

Edward Bliss Emerson, the Medical Tourist¹

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Traveling for health reasons was not an unusual event for wealthy and well-to-do members of society both in North America and Europe in the early 19th century. Edward Bliss Emerson is an example of those who traveled for health reasons. Books and newspapers at that time, like today, incited the infirm to travel to far-away places where the climate and the surroundings would take care of their ills. This essay will look at medical tourism, especially in the Caribbean, as seen through the eyes of Edward Emerson. Keywords: Tuberculosis, Medical tourism, Medical practices, Puerto Rico, St. Croix, Edward Bliss Emerson

Introduction

Edward Bliss Emerson, a younger brother of Ralph Waldo Emerson, would now be called a medical tourist. The term medical tourism is a modern day description within the travel industry for people who live in one country and travel to another to receive medical, surgical or dental care for either personal or financial reasons (Connell, 2011). Some insurance companies provide foreign coverage for specialty treatments because of the less expensive procedures in other countries. A recent survey sponsored by the United Nations, for example, indicated that in 2002, over 600,000 persons traveled to Bangkok and Phuket, Thailand, and 150,000 persons traveled to India in search of medical attention (Paffhausen, Peguero, & Roche Villareal, 2010, pp. 16-17). This has created global, multi-industry commercial interests, as evidenced by the existence of a not-for-profit trade association for providers of medical tourism and health care, medical travel facilitators, insurance companies and related institutions. Members and potential patients can keep informed through regularly published magazines, newsletters and other promotional information (Medical Tourism Magazine, n.d.).

In Edward Emerson's time, the wealthy and the well-to-do could afford Grand (or less-than-grand) Tours in Europe and the United States, in order to experience different cultures, and at times, to seek a climate to improve their health. But medical tourism was not a novelty during that period; the concept dates to antiquity. More than two thousand years earlier, people traveled around the Mediterranean to Epidaurus, in the Grecian Peloponnese, to the sanctuary in the alleged birthplace of Aesculapius, god of healing and son of Apollo. In Augustan times (44 B.C. – 69 A.D.), tourism on the Roman coastline was as much about recreation as about self realization, or relaxation, recuperation and health restoration (Connell, 2011). The journey itself was sometimes considered as possibly a treatment (Lomine, 2005). Aulus Cornelius Celsus (25 B.C. – 50 A.D.), the medical authority of his times (and for more than a millennium) wrote in *De medicina*: “in case of phthisis [tuberculosis], if the patient has the strength, a long sea voyage and change of air is called for...” (Celsus, 1971, p. 72). This was still considered valid advice in the nineteenth century.

¹ Edward B. Emerson's Caribbean journal and letters can be accessed online at <http://bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu/cdm/ref/collection/librosraros/id/1701>. Unless otherwise specified, his letters from that period can be found in that text. Permissions to quote from Edward Emerson's journal and letters have been granted by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Historical Society, and are gratefully acknowledged.

Edward was the most physically frail of the Emerson brothers, and in his short life suffered several health crises that forced him to take refuge in different locations in the United States and Europe (see Rabionet, 2014). In 1830 he moved from Boston to New York, where he worked and resided with his brother William, but he developed a severe pulmonary inflammation. According to a letter from brother Charles to grandfather Ezra Ripley, dated December 4, 1830:

Dr. Perkins, their best physician in N. Y. was called in – he applied a blister immediately – but said that Edward ought to go off directly, to the South. Since then we have had more letters – Edw. remains much the same – his cough is bad – ‘his strength, weakness’ – Dr. Perkins repeats his advice – and Edward is going away as soon as necessary arrangements be made... (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 131)

The treating physician was Dr. Cyrus Perkins, a graduate of Dartmouth College, and a friend of William Emerson (Rusk, 1939/1966). His methods fall within the acceptable standards for the treatment of “consumption” (tuberculosis) at the time. The choice of treatment, particularly long sea voyages, was outlined in at least two well-known publications, *Recherches sur la phthisie pulmonaire*, written by Gaspard L. Bayle and published in Paris in 1810, and *An inaugural dissertation on pulmonary consumption*, written by Dr. Edward Delafield, published in New York in 1816 (see also Ramírez de Arellano, 2014).

