

Medical Care of Ebenezer Pettigrew's Slaves

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Between 1797 and 1865 three generations of Pettigrews operated plantations in Tyrrell and Washington counties, North Carolina.¹ These plantations were located in the Scuppernong River-Lake Phelps area. The fertile, swampy soil provided the planters with bumper crops of rice, wheat, and corn. Since plantations in that region were far removed from towns they were also far removed from physicians unless the Pettigrews and their neighbors could persuade them to settle there. In most cases that meant guaranteeing them an income. Physicians seldom remained long in a rural area, and the attendant uncertainty forced planters to study and treat minor injuries and diseases. Thus the Pettigrews through necessity acquired considerable medical knowledge and became relatively skillful practitioners.

Charles Pettigrew, who established the plantations, was much troubled with the high incidence among his slaves of plagues, fevers, and diseases reputedly peculiar to the low swampy region in which he lived. Under his direction female slaves became accomplished nurses and midwives. On one occasion he risked the life of one of his Negro nurses who tended a neighbor "ill of a dreadfully putrid fever."² In the fall of 1799 several of Pettigrew's slaves had malaria — termed by the planter "The most mortal fever, ever known since the Settlement of the place." He exhausted his stock

¹ A portion of the research for this study was made possible by a grant from the University of Kentucky Research Fund.

² Charles Pettigrew to Major Howell Tatum, September 12, 1803, Pettigrew Papers (University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill). This source will be referred to hereafter as Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill, to distinguish it from another collection of Pettigrew Papers (North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh), which will be cited as Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh. As Ebenezer Pettigrew figures more conspicuously in this study than other members of the family, he will be cited by his last name only; other Pettigrews will be identified by their full names.

of medicine and as "a quack" did everything he could for them.³ His efforts saved the Negroes but neither he nor his physicians could save his son John, who died that fall, probably from a combination of tuberculosis and malaria.

It was the other son, Ebenezer, who inherited the plantations upon the death of his father in 1807 and who expanded the plantations and established the routine which made the name Pettigrew synonymous with a well-ordered agricultural system.

Ebenezer Pettigrew listed ninety-one Negro slaves in the census of 1840, sixty at Bonarva plantation and thirty-one at Belgrade plantation. From this total he commanded a potential field force of sixty-seven slaves from ten to fifty-five years of age.⁴ Since slaves under fifteen and over fifty-five could not perform heavy tasks, it is unlikely that Pettigrew's effective force exceeded fifty field hands. He could not be called a great planter; rather he was an extraordinary member of that slaveowning group possessing more than fifty and fewer than one hundred slaves.

Pettigrew approached the ideal in his relationships with his Negroes: he gave them the best medical treatment available; quartered them in comfortable houses; issued adequate food supplies and clothing in finished and unfinished lots; encouraged them to tend small fields by guaranteeing cash rewards from the sale of their crops; and provided awards for slaves who performed skilled labor. His Negroes labored long hours in the mucky swamps and damp fields, but the slaves responded to the care of the master and bore the burden of the work lightly.

The evidence is conclusive that the health of his Negro slaves burdened Pettigrew more than any other labor problem. In the vicinity of Lake Phelps there were recurrent waves of "ague and fever," "flux," "bilious fever," and "influenza" throughout the early nineteenth century. From November 3, 1803, the day Pettigrew began to manage Bonarva plantation,⁵ until his death on July 8, 1848, he continuously faced the problem of keeping his laboring force healthy. While practically all planters in the South were able to prescribe for the ills of their slaves and to administer treatment,

³ Charles Pettigrew to Dr. Andrew Knox, August 20, 1799, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁴ United States Census of 1840, Tyrrell County, North Carolina, microfilm (North Carolina Department of Archives and History).

⁵ Miscellany, an undated sheet in the handwriting of William Shepard Pettigrew, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

few approached the problem as scientifically as did Pettigrew. The latest general and specialized medical treatises⁶ occupied a prominent position in the library which he established at Bonarva in 1805, and subsequent orders added other medical works to his collection.⁷ An example of careful study of one of them is noted in the following quotation:

I have read with a good deal of attention Dr. Sawyer's work on fever and am pleased to say that I have found . . . more of usefull matter than I expected. Upon the whole to anyone who is Quick enough to discriminate between good and evil, sense and nonsense it is not a useless book. . . Perhaps the same may be said of a great many other medical works of high standing at the present day.⁸

Pettigrew frequently applied the skill acquired in caring for his Negroes to aid white neighbors. In 1829 he wrote his confidant James C. Johnston: "I have commenced in Doctor Warren's absence the practice of medicine. I . . . visited a very sick child eight miles in the country twice last week."⁹ He dosed his Negroes with the currently used remedies and kept all medical prescriptions with the thrift typical of agricultural people everywhere. Recipes and prescriptions and the favorite cure-alls were copied, traded among the planter families, and handed down from father to son in that region.¹⁰ In 1837, while Pettigrew was in Congress, his son Charles wrote him that Johnston Pettigrew and many of the slaves had colds. He added: "While I am on the subject of colds I should be glad dear father if you would in your next give a remedy. The plan I pursue is, to prevent all kinds of exposure, to bath[e] the

⁶ For thirty-four volumes purchased in 1811, see Thomas & Ronald's receipt, New York, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh. See also Pettigrew's receipts for books bought in 1845, including Samuel Ashwell, *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases Peculiar to Women* (Boston, 1843), and David B. Reid, *Illustrations of the Theory and Practice of Ventilation* (London, 1844); and a receipt issued by the United States Homeopathic Pharmacy, Philadelphia, September 22, 1841, for Paul F. Curie, *Principles of Homœopathy* (London, 1837), the same author's *Domestic Homœopathy* (Philadelphia, 1839), and a work entitled *Mothers' Medical Assistant*. *Ibid.*

⁷ Pettigrew to Frederick Blount, May 26, 1814, *ibid.*

⁸ Pettigrew to —, n. d., *ibid.* Dr. Matthias E. Sawyer was the author of *A Treatise on Primitive or Secondary Disguised or Misplaced Fever, as a Single Disease* (New York, 1831).

