

Excerpted/adapted from...

Social and Industrial Life in Early Settlements (<http://www.wvculture.org/history/settlement/settlementlife.html>)

Which was...

Extracted from *West Virginia and Its People*,
by Thomas Miller and Hu Maxwell (published 1913)
pages 241-263

The period covered by this chapter extends from the time of the first settlements by white men in Western Virginia down to about the close of the Mexican war (1848). The old period and its customs passed away with the invention of the grain reaper. That epoch-making machine appeared in the grain fields about 1840. The employment of gunpowder in warfare did not so quickly change the tactics of battle, as the reaper changed the methods of agriculture.

In the earliest period of settlement, practically every man was a farmer; by 1848 about four out of five supported themselves by cultivating the soil. Though farmers most of the year, many of them were jacks of all trades part of the time. They could turn their hands to pretty much anything that might come up in the course of their daily affairs. Many things needed doing even in the simple lives of our ancestors who lived among the hills and valleys of Western Virginia. The average man was competent to do several kinds of work and he thought nothing strange of it. He tilled his few acres. He tanned leather for the winter shoes and made the shoes, after having manufactured the thread and the wax for sewing. He prepared the flax and the wool for the loom, and frequently wove the cloth. He did simple blacksmithing and rude carpentering; carved dishes and bowls from blocks of wood; laid out roads, such as they were, and built them; served as juryman, constable, or justice of the peace.



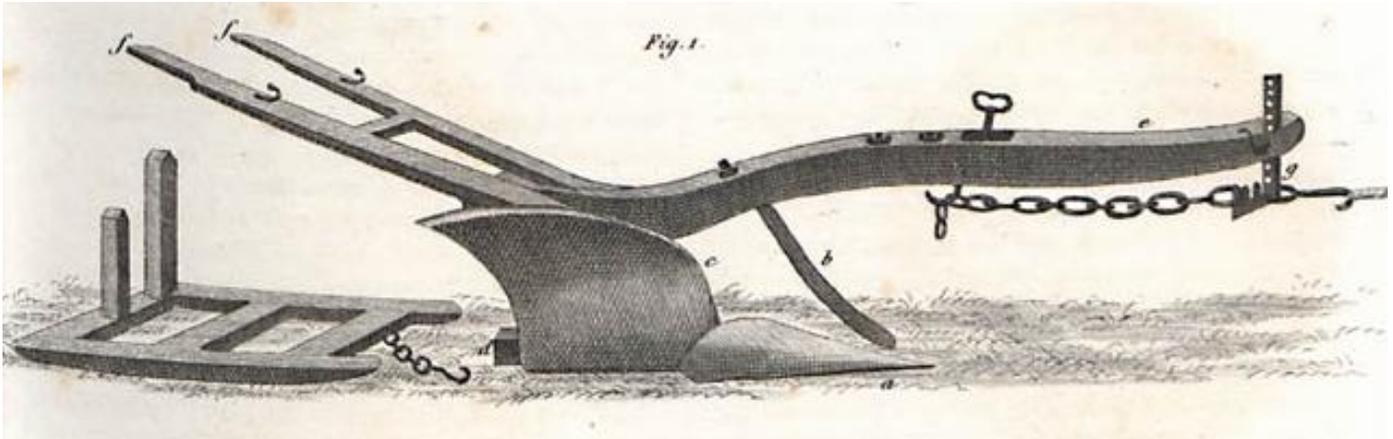
At the close of the eighteenth century the farmers of Western Virginia were using tools differing little from those with which the Egyptians tilled the soil four thousand years ago. It is amazing that the world should have stood still so long in the matter of agriculture. From century to century men continued to use the same clumsy implements. Scarcely an invention that had any effect upon the mode of cultivating and harvesting crops was made during ages. Men did not even learn to put horses and cattle to work, except in a few ways. Practically all that was done on the farm was accomplished by hand labor, and much of that does not seem to have been done in an intelligent manner. If anyone thought of cutting hay or grain by horsepower, nothing came of the thought.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century four-fifths of the people of the United States lived on farms, and at an earlier period the proportion was still higher. They had to live on farms in order to live at all. The work of four-fifths was necessary to raise enough grain to feed the other fifth who followed other occupations. The land was as fertile a hundred years ago as it is now, but with the old-fashioned hand tools it was simply impossible to produce a surplus of food. Under such conditions there could be no factories such as the country now has, because the laborers could not be fed. The farmers could not produce a surplus for that purpose, and other industries stood still because agriculture could not take a forward step. It was not, as some suppose, a question of transportation. Railroads were built before the reaper was invented, but the railroads did not much increase the food supply, for the limit of hand production had been reached. In 1839 the production of wheat in the United States was only five bushels per person. It has been shown that in 1830 three hours of a man's labor was required to produce one bushel of wheat. Ten minutes of labor does it now (1913). The difference is due to improvement in machines, not improvements in men. A man with a sickle could harvest only from three to five acres of grain in a season. Most grains had to be cut quickly or they would waste in the field.