Why St. Croix?

Unfortunately, Edward does not explain in his journal why he chose St. Croix, which would seem at first sight a surprising location for treatment. St. Croix, just off the arch of the Caribbean islands, is located 40 miles south of St. Thomas and 70 miles southeast of Puerto Rico. It was then a Danish possession and a major sugar production center in the region. The popularity of St. Croix with visitors from the States, particularly those from the northeast, may have a simple explanation. The United States was the largest source of North American commerce for the island since the second half of the eighteenth century. Connecticut had

its share of merchants... who could afford to send and hire captains or younger members of the family to St. Croix with orders as to business operations. The greatest percentage of North American merchants, who had business contracts with the Danish West Indies ... were from Philadelphia. (Willis, 1963, p. 93)

Several well-known families such as the Kortrights, Angers, Beekman, Lynseus and Van Cortlands of New York and the Whites and Yards of Philadelphia, carried on the major portion of commerce for the North Americans at Christiansted and Fredericksted. “They were usually assisted by the local residents, [who were] related members of the family who sought their fortune in the Caribbean” (Willis, 1963, p. 94). This is confirmed by Edward's brother Charles, when he asks in a letter “Do you see Dr. C. and Mrs. Richard Derby? & others ... I name Northern Emigrants to make you feel that you are in a large company of friends” (Charles Chauncy to Edward, Feb.1, 1831, as cited in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, pp. 132-133). The journal entries identify additional people Edward knew from the States or with whom he becomes acquainted during his extended walks or rides to various estates.

The island, according to a visitor, had

not inaptly been styled ‘the Garden of the West Indies’, on account of its superior cultivation, beautiful homes and its fertility. Its scenery is extremely varied and possesses great interest to the student of nature and those who care to make it a health resort. (Taylor, 1888, p. 183)

Another traveler, a Lt. Brady, the brother of the plantation manager of Estate Manning’s Bay, published *Observations upon the State of Negro Slavery* in London in 1829 and said of the island:

its comparative salubrity is much vaunted by its inhabitants, and probably with reason, for there are no features in its topography that are particularly unfavorable to health.... During the first six months of the year, the climate is considered favorable to consumptive patients, by some of whom it is frequently resorted from the United States. (Brady, 1996, p. 110)

“The island is endeared to me”, wrote Sylvester Hovey, in 1838, “by the recollection of its balmy climate and beautiful scenery -- by many kindnesses received when I was in a condition most highly to appreciate them, and by the refined and generous hospitality, uniformly showed to my countrymen, who have gone there for health” (Hovey, 1838, p. 37-38). In another passage, he expressed:

St. Croix is justly considered the most delightful of the West India islands. In its natural fertility, beauty of scenery, salubrity of climate and in the facilities for traveling it yields to no other. The invalid, who goes there to escape the rigors of a northern winter, will find not only a balmy atmosphere and a profusion of the ordinary luxuries of tropical countries, but, what is more to a ‘a stranger in a strange land,’ the sympathy of warm and generous hearts and a noble hospitality. (Hovey, 1838, p. 24)

The island’s “salubrity” could also be observed in its inhabitants, if local physician reports to government were reliable. The term “consumption” appeared in their annual reports only in reference to the “invalids” from North America who started visiting St. Croix in the 1830s. There is no reference to this term regarding the local population (Jensen, 2012, p. 93). In contrast, the island received so many invalids in search of better health that the influx fostered an economic sector of the activities necessary to take care of the needs of the visitors: transportation, housing, service, medical care, and of course, publications for prospective visitors.

