

November 2017

Peppermint Kings: A Rural American History

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PEPPERMINT KINGS: A RURAL AMERICAN HISTORY

A Dissertation Presented

by

DAN ALLOSSO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

SEPTEMBER 2017

HISTORY

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A Dissertation Presented

by

DAN ALLOSSO

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DEDICATION

**To my parents, Salvatore F. and Patricia A. Allosso,
my wife Steph,
and my children Lucy, Sofie, Gio, and Vivi**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks are due to my committee members, for sticking with me through the entire process of writing this dissertation. David Glassberg encouraged me to return to the project after other writing interests distracted me. Chris Clark expressed a very early interest in my findings in Ashfield and was always unusually kind and supportive. Ted Melillo challenged me to keep my eye focused on the historiography and Emily Redman helped me articulate why the science was important and not just an advertising gimmick.

Nancy Gray Garvin and Grace Lesure at the Ashfield Historical Society encouraged my interest in their town and its residents and were always interested in my findings. Ian Blair and Winship Todd welcomed me to the A.M. Todd Company and told interesting tales of their experiences in the peppermint business. “Peppermint Patty” Alena opened the H.G. Hotchkiss building in Lyons and gave me a personal tour. And since this history would have been impossible without a LOT of primary documents I’m very grateful to the historians and archival staff members at Cornell, The Phelps Historical Society, The Kalamazoo Valley Museum, Western Michigan University, Harvard’s Baker Library, and the Records and Archives Department of Ontario County NY, who were all very welcoming and helpful.

Chris Fobare was a generous “dissertation buddy” providing valuable insights as we read each other’s chapters and offering needed support and encouragement. Last but not least, I’m very grateful for my family’s support and encouragement to complete the project and write this dissertation. When obstacles or other interests threw me off course, they gave me the nudge I needed.

ABSTRACT

PEPERMINT KINGS: A RURAL AMERICAN HISTORY

SEPTEMBER 2017

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Explores rural history through the experiences of three families that dominated the American peppermint oil business from its beginning in the early nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The rural entrepreneurs who became Peppermint Kings acted in ways that challenge traditional historical depictions of rural people. The freethinking Ranney clan built a family business that extended from Massachusetts to western New York and Michigan during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Hotchkiss brothers entered the international market and ventured into finance and banking at a time when the United States government was reducing opportunities for regional bankers. Albert May Todd brought science to peppermint farming and distilling, and advocated progressive and socialist causes as a politician and organizer of the Municipal Ownership League of America. The Peppermint Kings' stories not only demonstrate the remarkable agency of rural people, but offer insights into how rural Americans responded to broader social changes that have typically been viewed from a predominantly urban perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout *Peppermint Kings*, I will discuss the relationship between the primary sources upon which it is based and traditional interpretations of rural America's engagement with the capitalist marketplace in the nineteenth century. But it would be useful here to outline briefly some of the major points made in this work. Underlying my project is the conviction that American rural history should be considered a distinct field of historical study. Throughout most of American history, most Americans were rural; but the people writing their histories were not. Historians should re-examine their ideas of rurality: economically, politically, and culturally. Historical constructions of rurality have usually appeared within works whose primary focus was something else such as "frontier," "market transition," "the West," "agricultural history," "populism," or the history of the Early Republic. The changing politics of labor, for example, as artisanal craftsmanship shifted toward wage-earning factory employment, is often considered without much regard to differences between rural and urban settings.¹ Rural life and its depiction by historians have changed over time, but the relationship between these changes is not straightforward. Shifts in historians' understanding of rurality have sometimes been mistaken for changes in the nature of rural life as experienced by people at the time.

My goal in this study is to focus on the ways rurality has, in historical accounts, been constructed economically, politically, and culturally. These constructions have

¹ For example, Bruce Laurie promises to trace the "unfolding of capitalism in the countryside as well as the city," in the introduction to *Artisans into Workers*, but his account rapidly shifts toward a depiction of the British and Continental radicalism imported by immigrants even though he acknowledges that well into the second half of the nineteenth century, "rural-urban flow persisted." Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989). 14, 26.

changed over time, but historians' perspectives have been limited by a lack of specific attention to the nature of rural life itself. Primarily, what obstructs historians' vision of rural change is a *current* cultural construction of a rurality that suffers by comparison with the modern, urban lifestyles in which they too often are embedded, and which they erroneously believe represents a durable point of view that has been shared by most Americans over the long-term. In the primary materials that form the backbone of *Peppermint Kings*, the ways rural people have thought of themselves and their relationships to other Americans reveal perspectives that challenge several of the prevailing grand narratives of American history.

This study will reveal rural stories that suggest flaws in constructions of rurality found separately, but rarely integrated, in mainstream social, economic, and political histories of nineteenth-century America. Economically, my research suggests the subjects of *Peppermint Kings* had a different understanding of centers and peripheries than the perspectives historians derive from central place, colonial, and dependency theories of American and world history. Colonial and dependency theories are in fact applicable to American history, but centers and peripheries were created by deliberate transfers of power between rural and urban people and by people moving between rural and urban settings. The binary of the powerful center and helpless hinterland, if it existed at all, was not the product of an invisible economic hand, but rather the creation of laws and social customs that concentrated power in the hands of urban elites. For example, my sources show a rural reaction unaccounted-for, even in histories of regional banking, to the transition in the middle years of the nineteenth century from local control of banking (note issue, and thus credit, and thus rural capital formation) to centralized control under

the national banking regime established during the Lincoln administration. The story of rural banking and investment suggests that federal policy had a pivotal role in *creating* a financial periphery by removing economic power from rural people and giving it to urban people. But rural bankers resisted, believing they had just as much right to issue notes, grant credit, and control capital as their urban counterparts.

Historians have frequently associated rurality with radical politics. When we think of nineteenth-century farmers, we often think next of Populists. Nineteenth-century rural people have frequently been described as either fleeing from Eastern commercial culture or as being unable to play the game, and being as a result victimized by the market economy.² My sources show a group of rural people whose political affiliations and activities suggest a high degree of integration with society at large, and also a frequent self-identification with issues and causes that do not line up well with historians' expectations. Examples include western Massachusetts farmers who were also astute businessmen, who opposed the social control sought by local evangelists and engaged in interstate abolitionist activism; upstate New Yorkers who lobbied William Henry Seward on behalf of their favored "internal improvements" while trying to evade or ignore lawsuits and judgments over debts and broken contracts; and an early twentieth-century Michigan monopolist who was also a committed socialist.