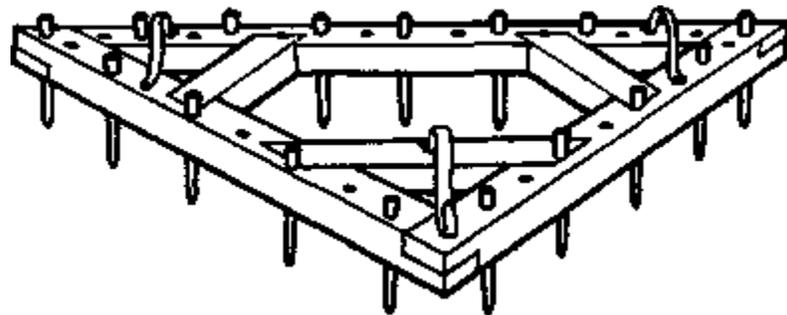
THE CORN CROP

Corn was the first crop raised in this region. It was surer than wheat, and was produced with less labor. The rank weeds of newly cleared ground could be controlled more in a growing crop of corn than in almost anything else. More was grown to the acre, it was easier to prepare for food, and it went farther.

The Plow - Prior to the first cast iron plow which made its appearance about 1825, the majority of plows had wooden mold boards. All had iron points and most had other metal trimmings on parts where the wear was greatest. The plow did poor work, stirring rather than turning the ground. A man and a boy could plow about an acre a day. The boy's part of the operation consisted in walking beside the plow, and every several yards using a wooden paddle to scrape the dirt from the wooden mold board and share.



Harrows - The pioneers used three or more types of harrows to smooth their ground after they plowed it.



The "A harrow" was the most advanced in point of workmanship. It was so named because it was the shape of the letter "A," was made of three pieces of wood formed in a triangle, and was dragged point forward by horses or oxen. The teeth were wooden pins a foot or more in length. Where the ground was mellow and fairly free from rocks the teeth wore well, and sufficed to harrow fifteen or twenty acres, which was more than the annual crop land of most farmers a hundred years ago in Western Virginia, particularly in the mountain parts of it. In stony ground the harrow's wooden teeth wore down in a day or two, but it was only the work of an hour or so to make and insert a new set.

Another kind of harrow consisted of a log, called a drag, which was drawn broadside across the plowed ground to crush the clods. A third harrow, more rustic than the others, was a bush, preferably a crabapple, dragged by horses over the plowed land.

Cutting, Husking, Shelling - If a farmer were fortunate enough to produce a crop of corn, it had to be cut from the stalk and husked, all by hand.

Then it had to be "shelled", that is, the kernels removed from the cob. One type of sheller was a piece of a hollow tree trunk, the size of a barrel, which was partly filled with ears of corn. An ax was used to pound the grains from the cob. A man could shell and clean about twenty bushels a day.

Hand Corn Mills - When the backwoodsman had raised, husked, and shelled his corn, the process of making it into bread, mush, or hominy was not yet complete. The dried kernels still had to be made into meal.



This might be done by pounding in a large wooden mortar and pestle. Well-to-do families might have a hand mill in which meal was ground with circular stones of about the circumference of a bicycle wheel, and four inches thick. A hand grip was attached to the upper stone, and the operator turned it slowly round, while the under stone was stationary.