⁹ Pettigrew to James C. Johnston, January 12, 1829; October 3, 1836, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill. See also Pettigrew to Dr. William C. Warren, October 12, 1832, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

¹⁰ N. E. Sawyer to Pettigrew, July 14, 1821; Pettigrew to John H. Bryan, October 5, 1824; Pettigrew to William Shepard Pettigrew, February 1, 1847; and other correspondence, 1800-1848, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

feet and drink warm to [ddy?] drinks; if the colds are obstinat & of inflammatory nature I suppose bleeding would be good.”¹¹

From 1819 to 1830 Pettigrew's wife, Ann Shepard, irregularly kept a "Family Account Book and Medical Note Book" in which she noted remedies for all types of complaints from coughs and colds to snakebite and fever, as well as some simple cures for female complaints.¹² With feminine directness she developed a tendency to reduce treatments to an absolute cure-all. Her sovereign remedy for many complaints was castor oil. She wrote to her husband in 1819: "Charles . . . I expect took cold . . . and . . . I being alarmed . . . poured down my sovereign cure Castor oil. . . I Shall be as finished a quack as yourself by the time you return."¹³ She wrote to her sister Mrs. John H. Bryan that eggs and charcoal were her remedy in all bilious diseases.¹⁴ However, her planter-husband prescribed for and nursed most of the sick slaves.

Pettigrew ordered large quantities of drugs and general pharmaceutical supplies from his factors for his own use and also for the successive physicians who treated his family and slaves.¹⁵ Doubtless these physicians saved money by placing their orders through Pettigrew. When the young planter was in New York in 1805, he purchased such medical supplies as vitriol, ipecac, copaiba, Glauber's salts, red sarsaparilla, castor oil, tartar emetic, and calomel from the firm of Phillips and Clark, Druggists, at No. 66 Maiden Lane.¹⁶ Intermittently for the next forty-three years Pettigrew replenished his stock of medicines. Two of these purchases may be considered typical. On June 29, 1821, he received from the New York firm of Blount and Jackson, in addition to plantation supplies and equipment, "8 bottles Henry's Calcined Magnesia, 6 boxes Meads Pills, 2 pounds Sandfords Bark, 1 [measure not given] neat oil wormseed, 1 [unitemized] box of medicine."¹⁷ Some twenty years later, on April 26, 1842, Pettigrew received from Roberts, Coleman and Company of Norfolk "1 half ounce syringe;

¹¹ Charles Lockhart Pettigrew to Pettigrew, January 19, 1837, *ibid.*

¹² Pettigrew Family Account Book and Medical Note Book, 1819, *ibid.*

¹³ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Pettigrew, September 23, 1819, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Mrs. John H. Bryan, July 13, 1825, John H. Bryan Papers (North Carolina Department of Archives and History).

¹⁵ E.g., Pettigrew to Mollan, Rankin and Gallop, August 31, 1817, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill; Day Book, 1816, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

¹⁶ Phillips and Clark, receipt dated 1805, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

¹⁷ Blount and Jackson, invoice dated June 29, 1821, *ibid.*

4 ounces Sulphate of Quinine; 1 oz. Best English Calomel; 2 Bottles Henry's Genuine Calcined Magnesia; ½ doz boxes Seidlitz Powder; 2 phials Liquid ophodelac [opodeldoc] whitwell; 1 phial solid ophodelac [opodeldoc] 1 Halls improved double truss; 1 Halls improved single truss; 1 Bottle Harris' Tetter Wash; one case Amputation Instruments complete."¹⁸

A remedy used by Pettigrew for the cure of common colds was a purgative, either oil, Glauber's salts, or calomel, followed the next day with a dose of magnesia and the third by cream of tartar.¹⁹ For practically all types of illness and especially for agues and fever, "the Bark" (as Peruvian Bark was generally called) was administered until the new drug "Sulphate of Quinine" became popular.²⁰ The conservative planter preferred "the Bark" for some cases after the appearance of quinine, possibly because he thought it more effective and less costly. He stated this opinion to his son Charles: "If the strong negro men should be sick, in ordinary cases where tonic may be wanting the peruvian bark is as good as the Quinine. I mentioned this that the Quin[in]e may be not used except in cases where needed. It is a matter of argument whether the Bark is not better where the stomach can take it than Quinine."²¹

Another remedy was prescribed for one of his valuable slaves, Nelson, who was ill with the debilitating complaint "flux":

Give Nelson a tablespoonful of the solution of Tartar in flaxseed tea every two hours (unless it should give pain of the stomach or bowels or purge too freely in which case it must be discontinued) & allow him to drink flaxseed tea freely for several hours. Then give him one of the powders in a little molasses every two hours after give him a small dose of oil and repeat in 4 hours if the first dose should not operate.²²

Pettigrew used a variety of cures for muscular and nervous "diseases." He himself suffered severely from rheumatism and when prescribing for his slaves used his favorite remedy "prickly ash bark and gin."²³ For St. Vitus dance he used the remedy that the best

¹⁸ Roberts, Coleman and Company, invoice dated April 26, 1842, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Bryan to Pettigrew, October 12, 1832, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

²⁰ When Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew was ill in New Bern in 1816, she wrote: "Dr. Blount . . . desires me to tell you exactly my situation this morning he has been scolding because I will not drink brandy tody after every dose of bark and brandy." Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Pettigrew, February 1, 1816, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

