

# A Journey Through Time

## The **TIMES** Chronicle

Columnist Linda Reno is a historian and genealogist specializing in Southern Maryland history. Mrs. Reno is a member of the St. Mary's County Historical Society, St. Mary's County Genealogical Society, Charles County Genealogical Society, Maryland Historical Society and the Maryland Genealogical Society. She has authored many books and articles on local history. We hope you will enjoy these articles and welcome your comments and suggestions for future subjects.

By Linda Reno  
Contributing Writer

Stop, right now and take a few moments to enjoy the sight and yes, even the sounds, of your children. Then tonight get on your knees and thank God that you were given these gifts and promise him that you will do everything in your power to protect them--even if it hurts them a little bit sometimes.

School has just started and we'll begin hearing about children being denied admission to school because they haven't been immunized. There's only one reason for this. It's called ignorance.

Four little footstones, all in a row, lie at Christ Church in Chaptico. They mark the burial places of the children of Lewis Davis and his wife, Molly Love. In little over a month, this couple lost four of their six children to diphtheria. The Davis home, once filled with the laughter and gaiety that only little children can bring, was now the scene of sorrow and tears. Anna Mae (Herriman) Richardson, a granddaughter of Lewis and Molly, once told me that Molly never got over the deaths of these children. Who would?

Diphtheria, a highly contagious disease, caused death by suffocation or through damage to the heart or kidneys. The prevailing treatment at that time was kerosene poured on a cloth and tied around the patient's neck—the equivalent of lighting a forest fire with a garden hose.

The first successful vaccine for diphtheria was not developed until 1913 and it would be another 10 years before deaths began to significantly decline. The DPT shot protects today's children not only but diphtheria but pertussis (whooping cough) and tetanus (lockjaw).

Your children receive a number of different shots, all important to their well-being and indeed, their lives. Medical science has made huge advances over the years and some diseases or injuries that meant almost certain death in earlier years are just about unheard of today. We still hear about a few of them, but they're treatable. Let's look at a couple of others.

"On Friday Night the 18th Instant, expired in the midst of inexpressible Tortures, in St. Mary's County, Mr. John Hoskins, a Man of about 45 or 50 Years of Age, who about 10 Weeks before was Bit in the Leg by a Mad Dog. The Wounds, which were considerable, healed in a small

Time, and no Regard was paid to the Consequences, until the Hydrophobia had begun to shew itself. On Thursday Evening some Assistance was called in, and Dr. James's Mercurial Medicines were administered; but before their Effects could be fairly produced, Death put an End to his Miseries. At the Intervals between his Convulsions, he was perfectly sensible, and begged to be so secured as that he might not do any Person an Injury." (Maryland Gazette, May 31, 1764).

A cure for this dreaded disease began about 1885 with Dr. Louis Pasteur. You don't get inoculated for hydrophobia (rabies), but if bitten by a rabid animal, there is now help.

In 1910, a young St. Mary's County boy died of polio. The Baltimore Sun reported that Dr. William Baltzell Burch had diagnosed four children with infantile paralysis. One had already died and three others, the children of Colton Yates, well seriously ill. The thought was that Mr. Yates had taken the infection to his home in his clothing.

The source of the infection was believed to have come from the blood of a sick sheep, "which was bled by Colton Yates, a colored farmhand, on September 18. Permeating the air, the germs of the malady attacked four-year-old Benjamin Greenwell, son of the late Senator J. J. Greenwell, of St. Mary's county." The child became ill 12 days after the bleeding of the sheep.

Dr. Burch said that he had soon learned of the sheep being sick with a "peculiar" disease and had tried to make an examination of the sheep's carcass, but the buzzards had picked its bones clean.

The doctor had determined that Ben Greenwell had played around the spot where the sheep had been bled, and "breathed the germs into his lungs." He died after just four days "the shortest illness from this malady I have ever known in 21 years' experience. His heart was paralyzed, though he remained conscious until the end." After treating the other children, Dr. Burch directed that the homes of the Greenwell and Yates families be disinfected with formaldehyde. He said that he thought the Yates children would recover—although one little girl's arms and legs were then paralyzed.

"As for the treatment, we usually give strychnine. We have also been giving quinine. Massage seems to give some relief, while most of the drugs have been proved to be useless."

\*According to Dr. Robert Bauer, infection would have occurred by physical contact with the sheep's remains or blood vs. air.



Davis Children footstones, Christ Church.

Photo Courtesy of Nathan Mueller

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