The Hay Crop – In order to keep large animals such as horses, cattle, or goats alive through the winter, some sort of storable feed was needed. Most often this was hay, or dried grasses. The first natural meadows in Western Virginia were small and rough, and coarse wild grasses prevailed in many of them. Timothy grass made its appearance about 1750, and was a native of America. It became the leading forage plant next to corn fodder; but it had to be planted in ground that had been plowed and harrowed. Then the hay crop had to be cut and gathered.

The Scythe - In one form or another the scythe is a very old tool. It was originally a large sickle with a long handle, and the name as we have it now is a modification of the word sickle. The scythe was for cutting grass, the sickle for grain, though grain could very well be mowed with the scythe, and it was often done. A whetstone renewed the edge until it became too dull to be longer sharpened in that way, and the blade was then taken to a blacksmith shop, and the edge was beaten thin so that a whetstone would again take hold of it.



The Pitchfork – Pitchforks were used for moving and stacking the hay.



The Wooden Horserake - Prior to the War of 1812 it does not appear that horses were employed to rake hay in Western Virginia. Handrakes and pitchforks met the demand. They were considered sufficient, for everything then moved slowly. A man with a scythe could mow an acre a day and another man with rake and fork could gather it into heaps called shocks or doodles. The work moved along in the same old way that it had always moved, and no one seemed to think that a horse might drag a large rake and do the work ten times as fast. The earliest horserakes in Western Virginia appeared about 1818. The teeth of the horserakes were two or three feet long, made of stout hickory or locust pickets. Some rakes had two sets of teeth, and when one set were full of hay they were ingeniously dumped by turning the rake half over, thereby putting the other set of teeth in front. The idea of mounting the rake on wheels did not occur to anyone until a good many years later. The implement did good work on smooth ground, but if the surface was bumpy, the teeth were prone to dig into the ground and dump the hay at the wrong time. The spring tooth rake on wheels sent the wooden implement to its eternal rest.

THE SMALL GRAINS

Wheat, oats, barley, rye and buckwheat were called small grain to distinguish them from corn, which was the main crop. Oats and wheat were most abundant. Buckwheat was never a general crop in West Virginia. It thrives in some localities, but meets poor success in others.

The Grain Cradle - The cradle was the first noted improvement in grain harvesting machinery in four thousand years. With it a man could cut from three to six acres a day, and it was greatly superior to the ordinary sickle.

The cradle appeared in Western Virginia about 1800. It was made wholly of wood, except the scythe blade which did the cutting. The handle might be any one of many woods, but the fingers were usually of hickory. They were five long, slender, springy, curved pieces whose function was to collect the stalks of grain as they were cut and lay them in a swath to be raked and bound. The cradle is much heavier than a scythe, and more physical exertion is necessary in operating it.

Considering how great an improvement the cradle was upon what went before, its period of usefulness was remarkably short. Scarcely had it taken possession of the grain fields when the reaper drove it out. The cradle held its place about fifty years. Of course, it did not go out at one time everywhere. It held longer in West Virginia than in less mountainous regions, because the reaper came in slowly. On steep and rough ground, and there is a great deal of that kind in West Virginia, cradles cut the grain well into the 1900s.



The Flail – Grains were often threshed with hand flails on the barn floor.



HOME INDUSTRIES

The Western Virginians of a century ago, and prior to that period, made little attempt to manufacture commodities for sale. In the first place, they were farmers by necessity, and had no time for side lines; and there was no market where they could sell factory products. But though they cannot be called manufacturers, they made many articles, and did it well. They produced what they needed for themselves, but all was homemade. The cabin and shop were all the factories they had, and at odd times they worked at other callings than farming. There were a few persons who lived by selling what they manufactured. They were, in the larger villages, the tanners, shoemakers, blacksmiths, weavers, tailors; but they were few and their trade was generally limited to their immediate neighbors. In a country where most of the people are jacks of all trades there is not much call for workers at single trades. So it was in pioneer Western Virginia.

Brooms - After the cabins were built, the problem of keeping them clean presented itself. Brooms were needed. When the early German colonists of the upper South Branch valley collected the soft and slender branches of white cedar from the cliffs overhanging the river, and tied the branches in bundles for brooms, they were the earliest users of that article in the region, as far as records go. The twig broom was peculiarly adapted for use in cabins with rough timber floors, or none at all, as most were in this state one hundred and seventy-five years ago. A modern broom would be torn to pieces by a few sweepings of such a cabin.

