

# An Old and Bitter Storyteller

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*There is a bitters bottle that few have seen. It is exceedingly rare; experts claim there are less than a half dozen still in existence. It was made before the Civil War and bears all the hallmarks of bottles from that early era: a slightly rough birth scar marks where the fragile newborn was severed from its iron pontil umbilical cord; an imperfectly applied collar swaddles the stretched and twisted neck; air bubbles and potstones fill the glass like a frozen galaxy of stars and planets, and whittle marks hint that it shivered in the cold embrace of the glassmaker's mold. This was not one of those gloriously fancy figural bitters; it sat plainly on the store shelf next to dozens of other aqua-colored bottles. Its only claim to fame was the name bequeathed by its creator. It is embossed on three sides, the words stretching into space, demanding to be noticed, purchased, used, and remembered. This simple glass antiquity is an old and bitter storyteller – the last testament of one of the thousands of forgotten healers of the nineteenth century. Its sole purpose now is to tell its story to all who will listen.*

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Samuel and Mary Eastman raised their crops and their children in the rugged foothills to Maine's tallest mountains. Living deep in the new state's interior was not for the weak-willed or those of delicate constitution; even the town's name – Strong, Maine – intimated the kind of person best suited to live there as well as the character of those the area would produce. Samuel and Mary met the challenge, exceeding the life expectancy of adults of that era by a good measure (living to eighty and seventy-nine years respectively), and having an extra large family of a dozen children. Mother and father were exemplars for their offspring, demonstrating a drive to survive and thrive. Mary ran the home and raised the children, usually while pregnant with still another, and Samuel served over the years as a state senator, justice of the peace, captain in the militia, and a member of the governor's executive council, all in addition to farming for his family's food and profit.

The Eastman farm yielded a bounteous harvest. Three sons became lawyers, two others became doctors and one a banker; one daughter married a lawyer and the other a ship captain. Most of the Eastman boys traveled far from home to find their futures. One son ventured to and died in New

Orleans in the terrible cholera year of 1832. Four other brothers pioneered the new Wisconsin Territory, apparently encouraged, as were thousands of other New Englanders, by the government's cheap sale of land to promote rapid settlement of the region. Benjamin and Harry Eugene were the first Eastman brothers to go west. In 1840 Benjamin settled in Platteville, Wisconsin, near the Iowa border, where he became a two-term Congressman after the territory became a state. Harry arrived in the same year and was later elected the third mayor of Green Bay. Another of the adventurous sons was Ezekiel Porter Eastman, who traveled to the new land of his brothers shortly after his graduation in 1838 from the Medical College of Maine and his marriage to Mary Macomber in 1840.

Ezekiel had been married just one month back in Strong when brother Benjamin wrote to a physician friend in Boston, urging him to marry quickly and come to Wisconsin, promising excellent prospects for his medical business. The old friend declined, but within the next few years, Ezekiel, as a newlywed young doctor, took up the challenge because Eastmans knew how to grow a challenge into an opportunity. In 1842 Ezekiel and Mary made the long journey west to the frontier

territory, settling into a young village on Lake Michigan called Milwaukee that had reached a population of 1,700 inhabitants a few years earlier. Writing to his father from there in the spring of 1843, Ezekiel reported that he had just endured what the Indians were saying had been the severest winter in eighteen years. He told his father that immediately upon his arrival he had purchased eighteen parcels of land and was in the process of building two fine brick homes, each with three bedrooms, a cellar, and a kitchen. He had also teamed up with one of the town's oldest settlers, Dr. Jesse S. Hewett, who was a quiet, unassuming man and good physician but a poor businessman. "[He] has no faculty of getting business or husbanding it," Ezekiel wrote, "I have the whole care and control of the books and co[mpany] affairs. He is just the right kind of a man for my partner ..." Ezekiel's doctoring route ran all the way across the territory over to the Platteville region. He also wrote that the next day he was going to leave "for the Mississippi country to collect some fo[u]r or five hundred Dullars that is due me. There I shall see Ben ... The tour that I am about to make would be thought to be a long one in Maine. I shall go west two hundred miles ..."