The construction of rurality shown in the writings and actions of my subjects suggests they had a much different perspective on society and their place in it than most histories portray. My sources show that many rural people believed themselves to be the

² The idea that many western migrants were fleeing Eastern capitalism was a major theme in Allan Kulikoff's interpretation of the market transition. Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

peers of people at the tops of urban business and social pyramids. Due to a communication and transportation revolution the magnitude of which we generally fail to appreciate, many rural people in the nineteenth century did not feel isolated or of lower economic, political, or social stature than people in the cities. Rural people communicated and traveled more than we think they did. Their families, business interests, and politics were not isolated or provincial, but rather were spatially extended in ways that, contrary to a myth of westward, one-way motion, would seem completely familiar to us in a modern, networked age.

Historians have often used farmers and rural people in general as a narrative antithesis to capitalists and urban business interests. While it is true that rural people often opposed the interests of urban businessmen, my research suggests they had a more complicated relationship with local businessmen. In fact, much of my primary reading suggests that to the extent there was rural resistance to capitalism, it was actually resistance to a particular form of colonial capitalism in which urban elites used political power to undermine the level playing field that rural businessmen believed stood at the heart of democracy and free enterprise. The evidence suggests that, even if people in the past thought of themselves and their world in terms of binaries (and it seems they may have been less likely to think in these terms than historians have been to project these binaries onto them), they may not have thought in terms of the binaries we now see.

Brief Historiography

There is no self-contained body of works that I think encapsulates American rural history, or even the rural history of the nineteenth century. The best examples of rural histories

cover the Early Republic, many focusing on the transition from an agrarian to a market economy.³ Since there is not a self-contained canon of rural history, I have pulled together relevant observations from a variety of historiographical sub-disciplines including business history, agricultural history, social history, and cultural history. Each of these sub-disciplines has focused on particular aspects of rural life in the nineteenth century. I will try to integrate them into a more complete depiction of rural life and then add color to this picture.

According to traditional histories of American agriculture, frontier agrarian communities were nearly always based on subsistence farming, because the roads were poor.⁴ Farm products could not be easily brought to seaport markets, so farmers were unable to sell their surpluses and buy urban manufactures or imports. Rural culture languished until better roads and the growth of local industrial centers caused a farm-products boom.⁵ Seeking potential profits, urban capitalists invested in transportation infrastructure like the Erie Canal and early railroads, which spurred agriculture in, and migration to, the Middle West.⁶ New England farmers were caught unaware by rapid economic changes,

³ Two exemplary works set in the Early Republic period are Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Martin Bruegel, *Farm, Shop, Landing: The Rise of a Market Society in the Hudson Valley, 1780-1860*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁴ Percy Wells Bidwell, *Rural Economy in New England at the Beginning of the 19th Century*. (Clifton: A.M. Kelley, 1916); Percy W. Bidwell, "The Agricultural Revolution in New England," *The American Historical Review* 26, no. 4 (1921).

⁵ George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860*. (New York: Rinehart, 1951); Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

⁶ Roberta Balstad Miller, *City and Hinterland: A Case Study of Urban Growth and Regional Development*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979); Donald Hugh Parkerson, *The Agricultural Transition in New York State: Markets and Migration in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995); Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

and were unable to compete with rich western farmlands. The abandoned farms of the eastern states were quickly overrun with second-growth forests.⁷ Although this vision of early America is considered out-of-date by historians such as Brian Donahue, its specific errors are less well known.⁸ *Peppermint Kings* addresses these errors.

Since Frederick Jackson Turner's famous speech at the 1893 Columbian Exhibition, westward migration and the frontier have been key elements in our understanding of the nineteenth century.⁹ Every history that covers territory west of the original coastal Republic must in some way or another address Turner's "frontier thesis".¹⁰ Taking cues from agricultural and economic historians, an earlier generation of historians of westward migration considered some combination of population pressure, improving transportation networks, and expanding markets for farm products as the enablers of expansion.¹¹ Initially, many of these histories repeated Turner's narrative of a

⁷ Stewart Hall Holbrook, *The Yankee Exodus, an Account of Migration from New England*. (New York: Macmillan, 1950); Harold F. Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History, 1790-1930*. (New York: AMS Press, 1967); Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁸ Brian Donahue observed that contrary to previous portrayals, farming continued in many New England towns until the end of the nineteenth century, and when agriculture did decline. The reduction in planting was balanced by substantial appreciation of the farmland being abandoned. Brian Donahue, "Another Look from Sanderson's Farm: A Perspective on New England Environmental History and Conservation," *Environmental History* 12, no. 1 (2007). In addition, William Gilmore-Lehne studied estate records and found that the reading habits of rural New Englanders were much wider more varied than had previously been suspected. William J. Gilmore-Lehne, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962).

¹⁰ William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1987).

¹¹ Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier, Agriculture, 1860-1897*. (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1945).; Robert P. Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier*. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968).; Howard Roberts Lamar, *The Trader on the American Frontier: Myth's Victim*. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1977).; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).; John Thompson, *Closing the Frontier: Radical Response in Oklahoma, 1889-1923*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986).; William Wyckoff, *The Developer's Frontier: The Making of the Western New York Landscape*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

frontier experience so powerful that it even stripped eastern culture and patterns of thought from the settlers. Migrants in these histories were thought to have returned to an earlier, less civilized state of mind, and social evolution was recapitulated at each new outpost on the frontier.¹²

Later historians abandoned Turner's romantic notions of social evolution and focused on the peculiar eastern traditions settlers took with them.¹³ Some historians of migration focused mainly on immigrants from Europe or on domestic migrants who moved from city to city.¹⁴ Others explored the cultures of the old, rural New Englanders who stayed behind.¹⁵ In most cases, however, these populations of urban migrants or rural stay-at-homes were treated as individual groups, with distinct cultures little affected by interaction with other groups or indeed the rest of American society. My sources suggest that a more accurate depiction would focus on families rather than locations. A multi-generational look at families shows dynamic, fluid movement of people, information, and capital between old eastern and new western communities.

¹² Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*. (New York: Macmillan, 1967).; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).; Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986).; Stephen Aron, "Pioneers and Profiteers: Land Speculation and the Homestead Ethic in Frontier Kentucky," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1992).; Carville Earle and Changyong Cao, "Frontier Closure and the Involution of American Society, 1840-1890," *Journal of the Early Republic* 13, no. 2 (1993).