The corn husk broom came and went, and early records scarcely mention it in Western Virginia. It could not have been much used. It was made by tying a bundle of corn husks tightly to a handle.

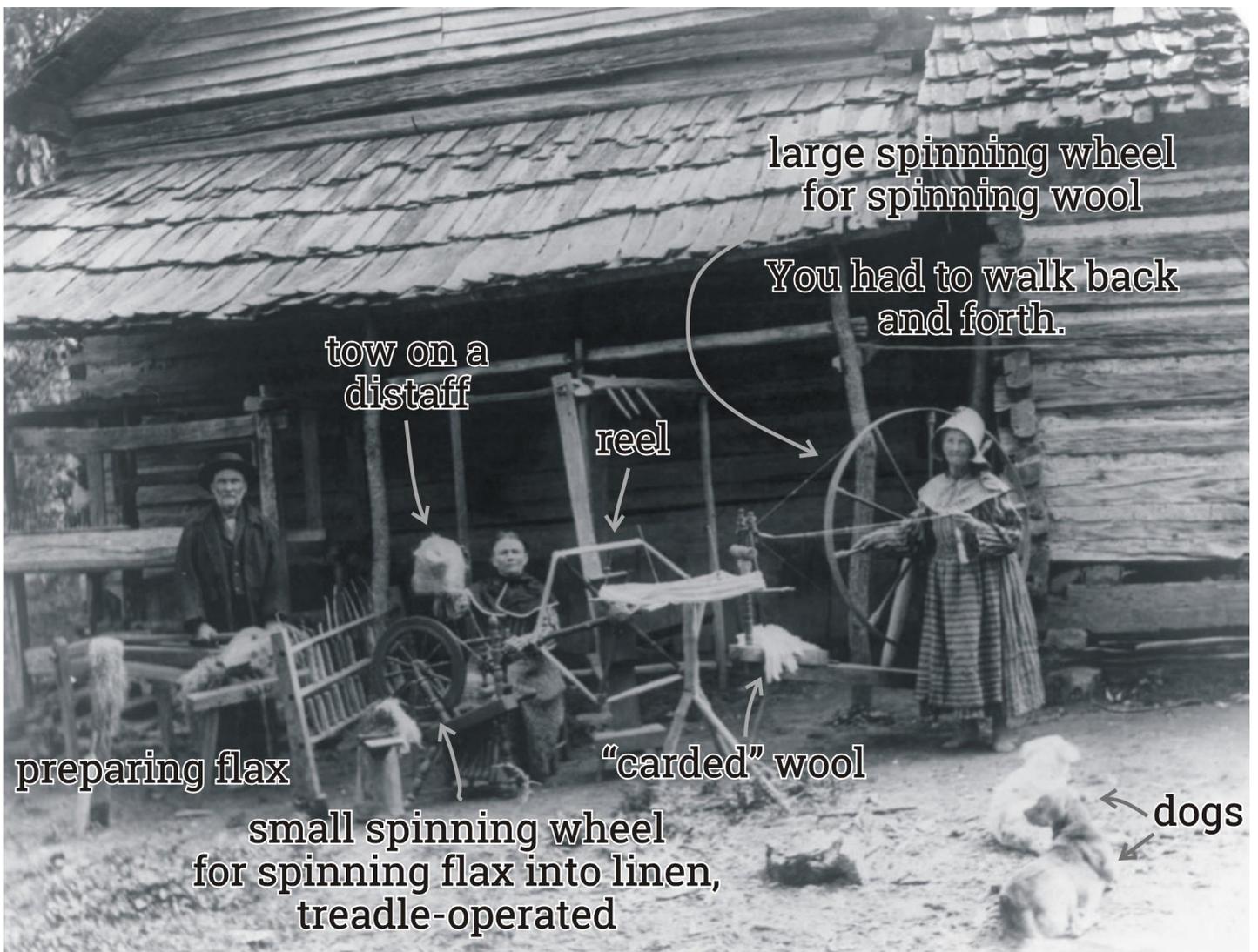


Then came the split broom. It was probably as early in Western Virginia as any of the others, for no one knows when the first ones were made. It is certain that it is not an American invention, but it reached its greatest development here, and the mountaineers of West Virginia made the best from hickory saplings. A hickory sapling three inches or less in diameter is selected for the split broom. It must be free from knots and blemishes for a distance of five feet. The split broom maker knew good hickory when he saw it. He cut his sapling and peeled it in the woods with his ax, carried the piece home to complete the work by his fireside that evening, or when the first stormy day kept him indoors. Except for a string tied around it, the entire broom, including the handle, was of one piece of wood.

Spinning Wheels - Two kinds of spinning wheels prepared the yarn and thread for cloth on the frontiers, the large and the small. Flax and wool were the chief materials, and cotton came later. Flax was abundant and some part of nearly all cloth was linen. In very early years, sheep could not be kept because of wolves; but when these animals had been killed or driven away, sheep raising was more profitable and woolen cloth came into use. Linen clothes were coarse, yellowish white, and not warm in winter. Flax went through several operations before it reached the wheel that spun it. After being "pulled," as the gathering of the stalks in the field was called, it was placed in heaps where the coarse, woody fiber of the stalk rotted. That softened it and prepared it for removal from the tough bark. Then the stalks of flax were broken into short pieces which were held together by the strong bark. Then the swingle came into play. That was a dull, wooden knife, shaped like a broad sword, with blade eighteen inches long. The operator held a bundle of broken stalks in one hand, and with the other struck them with the swingle until most of the broken stems were beaten free from the bark. The remaining mass was called tow. Then a tool called a hackle was used to comb the tow. This tool consisted of many sharp metal spikes like long, slender nails, set in a board. The rows of such spikes resembled the teeth of combs. Remaining fragments of stalk were removed, and the fiber was drawn out in smooth bundles. The tow was then ready to