The Care of Invalids in St. Croix

A contemporary of Edward’s, whom we know only by his pseudonym, “Invalid”, published *A Winter in the West Indies and Florida* (1839), provided information on the charges for medical attention and compared prices with those of New York: the price of bread was doubled; fresh pork was good and cheap (only ten cents a pound); poultry in general was indifferent, but 33% less expensive. Board cost ten dollars a week, and washing cost about the same as in New York. “Invalid” described the quantity and conditions of boarding houses and their occupants as follows:

There were six boarding-houses here [Frederiksted], entertaining in all about seventy American boarders, about one half of whom were invalids, and the

residue their husbands, wives or companions; of course, every house was filled to overflowing. [...] The great number of invalids makes it seem more like a hospital than a boarding-house, and nervous people are not at all benefitted by having so many patients before their eyes, hearing the stories of their sufferings and sympathising in their despair. A person, however, who is not alarmed at beholding hard cases of disease, will find some, if not all, of these boarding houses very comfortable..." (Invalid, 1839, pp. 54-55)

This crowding is demonstrated by some of the published journals written more or less contemporaneously with Edward's visit to St. Croix. One writer declared: "I found myself one of thirty passengers, all but seven of whom were seeking, in a milder climate, that boon without which life is bereft of its chief enjoyments" (Weed, 1866, p. 315). Another related: "Our ship's company consisted of about 20 individuals (mostly in search of warmer climate and better health) who had taken the passage, in this accommodating little ship, for Santa Cruz" (Gurney, 1840, p. 4).

During the 1830s there were at least four packet boats with service from New York to St. Croix. These were the brig *Eliza*, under Captain Lockwood, which was owned by De Forest & Co., the proprietor of two plantations in St. Croix; the *Camilla* with Captain Watlington, which carried about twenty passengers; the *Cornelia*, with capacity for fifty passengers, which made a 9 or 10 day crossing (however, the sailing could last up to 18 or 20 days); the ship *Emily*, under Captain Davis, which was owned by Aymar & Co. of New York (mentioned in Edward's journal, 14 November 1831). The *Emily* and the *Eliza* were known to make five or six voyages annually. There was also the brig *Rosalie*, which regularly sailed from Philadelphia to St. Croix. An occasional schooner sailed from Norfolk (Virginia), Savannah (Georgia) or Wilmington (North Carolina) (Weed, 1866, p. 340).

If the climate was a factor and there were close ties to the island and the eastern seaboard, the fact that there were numerous eminent physicians on the island must have been a consideration to move there in search of health. Hans West, in his *Account of St. Croix*, written in 1799, stated that some of the traders were men of science. "Among the latter I know ten mostly residents of plantations, who are educated doctors and have more or less active practice" (West, 2004, p. 64). He mentioned Dr. John Paul Pflug, who was born in Prussia, studied surgery in Copenhagen, and practiced medicine in the city of Kiel, in Holstein, until he moved to St. Croix, where he died. There was Dr. Thomas, born in St. Christopher and raised in Scotland before studying medicine in Copenhagen and becoming a physician in 1789 (Willis, 1963, p. 39). There was also a Dr. Clarkstone, about who little is known. West mentioned that in the case of illness, remedies could be found as in a location of similar size elsewhere. In addition to numerous doctors who resided on their own plantations, and who confined their practice primarily to those plantations and their friends, the town of Christiansted boasted of men who had excelled at the medical schools of Europe. Each of these doctors had his own pharmacy, from which he provided to their patients' needs.

"Invalid" expressed his concerns for the increasing number of "pulmonary complaints in the United States," and addressed the need for an appropriate climate for "invalids," as patients of tuberculosis or consumption, were called. The preface states:

Within a few years past, many eminent physicians have been urging their patients to go to the West Indies, and many have pursued the advice with decided advantage... The author of this little volume, after having suffered the effects of northern winters for several years ... was induced, by the strong recommendation of his physicians, and the increased severity of his disease, in the early part of the winter of 1838-39, to visit the island of St. Croix, which

was supposed to be the best of the West Indies for climate...” (Invalid, 1839, pp. vii-viii)

This anonymous author provided his readers with important information regarding facilities and medical care in St. Croix, which he described as “the very best [that] can be procured”, insofar as there were “several eminent physicians residing there.” He specifically mentioned a Dr. William Stedman (1764-1844), who initially went to the island for his health at the age of eighteen and was then “hardy and robust at the age of about sixty” (Invalid, 1839, p. 54). According to research on the health of the enslaved population, Dr. Stedman was the only physician who mentioned “invalids” in his annual medical report to government. “He seems to have been a prominent physician who made it his specialty to treat this group of people” (Niklas Jensen, personal communication, January 24, 2012).