²¹ Pettigrew to Charles L. Pettigrew, August 2, 1842, *ibid.*

²² Undated Pettigrew note, *ibid.*

²³ Pettigrew to Bryan, October 5, 1824, *ibid.*

physicians prescribed, "a calomel pill in the middle of the day" followed by "castor oil and half teaspoonful of turpentine" the next day, balanced with doses of snakeroot three times daily.²⁴ In 1852 his remedy — an old Indian remedy — was used by his friend James C. Johnston to cure a sprained knee: "take a sufficiency of the inner bark of the Pine Tree to cover the joint injured, add to it a reasonable Quantity of Brown sugar & saturate it with camphure. renew it several times (say three) a day."²⁵

In accordance with the prevailing theory of the time, Pettigrew occasionally bled his sick slaves.²⁶ He guarded against smallpox by vaccination;²⁷ and to minimize the possibilities of cholera he had skilled white workmen erect a huge cistern at Bonarva to hold drinking water.²⁸

Pettigrew was much interested in the causes of "ague and fever" or "chills and fever" — malaria — the dread disease of the southern coastal plain. Throughout the ante-bellum period malaria was attributed to noxious atmosphere termed miasma which rose from stagnant water and the fogs which hung over them. Malaria struck down white and black, but usually impaired the efficiency of whites more than of Negroes. It was generally believed that Negroes were immune, but when Pettigrew's slaves had the symptoms he prescribed for them the same medicines that he gave his family. By 1840 Pettigrew had formed his opinion on the cause of the disease. In a letter to the editor of the *Farmers' Register*, he stated: "for more than twenty-five years I have been fully convinced of the great cause of most of our sickness in this country (stagnant water and mud exposed to a hot fall sun); and have spared no labor cost in my power to avoid them."²⁹ His prediction of an epidemic depended upon whether the fall season was damp or dry. A dry fall

²⁴ Mrs. Bryan to Pettigrew, February 26, 1845, *ibid.*

²⁵ William Shepard Pettigrew to Johnston, November 18, 1852, *ibid.*

²⁶ E.g., Charles Pettigrew to Pettigrew, March 21, 1805, *ibid.* See also Charles L. Pettigrew to Pettigrew, January 19, 1837, *ibid.*

²⁷ Charles Pettigrew to Pettigrew, June 30, 1802, *ibid.* See also J. W. Bell to Pettigrew, February 26, 1836, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

²⁸ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Mrs. Bryan, October 20, 1826, Bryan Papers.

²⁹ *Farmers' Register* (Shellbanks, Petersburg), VIII (March, 1840), 141. It is interesting and tragic to note that both adults and children were afflicted. As close as Pettigrew and his contemporaries came to the cause of malaria, they failed to see what, in the light of modern knowledge, is to us obvious. E.g., Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Mary Shepard, July 17, 1816 (from Bonarva), Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill: "Charles [Lockhart Pettigrew] has learned the art of crying, but never before the mosquitoes came about they bit so Severely that he could not Stand it."

and stagnant water in the swamps, creeks, and ditches would "produce malaria enough to kill Napoleon's Army."³⁰ Pettigrew's interest was not entirely altruistic for he suffered severely from attacks of malaria.³¹

The health of slaves was mentioned in the majority of the letters and in the interplantation correspondence. "send down in the cart," Charles Pettigrew directed, "as much plank . . . as will make a coffin for Judith, for I am confident she can't stand it much longer."³² Ebenezer wrote in 1814 to William Shepard, his future father-in-law, "the people in this part of the country are at this time very sickly, I found my negroes unusually so."³³ Later he commented in a letter to his bride of a few months: "our negroes had been a good deal Sick with . . . [influenza] but were better and are now quite well."³⁴ In 1818 he returned from New Bern to his plantation to find "several of the Negroes . . . sick, they have what the Doctors call the Catarrh fever."³⁵

Bilious fever occasionally struck down his most valuable slaves. In 1830, while Pettigrew was in Philadelphia, Dr. William C. Warren wrote him that he had been attending Dave, a prized and intelligent Negro, and Rachel's daughter, Caroline, both of whom had bilious fever.³⁶

The patriarchal attitude of the planter is revealed in a letter to his brother-in-law, John H. Bryan. "I have been blessed with health for the last year & up to this time both in my white & black family, but it is exceeding sickly around me. . . . The disease is called by the Doctors Epidemic Influenza."³⁷ The transmission from father to son of the patriarchal attitude toward slaves is illustrated by a letter from nine-year-old Charles Lockhart Pettigrew to his grandmother, Mary Lockhart Pettigrew: "I am sorry to inform you that we have a very sickly family. Adam has died very sudden a very strange death. Penny also has lost her child which was very puny from the first the white family are pretty well."³⁸

³⁰ Pettigrew to Bryan, June 28, 1842, Bryan Papers.

³¹ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Mrs. Bryan, September 11, 1826, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

³² Charles Pettigrew to Pettigrew, n. d., *ibid.*

³³ Pettigrew to William B. Shepard, September 6, 1814, *ibid.*

³⁴ Pettigrew to Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew, January, 1816, *ibid.*

³⁵ Pettigrew to Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew, February 12, 1818, *ibid.*

³⁶ Dr. Warren to Pettigrew, August 28, 1830, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

³⁷ Pettigrew to Bryan, January 18, 1839, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

³⁸ Charles L. Pettigrew to Mary Lockhart Pettigrew, November 12, 1825, *ibid.*

In 1840 Pettigrew wrote his youngest son, James Johnston Pettigrew: "We, that is myself your brother & the negroes are yet very healthy, but I apprehend a sickly September."³⁹ After moving to his new plantation, Magnolia, in 1842, the general health of the Negroes began to absorb his attention more than ever. Every inter-plantation note mentioned their health. Typical of these is his communication to William: "When I returned yesterday at 12 o'clock, I found Mack had been sick from the [illegible] night. His fever had abated but he Says he was quite unwell in part of last night, but better this morning. I send him home in the cart, & would advise you to give him tonight a dose of calomel & salts or oil in the morning."⁴⁰ Even the occasional letters from the Negro drivers left in charge of the plantation carried the refrain: "Master Charlse people I hear no sickness among them but at Mr. Collinses . . . there has died thare this week 10 children I heard."⁴¹