spin. It was of light yellow color, and soft to the touch. "Towhead," when the word refers to a person's hair, means that the color and appearance resemble unspun flax. The small spinning wheel found in most pioneer homes reduced tow to linen thread. The operator sat, gave motion to the wheel by means of a foot pedal, or treadle, and drew the tow from a distaff attached to the wheel frame. The distaff was usually of dogwood or of sourwood, because these grew with a central stem, and several branches coming out of the stem at one place in a whorl. The branches were the size of a lead pencil, the central stem twice as large. The branches and stem were cut to a length of eighteen inches, and were brought together and tied at the top, and on this the tow was placed for spinning.

Wool was sometimes spun on the small wheel, but the large wheel was preferred. The operator paced to and fro across the room, turning the wheel by means of a wooden peg, called a finger, which was carried in one hand, while the yarn in process of spinning was worked with the other. Wool was carded by hand before machinery was brought in for doing it. The cards were flat pieces of wood, about four by eight inches, fitted with handles and equipped with many rows of small metal teeth, half inch long, made of pieces of wire. By rubbing wool between their toothed surfaces, it was reduced to rolls for spinning.



The Reel - The reel wound the thread from the spindle and converted it into skeins.



The Loom - Looms were common in the homes of the pioneers. Factories for weaving cloth were few anywhere at that time. The family that did not weave its own cloth bought from someone who had a surplus. It was all homemade. The best wool fabrics of the period of the Revolution were strong and serviceable, but specimens exhibited in museums show that they were far less handsome than machine-made cloth of the present time. A dress suit worn by President Washington, and preserved in the National Museum in the city of Washington, is of cloth that would now be unsalable because of coarseness. If that was the best of that day, it may be imagined what the common people wore in the distant mountains. Many of the old time looms in the mountains of West Virginia were of good design and workmanship. The weaving was usually done by the women of the household, though men frequently took a hand in it. The thread and yarn for the cloth was sometimes dyed before it was converted into cloth, and sometimes the finished cloth was dyed. It was deemed better to dye the wool before weaving it, for it held its color better. The phrase "dyed in the wool" is traced back to that custom. The dyes were manufactured at home from bark and roots of trees. The bark dyes in West Virginia's early days were many, but the most common were butternut and yellow oak. The bark of almost every tree provides dyeing matter. The colors produced with barks were not as brilliant or varied as the chemical dyes of today, yet they were subdued, soft, and pleasing. Coal tar dyes have replaced the bark dyes.

