

The William Beaumont Papers: A Life in Letters

by Philip Skroska

The Becker Medical Library holds the correspondence, notebooks and casebooks of William Beaumont, the physician known for his landmark publication on human digestion. Beaumont came to St. Louis, Missouri in 1835. He took part in the creation of the first medical professional society and the first medical school west of the Mississippi. His collection sheds light not only on his research and career, but also on the medical profession in the burgeoning American West.

The Becker Medical Library holds the correspondence, notebooks and casebooks of William Beaumont, the physician widely regarded as the “Father of Gastric Physiology” for his landmark 1833 publication on human digestion: *Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juice and the Physiology of Digestion*.

In 1822, while stationed at Fort Michilimackinac on Mackinac Island, he treated Alexis St. Martin for a gunshot blast to the abdomen. Alexis survived, but the wound healed into a fistula allowing Beaumont to peer directly into St. Martin’s stomach. Being able to observe the workings of human digestion, his experiments settled the debate as to whether digestion was a chemical process.¹

It was an accident of history which gave Beaumont this scientific opportunity, but it was his inquisitiveness and determination which resulted in his self-published book and his fame. Sir William Osler said of Beaumont, “[he] is the pioneer physiologist of this country, the first to make an important and enduring contribution to science.”²



Philip Skroska is an Archivist at the Bernard Becker Medical Library at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. Contact: skroskap@wustl.edu

The letters and journals which make up the Beaumont Papers offer a unique insight into the man and his life. The challenges he faced throughout his career foreshadow many concerns for today’s medical profession. His constant efforts to secure funding for his research, his relationships with would-be collaborators, the efforts to publish, and disagreements with colleagues and professional associations, are very relevant concerns for the modern medical practitioner and scientist.

His writing also touches on his inner thoughts and the times in which he lived. As a physician, military officer, civic leader, husband, and father, Beaumont’s life offers a glimpse into the society of the 19th century American West. His writings cover topics as diverse as the War of 1812, life in frontier towns, and modes of travel before the age of railroads.

On Wednesday, June 14, 1820, Beaumont was in Detroit. He was 34, newly re-commissioned as a surgeon in the U.S. Army, and eager to set out after a wait of 10 days for favorable transport. He had been brooding for the last two weeks with nothing to do and little to occupy his time but reading. Before dawn he boarded the steamboat *Walk-in-the-Water* and left for his new posting on Mackinac Island. There was a fine breeze and fair weather, but in his journal Beaumont wrote down what was on his mind.

*“Adopted the following maxim this day. ‘Trust not to man’s honesty . . . Deal with all as though they were rogues & villains, it will never injure an honest person & it will always protect you from being cheated by friend or foe. Selfishness, or villainy, or both combined, govern the world, with a very few exceptions.’ ”*³

His dark mood shows his uncertainty of the future and a certain amount of heartbreak. Beaumont had left his fiancé, Deborah Green Pratt, behind in New York while he reported to this new posting and was missing her terribly. On the top of the next page in his journal he wrote a poem.

*“Oh D. my heart a vacuum feels,
Your image only I can see;
And wheresoever my body reels
My spirit wings its way to thee”⁴*

His earliest notebooks, written just after beginning his medical apprenticeship, reveal his youthful idealism.

“[T]o assist mankind by curing their diseases & and repairing their constitutions, is preferable to being commended by them, & is highly conducive to tranquility of mind, . . .”⁵

In 1810 Beaumont apprenticed himself to Dr. Benjamin Chandler of St. Albans, Vermont as this was then the typical method of medical education. In addition to journaling his personal thoughts he also kept a detailed notebook of his medical training, including case reports and comments on available treatments such as bleedings and “evacuations, by Emetics & cathartics.”

“Intermittants [fevers] –

Causes- Marsh Miasmata – damp houses, evening dews, lying on the ground, . . .

Regimen. Acidulated drinks, mucilages, broths, wine, whey etc. with sometimes, twenty or thirty drops of Laudanum.”⁶

After two years of training Beaumont received his medical license from the Vermont Medical Society. When the War of 1812 broke out Beaumont joined the U.S. army as a surgeon’s mate and served much of his time treating soldiers at York [now Toronto, Canada] where a major battle occurred in the spring of 1813. On April 28, 1813, he writes:

“Just got time, to suspend capital operations [sic] whilst I can take a little refreshment to sustain life, for the first time since four o’clock yesterday – return again to the bloody scene of distress to continue dressing, Amputating, & Trepaning. Dressed rising of 50 patients, from simple contusions to the worst compound fractures more than half of the last description – perform’d two cases of Amputation, & one of Trepaning – 12 o’clock PM retired to rest my much fatigued body & soul.”⁷

As he prepared to leave Detroit on that day in 1820 he had already served his countrymen in war and would soon marry and begin a family. He could not have suspected what the next fifteen years would bring.