¹³ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).; Richard L. Ehrlich, *Immigrants in Industrial America, 1850-1920: Proceedings of a Conference Sponsored by the Balch Institute and the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation, November 1-3, 1973*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973).; Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1983).;

¹⁴ Stephan Thernstrom and Peter R. Knights, "Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations About Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1, no. 1 (1970).; Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

¹⁵ Barron. Susan E. Gray, *The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

In addition to migration, historians of the Early Republic have debated the character of economic change. At the turn of the twentieth century, progressive historians such as Charles Beard proposed that economic interests influenced social and political life from the nation's founding. Following Beard, Richard Hofstadter located the roots of the Populists' nostalgia in Jefferson's agrarian myth, and Louis Hartz declared that capitalism had come to America with the Pilgrims. But in the 1970s, social historians began to question the details, timing, and even existence of a transition from pre-commercial agrarian society to a market economy.¹⁶ The "New Social Historians" drew on both British social history and on earlier agricultural historians who, following Adam Smith, had argued that commerce could not develop where goods could not reach markets. They suggested that before inexpensive transportation linked producing areas with consumers in American cities, Europe, and the West Indies, many American farmers enjoyed a period of relative isolation, during which they engaged in a "subsistence-surplus" style of agriculture.¹⁷ Farmers produced first for their own family use; and only after they had provided for their families sold their surpluses in the market. The need to provide a secure, consistent food supply for the family dictated the types and quantities of field crops and livestock farmers chose to raise. And because they only rarely sold

¹⁶ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935).; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: an Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform; from Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

¹⁷ Clarence H. Danhof, "Farm-Making Costs and the "Safety Valve": 1850-60," *Journal of Political Economy* 49, no. 3 (1941).; Gates.; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).; Gilbert Courtland Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).; E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50, no. 1 (1971).; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: Mentalite in Pre-Industrial America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1978).; Christopher Clark, "Economics and Culture: Opening up the Rural History of the Early American Northeast," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991).

commodities for cash, these remote farm communities relied on personal relationships and traded work among themselves, forming elaborate webs of interdependence and mutual obligation.¹⁸

As soon as the New Social Historians had articulated this vision of pre-commercial rural life, factions formed to their left and right. On the left, historians argued that the rapid expansion of the frontier was due in part to people fleeing as far as possible from the market-driven Atlantic economy. The agrarian frontier, these scholars argued, was a commerce-free haven for Europeans and Americans seeking a life outside the capitalist market.¹⁹ On the right, another group of historians argued that early farmers were keenly interested in getting to market with their surpluses as early and as often as possible, and that even Jeffersonian agrarians were commercial. Farmers did not object to capitalism, these historians insisted, only to aristocratic urban merchants.²⁰ The argument

¹⁸ Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 2 (1979).; Jeremy Attack, "Farm and Farm-Making Costs Revisited," *Agricultural History* 56, no. 4 (1982).; Carole Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 13, no. 2 (1982).; Jeremy Attack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North*. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987).; Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).; Andrew H. Baker and Holly V. Izard, "New England Farmers and the Marketplace, 1780-1865: A Case Study," *Agricultural History* 65, no. 3 (1991).; Clark, "Economics and Culture"; Carole Shammas, "A New Look at Long-Term Trends in Wealth Inequality in the United States," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (1993).; Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).; Christopher Clark, "The View from the Farmhouse: Rural Lives in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004); Christopher Clark, *Social Change in America : From the Revolution through the Civil War*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

¹⁹ Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1989).; Michael Merrill, "The Anticapitalist Origins of the United States," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13, no. 4 (1990).; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).; Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992).

²⁰ Winifred B. Rothenberg, "A Price Index for Rural Massachusetts, 1750-1855," *The Journal of Economic History* 39, no. 04 (1979).; Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic," *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 4 (1982).; Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984). Joyce Appleby, "Republicanism in Old and New Contexts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 43, no. 1

over the transition to capitalism became heated, but the passion frequently reflected contemporary political divisions rather than irreconcilable historical claims.²¹ It is most useful to read this debate, which continues into the twenty-first century, as evidence of the variability of nineteenth-century conditions.²² The story of peppermint suggests that both sides in the debate were right: commerce began early and extended to the remotest frontiers, but rural people imagined their relationship with markets in different ways than we do today.

Business and banking histories, like many of the more commerce-friendly histories of the market transition, are usually written by economic historians.²³ In contrast to the industrial orientation and celebratory nature of most business history, a few social historians have focused on frontier manufacturing, on the processing of rural commodities, and on the growth of western cities as intermediaries between eastern markets and western producers.²⁴ Other historians have chronicled the growth of

(1986).; Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-Places to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750-1850*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²¹ Winifred B. Rothenberg, "The Bound Prometheus," *Reviews in American History* 15, no. 4 (1987).; Michael Merrill, "Putting 'Capitalism' in Its Place: A Review of Recent Literature," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1995).; Joyce Oldham Appleby, "The Vexed Story of Capitalism Told by American Historians," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (2001).

²² Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000).; Allan Kulikoff, "From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers," (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).; John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²³ Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001).; Allan Nevins, *The Emergence, of Modern America, 1865-1878* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927).

²⁴ Rolla M. Tryon, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860*. (New York, N.Y.: A.M. Kelley, 1917).; James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).; Margaret Walsh, *The Manufacturing Frontier: Pioneer Industry in Antebellum Wisconsin, 1830-1860*. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1972).; John D. Haeger, *The Investment Frontier: New York Businessmen and the Economic Development of the Old Northwest*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

transportation and communication networks that enabled trade and rural consumerism.²⁵

And environmental historians have followed the flow of resources from hinterlands to manufacturing centers, the return flow of consumer products to the periphery, and the financial mechanisms that facilitated these transfers.²⁶

The historiography of banking may actually extend farther back into the nineteenth century than that of manufacturing.²⁷ Banking has been socially and politically contested throughout American history, and historians of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century America have entered the fray.²⁸ Recently, a new generation of business historians has begun to chronicle the histories of state banks before the national banking acts of the Civil War era.²⁹ For the most part, these historians have retained a centralist

²⁵ R. Malcolm Keir, "The Unappreciated Tin-Peddler His Services to Early Manufacturers," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 46 (1913).; Richardson Little Wright, *Hawkers & Walkers in Early America, Strolling Peddlers, Preachers, Lawyers, Doctors, Players, and Others, from the Beginning to the Civil War*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1927).

²⁶ Margaret Walsh, *The Rise of the Midwestern Meat Packing Industry*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982).; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

²⁷ John Jay Knox, *United States Notes; a History of the Various Issues of Paper Money by the Government of the United States*. (New York: C. Scribner's, 1892).; John Jay Knox, *A History of Banking in the United States*. (New York: August M. Kelley, 1900).; A. Barton Hepburn, *History of Coinage and Currency in the United States and the Perennial Contest for Sound Money*. (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1903).; Wesley C. Mitchell, *A History of the Greenbacks, with Special Reference to the Economic Consequences of Their Issue: 1862-65*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1903).