Before he closed his letter, the fledgling doctor gave his father some medical instructions to pass on to family back home in Strong. For one of his Porter cousins, he prescribed a syrupy mixture of plant materials: rhubarb, balsam of tolu, bloodroot, and dried juice of the poppy flower – opium. As the final hurdle in his medical studies at Bowdoin College, Ezekiel had written his dissertation on the benefits of opium for the cure of rheumatism, asserting that when administered without "timidity" the patient experienced "a kind of delightful ecstasy, forgets his sufferings, &c." He demonstrated that same zeal for extreme dosing and exhibited further faith in the healing power of plants by directing his sisters to virtually marinate themselves in a broth of the common yellow dock weed. The large, dark roots of this plant cut open to reveal yellow pulp. The liquid that was drawn off from boiling the yellow matter was much admired for its gentle laxative effect, thus flushing out sickness or, if used externally, washing it off the body. An 1844 herbal medicine book revealed, "The reason that the value of this article is so little known ... is because the patient does not

take enough of it, and does not follow it up long enough.” Ezekiel was already trying in 1843 to convince his sisters not to make this mistake, urging them to make it part of their daily rituals, “get some yellow dock – steep it – drink it and wash in it every day for months ...” He urged his father to tell his sister Julia “not to fail to do so. She must persevere in its use ... if she [does] she will be cured.” He insisted that his other sister Frances should also use yellow dock and wrote, “I have cured three or four of the same disease within the past year.” He suspected, however, that Julia would not hold much stock in his advice, so he teased that if his cure seemed too “far fetched,” he would get some big-name doctor to tell her the same thing.

Although Ezekiel was successfully enduring the rugged travel, weather, and experiences of doctoring over extraordinary distances, Wisconsin might have proved too rugged an experiment for Mary. By the end of that year 1843, she was pregnant with their first child in a largely untamed land that was still populated with Indians, beset by severe winters, and far from their families back in New England. Mary refused to travel back, even for a visit, without Ezekiel, so they left together and for good. Charles Follen Eastman was born in August of 1844 in the tranquil, tame little village of Monroe, Maine – perhaps too peaceful and quiet for Ezekiel to practice his profession and sustain his family.

In the spring of 1846, Ezekiel, Mary, and their baby relocated to bustling Lynn, Massachusetts. The young healer and his family settled into the same neighborhood as several other branches of the Eastman family tree that had also relocated from hometown Strong. All five families lived in close proximity to each other, within a mile radius of the very large town’s central business district. But there was more than just familiar faces that attracted them to this seaside town.

Ezekiel was thrilled to get an invitation from the residents of Nahant (a community on a peninsula that extends into the ocean from Lynn) to be their physician. Nahant was a popular summer coastal resort for the affluent, hosting several hotels, including one that was said to be the largest in New England at the time. The opportunity for many patients, many of whom were wealthy, appealed to the young doctor whose prospects had been far fewer and bleaker in the remote backwoods villages of Maine and far less arduous than his

practice on the Wisconsin frontier. In March, 1846 he wrote to his brother-in-law back in Strong,

I am three miles from Lynn at the watering place of the United States. I was hired by the inhabitants of the place to tend them for four hundred and fifty Dollars a year. In summer my charges to strangers will amount to more than my salary. I spend now four hours each day at Lynn where [I earn] an average two Dollars and a half each day ...

A doctor on salary was a rarity indeed and Ezekiel’s retainer was especially generous because he was free to collect additional fees from the wealthy summer tourists to Nahant’s hotels and to spend a good part of each day doing the same in Lynn. It was also probably much easier to collect his earnings from the town than it would have been to gather it from an equivalent of many dozens or even hundreds of individual patients.

It was not always easy to ply his profession, however, because the population seemed plagued by excessive health. In 1847 a cousin of Ezekiel’s wrote, “I have heard of no colds or bowel complaints in Lynn (or rarely) this summer. Doct. Eastman says it is alarmingly healthy here just now.” Again in January of 1853, Mary Eastman was not certain whether to root for healthy neighbors or her husband the healer, “Notwithstanding this unseasonable weather – there is no severe sickness here as yet – Should we be glad or sorry?”

Another challenge came from medical competition. One of his sickly relatives in Lynn found herself surrounded by a dizzying array of healers; she relied on the psychic insights of a clairvoyant healer, the cold-water baths of a hydropathist, the advice of a minister turned healer, and the pills of her cousin, Ezekiel Eastman.