By July 23, 1835, William had married his sweetheart, Deborah Green, and had a daughter and a son. His family had just arrived in Missouri where William had been assigned to Jefferson Barracks outside of St. Louis. The



Portrait of William Beaumont

Along with his papers Beaumont’s family also donated a fine portrait of him executed by notable portrait artist, Chester Harding.

publication of his experiments on St. Martin two years earlier had already made him one of the most famous physicians in the country. He was given permission by the Surgeon General to start a private practice in addition to his military duties and was quickly inundated with private cases and pleas by young physicians to enter practice with him. The attention would only grow as the city grew in population. St. Louis was one of the fastest growing cities in the country. From 1835 to 1840 the population of St. Louis doubled to 16,400 residents. In the 1840s the population quadrupled to nearly 78,000. In addition to its permanent residents, St. Louis was the Gateway to the West and incredible numbers of people would pass through the city. Just in April 1836, more than 5,000 newcomers came to St. Louis.⁸

At first, William enjoyed the fellowship and hospitality of his fellow physicians and surgeons. He became a leader and strong supporter of professional camaraderie. On Christmas of 1835 William Beaumont and several other local physicians met at the Masonic Hall where they decided to form a professional society, then called the Medical Society of Missouri.⁹ The Society, now known as the St. Louis Metropolitan Medical Society, was also the originating body of the Missouri State Medical Association. In 1850, the Society adopted a resolution to “*devise a plan . . . by which the entire profession of the state can be brought together . . .*” The

result was the Missouri State Medical Society which had its first annual meeting in 1851.¹⁰

Having finally found a home after years of traveling the country from one military appointment to another, William stayed in St. Louis until his death in 1853. Many of his journals and papers were kept by his daughter, Sarah, and eventually donated to Washington University. The William Beaumont Papers at the Bernard Becker Medical Library is perhaps the largest collection of Beaumontiana in existence, although additional collections can be found at Yale University, the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, the National Archives, and at smaller, local repositories throughout the upper Midwest. None duplicate the holdings of the others. The dispersion of his writings is the natural result of his correspondence. A good portion of his writing he sent to family, friends and colleagues.”¹¹

Interest in the fate of Beaumont’s papers began in the 1890s, when Sir William Osler championed Beaumont’s place in medical history. However, the papers might not have been saved if not for Jesse Myer, MD. Myer was an associate editor for the *Interstate Medical Journal* published in St. Louis by its founder and chief editor, James Moores Ball, MD. It was Ball who first called Myer’s attention to the pioneering work of Beaumont. Myer soon learned that Beaumont’s daughter, the elderly Mrs. Sarah Beaumont Keim, was still living in St. Louis and had kept two old chests full of yellowing manuscripts and letters. Myer approached her with his desire to write a biography on Beaumont, if the material was made available to him. Working with a small basketful of documents at a time, Myer began going through the letters. Tragically, Myer was diagnosed with leukemia soon after starting. Reading and writing at a feverish pace he was able to complete the biography and lived long enough to see it into print.¹²

Beaumont’s account of treating the wounded during the Battle of York, April 27, 1813.

Beaumont writes of the scene in the hospital:

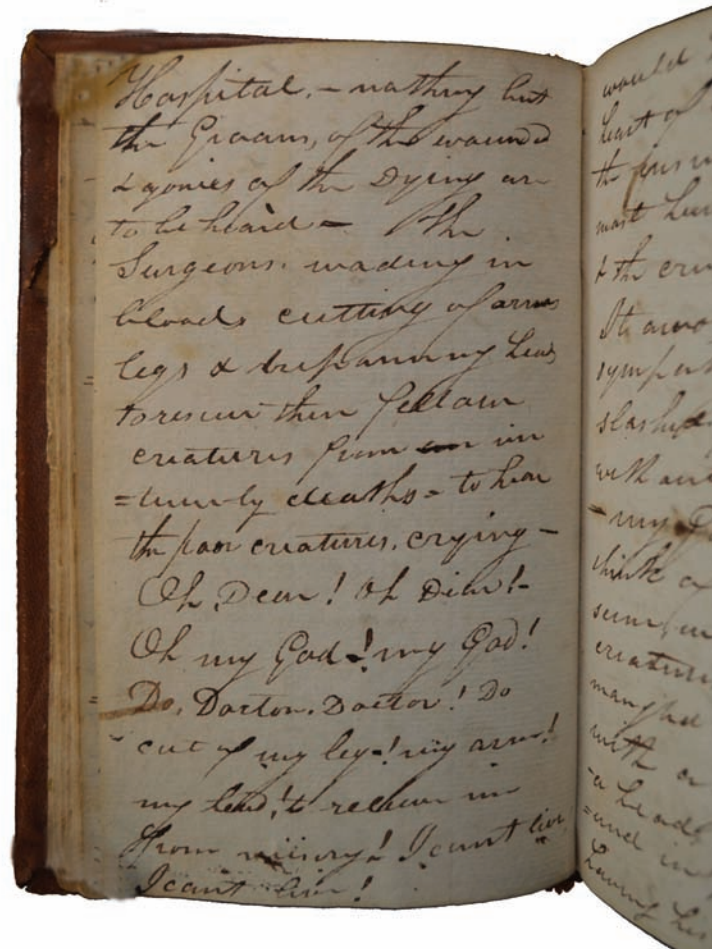
“ – nothing but the Groans, of the wounded & agonies of the Dying are to be heard – The Surgeons wading in blood cutting [off] arms, legs & trepanning heads to rescue their fellow creatures from untimely deaths – to hear the poor creatures, crying – Oh, Dear! Oh Dear! Oh my God! My God! Do, Doctor, Doctor! Do cut off my leg! My arm! My Head! To relieve me from misery! I can’t live! I can’t live!”