²⁸ Wesley C. Mitchell, "Greenbacks and the Cost of the Civil War," *The Journal of Political Economy* 5, no. 2 (1897).; Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America, from the Revolution to the Civil War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).; Fritz Redlich, *The Molding of American Banking: Men and Ideas*. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968).

²⁹ Hugh T. Rockoff, "Varieties of Banking and Regional Economic Development in the United States, 1840-1860," *The Journal of Economic History* 35, no. 1 (1975).; Naomi R. Lamoreaux, "Banks, Kinship, and Economic Development: The New England Case," *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 3 (1986).; Larry Schweikart, "U.S. Commercial Banking: A Historiographical Survey," *Business History Review* 65, no. 3 (1991).; Gretchen Ritter, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance in America*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).; Howard Bodenhorn, *A History of Banking in Antebellum America: Financial Markets and Economic Development in an Era of Nation-Building*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).; Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).; Howard Bodenhorn, *State Banking in Early America: A New Economic History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).; Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

approach to issues such as credit and capital formation, even while they have extended their view to the varied regional banking regimes of antebellum America. The primary sources explored in *Peppermint Kings* suggest that rural businessmen had very sophisticated ideas about finance and credit, that are not adequately accounted for in center-focused banking histories.

These are some of the main historiographical issues explored in *Peppermint Kings*. By tracing the history of a single commodity, I add depth to our understanding of rural America and complicate the histories of the settling of American frontier, the growth of commerce, and the integration of rural economies in the world market. The Peppermint Kings were agricultural entrepreneurs. They moved easily between rural and urban settings and were effective in both. They built enterprises that helped expand frontiers of western expansion. And they had a much more complex understanding of their identities and their roles in American society than historians have usually attributed to country people. Not every complication improves a story, but I believe the complications introduced in *Peppermint Kings* add interesting and important insights that deepen our understanding of rural American history. I hope my readers agree.

Origin of Peppermint Oil

Mint, according to Albert May Todd, the last Peppermint King, “was among the plants first recognized as of value by the ancients.”³⁰ It is unclear whether the use of herbs such

³⁰ Todd, the final Peppermint King of this study, was a scholar of the herb’s early history. His family retained that interest, and in the 1960s the Todd Foundation commissioned a history of the peppermint and spearmint industries in America which has been a useful source for this study. A. M. Todd, "Mint--Its Early

as mint extends as far into prehistory as the development of staple grains and other food crops, but nearly as soon as people began keeping written records, they wrote about mint. The herb's family name belonged to a mythical Greek woman, Mintha, who was turned into a plant by the jealous goddess Ceres, after Hades expressed amorous interest in her. The mint plant itself was first mentioned by Hippocrates in the fifth century B.C.E. A century later, Aristotle described the plant's cooling and antiseptic qualities. Pliny, Theophrastus, and Galen made mint an important culinary and medical herb in the ancient world, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) carried the tradition forward and helped insure that mint's uses were not forgotten during Europe's dark ages.

At the beginning of the modern era, the German alchemist Hieronymus Brunschwig (1450-1512) published his *Liber de Arte Distillandi de Compositis* in Strassbourg. Brunschwig mentioned five species of mints, including *Mentha aquatica* (Water Mint).³¹ Essential oils are processed products of nature, and the people who grew and distilled them combined traditional agrarian knowledge and technical commercial interests from the start. In addition to being "natural philosophers" or early scientists, alchemists like Brunschwig were also sources of practical information for farmers and millers seeking markets for surplus grain and for physicians looking for substances to add to their *materia medica*.

Swiss physician Theodor Zwinger's *Theatrum Botanicum*, published in 1596, includes nine species of mints and gives their names in a variety of languages including

History and Modern Commercial Development," *Proceedings of the American Pharmaceutical Association at the fifty-first annual meeting* (1903).; James E. Landing, *American Essence; a History of the Peppermint and Spearmint Industry in the United States*. (Kalamazoo: Kalamazoo Public Museum, 1969).

³¹ Hieronymus Brunschwig, *Liber De Arte Distillandi De Compositis. Das Buch Der Waren Kunst Zu Distillieren Die Composita Und Simplicia*. (Strassburg: Mathis, 1512).

Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, English, Danish, and Dutch.³² This suggests both wide interest in mints, and the wide natural habitat of the original plants. Mints of many varieties were common across Europe. Peppermint, however, seems to have originated much more recently in England.

Like Zwinger's text, London botanist John Gerarde's 1597 *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* featured a wide variety of mints including spearmint, which he called *Salvia Romana*, and two types of water mint.³³ Gerarde's descriptions and illustrations are very detailed, but the text does not give the



Figure 1: A page describing Mints in Gerarde's 1597 *Herball*.

impression that the author was writing entirely from personal experience. Gerarde's descriptions appear to be compilations derived from earlier published works. The tendency of authors to lean heavily on received tradition began to change in the next century, when English botanists and their amateur correspondents began to record not only the varieties of plants they observed, but where the specimens could be found. In these seventeenth-century British herbals, we see the first evidence of peppermint.

In his 1677 *Catologus Plantarum Angliae*, John Ray (1627-1705) not only

³² Theodor Zwinger, *Theatrum Botanicum : Das Ist, Neu Vollkommenes Kräuter-Buch: Worinnen Allerhand Erdgewächse Der Bäumen, Stauden Und Kräutern, Welche in Allen Vier Theilen Der Welt, Sonderlich Aber in Europa Herfür Kommen*. (Basel: Jacob Bertsche, 1696).

³³ John Gerarde, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes*. (London: Islip, Norton and Whitakers, 1597).

described several types of mint in Latin, he remarked—sometimes in English—on where they had been discovered. About a new variety of round-leaved wild mint, Ray said “*Rarius occurrit sponte*. I observed it growing by the Rivers side at Lydbrook, near Rosse in Hertford-shire, plentifully; and in some places in the West-country, which I do not now remember.”³⁴ A few years later, in his *Synopsis Methodica Stirpium Britannicarum*, Ray provided even more detail. He described seven species of mint found in England, including *Mentha aquatica* (Water-Mint), *M. angustifolia spicata* (Spear-Mint), and a new variety (number five in his list) Ray called *Mentastri aquatici genus hirsutum spica*. Ray further described this plant as “Spiked Horse-Mint or Water-Mint with a grosser spike.” It had been discovered, Ray said, by “Mr. Dale in Essex by Bocking River side...a little above the Fulling-Mill.”³⁵

John Ray’s 1690 description seems to record the first discovery of peppermint, although Ray didn’t use the name until the second edition of the *Synopsis*, published in 1696, when he revised the fifth entry on his list to read, “*Mentha spicis brevioribus & habitioribus...sapore servido Piperis*. Pepper-Mint found by Dr. Eales in Hartfordshire, and communicated to me, since by Mr. Dale in Essex.”³⁶ Dr. Eales, a botanist from Welwyn, seems to have left no records of his own. But Mr. Dale of Essex did.