In late 1846 Ezekiel went on a whirlwind tour of England, France, Germany, and Belgium to learn the water cure. (Also known as hydropathy, the water cure started in Austrian Silesia [now located in Czechoslovakia], and was becoming the rage in the late 1840s. The new healing regimen advocated the use of water only, almost always cold, in the form of baths, showers, and virtual mummification in soaked sheets, to cure all ills.) Ezekiel quickly soaked up information on the new healing method and upon his return in the beginning of 1847, began his hydropathic

practice at Dracut Heights near Lowell, Massachusetts, in an establishment with enough space for sixty patients. He was apparently at that facility for a very short time, however; by May it was already being run by different doctors. Upon Ezekiel’s return to Lynn, a cousin named Oliver Porter wrote to his wife who was at a water cure facility in Maine, urging her to come back home because during her absence, cousin Ezekiel had become a capable water cure healer. Oliver heard that he had used the water cure for typhus fever “with excellent success.” For most of 1849, Ezekiel again tried to run his own water cure facility, this time in Gorham, Maine, but that effort also ended in under a year and he came back to Lynn again. Upon his return, he was willing to try the next new thing – homeopathy. Homeopathic medicine was repeatedly diluted (often in a sweetened base) to minimize the presence of the single medicinal ingredient it contained because it was believed that potency increased as the active ingredient’s presence was decreased. After only a brief effort with the tiny pills, Ezekiel replaced his newest experiment with the botanical



medicines that he had learned to trust in his earliest years as a healer.

In the midst of the many medical philosophies being practiced, some physicians practiced eclecticism – a blend of medicines and therapies from the various systems, according to the needs of the particular case. Ezekiel Porter Eastman was one such eclectic healer: he had immersed himself in the water cure and taken a little dose of homeopathy, but he also administered medicines with gusto, which was considered totally unnecessary by water cure purists and completely improper by homeopaths. His success was rewarded, however, with kudos from the town press; one newspaper reported, “Dr. Eastman is another fine specimen of the polished gentleman, as well as [an] accomplished physician. He unite[s] in his practice both the old and new systems, using drugs or cold water, as occasion in his judgment may require, and for this he is highly esteemed by many.”

He sold medicines of his own creation, like some pills that he gave to Oliver Porter to whom he told, “They never have failed to cure Dispepsia,” and warranted a cure, “They excite the bile to do its duty in digestion – or in some way helps it.” In 1853 he introduced Eastman’s Sick Headache Remedy. It was said to have created a sensation in the community because “there are so great a number of people who are afflicted with the distressing complaint, for which no [specific] medicine has before been made public.” John B. Alley, part owner of a wholesale leather business, testified that the remedy almost entirely cured him and had “relieved or greatly mollified the disease” of several of his neighbors and friends.

It came as no surprise – to his sisters, at least – that Ezekiel also decided to bottle a medicine made of yellow dock root. He arranged to have the bitters manufactured by Joseph B. Hill, a barber in Lynn. (Hair dressers/barbers of this era were often involved in mixing chemicals and other ingredients to make their own hair oils, tonics, pomades, etc., so by mid nineteenth century standards, medicine preparation by a barber was not at all a stretch on the credulity of the average person.) Since counterfeiting labels of commercially successful medicines was easy and frequently done, they resorted to a bottle version that had his proprietary information embossed right into the aqua glass: “D<sup>r</sup> E. P. EASTMAN’S // YELLOW DOCK /

BITTERS // LYNN MASS.” He also registered the product name at the U.S. Copyright Office in 1852.

The general population knew their botanical ingredients and could even go to the local drugstore and buy various roots and herbs to make their own medicines, poisons, glue, shoe polish, and any other household compounds, if they desired. They knew then that the bold declaration of YELLOW DOCK was a promise to spend time in the outhouse, flushing the illness away. But this medicine was no deceitful money grab for Eastman; he had demonstrated years earlier that he really believed in the stuff. He had promised cures to his own sisters if they would faithfully, frequently, and repeatedly drink and wash in the soupy water made from boiling yellow dock roots. It was the only medicinal ingredient he prescribed for their illnesses and he told them to use it internally and externally for months until cured. While many thousands of medicines would be concocted in the nineteenth century solely to quench their maker’s greed, Ezekiel Porter Eastman can be counted among those who actually believed in their medicine.