Pettigrew cared for his Negroes during the epidemics to the extent of neglecting his own health. In 1824 he was seriously afflicted with rheumatism,⁴² which resulted from exposure and long hours caring for his people. On one occasion he wrote to his cousin, Frederick Blount, that he was the only white person on the lake who had not been confined to his bed. The disease prevalent at that time was bilious fever and flux. "It appears that I have not time to be sick," and he added that his efforts to attend white and black alike, "first at the Lake, then at my cabin on the ditch, and then at my Mothers," had prevented his sleeping two nights in succession in the same bed. He concluded the discussion of health by remarking, "I however got wet the other day and ever since felt something of the rheumatism but I treated it with contempt."⁴³ When bilious fever appeared on the lake in 1817 he wrote, "I Shall not run myself into danger while the Doctor is to be had, particularly when they get disease by going where it is contrary to my wish."⁴⁴ His wife continually implored him to avoid exposure both to the sun and to disease. "you need not murder your days to make farms,"⁴⁵ she

³⁹ Pettigrew to James Johnston Pettigrew, August 1, 1840, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, October, 1845, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Henry (a slave) to Pettigrew, 1846, *ibid.*

⁴² Pettigrew to Johnston, January 12, August 3, 1824; Pettigrew to Bryan, October 5, 1824, *ibid.*

⁴³ Pettigrew to Blount, September 17, 1814, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Pettigrew to Johnston, October 16, 1817, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Pettigrew, January 18, 1825, *ibid.*

wrote. In September, 1836, after an illness of eight days' duration, he visited his slave quarters to find "the fevers among my negroes of the most obstinate character," and he stayed on his feet to dose and to nurse them despite his own indisposition.⁴⁶ He was frequently careless about exposure in keeping with the tradition of busy farmers.⁴⁷ Regularly in his career he suffered from malaria, and by 1844 he had formed the opinion that "Farming among slaves is a miserable business, and particularly in this low sickly country."⁴⁸

In 1808 Pettigrew began to keep an account of the sick Negroes, their complaints, and the number of days each lost from work. While he did not continue to keep this record systematically during the next forty years, it is interesting to note a few of the complaints and the comments of the planter. In 1808 Crook lost one day due to laziness; Charles lost one day in April from a pain in the back, and in January three years later two days from a head pain and cold. The "Sick Book" recorded that Fortune was absent from work nine days in 1809 and 1811. The entry for February 1, 1809, reads: "Pain in breast & all over," two days; for April 6, "pain in back belly & sides," two days; April 20, "pain in back belly and side"; January 22, 1811, "pains," four days; February 8, "Laziness alone," one day. Pettigrew recorded on January 24, 1808, that Cambridge was "Disabled from a cut on his arm by another negro Mack" and that he lost thirty-one days. Fifteen Negroes were on the sick list, 1808-1811, but Pettigrew noted that the slave Sam was "0" days absent from work.⁴⁹

To supplement his own ministrations Pettigrew had physicians attend his slaves whenever they were available. This was especially true after 1825 when he definitely decided to remain in the Lake Country.⁵⁰ A number of physicians treated the Pettigrew slaves, but there are years for which no bills, receipts, or references to doctors' services can be found. Between 1812 and 1848 bills and receipts seem to support the conclusion that Pettigrew was more inclined to call on physicians as he grew older,⁵¹ though his Negroes might

⁴⁶ Pettigrew to Mrs. Bryan, September 19, 1836, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Pettigrew to Bryan, June 24, 1840, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Pettigrew to Johnston, June 24, 1844, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ An account of Sick Negroes, January 1, 1808, by E. Pettigrew, Book No. 3, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁵⁰ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Pettigrew, January 18, 1825, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁵¹ Receipts and bills, 1812-1848, *ibid.*

have been more in need of doctors' services, physicians more numerous, or epidemics more frequent. In this period the following physicians served Pettigrew:

Dr. John Beasley	1812-1814
Dr. T. Sawyer	1814
Dr. Frederick (?) Blount	1816
Dr. J. H. Ellis	1817-1818
Dr. Thomas Old	1822-1825
Dr. William C. Warren	1825-1832
Dr. Henry E. Lewis	1831-1848
Dr. William Henderson	1833
Dr. James W. Bell	1834-1837
Dr. Hardy H. Hardison	1837-1848

These physicians treated both black and white families, and ordinarily their bills separated the white from the black when they treated the one or the other. The best trained and relatively the most successful of these physicians was Dr. Warren, whose predecessor Dr. Old recommended as an eminently qualified and brilliant University of Pennsylvania graduate.⁵²

The responsibility of keeping a physician domiciled in the Lake Country was usually assumed by the Collinses and the Pettigrews,⁵³ the leading planter families in that region. Since the Collins family was away from its Somerset plantation most of the year, the Pettigrews' selection was usually the successful candidate. Physicians left the Lake Country for many reasons. Three, Dr. Old, Dr. Warren, and Dr. Bell, left because of poor health.⁵⁴ In 1818 Pettigrew quarreled with one of them: "Doctor Ellis and myself have fallen out, he came here half drunk and was disposed to get quite so, which to prevent I put away the decanter, and he took it in high dudgeon, I have determined not to let men get drunk in my house, and am very willing to receive his displeasure in preference to making my house a grog shop."⁵⁵ Pettigrew settled his account on the spot and subsequently gave his practice to Dr. Old.⁵⁶

⁵² Thomas Old to Pettigrew, August 5, 1825, *ibid.*

⁵³ Pettigrew to Warren, October 12, 1832, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁵⁴ Correspondence, 1825-1836, *ibid.* See specifically Doctrine Davenport to Pettigrew, December 26, 1835, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Pettigrew to Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew, March 6, 1818, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁶ Day Book, 1816, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