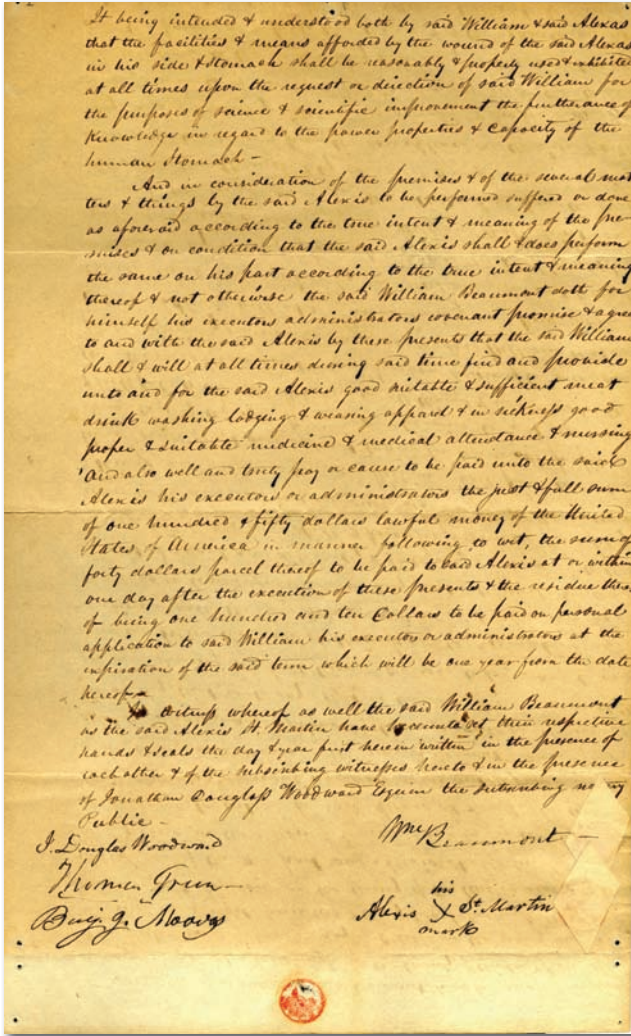
Source: Beaumont W. Notebook kept by Beaumont during the War of 1812. Series 2, Box 21, Folder 2. William Beaumont Papers. Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives. Washington University School of Medicine, Saint Louis, Missouri.

After the publication of Myer’s biography, the Beaumont Papers were presented to the Washington University School of Medicine by Miss Lucretia Beaumont Irwin, Sarah’s daughter, and grand-daughter of William Beaumont. Sarah had once entertained the idea of gifting the papers elsewhere. William Osler had made inquiries with her for procuring the papers on behalf of the Office of the Surgeon General. But in an interesting coincidence, Sarah had been fond friends with Washington University’s president, Robert S. Brookings. In the early 1880s, before Brookings had begun his association with the University, he rented an upper floor in Sarah’s home. There they co-hosted many parties and society events. Sarah also helped Brookings polish and refine his social graces.¹³

At first the Beaumont Papers were housed in a special room in the Medical School’s library, but in the 1940s changes to the library building forced the collection to be moved from one storage area to another. Beginning in 1960, the collection was reassessed and an attempt was made to better describe the letters. If Beaumont had an original order for filing the documents, it had long been lost. His correspondence has now been placed in a chronological order.¹⁴

In the late 1960s the Beaumont collection was chosen to test the use of computers in producing indexes for archival collections. At the instigation of Estelle Brodman, PhD, Librarian and Professor of Medical History at the





Contract between William Beaumont and Alexis St. Martin, October 1832

As he was finalizing his research for publication, Beaumont had Alexis St. Martin submit to a legal contract binding him for one year to “obey, suffer & comply with all reasonable & proper orders or experiments,” in return for \$150 plus “good, suitable & sufficient meat, drink, washing, lodging and wearing apparel.” St. Martin, unable to write his own name, signed the document with an “x.”