Samuel Dale (c. 1659-1739), was a Braintree-based physician and apothecary. He

³⁴ John Ray, *Catalogus Plantarum Angliae, Et Insularum Adjacentium Tum Indigenas, Tum in Agris Passim Cultas Complectens in Quo Præter Synonyma Necessaria, Facultates Quoque Summatim Traduntur, Un Cum Observationibus & Experimentis Novis Medicis & Physicis*. (London: Clark & Martyn, 1677). 198.

³⁵ John Ray, *Joannis Raii Synopsis Methodica Stirpium Britannicarum: Tum Indigenis, Tum in Agris Cultis Locis Suis Dispositis*. (London: Gulielmi & Joannis Innys, 1690). 79.

³⁶ John Ray, *Synopsis Methodica Stirpium Britannicarum in Qua Tum Notae Generum Characteristicae Traduntur, Tum Species Singulae Breviter Describuntur : Ducentae Quinquaginta Plus Minus Novae Species Partim Suis Locis Inferuntur, Partim in Appendice Seorsim Exhibentur : Cum Indice & Virium Epitome*. (London: Sam. Smith, 1696). 124.

contributed to Ray's 1690 *Synopsis* and then published his own *Pharmacologia* in 1693. Dale mentioned peppermint in his expanded *Pharmacologiae Seu Manuductionis ad Materiam Medicam Supplementum*, 1705, dubbing the new plant "*Mentha Saxifraga*...Pepper-Mint." He said "At times one encounters it in ditches of water" and declared it was effective against kidney and bladder stones.³⁷

Acknowledging the immediate commercial value of the newly-discovered peppermint, Dale hinted at why it had taken him a while to recognize the herb in print. "This plant is considered a great secret by some illiterate London doctors," he said. "When they have occasion to use it, they lock themselves in a room and cut it into particles so minute that it is almost impossible to find out what plant it might be." Peppermint's flavor and the perceived medical effectiveness of the new variety was so superior that those lucky enough to possess it did everything in their power to hold onto the trade secret. The mystery was solved, Dale said, when "Finally a tiny crumb was carried to Dr. Watson who planted it in his garden where it sprouted and revealed the secret."³⁸

Dale's account is interesting for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that peppermint's discoverers were well aware that their find was unlike other mints. Because the peppermint plant is a hybrid, it rarely sets seeds and peppermint seeds are not viable. Peppermint plants are effectively sterile. Peppermint must either be discovered where it occurs naturally through a chance crossing of watermint and spearmint, or propagated from cuttings (the "*particulas adeo minutus discidisset...ad D.D. Watson allato*")

³⁷ Samuel Dale, *Samuelis Dale Pharmacologiae Seu Manuductionis Ad Materiam Medicam Supplementum: ... Cum Duplici Indice*. (London: Smith & Walford, 1705). 125.

³⁸ Ibid. 126.

mentioned in Dale's description). Second, the attempt by London physicians to keep peppermint secret illustrates their immediate recognition that the plant's uniqueness conferred value.

By 1750, peppermint was being commercially cultivated in medicinal herb gardens in and around Mitcham, a suburb of London about nine miles south of the City (now part of greater London). At the end of the eighteenth century a hundred acres planted to peppermint in Mitcham produced three thousand pounds of essential oil annually.³⁹ The economic impact of peppermint was significant enough that a book review printed in the *English Review* in 1789 criticized botanist James Adams's *Practical Essays on Agriculture* for recommending lavender too enthusiastically. The reviewer noted that "Chamomyle, peppermint, and strawberries, were articles in greater request than lavender, and equally befitting the farmer's attention."⁴⁰

Because peppermint plants do not set viable seeds, all the root cuttings used to propagate peppermint were the offspring of a one or a very small number of original plants. This identity of peppermint plants means that unlike other naturally-reproducing species such as spearmint, it is possible to trace the expansion of peppermint culture. All the peppermint discussed in this account, and the peppermint in use today, descends two cultivars of *Mentha Piperita*, branded "Black Mitcham" and "White Mitcham." These two varieties have been the basis of the entire peppermint oil industry from the 1750s to the present. In the next chapter, we'll follow the spread of peppermint oil and peppermint plants in England's American colonies.

³⁹ Landing. 6.

⁴⁰ "Art. iv. Practical Essays on Agriculture; Containing an Account of Soils, and the Manner of Correcting Them," *English review, or, An abstract of English and foreign literature, 1783-1795* 14 (1789).