This continuous turnover of physicians led Pettigrew to adopt a semicyclical attitude. When Dr. Warren announced his decision to leave, Pettigrew observed in a letter to Mrs. Bryan: "I do not care much for any of them, I have at last learned that they are but men, and as mean and ignorant as other men and little to be depended on."⁵⁷ In 1832 he wrote Dr. Warren that all he knew about Dr. Henry E. Lewis, a candidate for Warren's position, was that he could make a good bill.⁵⁸ Yet Pettigrew was courteous and generous as well as exact in his relations with the physicians who attended the sick on his plantations. He frequently lent them money; in fact, most of the physicians who left the Lake Country were indebted to him.⁵⁹

Pettigrew furnished both Dr. Bell and his successor, Dr. Hardison, a cottage at Belgrade plantation. While Hardison was residing there, Pettigrew discontinued his services and began to employ Dr. Lewis. Feeling that the change was occasioned by a belief that he had neglected Pettigrew's interests to care for the sick on Collins' plantation, Hardison wrote: "Five years ago I came here, without friends, without patronage, pennyless and unknown. Among the first who extended to me the hand of friendship was yourself." He liked and respected Dr. Lewis, he said, and cared only for Pettigrew's friendship.⁶⁰ Pettigrew "was resentful but not revengefull,"⁶¹ and after 1842 divided the plantation practice between Lewis and Hardison.

The Pettigrew plantation physicians were general practitioners. An examination of their bills indicates that they prescribed for aches and pains, prescribed diets, delivered babies, set broken bones, inoculated against smallpox, pulled teeth, and performed major operations. Between June 1 and December 15, 1817, Dr. Ellis charged \$109.17½ for visits to Negroes, prescribing bark and camphor and "bleeding Dave."⁶² Dr. Warren performed three "vivisections" for \$2.00 each on a Negro woman in labor in 1828.⁶³

⁵⁷ Pettigrew to Mrs. Bryan, September 27, 1832, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁸ Pettigrew to Warren, October 12, 1832, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁵⁹ Correspondence, 1825-1848, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill; Pettigrew to Josiah Collins, Jr., December 7, 1836, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁶⁰ Dr. Hardy Hardison to Pettigrew, August 9, 1842, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill. See also Pettigrew, note, July 29, 1841, on rental of Belgrade cottage to Hardison, Belgrade Plantation Book, 1816-1840, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Pettigrew to Charles L. Pettigrew, August 22, 1842, *ibid.*

⁶² Dr. J. H. Ellis, bill dated December 15, 1817, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁶³ Warren, bill dated April 2, 1828, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

For general attention to adult Negroes he charged \$1.00 per treatment, and added the cost of medicine if it was not stocked on the plantation. Children were treated for fifty or seventy-five cents. Between January 6 and December 26, 1832, a portion of his charges for services to slaves were: "to negro Frank, July 18, \$6.50; From Mr. Collin's to See Frank \$1.00; do Henry \$1.00; do Diamond . . . \$1.00."⁶⁴ Between August 17, 1832, and February 16, 1833, he visited the plantation and "opened Prince finger \$1.00; 3 other visits to Prince \$3.00, etc."⁶⁵ Dr. Henderson, who succeeded Warren in 1833, charged fifty cents per mile for his visits plus charges for services rendered.⁶⁶ His account to November, 1833, included such items as: "call upon Lea and Sarah from J. Collins, \$1.00; going and coming attendance upon six at the Lake from Somerset Place from August 4 which was Sunday till Wednesday following \$8.00. . . . to visit Molly \$16.00, \$6.00 for delivering the child \$10.00 for delivery of the placenta."⁶⁷

A typical bill for services to Negroes is that of Dr. Bell from June 15, 1834, to September 6, 1835:⁶⁸

June	15, 1834	to visit, bleeding, purge & diaphoretic for Cambridge	\$5.
July	22	to visit and antispasmodic for Tom	1.25
Oct	10	To visit and attention to Welcome all night	2.
Jan	6, 1835	to visit Simon through snow bleeding & c	5.
Jan	7	To visit " "	5.
	22	To visit David	1.
Feb	5	To nursing Mack finger	1.
	24	To visit Henry & expect	1.
March	13	To visit Welcome Cambridge and girl	3.
		To attention David 10 days	12.
June	26	To visit Grace bleeding & enodgen	3.50
June	28	" " "	3.50
June	29	" " "	3.50
July	18	To deliver Jinney	10.00
Sept	5	To visit Nelson	1.00
	6	To visit Maranda — to pulling tooth for	3.50

pd. 60.25

⁶⁴ Warren, bill dated December 26, 1832, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Warren, bill dated February 16, 1833, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Dr. William G. Henderson, bill dated November, 1833, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Bell, bill dated September 6, 1835, *ibid.* Note that the correct amount of this bill was \$61.25.

Dr. Hardison, between July 1 and August 15, 1838, performed a vivisection on a slave, "extracted tooth for Nancy," dressed a wound "for negro alfred at Belgrade," and treated "injury of knee Aaron." Between January 28 and December 25, 1839, he visited the following Negroes:

January 28 & 30 Belgrade Hanson 2 time Feb. 4 & 5 visited Moses at B[elgrade]; March 6 visit to Hanson at the Lake; & 23 to Same at B[elgrade], 24 26, 27; April 8-visit to graces children, 24 Moses at B[elgrade]; May 4-Jacob at the Lake; May 29, Moses at B[elgrade]; July 5, Glasgow at B[elgrade] & daily attended until 18 July \$14.00; Aug. 16 visit to Lydia at the Lake, 17 to Clarissa at Lake: 19 Same-21st to alfred;-Sept 12-medicine & prescription for Stephen; 13 visit Stephen at the Lake; 15, to Rachels children; 19th to Boy George at the Lake; 21 to George & Stephen [same charge as for 1] 24 to levi & Macy 25 to Macy & Polly; 26 to Macy 27 to same; 28 to Moses at B[elgrade] 29 to Same & prescription; Oct. 3, Visit to Hanson at B[elgrade] 4, 5, 18, 19; 30 to boy Bob at the Lake; Nov. 1, 5 to same; Dec. 17 Visit to Welcome at the Lake; 20 to Grace & Prescription [same price]; 23 Stephen at B[elgrade]⁶⁹

By this time Hardison began to standardize his charges. His bills from 1839 to 1848 show that he charged \$1.00 for visits to Belgrade and \$3.50 for visits to Bonarva, seven miles farther away.⁷⁰ Treatment of more than one patient on these visits did not necessarily increase the charge.

