. Receipts show he boarded first with E. Clark and then with Thomas Winns, returning some time in late summer or early fall. A Harvard classmate wrote -

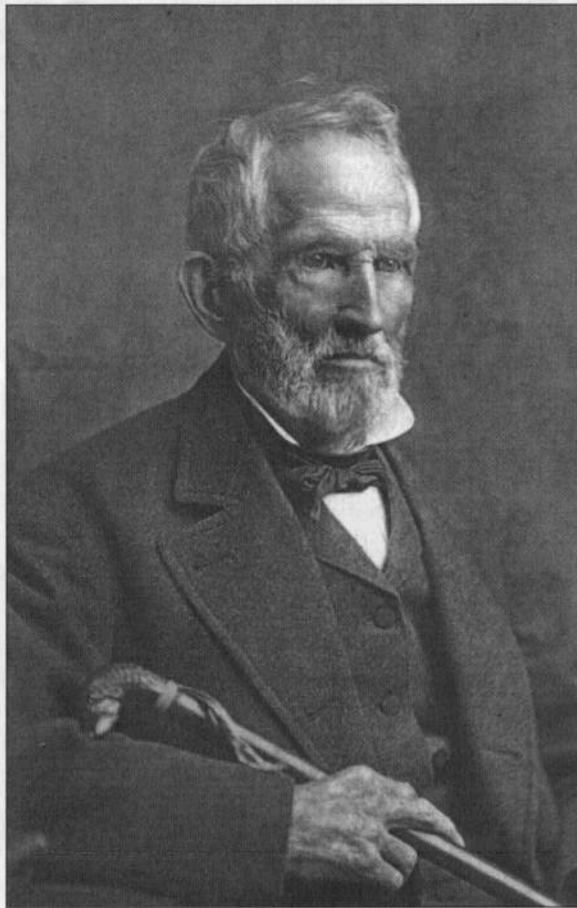
*Castine Oct. 28, 1815. -*

*Friend Stevens,*

*After leaving you at Boston, I took passage on board a packet & returned to Duxbury, where I stayed until day after the Gale of 22<sup>d</sup> Ult. then having settled my affairs . . . took passage again on board sloop, Samuel, for Bath, Maine, tuesday eve. Next morn. strong wind a head, expected to call at your port, but all the forenoon, made Portsmouth harbor next morn. went up to town, saw Elliott in high glee and out of business. the people have grown so abominable healthy doctors must starve, he told me he intended going to the Ohio &c. Set sail again and arrived at Bath next day. Stayed thru day, became acquainted Doct. Holbrook, a son of Harvard as you know - met with Sprague in search of litigation, we went into one party fitted up in great style, Saw your friend Elwell, now keeping store in Bath, he talked much of you and expressed a deep regret that you was not with us. you certainly would have enjoyed it. The Bath ladies are very beautiful -*

*Sprague and I went up the Kennebec, in company, as high as Watervill, by stage, seventy miles from the sea, stoped several days in Hollowell - was at a stylish party at Doct. Page's. The Doct. is a fine man, has become rich, lives in great style, has a handsome daughter, a son in Colege, who was then at home.*

*The Doct. talked much about Andover, the old shop &c and inquired with particular interest about Susan asking if she had yet got married. - On my return to Bath, Doct. Holbrook gave me a letter, left by a gentlemen from this town, stating that Doct. Peck [a fellow boarder with Dr. Stevens while*



Joseph Lowe Stevens (1790-1879)

attending lectures at Harvard] was about to leave, and giving me an invitation to succeed him. I came immediately here & found that he had actually left. His departure was sudden, unexpected and somewhat [torn]table, his prospects I think were good; he acknowledged that his charges the last year would amount to nine hundred dollars. Peck has married a wife, from Ellsworth, the place where he gone, and therefore could not stay - is the best explanation, perhaps. I shall take the advantage of his quick departure, and am determined to take up winter quarters in Fort Castine.

Last Monday Major General Brown and unit were here to visit this port: it is probable from the report, which he will make to Congress that Castine will be made strong military depot. I had the pleasure of spending an eve. with him. He spoke of Gale in very high terms; said that he was the first Surgeon in the army, would be station in future at Detroit.