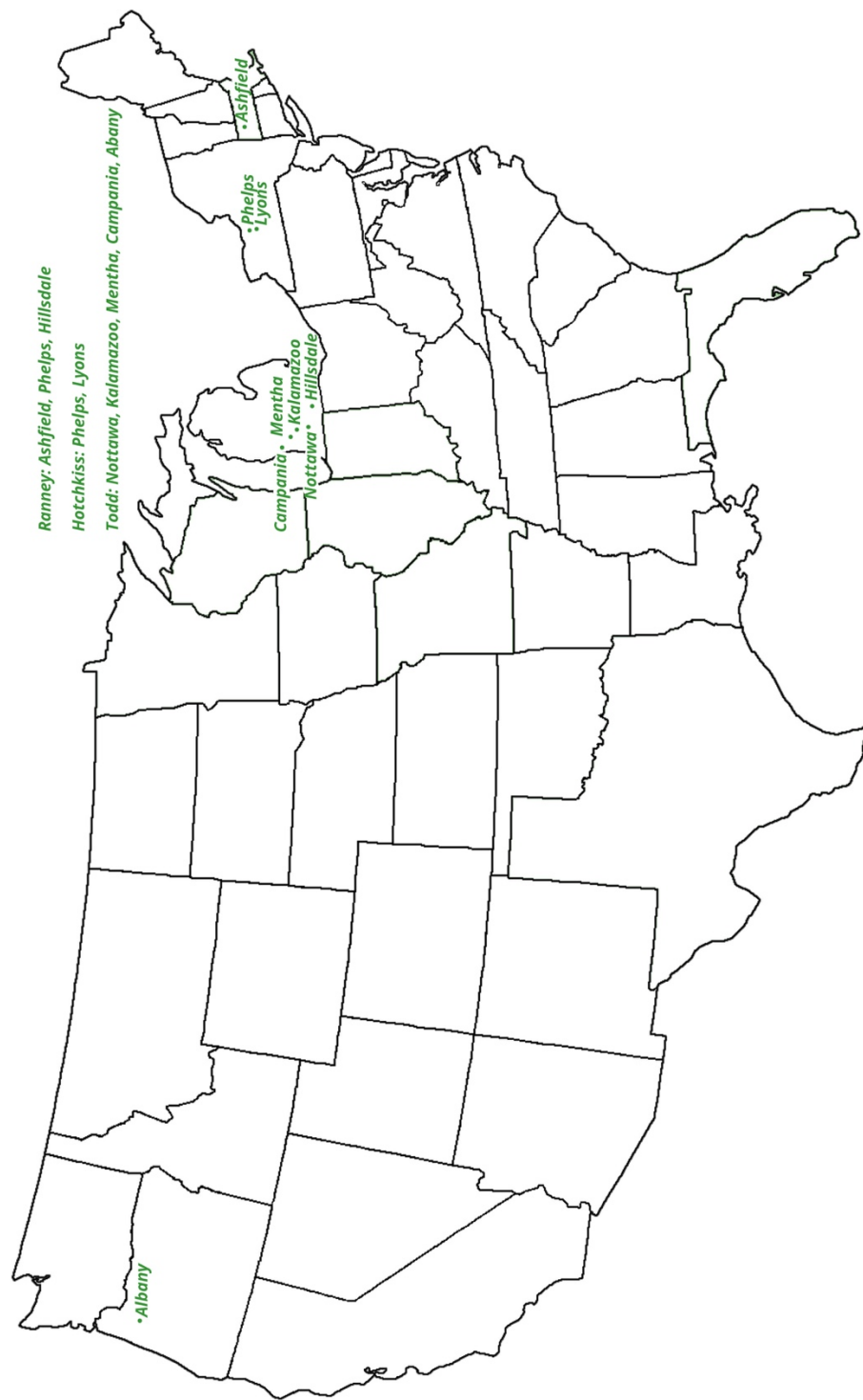


Figure 2: Map of the peppermint-growing regions of North America, by author.

CHAPTER 1

PEPPERMINT IN AMERICA

Historians have explored the era of the early settlement of Britain's Atlantic colonies from many perspectives. While cultural, political, religious, and social history approaches have arguably dominated accounts of early America, environmental historians have recently added accounts that include the land and climate of the new world and the bidirectional transfer of plants and animals during the colonial period. The Columbian Exchange, as described by the term's author Alfred W. Crosby, included native American crops such as maize, potatoes, and manioc, carried back to Europe by explorers, and Eurasian pathogens such as smallpox, which wiped out up to 95% of the native American population. The Columbian Exchange, which Crosby considers to be ongoing, also included European commodities like sugar, wheat, and livestock, produced in the Americas not only to feed colonists, but to ship back into the transatlantic market.⁴¹

American historians often portray colonies such as Barbados and Jamestown as essentially commercial ventures while suggesting the New England colonies were not. Barbados, a sugar-producing colony sometimes overlooked due to its location in the Caribbean and the fact it did not participate in the mainland colonies' revolution against Great Britain, has recently begun to be included in colonial histories and is part of the

⁴¹ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972).; Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

early story of peppermint.⁴² Jamestown is not part of the peppermint story, although John Rolfe's introduction of smuggled Spanish tobacco into the Virginia economy may have a parallel in the introduction of peppermint plants in New England. But even in regions historians have traditionally characterized as more interested in religious freedom or in building a City on a Hill, commerce was central.⁴³ New England commodities such as cod and white pine were important in European markets even before the Pilgrims and Puritans left England, and imported products like peppermint oil from England were a regular part of colonial life.⁴⁴

An important British export to the colonies was medicine. American physicians depended on centers of learning on the continent and in Edinburgh Scotland, and on medicines that crossed the Atlantic to the colonies. For example, in 1635 John Endecott sent a package to the ailing Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop. "I have sent you of all I have or what I can get: viz. Syrup of violets," Endecott wrote, "Spirit of Mints: Spirit of Annis as you may see written upon the several vials."⁴⁵ The medicinal mint that Winthrop received was not peppermint, which Ray and Dale did not

⁴² Matthew Parker, *The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies*. (New York: Walker & Co., 2011).; John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).; Charles C. Mann, *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*. (New York: Knopf, 2011).

⁴³ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land : Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

⁴⁴ Following Sidney W. Mintz's seminal 1985 study of sugar, commodity histories have crossed disciplinary boundaries to explore the historical relationships between items of everyday life, society, and culture. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. (New York: Viking, 1985).; Arturo Warman, *Corn & Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).; Wendy A. Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); William Kerrigan, *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard a Cultural History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ John Winthrop, *The Winthrop Papers*. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1863). 8.

identify until 1690. But the prescription of distilled plant essences and their delivery in vials shown in this passage illustrates a medical tradition and a production technology that would be repeated for two centuries.

As soon as peppermint was available, it became the preferred mint variety for medical prescriptions. Between the middle and the end of the eighteenth century thousands of advertisements appeared for peppermint products in American newspapers. Searching online archives and the American Antiquarian Society, I was able to find 2,922 advertisements in 75 newspapers printed in all of the original thirteen colonies.⁴⁶ This number is probably an artifact of the current availability of papers and the limited duration of my search, rather than an indicator of the true number of advertisements. However, from these nearly three thousand ads, we can conclude that physicians and apothecaries used and sold peppermint-based products in every major city in every colony, and that the use of peppermint continued during the Revolutionary War and