Clothes were made at home in most cases, though there were a few tailors. A paper in the Court of Randolph County in 1786 records that one dollar was paid to a tailor for making an overcoat, after the cloth was furnished.

Tanning of Leather - The first tanneries in West Virginia consisted of one or more wooden troughs, a little hemlock or chestnut oak bark, ashes in place of lime, and one or two tools, and other materials as they could be had. It was not unusual for each family to do its own tanning, and a trough hewed from a log was the vat. Bark was whittled and pounded by hand, and this was one of the evening and rainy day jobs in the cabin. In early times buckskin and bearskin clothes were worn, but they went out of general use as soon as other materials were procurable. The moccasin was worn very early, but shoes took its place later. The shoes were made at home or in the neighborhood. The shoemaker often went from house to house working a week or so at each, the length of time depending upon the size of the family.

Churns - Few towns were then so large that most of the people could not keep cows which were driven to pasture in the morning and brought home at sunset. In the country, cows were everywhere; all the people had them, whether they owned pasture land or not. There was plenty of unfenced land, and cows were at liberty to roam at will. There were no laws to say where family cows might roam. Consequently, cows, milk, and churns were abundant everywhere. The churn decreased in size from bottom to the lid, and the hoops never fell off when the staves shrank in the heat of the cabin. Barrels, kegs, and tubs when left empty near the fire, lost their hoops and fell to pieces.



The Grist Mill - The grinding of grain by waterpower was not usual in the earliest years west of the Alleghany mountains. The grist mill which did work of that kind came later than the hominy block and the grater. A little capital was required to build and equip such a mill, even of the simplest kind and smallest size. The stones which did the crushing of the grain were not shaped by novices, but their making required the hand of a man who knew that business. A coarse grained, very hard rock was needed, and a pair of stones was necessary. A pair of old weighed from 600 to 1000 pounds. The upper turned upon the fixed one, and the grain between them was crushed. The miller regulated the coarseness and fineness of the meal or flour by raising or lowering the upper stone. The custom was for the miller to take a certain part of the grain as pay for grinding the other part - usually one-eighth or one-tenth.

Some of the early mills ground thirty or forty bushels of grain a day, others only four or five. The mill that ground corn did not necessarily grind wheat. Additional apparatus was required for the latter. A silk cloth separated the flour from the bran, but with corn, no such separation was required.

In early pioneer times grain was generally carried to mill on horses. The boy rode on top of his grist, and waited at the mill until it was ground, and rode the meal sack home. The family that had no horse, and there were many such, carried the grain to the mill on their backs. It was not unusual for a man to carry fifty or sixty pounds of corn several miles to mill, and carry the meal home.

The mill was often the social center of the neighborhood, or rather the news center. The people all visited that place, and each man told what news he knew and listened to others tell theirs.

The Doctor - In early years on the Western Virginia frontiers, there were few physicians and surgeons who had studied their profession in schools. Medical colleges were few then, and it was a difficult matter to procure an education. Those who were able to meet the expense and overcome the obstacles, and prepare themselves for practice, could do better from a financial standpoint than to take up their dwelling on a thinly settled border, where the people were too poor to pay what a doctor had a right to expect for his services.

Joseph Doddridge, who knew early conditions so well, and who wrote of the times of his boyhood on the frontiers, said he lost both of his parents for the want of a doctor. The army that marched to Point Pleasant in 1774, numbering 1,400 men, had only one surgeon, and he was shot and disabled early in the battle. The large number of wounded had no medical attention except such as their more fortunate companions could give. A number died who could have been saved by a little attention from a surgeon.

The country doctor usually had a pretty hard life. He went day and night, and in all kinds of weather. In early days the roads were often as bad as they could be; mere paths, up mountains and down, among rocks, over logs, in mire, across bridgeless streams, in pitch darkness, pouring rain, or driving snow. The sick could not wait for the elements to grow favorable or for storms to howl themselves away. The doctor had to face whatever came, and to hurry on.