The combined watchfulness and care of the planter coupled with the skill of his physicians undoubtedly saved the lives of many Negroes, but in at least one instance it was necessary to send a slave to a specialist in order to save her life. Nicey was seized by rheumatic pains in 1844. When the efforts of Dr. Lewis and Dr. Hardison brought no relief,⁷¹ Pettigrew sent her by boat to Thomas Nash in Norfolk, a specialist in hydrotherapy — "a steam doctor."⁷² She remained there for more than eight months. Pettigrew's Norfolk factors, Messrs. Hardy and Brothers, wrote after Nicey re-

⁶⁹ Hardison, receipt dated July 22, 1841, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Undated prescription [1845], on back of letter from George E. Badger, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh: "Give Nicey one of the pills night & morning till they are all taken & a dose of oil every other day while taking them. When they are gone put her on the drops in the large vial of which give 30 Drops in a wine glass of water three times a day. Light diet but more than grease, bread & milk & occasionally a little meat."

⁷² For a discussion of hydrotherapy in the ante-bellum period, see Guion G. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1937), 757.

turned to the plantation: "We have just settled your ac[coun]t. With our *Steam Doctor Nash* . . . and [have] the Doctor's certificate to Show you have paid him for *his* services — being altogether a full discharge of your indebtedness for board, medicines, and the doctor's attendance on your girl Nicey."⁷³ The amount paid by the factor was \$59.50, but this sum was not the total cost⁷⁴ for Pettigrew had already paid bills totaling \$163.81. Nicey was probably less than ten years old when she was sent to Norfolk, and the expense was at least a substantial portion of her value. Many planters would not have sent a slave to a specialist miles away and the fact that Ebenezer Pettigrew did so is evidence of his kindly feeling for his slaves.

Despite all efforts on the part of the planter and his family, some slaves died. The genuine concern and sorrow expressed by all the whites was based on more than an economic interest. Pettigrew considered Negroes as real human beings, though "immature," and he felt personal loss when one of them died. In some cases it was not disease but accidents that caused the deaths. "Am sorry to inform you of the accident . . . at the Lake. Cambridge has unfortunately killed himself By a tree," wrote one of Pettigrew's temporary overseers, Samuel Bateman, in 1810.⁷⁵ Pettigrew wrote his son William in 1833: "mike at your grandmamas [Belgrade plantation] dide [*sic*] last. He had been ill ten days. The doctor as well as all other who saw him believed that he was injured by some of his own misconduct, but he could not be induced to tell anything."⁷⁶

The story of the failure of medical science in the nineteenth century to arrest gangrene poisoning is graphically told in the account of the death of the slave Holloway. A Belgrade field hand, he was the property of Mrs. Mary Pettigrew and was willed to Charles L. Pettigrew in 1833. From that year until 1838 he was hired by Ebenezer Pettigrew at an annual rate of \$50 to \$100.⁷⁷ After 1838 he worked for his young master Charles Pettigrew at his sawmill

⁷³ Hardy & Brothers to Pettigrew, April 23, 1845, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill. See also Thomas Nash to Pettigrew, February 14, 1845, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Other bills for Nicey's care at this time were: Dr. Thomas Nash, bill for medical services, April 23, 1845, \$60.00, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh; Catherine Pollock's bill for Nicey's board, July 9, 1844 — April 9, 1845, \$77.00, *ibid.*; apothecary bill, April 14, 1845, \$26.81, *ibid.* It is interesting to note that in a few months Dr. Nash used this slight contact with Pettigrew as the basis for an attempt to borrow money.

⁷⁵ Samuel Bateman to Pettigrew, December 7, 1810, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁷⁶ Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, March 15, 1833, *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Belgrade Plantation Book, 1816-1840, *ibid.*

in Columbia, North Carolina. Holloway was a stubborn, independent but industrious⁷⁸ Negro who occasionally violated the plantation rules.⁷⁹ During Christmas, 1841, Charles took charge of Bonarva and brought Holloway from his mill at Columbia to work on the plantation. Ebenezer Pettigrew narrated the subsequent events:

Charles took command of this place at Christmas and I am exceedingly gratified. . . . Three days after he took command in cutting down new ground his fellow left him by his grandmother foolishly walked under a tree that was falling, a limb of which broke his collar bone, his shoulder, his arm close to the shoulder & the arm at the elbow. It is yet doubtful whether he will live & if he does the whole arm will be stiff & he of course useless.⁸⁰

During the next weeks Holloway received the best attention possible, but his arm became swollen and gangrene soon threatened his life. William Pettigrew concluded the story in this manner: "Dr. Lewis arrived here this morning about half after nine, and Dr. Hardison about ten. At a quarter after twelve they commenced amputating Holloways arm. At fourteen minutes of two life left his body."⁸¹

Slaves sometimes resisted the physician's efforts to aid them. Dr. Hardison described one such case in 1845:

I cannot persuade Jack to Submit to the operation of having his tooth extracted nor do threats avail anything — It was with great difficulty I succeeded in fixing the instrument on the tooth and as soon as I did so he gave my hand and instrument a violent knock and broke the tooth even with the gum —

His fortitude will not allow him to submit any further, I will be over at *Sunset* and perhaps your presence may give him more fortitude, the remains of the tooth can be extracted if he will be still.⁸²

Another interesting sidelight on the plantation physician is the case of a Negro driver questioning the orders of the physician and appealing to the master for a decision:

On Monday morning after Nelson came, he told me that his child was puney, & that the Doctor had said that twice in the day was often enough

⁷⁸ In 1832 Holloway produced seventeen bushels of corn on his private plot, which was more than the amount produced by any of the other slaves. Accounts with the Individual Negroes, 1831-1834, *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Davenport to Pettigrew, January 9, 1836, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁸⁰ Pettigrew to Johnston, February 22, 1842, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁸¹ William S. Pettigrew to Pettigrew, March 10, 1842, *ibid.*

⁸² Hardison to William S. Pettigrew, September 22, 1845, *ibid.*

for it to suck, & that he would have mentioned that he did not think it was, but he did not know that you would like it. I merely mention this that you may inquire into it. Nelson did not mention this in a tone of complaining at all. I think I asked him how his buntling was.⁸³

When Ebenezer Pettigrew was away he frequently asked or ordered his physicians to inspect the management of his plantation as well as the health of his Negroes. His reasons for doing so were numerous. In the first place, the physicians were educated men, and the overseers or Negroes in charge of operations were not always able to read and write. Secondly, overseers frequently neglected the health of the slaves and lacked an understanding of some problems of laborers that more detached observers had. The physicians could call attention to obvious abuses of power and responsibility. In the third place, Pettigrew always welcomed an unbiased criticism, and he knew that overseers frequently reported all well on the plantation without being aware of conditions that were apparent to others. Typical of this extraprofessional activity by the physicians was the work of Dr. Warren in 1832. In April Pettigrew toured the southern and eastern states for his health, traveling to New York via Florida, New Orleans, Nashville, Louisville, and Philadelphia, and returning directly to Bonarva on board his schooner *Lady of the Lake*.⁸⁴ Warren visited Bonarva plantation and recommended several tasks to the overseer Doctrine Davenport; superintended the preparation of corn for the market; opened Pettigrew's mail from his New York factors; and, when Mrs. Mary Pettigrew was concerned about the effect of Pettigrew's absence on her Belgrade plantation, Warren ordered Davenport to check the operation of that plantation every week.⁸⁵ In another instance Dr. Bell, who lived at the cottage on Belgrade plantation, vaccinated Pettigrew's Negroes to prevent a smallpox epidemic in the vicinity from spreading to Bonarva and Belgrade.⁸⁶

While infectious and epidemical diseases debilitated and impaired the efficiency of the adults, it was the Negro children who experienced the worst effects. Flux and fever were widespread in 1814 and Ebenezer noted, "the people in this part of the country

⁸³ Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, November 26, 1847, *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Pettigrew to Warren, March ?, 1832; Warren to Pettigrew, April 2, 1832, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

⁸⁵ Warren to Pettigrew, April 2, 1832, *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bell to Pettigrew, February 26, 1836, *ibid.*

are at this time very sickly . . . my negroes unusually so, a favorite little boy, who had been sick several days before my return has since died.”⁸⁷ Young Tamer, five-year-old son of the valuable slave Idabella,⁸⁸ died in 1822 of a “pain in the neck.”⁸⁹ In 1825 young Charles Pettigrew’s Negro playmate Shamrock died from ague and fever (malaria), and Ann Shepard Pettigrew commented, “poor fellow, Charles No doubt grieved much.”⁹⁰ Bilious fever frequently carried off the small Negroes. Pettigrew described one such epidemic: “I find the fever among my negroes of the most obstinate character. I had a little one in the 5th year taken the other day about sunrise. . . . I gave her a dose of phisick; at one she was very ill & after Sunrise the next day She died.”⁹¹

A complaint diagnosed as worms also increased the rate of infant mortality on the Pettigrew plantations. In 1817 Pettigrew commented, “one of Anns small children is at present sick from worms but I gave him a dose of callomel and set some of them scampering.”⁹² The effectiveness of the calomel on the worms is unknown but the young Negro died. Mela (Amelia), a valuable house servant, lost her small son Edmund in 1822 and Pettigrew commented, “I suppose with worms.”⁹³

Occasionally accidents to Negro children resulted in death. “Jim’s child, Medicus, was so seriously burnt, on last Tuesday week, as to occasion his death in a few hours. It is uncertain how it occurred But I presume, the child was standing too near the fire, and its clothes came in contact with the blaze.”⁹⁴

Whenever slave children were ill Pettigrew permitted the parents to visit them. His slaves were a mobile labor force and were shifted as needed from plantation to plantation. Occasionally an order would be sent to allow a particular slave to leave one plantation to visit his sick family at another plantation. Thus in midsummer, 1844, Ebenezer wrote his son William, “will you let Allen come to see his wife & child Wednesday night. The child is very low.”⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Pettigrew to Shepard, September 6, 1814, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

⁸⁸ Bill of sale for Idabella and Tamer, Daniel Pough to Pettigrew, December 30, 1818, *ibid.* Idabella and her eight-months-old child brought \$675, a good price in 1818.

⁸⁹ Pettigrew to Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew, September 17, 1822, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Pettigrew, January 10, 1824, *ibid.*

⁹¹ Pettigrew to Mrs. Bryan, September 19, 1836, *ibid.*

⁹² Pettigrew to Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew, January 20, 1817, *ibid.*

⁹³ Pettigrew to Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew, September 17, 1822, *ibid.*

⁹⁴ William S. Pettigrew to Pettigrew, January 13, 1848, *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, July 29, 1844, *ibid.*

If records kept by the planter are reliable, slave mortality on Bonarva plantation was surprisingly low. Pettigrew noted on a scrap of paper in 1823 that thirty-four males and eight females had been born on the plantation since its settlement in 1790, and that thirty-one of the forty-two — twenty-five males and six females — were still alive.⁹⁶ The deaths do not indicate an exceptional mortality for that period. In 1830 there were eighty-one slaves on Bonarva plantation, and in the next eighteen years thirty-three children were born and twenty-one slaves died. The natural increase was approximately 15 per cent.⁹⁷ These figures indicate no surprising mortality among slaves on Pettigrew's plantations and are a statistical tribute to his work in caring for the Negroes.