⁴⁶ Some of the newspapers held by the American Antiquarian Society featuring advertisements for peppermint products: Massachusetts: *Boston Chronicle* 1768, 1770; *Boston Evening Post* 1769; *Boston News Letter* 1769, 1773; *Boston Post Boy* 1773; *Columbian Centinel* 1790, 1798; *Daily Advertiser* 1789; *American Herald* 1784, 1785; *Hampshire Gazette* 1788, 1800; *Hampshire Chronicle* 1790, 1791; *Hampshire Herald* 1784; *Herald of Freedom* 1789; *Independent Chronicle* 1783, 1784, 1786; *Independent Ledger* 1784; *Massachusetts Gazette* 1787; *Massachusetts Mercury* 1798; *Massachusetts Sentinel* 1789; *Massachusetts Spy* 1774; *Moral and Political Telegrapher* 1796; *Salem Gazette* 1784, 1785, 1795; *Salem Mercury* 1788; *Western Star* (Stockbridge MA) 1795; Connecticut: *Connecticut Journal* 1774, 1783, 1785, 1791; *Connecticut Gazette* 1788, 1796; *Connecticut Courant* 1791; *Bee* (New London) 1798; *Litchfield Monitor* 1791; *Norwich Courier* 1797; *American Mercury* 1784, 1785, 1797; *New Haven Gazette* 1784, 1785; Delaware: *Delaware Gazette* 1790; Georgia: *Georgia Gazette* 1769, 1790; *Augusta Chronicle* 1796; *Columbian Museum* 1796; Maryland: *Maryland Journal* 1784, 1785, 1786, 1787, 1790; *Maryland Gazette* 1790; *Baltimore Evening Post* 1792; *Federal Gazette* 1796; New Hampshire: *New Hampshire Gazette* 1784, 1789, 1795; *New Hampshire Spy* 1791; New Jersey: *New Jersey Journal* 1790; *New Jersey Political Intelligencer* 1784; *Burlington Advertiser* 1790; New York: *New York Mercury* 1763, 1771; *New York Gazette* 1764, 1765, 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779, 1782, 1783, 1790, 1791, 1792; *New York Journal* 1768, 1772, 1773, 1785; *New York Morning Post* 1784, 1785, 1786, 1788, 1789, 1790; *New York Packet* 1784, 1791; *Albany Gazette* 1791, 1798; *American Spy* (Lansingburgh, NY) 1792; *Daily Advertiser* 1786, 1791, 1792, 1796; *Diary* 1792; *Independent Journal* 1784; *Royal American Gazette* 1777, 1778, 1779, 1781; *Royal Gazette* 1778, 1781, 1782; North Carolina: *North Carolina Journal* 1792; Pennsylvania: *Carlisle Gazette* 1787, 1792; *Pennsylvania Chronicle* 1768, 1772; *Pennsylvania Gazette* 1768, 1770, 1771, 1772, 1787; *Pennsylvania Packet* 1772, 1773, 1774, 1778, 1783, 1784, 1785, 1787, 1788.

increased after the continental colonies became the United States.

The earliest peppermint advertisements I found dated from 1763 in the *New York Mercury* and 1764 in the *New York Gazette*. By 1770, advertising had spread to the *Boston Chronicle*, the *Boston News Letter*, and the *Boston Evening Post*, as well as the *Georgia Gazette*, the *New York Journal*, and the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. Although newspapers often came and went rapidly in the colonies and early republic, several papers enjoyed long publishing runs and advertisements for peppermint products can be found throughout their lifespans. The *Connecticut Journal*, for example, ran advertisements for peppermint essence from the 1770s through the early 1790s. The *Pennsylvania Packet* included ads over the same period. And peppermint ads can be found in the *New York Gazette* from the mid-1760s through the 1790s. Occasional gaps in these ranges probably represent lack of sources accessible to my searches rather than lapses in the marketing of peppermint. Even the Revolutionary War failed to halt sales of what had been a quintessentially British product.⁴⁷ The war simply shifted production to the rebellious colonies.

These advertisements show how peppermint products were used and how their production shifted from England to America during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. For example, on December 19, 1763, importer Daniel Fueter announced in the *New York Mercury*:

Just imported from London. By the King's authority...Essence of peppermint, in bottles of 3s. 6d. and 9s. each, much esteemed and recommended by eminent physicians, as an highly useful family medicine; it contains all the virtues of that valuable plant, improved to the highest degree of perfection; it speedily relieves

⁴⁷ quintessentially British because after peppermint was discovered in England, its production was not rapidly adopted by any other European nation.

cholick, and gouty pains in the stomach and bowels, and all disorders arising from wind. Its grateful cordial and stomachick effects are very great. Six or eight drops give to a glass of pure water the high yet pleasing flavor of the peppermint. In the sea sickness, no other remedy is so efficacious. Added to mineral waters, it renders them in many cases of more extensive use.⁴⁸

In a *New York Gazette* advertisement dated October 1, 1764, Cornelius Fisher of Broad Street offered “a fresh Assortment of Drugs and of Chymical and Galenical Medicines,” including “Peppermint water.” Fisher’s products were fresh off the boat, “Imported in the *Edward*, Capt. Davis, from London.”⁴⁹ The British provenance of Fisher’s medicines added to their value -- because of the peppermint plant’s origin in London, advertisers considered British peppermint products the most authentic and highest quality. An April 18, 1768 advertisement in the *Boston Chronicle* offered “ESSENCE of PEPPER-MINT. By his MAJESTY’s Royal Letters Patent” at 1 shilling 4 pence per bottle. Peppermint, the advertiser declared, “Is now well known to give speedy relief in cholicky and gouty pains in the stomach and bowels, In the sea sickness, in retchings from other causes, and in all disorders arising from wind.— Multitudes of infants, as well as others, are daily relieved from its grateful, cordial, and stomachic effects, not equalled by any other medicine.”⁵⁰

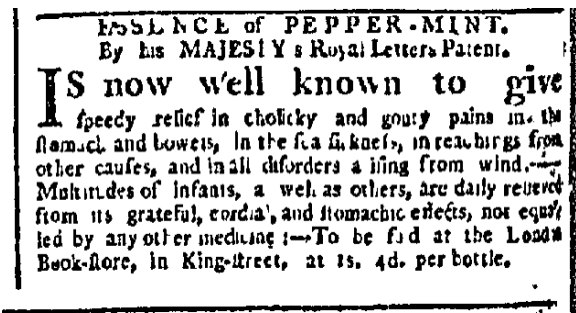


Figure 3: 1768 Advertisement from the *Boston Chronicle*.

American colonists were quick to recognize commercial opportunities, and

⁴⁸ "Just Imported from London," *New York Mercury*, 12/19/1763.

⁴⁹ Cornelius Fisher, *The New-York Gazette*, 10-1-1764.

