

**Mercy B. Jackson, M.D.**  
**(1802–1877): A Pioneering Woman**

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**In Sickness & In Health: Medicine in the Old Colony**



Women have always been nurses, midwives, healers, and “watchers”—sitting day and night with the ill or dying. They used home remedies, usually passed down through generations. Favorite culinary and medical recipes were often kept in the same notebook. It was not until the mid-1800s, that a small number of women were able to break into the all-male world of professional medicine. Mercy (Ruggles) Bisbee Jackson was one of the women who were able to enter programs granting medical degrees, opening the door for the women physicians who would follow.

Mercy Ruggles demonstrated a streak of independence from the start. She graduated at age 17 from a private school in her hometown of Hardwick, Massachusetts, and promptly accepted a winter teaching position in Plainfield, a good fifty miles west (as the crow flies) of her central Massachusetts home—a daring decision for a young woman in 1819. She returned closer to home to teach the following year, and married John Bisbee in 1823. Scarlet fever claimed the couple’s firstborn, but two more children followed quickly. Mercy’s spirit must have been sorely tested when John Bisbee died of pneumonia in 1829, and the younger of her two remaining children died in 1832.

Mercy moved to Plymouth in 1833 with her second husband, Captain Daniel Jackson. In the house at 6 North Street eight children were born to the couple, four of whom survived. Mercy thrived in the wider social and intellectual circles of Plymouth. Her husband’s cousin, and Mercy’s good friend, Lydia Jackson, married Ralph Waldo Emerson, opening to Mercy the vibrant intellectual circle of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Concord. Lydia’s brother, Mercy’s cousin Charles Jackson, became embroiled in not one but two celebrated controversies—first with Samuel Morse over claims for developing the telegraph, and then, incredibly, in a second struggle with W.T.G. Morton over the discovery of the anesthetic properties of ether!

Having buried five of the eleven children she bore, as well as her first husband, Mercy became intimate with the illnesses of children and the prevailing treatments. She must have experienced the failure of repeated bleeding, purging, and harsh medications of conventional medicine.

In the early 1840s, Mercy focused her intellectual curiosity and energy on studying the new and more gently therapeutic system of homeopathic medicine. The system promoted self-healing in individuals by the administration of minute doses of a remedy previously shown to produce symptoms similar to those of the disease in healthy persons.\* The theory was that a tiny dose of the properly chosen remedy would stimulate the body to heal itself. Unlike conventional medical treatments, the homeopathic treatment (at the least) rarely did harm to the patient.

Mercy first studied on her own, and then with a homeopathic physician. She began by treating her family and friends and quickly gained a reputation for good results. Patients came from Plymouth and surrounding towns to consult with her. Still, in spite of her skills, she could only watch as her second husband, Daniel Jackson, died of cancer in 1852.

Many homeopaths were trained physicians, some newly immigrated from Germany where physician Samuel Christian Hahnemann (1755–1843), disillusioned with orthodox medical practices, had introduced and developed the system over a period of fifty years.\*\* Feeling a need for more formal training, and inspired by the struggle of Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910) who earned the first medical degree granted to a woman (Geneva Medical College, New York, 1849), Mercy—then in her late 50s—graduated from Boston’s New England Female Medicine College (now Boston University College of Medicine) in 1860.

Some schools remained closed to women. When feminist Harriet K. Hunt (1805–1875) was refused admission to Harvard, Mercy wrote to her in support of her efforts. Their ensuing friendship blossomed as both women became increasingly involved in the women’s rights movement. As early as 1854 Mercy wrote a letter to the assessors of the Town of Plymouth protesting “taxation without representation.”

*...to all who feel an interest in the cause of Freedom, I would call your attention to the manifest injustice of the laws of this Commonwealth in taxing a large proportion of the inhabitants, who are native-born citizens, who have the same national rights as others, and yet withholding from them the right of representation....I do not object to woman’s bearing the equal share of the burdens of society. I only object to her being compelled to bear them without her having equal benefits from society.*

As Mercy became acquainted with a broad spectrum of women patients through her medical practice, her fervor for both better medicine and for women’s rights grew. She was especially moved by one wife and mother damaged beyond repair by heavy doses of opium prescribed by a prominent allopathic (regular) physician for chronic stomach and nerve problems. During the Civil War, Mercy listened to many stories of women trying to come to terms with crippled, maimed or lost husbands and sons. Mercy’s practice and career prospered as many women preferred a female physician. In 1871, perhaps the year her portrait was painted, Mercy became the first woman admitted to the American Institute of Homeopathy.

Radicalized by her desire to level the playing field for women, Mercy argued her medical beliefs in articles on women’s diseases for homeopathic journals, and battled for women’s rights in articles written for Lucy Stone’s feminist publication, *The Women’s Journal*. She chastised a prominent advocate for co-education for “wishing to make women as nearly as possible like men....women are now struggling...to have the same opportunities to use in a woman’s way....” *The Women’s Journal*, February 14, 1874.

In 1875 at the age of 73, the indefatigable Mercy traveled to northern Michigan to advocate for women's rights. In a report of her journey by train, she noted that "after more than twenty hours of rapid transit, we found ourselves enjoying the fine scenery and grand falls of Niagara."

I am indebted to Bojan Jennings for sharing her long-time fascination and meticulous research on Mercy Jackson for this article.

\* Introduced in the United States in the 1820s, homeopathy grew rapidly in popularity. By the 1860s there were an estimated 2500 homeopathic physicians, more than 1000 homeopathic pharmacies, and twenty-two homeopathic medical schools including Boston University School of Medicine, the New York College of Medicine, Hahnemann Medical College of Philadelphia, and the University of Michigan's medical school. By 1900 advances in mainstream medicine overshadowed Hahnemann's system of gentle therapeutics. Recently, however, new interest has risen in the system as a complement to mainstream practices.

\*\* Samuel Christian Hahnemann, *Organon of Medicine: The Art of Rational Healing*, (Leipzig: \_\_\_\_ 1810), six revised editions by Hahnemann followed in 1818, 1824, 1829, 1833, 1842. The first French language edition was published in 1824, the first English language edition in 1833.

### **Selected Bibliography**

Ruth J. Abram, ed., "*Send Us a Lady Physician*" *Women Doctors in America 1835–1920*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1985).

Jonas, Wayne B., M.D. and Jennifer Jacobs, M.D., M.P.H., *Healing with Homeopathy: The Doctor's Guide*, (New York: Time Warner Company, 1996). See page 71-72 for more about Mercy's friend, Harriet K. Hunt.