*I have been up the Penobscot as high Bangor and much pleased with Maine in general and Castine in particular - it is one of the most charming places in point of local situation I ever beheld. If you are out of business get on board a coaster at Boston and you would be here in eight and forty hours.*

*No more at Present -  
Moses Gage -*

Three years later Dr. Gage wrote to Joseph who was then practicing in Warren, ME -

*Castine 3. February, 1819 -  
My old friend Stevens,*

*I expect ere this my friend, Mr. [Samuel] Upton, whom you saw when here, has informed you of my present indisposition, and determination, in consequence of it, to voyage to the south. If not, know by this that a disease of the lungs has got fast hold of me. Therefore I wish you to take my place. It is a better one than where you are - If you come stop at this house, Mr. Lakemans - and use my room, books and medicine as if you own. -*

*Your humble servant . . .*

And two days later -  
*Castine 5, February, 1819*

*Dear Jo.  
I received your letter of the 2. inst. last evening. You probably will receive mine of the 3. this eve. . . .*

*. . . I am induced, from motives of prudence and safety, and a hope of obtaining relief in a southern atmosphere, to voyage to the South.*

*To execute this project I have everything in readiness, but wind and weather.*

*It is my wish, and the wish of the good people of this place, that you would come here and supply my place, at least to make them a visit, and judge for your self. . . .*

*For six months prior to my confinement my charges will amount to ten dollars per day. My business was attending daily. In fact - attending to too much business is the cause, my dear friend, of my present ill health. I am sure you can come here and realise five dollars per day the first year. You would take all my practice, at once, on the peninsula. And you know very well it would be gradually extending into the country and islands. . . .*

*. . . With regard to my return and stay in this place in future, it is extremely equivocal. If I find a*

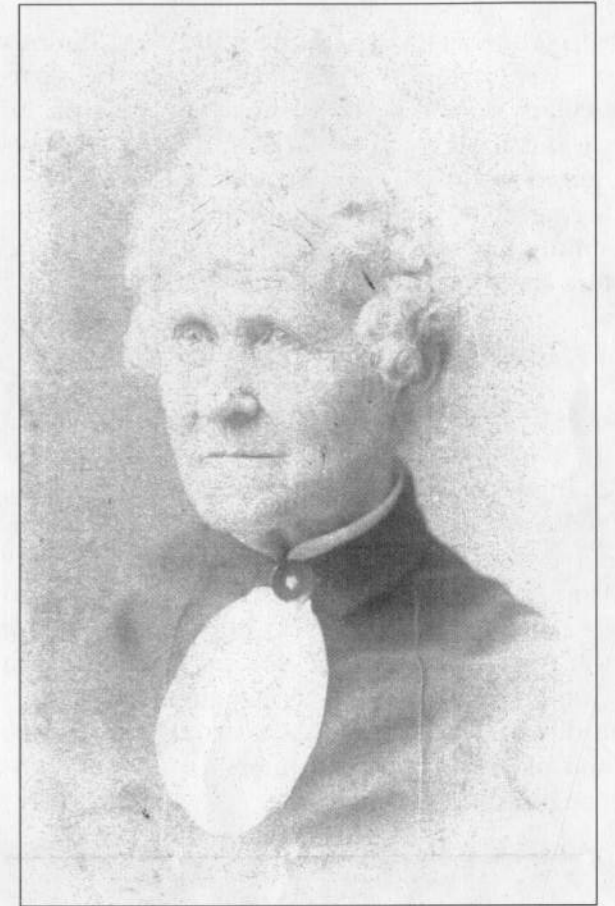
*southern climate agrees with me better than another, I shall not. Provided I do return, it, in my opinion it would be per your interest to stay - There is more business than two can attend to - Dr. Mann is now about 65. and exceeding broken - Five years, probably, will terminate his active life . . .*

Joseph went to Castine, found the situation agreeable and, after settling affairs in Warren, returned on March 2. Years later he wrote - *It was a damp, snowy day - came over from Belfast [with Capt. Isaiah Skinner] in the Packet, & took up quarters at Mrs. Lakeman's - then a boarding house where put up, usually, many of the people attending Court - Lawyers &c. My first patient was Mr. Robert Mc.Farland [a blacksmith and Constable] who died in 1840 . . .*