Undoubtedly one reason for the low rate of infant mortality was that physicians were employed to deliver slave babies. On only four occasions between 1816 and 1840 did Pettigrew record that a midwife was hired.⁹⁸ One of these instances occurred after his difficulty with Dr. Ellis. Pettigrew settled Ellis' account on February 24, 1818,⁹⁹ and no physician lived in the region until October, 1823, when Ann Blount Pettigrew noted the appearance of Dr. Old. "We have a little Doct here who is Quite skilful also quite genteel."¹⁰⁰ During the interim Pettigrew used a midwife, Mrs. Deborah Phelps, whose bill included professional visits to his wife and to the slaves:¹⁰¹

Aug	27	1818	By Delivery Media -----	\$ 2.00
October	4		Services previous to this date-----	11.30
Dec.	5		By deliver Ann -----	2.00
Feb.		1820	By delivery Amelia -----	2.00
	13		Ditto Isabel -----	2.00
May			Ditto Ann -----	2.00
Aug.	28		visit to Mrs & at two several times-----	3.00
Feb.	10	1821	Ditto to grace -----	2.00

Since there were always several old female Negro slaves who could act in emergencies for both white and black, Mrs. Phelps was not called again after 1821.

⁹⁶ "Negroes Born on the Plantation Since its Settlement in 1790 to 1823," by Ebenezer Pettigrew, 1823, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Belgrade Plantation Book, 1816-1840, *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Day Book, 1816, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

¹⁰⁰ Mrs. Ann Shepard Pettigrew to Mrs. Bryan, October 7, 1823, Bryan Papers.

¹⁰¹ Day Book, 1816, Pettigrew Papers, Raleigh.

From 1840 to 1848 an old Negress Airy served as chief plantation nurse and occasionally as a midwife. An illustration of her function on the plantation is contained in a letter from William Pettigrew to his father.

If Airy be not particularly engaged, will you do me the favour to allow her to accompany George to Belgrade, in order to give Lizzy some directions respecting Patience's child, which made its appearance at 3 o'clock this morning? The birth was quite sudden, otherwise I should, of course have taken the liberty of sending for Airy. I was awoke at half after two, & learning that no time was to be lost, sent for Dr. Hardison, but, although he was at home, the birth had occurred previous to his arrival.¹⁰²

The death of slaves from natural causes attracted the planter's special attention. When the trusted Negro driver Bill died in 1844, plantation routine was interrupted out of respect for the slave. William Pettigrew wrote to Charles L. Pettigrew at his adjoining plantation:

This will corroborate the news, which has ere this reached you of the death of our faithful old Servant, William. His loss is irreparable to me and in it our family has been deprived of a friend over whom they should weep. His body will be interred tomorrow afternoon. As Pa [Ebenezer Pettigrew] is desirous of treating his remains with all possible respect, he requests that you will allow Such of the people as you may think proper to come to Belgrade in the morning.¹⁰³

The old slave had been a driver, had kept a work journal while in charge of Belgrade plantation, and had earned the respect of the Pettigrews, who in turn had dignified his approaching old age with positions of trust. All of the Negroes who died received interment near the family burying ground,¹⁰⁴ but few of the younger Negroes were important enough to upset the well-coordinated plantation routine.

The records indicate that the problem of health on the Pettigrew plantations was one of serious concern for the planter. Although the slaves were frequently sick, the evidence is that they received the best available medical attention and that the planter concerned

¹⁰² William S. Pettigrew to Pettigrew, September 9, 1847, Pettigrew Papers, Chapel Hill.

¹⁰³ William S. Pettigrew to Charles L. Pettigrew, September 28, 1844, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ E.g., Holloway who died in 1842. "I Shall Have him buried a little the other side of the white graveyard." William S. Pettigrew to Pettigrew, March 10, 1842, *ibid.* There was no reference to a gathering of fellow slaves.

himself with their recovery. Pettigrew valued his Negroes not only for their labor but also because the lives of those "poor ignorant devils" were his responsibility.

It is interesting to note that this concern over the health of the slaves was carried over to the third generation. In 1852 William Pettigrew wrote to a New York physician inquiring about medical practice, suggested prescriptions to be checked, and requested an estimated "cost of a sufficiency of . . . medicines for a family of about seventy persons."¹⁰⁸ He mentioned the fact that he was not equipped to prescribe but followed (Wooster) *Beach's Family Physician* as a guide. He sought information on some of Beach's prescriptions based on such medicines as sudorific drops, Henry's cephalic snuff, emetic powder, mandrake physic, tincture of foxglove, slippery elm infusion, white poppy sirup, tonic urine tincture, horehound sirup, diaphoretic powder, bitter herbs, sirup of ipecac, mustard plasters, cough powders, horehound, boneset, flaxseed, bran, and pulmonary sirup. But William Pettigrew never had the opportunity to become proficient as a "Quack" for before 1861 White Sulphur Springs interfered and after 1861 war came to the Carolina coast.

Both William and his brother Charles depended on near-by physicians more than did either their father or grandfather. Undoubtedly this was due to improved communication as well as to the increased availability of trained physicians. When necessary, however, both prescribed remedies similar to those administered by their planter predecessors.

One of the reasons that these three generations of Pettigrews evidenced such interest in the health of the slaves was that the working efficiency of the Negroes was better if their physical condition was good. But careful sifting of the thousands of papers does not indicate that this was more important than the personal relationship existing between master and slave. Certainly where planters such as the Pettigrews lived and worked with their slaves, personal considerations loomed large along with the economics of the plantation. That they took an interest in the health of their slaves is a tribute to those individuals as well as indicative of their efforts to mitigate what was, at best, a harsh labor system.

¹⁰⁸ William S. Pettigrew to Dr. Hapsell, September 16, 1852, *ibid.*