Thurlow Weed, who also visited St. Croix, reported on the medical services offered on the island, indicating there was one physician on each estate. The physicians were paid one dollar a year for their medical services to each slave, and the apothecaries who furnished medicines were paid twenty cents each year for each slave. Weed mentioned an eminent physician on the island, Dr. Stevens (whom Edward Emerson met) who could provide his patients “all that medical science and experience can do for them” (Weed, 1866, p. 373).

One issue that surfaced a few years before Edward’s arrival in St. Croix involved the apothecaries or pharmacies on the island, an important adjunct to medical treatment. In 1819, Peder Eggert Benzon, who approved the pharmaceutical examination in Copenhagen, managed to extend his jurisdiction to St. Croix by obtaining the titles of official inspector for all pharmacies and inspector of all imports of drugs. By 1821, he was recommending the expulsion of all other pharmacists from the island because they were not providing appropriate medications. It appears he was trying to squelch the competition. In December 1826, the Danish government approved a *Privilegium exclusivum*, a royal Danish monopoly. The following year Benson opened his *Pharmacie* in Christiansted, advertising leeches (for blood letting) for sale at the Pharmacy in King’s street No. 50 (Graffenhagen, 1996).

Edward’s Experience

Edward’s journal opens with his arrival in the Caribbean. In contrast to other travelers, he did not describe his experience during the voyage. His view of the region includes the islands of St. Bart, Nevis, St. Kitts, “Eustatia” and Saba (Emerson journal, 2 January 1831). These islands are off course for a direct voyage from New York, but Edward’s explanation reminds us that the wind dictated the trajectories of sailing ships. Throughout the pages of his journal, Edward makes constant references to his hope of improved health, through the salubrious environment. Recently arrived, he commented: “...the climate grows kindly & perhaps he [the invalid] gets well by some of the many remedies which nature here holds to every sense” (5 January 1831). After setting himself up, he followed a routine, starting with breakfast, horseback riding or walking for an hour and a half, lounging, reading, some more walking and an hour long bath in the afternoon. During his rides he visited numerous estates and held lengthy conversations with the owners and other visitors. He found “...politeness seems to abound in St. Croix...” (4 March 1831). During those outings he tasted local dishes and many tropical fruits. He mentions soursop as good for “invalids.” He attended several evening events at some of the plantations, as well as on visiting ships. He does not mention being treated by any of the well-known local physicians, and only once does he note taking some medication prescribed by his New York physician (21 February 1831).

Edward was visited by Dr. Stedman once (26 January 1831), but does not mention being treated by him. Dr. Stedman was acquainted with a Dr. Mitchell, whose “early powers he described” (the nature of these powers is not defined, so it is unknown if they were related to healing); a Dr. Wistar-Emmett and McIntosh, without any indication of the nature of the acquaintances. Edward later referred to a Dr. Stevens (half brother of Alexander Hamilton), who traveled to Scotland to study medicine, where he “made his famous experiment on digestion,” and also a “young Dr. Stevens,” a surgeon (20 March 1831).

At one point, Edward noted he was living in “the climate of Paradise” (23 January 1831). Charles wrote to William Emerson, “I have a letter from Edward dated Feb. 5, he speaks of the Eden he is in...” (1 March 1831, Massachusetts Historical Society Ms N-251, item 186). In addition, Edward’s notes and especially his recovery indicate that his sojourn in St. Croix was beneficial to his health. Edward’s journal confirms what contemporary “invalids” wrote about St. Croix. It was a wonderful place to recover one’s health, marked by the friendliness, politeness and hospitality of its people.

Edward and those other visitors to St. Croix during the 1830s documented in their letters and journals the now-forgotten popularity of St. Croix as a health spa supported by the ease of travel from the States, the congeniality of its people and the medical services provided by its physicians.

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