On July 5, 1821, Joseph married Dorothy Little, daughter of Major Otis and Dorothy Perkins Little. The house he bought was the first to be built on the west side of upper Main and on land originally belonging to Dorothy's grandfather Joseph Perkins. It was the same house advertised in the *Eagle Oct. 9, 1810 - That elegant and convenient two story house lately owned by Nathaniel Willson, together with a Lot of Land, one hundred feet square, situated on Main Street, in Castine. - Said House is completely finished, and was built in the summer of 1808.* Unfortunately, for Mr. Willson, the home did not sell before Boston creditors assumed title. It was sold, in 1812, with a parcel of land lying on Marsh's Island, now Old Town, for the total sum of \$4,000. The Castine property then was sold to Mason Shaw, in 1816, for \$450, who, in turn, sold it to the doctor on May 16, 1821, for \$2,000.

Dr. Stevens recorded that year in his weather journal - *May 30. Cherry trees in front of the door opening their blossoms - plumb tree same - apple trees in warm situation. Polyanthus in full bloom.*

The doctor's marriage settled him comfortably in a community where he would reside for the remainder of his life, making occasional trips south and west to attend to family affairs and to visit with family and friends. This arrangement was not entirely satisfactory to his mother. She wrote - *Gloucester March 25<sup>th</sup> 1821 . . . John was to see us last week he is well, has never had so much business as they now have their prospects are very pleasing Lakeman came with him John says he was much*



Dorothy Little Stevens (1802-1885)

*pleased with Dorothy found her quite sochiel I want to see her more . . . if it was not more than two or three Days journey I should visit you the coming season - you must write often to make amends for your settling so far distance . . .*

The Stevenses had nine children whom we will meet as we continue this study into the life of one of Castine's early physicians.

End notes

Dr. Moses Gage set up practice in Havana. He visited Castine, in 1921, for two to three months and shortly after returning to Havana died at the age of thirty-one.

Dr. Oliver Mann came to Castine in 1786 - he died in 1832, aged seventy-six.

The Lakeman inn was sold to Thomas Cobb for use as a private home soon after the Stevenses' marriage. It was sold, in 1875, to become the Acadian Hotel and, in 1943, was torn down. The lot remains empty today.

The Stevenses' home still stands, situated on the southern corner of Stevens Lane and Main Street.



Eleanor Fairley (1905-1997)

The society is grateful for the contributions of Eleanor Fairley. A project for which she is particularly remembered is the assemblage of the various tools for the Blacksmith Shop. This required months of cleaning, researching and cataloging. The society's fully-equipped, working smithy has been enjoyed by thousands of visitors since her work was completed in 1971.

Dorothy Connor Farnham (1912-1997)

Dorothy Farnham worked for the society over a sixteen year period, assisting the director during a time when the society underwent change and expansion. Later, needing to be home to care for her husband, she continued to serve the museum as trustee/council member from 1973 until this past year. She gave several items to the museum. On permanent exhibit: the portrait of her grandfather Capt. William Conner, Jr. who sailed clipper ships to the West Indies in the early 1800s; the drum belonging to and played by Capt. Conners' brother John at hangings in Fort George.

Philip Perkins (1909-1996)

As a retired history teacher, Philip Perkins returned to his native town in the early 1980s, spending his remaining years absorbed in the rich history of Castine. The museum was privileged to have him as a trustee during most of those years, and since 1993, serving as vice-president. He always took great interest in the society's activities and his constant research frequently resulted in additions to the museum's files.

Correction noted:

*Wilson Museum Bulletin*, Vol. 4. No. 7.

Hannah Bond Zimmerman, Australia, kindly wrote that the new home to which John Shepherd took his bride in 1896, is the home of the late Phil Perkins, Perkins Street, rather than the home of Joan Torno. The error is solely the curator's mistake as the society's records confirm this fact.

Wilson Museum: daily except Monday, 2 to 5 P.M., May 27 - September 30.

John Perkins House, Blacksmith Shop, Hearse House: Sunday & Wednesday, 2 to 5 P.M., July -August



Castine, Maine 04421