It is highly likely that he resorted to J. B. Hill and the retail sale of his medicines in the mid-1850s as a means of adding to a dwindling income; he had to cut back on his practice because of a difficult challenge to his own health. In January 1853 he had appeared vigorously healthy, telling his sister with manly pride, “I have been home from my morning calls about half an hour – since my return I have shovled the snow from off the poarch drank a mug of ale smoked a cigar read the paper and now I am [writing to] you.” But the doctor was human after all; he became stricken with the ubiquitous scourge of the nineteenth century, consumption (tuberculosis). By January 1855, after less than a decade of practice in Lynn, Ezekiel left on a long trip to regain his health.

He intended to go to the South, “but on arriving in Washington, D.C., he became more enfeebled, and by the advice of physicians turned to the West.” He rested in Platteville, Wisconsin, probably at the home of his brother Benjamin C. Eastman, who was then finishing his second term as a congressman from that state. With the comforts of a successful life and a home without children, Benjamin and his wife Charlotte were able to provide his brother a restful environment that gave some relief from his terrible disease. A letter from

Ezekiel to a friend back in Lynn was shared in one of the city’s newspapers, “The Doctor finds himself much more comfortable there, his appetite is good, and he can take some little exercise in the open air. He has gained strength since his arrival, and thinks that country, above all others, is the proper place for persons affected with pulmonary complaints.”

Ezekiel’s Midwestern hiatus appeared to buy him extra time. He returned to Lynn and resumed his physician’s chores, but his death in February 1860 at just 43 years old “was not unexpected.” He had been unable to continue his profession for the six months prior to his decease, consumption having “long since marked him as its victim; but, having an excellent constitution, and a determined will, he has, several times, by extraordinary perseverance, baffled the inroads of disease, astonishing ... those who knew of his troubles and sufferings.” His tenacious will to live had served him well, cheating death more surely than all his medicines could do.

Eastman’s Lynn home has long since been demolished to make room for the city that replaced it. His patients and his competition lie silently in the earth. No painting or daguerreotype of him is known to have survived. His bitters were never advertised in the town papers and like their creator they had a short life of only a few years. Thus there are less than a half-dozen bottles of Dr. E. P. Eastman’s Yellow Dock Bitters known to exist, but they bear his name, testifying to his existence and his belief that he had made life a little less bitter.

**Author’s Note:** According to Carlyn Ring in *For Bitters Only* back in 1980, someone has a labeled version of Dr. E. P. Eastman’s Yellow Dock Bitters. I would love to make contact with that person or institution so that I can find out all the words that appear on the existing portion of the label. Please E-mail me at [andrewrapoza@charter.net](mailto:andrewrapoza@charter.net).

Thank you!

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*(Spelling variations within the article’s selected quotations are as they appear in the original letters and writings of their authors.)*



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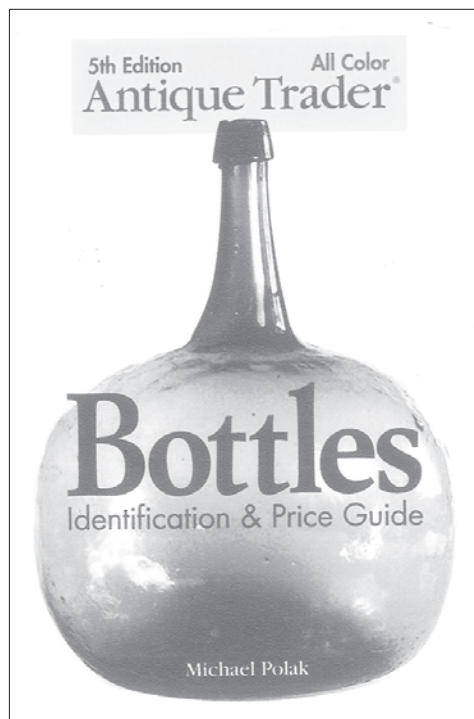
### For More Information, Contact:

Mike Polak (562) 438-9209

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