Source: Beaumont W, St. Martin A. Four articles of agreement, October 16, 1832–November 7, 1833. Series 1, Box 3, Folder 23. William Beaumont Papers. Bernard Becker Medical Library Archives. Washington University School of Medicine, Saint Louis, Missouri. http://digitalcommons.wustl.edu/beaumont_1828_1832/6

Washington University School of Medicine, a database with descriptions of Beaumont’s correspondence was entered into an automated system devised to output various indexes sortable by name, place, subject, and date. Library staff patiently keypunched hundreds of IBM cards.¹⁵ Those IBM cards, the indexing program and the original database no longer exist. However, the descriptions of the documents live on today in an updated online database. And, unlike in 1960, digital imagery of Beaumont’s original

correspondence can now be viewed by anyone with access to the internet.

The state of medical publishing in the 1830s presented Beaumont with a number of challenges. Deciding to self-publish and self-promote his book, he astutely gave a few copies away to influential people, including Missouri’s first U.S. Senator, Thomas Hart Benton.¹⁶ But he was constantly trying to recover the costs of printing and distributing the book. He even went so far as to give his cousin, Samuel Beaumont, power of attorney and authorized him to

“ask, demand, sue for, recover and receive from Lilly, Wait and Co. now or late Booksellers of Boston, . . . for the balance due from them for . . . five hundred copies of a book entitled, “Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juice and Physiology of Digestion.”¹⁷

Eventually, his private practice in St. Louis was lucrative enough that he was beginning to feel comfortable. Then in September 1839, Surgeon General Thomas Lawson issued special order #48 directing Beaumont to leave St. Louis and to report to Fort Brooks, Florida.¹⁸

There had been a long simmering animosity between Beaumont and his commanders, in part because of his burgeoning private practice.¹⁹ He threatened to resign his commission unless he was allowed to stay permanently in St. Louis. Behind the scenes he had his friend, U.S. Army Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, press his case. Unfortunately Hitchcock reported, “The mischief is done. . . . God bless you in your entrance into civil life.”²⁰ For his part, Beaumont felt that, “my pride spirit and indignation were excited at such gross and egregious injustice towards me.”²¹

As his professional stature increased in St. Louis, he also became involved in a number of controversial cases. He was censored by the Medical Society of Missouri for having run an advertisement announcing his new partner, James Sykes.²² He was also caught up in two cases of medical malpractice.²³ His testimony in the Darnes-Davis Case is in the Beaumont Papers.²⁴ The experiences left him at times frustrated with his fellow Missouri physicians. “Invidious, jealous and obsolescent minds . . . blockheads and dunces,” he called them.²⁵

Near the end of his life Beaumont’s fame weighed more on his mind. He began to feel that his original experiments had been a wasted opportunity due to his scientific naivety at the time. “I must retrieve my past ignorance, imbecility & professional remises of a quarter century, or more . . . before I die.”²⁶

In a letter to his cousin, William refers to “that old, fistulous Alexis” and his hope to convince St. Martin to

travel to St. Louis for more experiments.²⁷ He wrote repeatedly to St. Martin asking him to participate in more experiments. In one letter he address Alexis as “*Mon Ami,*” and ends with this exhortation, “*and now Alexis, I believe this to be the best thing you can do for your family, for yourself, for me and for science.*”²⁸ But he and Alexis would not meet again.

After Beaumont’s death in 1853 and into the early 20th century professional medical societies in Michigan, New York and St. Louis continued to honor Beaumont with an almost cult-like reverence. In St. Louis, annual ceremonies were held at Beaumont’s gravesite in Bellefontaine Cemetery. Historic sites in Connecticut, New York, and Wisconsin were dedicated to him. Several hospitals throughout the United States would bear his name and in St. Louis, so would a city high school and a medical school (today the Saint Louis University School of Medicine). The Missouri State Medical Association would remember him as a physician, “*beloved by all who knew him.*”²⁹

Idolized as the first U.S. physician to make a lasting contribution to medical knowledge, he was still a man who knew disappointment, longing, pride, and happiness. His journals and letters found in the Bernard Becker Medical Library leave a lasting insight into the man and his times.

If you would like to read William Beaumont’s letters, over 500 of them have been scanned and are available online at the Bernard Becker Medical Library’s Digital Commons at <http://digitalcommons.wustl.edu/beaumont/>

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Disclosures

None reported.

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