

Chatham's Early Medical Care Was Primitive but Dedicated

by Fred J. Vatter
2008

The earliest settlers in Chatham were on their own as far as the treatment of illness and injuries was concerned. They relied on traditional home remedies passed down through the families, often using herbal remedies. Many of the latter were learned from the Native Americans and the enslaved Africans, who used traditional folk remedies with sometimes amazing effectiveness.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, North Carolinians who aspired to become physicians usually received a medical education through an apprenticeship to one of the few experienced, older physicians. Generally, the latter had received their own medical education in locations such as London, Edinburgh, Utrecht, Basil, Berlin or in later years from one of the pioneer American medical schools in Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, S.C., or Louisville, Kentucky.

The North Carolina Register for the year 1823 lists six physicians residing in Chatham: Francis Farrell, William H. Strong, John Degraffinreidt, Thomas H. E. Degraffinreidt, Frederick Hill and J. H. Hawkins. By 1850 a Chatham County Census listed 20 physicians and 2 medical students as county residents.

Fred J. Vatter is a past president of the Chatham Historical Society, an organization for which he has also served as a board member and museum curator.