⁵⁰ "Essence of Pepper-Mint," *Boston Chronicle*, 1768-4-18.

peppermint preparations that could be produced locally rather than imported allowed local producers to offer lower prices and still pocket some of the shipping costs saved. Although it is unclear exactly when enterprising farmers first imported British peppermint roots to the colonies, Americans were growing and distilling their own peppermint well before the Revolution. On May 30, 1768, Druggist Robert Harris placed a notice in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*. Unlike the other advertisers considered, Harris was looking to *buy* “Mint and Peppermint, fresh and in their season—of which any quantity will be purchased.”⁵¹ Harris’s ad shows a growing interest among druggists in producing their own peppermint products rather than relying on London suppliers. It also suggests that farmers around Philadelphia were growing substantial quantities of peppermint to sell to city druggists. English peppermint products might still be perceived as superior, but the market was apparently big enough that the British original peppermint and the domestic alternative were able to coexist.

With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, distinguishing between British and American peppermint products gained a new urgency for advertisers eager to capitalize on the newfound patriotism of the former colonists. Although London peppermint might still be considered superior, only Royalists carried British products. New York City, occupied by British forces until 1783, was a battlefield for imported and domestic peppermint products. In September 1778, for example, New York’s *Royal American Gazette* carried this advertisement:

By the *KING’s PATENT*. The Genuine Essence of PEPPER-MINT, SOLD

⁵¹ Robert Harris, *Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, 5/30/1768.

WHOLESALE and RETAIL, BY RICHARD SPEAIGHT, Chymist.⁵²

Speaight's display ad for Peppermint Essence ran on the same page as his larger advertisement for a wide variety of drugs and medicines. His placement of a separate display ad for peppermint suggests both that it was a premium product and that there was a significant wholesale market Speaight was eager to serve. A few months later, Atwood's Medicinal Store on Water Street offered readers of the *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* "Some of the most approved Patent Medicines, such as...Essence of Peppermint." Since Atwood did not specify the origin of his peppermint essence, it is likely his supply was domestic. Atwood also offered, in the same ad, "Two commodius, elegant, and compleat chests adapted, with braces, for a Regimental Surgeon to be sold cheap."⁵³

Trade in peppermint was not limited to the largest seaports, however. In July 1778, a Rhode Island newspaper carried an announcement that "Amos Throop, Opposite the State-House in Providence, has for SALE, a general assortment of choice DRUGS and MEDICINES, among which are the following: Calomel...Opium...Tartar Vitriolat...Also, Hoopers and Anderson's Pills, Bateman's Drops, Balsam of Life, and Essence of Pepper-Mint."⁵⁴ Peppermint was so central to the *material medica* that every apothecary would have to offer it.

In February 1781, the *Royal Gazette* carried an advertisement for "ESSENCE of PEPPERMINT, A fresh importation lately landed, with a paper for taking it, adapted to

⁵² Richard Speaight, *Royal American Gazette*, 9/24/1778.

⁵³ Atwood, *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 12/28/1778.

⁵⁴ Amos Throop, *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, 7/11/1778.

the different constitutions of men, women, children, and infants. Price 4s. for a small, and 10s. for a large bottle; this Essence is warranted genuine by James Rivington."⁵⁵ Genuine, at the time, was a synonym for British. But even in occupied New York there was a ready market for less expensive but equally effective domestic peppermint. In February 1783, half a year before the British Evacuation, the *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* advertised:

Essence of Peppermint. General Experience has confirmed, beyond dispute, the great virtues of this plant in cholicky pains and flatulencies, as well as in retchings, sickness, loss of appetite, and other injuries brought on by the abuses of wines or spiritous liquors; nervous weaknesses, hypochronial Depressions, &c. &c. Sold by H. Gaine.⁵⁶

The American Revolution was a repudiation of British rule, but not of commerce with Britain. London peppermint was still in demand in America. In the summer of 1784, Boston's *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* carried an ad announcing, "Just imported, in the Ship UNITED STATES, *A large Assortment of Drugs and Medicines*, Which will be sold on the lowest terms for Cash or Credit...Essence of Peppermint."⁵⁷ Although imported on a ship whose name celebrated the new nation, the cargo of London peppermint essence and other drugs shows there was still a ready market for British medicines in the newly united states.

Nor was the perception that premium quality London peppermint commanded higher prices restricted to East Coast cities. In 1784, a Western Massachusetts druggist advertised "Essence of Peppermint...Just imported from London, And to be sold by

⁵⁵ James Rivington, *Royal Gazette*, 2/14/1781.

⁵⁶ H. Gaine, *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 2/24/1783.

⁵⁷ John Joy, *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* 6/17/1784.

Ebenezer Hunt jun. At his Apothecary Store, opposite the Meeting-House, in Northampton.”⁵⁸ Hunt’s advertisements appeared regularly in the *Hampshire Gazette* into the early 1800s.

By the last decade of the eighteenth century, markets for both English and American peppermint-based medicines were well established and growing quickly. Salem, Massachusetts, apothecary Jonathon Waldo sold vials of English Essence of Peppermint for eighteen shillings per dozen. He let his own domestic Essence of Peppermint go for 10/6. In 1799, Beverly druggist Robert Rantoul placed an order in London for a variety of English patent medicines, and also for “empty vials in which to put British Oil and Essence of Peppermint.” Whether Rantoul actually intended to fill the vials with English peppermint is unknown, but “For decades thereafter the catalogs of wholesale drug firms continued to specify two grades of various patent medicines for sale, termed ‘English’ and ‘American,’ ‘true’ and ‘common,’ or ‘genuine’ and ‘imitation.’”⁵⁹ A druggist’s 1797 advertisement in the Providence *United States Chronicle*, for example, announced “MEDICINES, genuine and fresh from EUROPE, which he will sell wholesale and retail, on as liberal Terms as may be had in New-England...*True* Essence of Peppermint.”⁶⁰

As time passed, domestic peppermint products gained ground with consumers. In the first decade of the 1800s, growing tensions between the new Republic and Britain led to an American boycott of British products formalized in the Embargo Act of 1807. American leaders preached self-sufficiency and domestic manufacture, which gave local

⁵⁸ *Hampshire Herald*, 10/19/1784.

⁵⁹ George B. Griffenhagen and James Harvey Young, *Old English Patent Medicines in America*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1959).

⁶⁰ *United States Chronicle: Political, Commercial, and Historical*, 5/4/1797.

peppermint producers a valuable opportunity to expand their market. In 1806, for example, Portland, Maine's *Eastern Argus* carried an ad for "NEWTON'S HIGHLY APPROVED ESSENCE OF PEPPERMINT, Having four times the strength of the Essence which is in common use, and is eight times as strong as some which is sold for good Essence, and will be always of equal strength. Prices 2/, 3/6 & 6/6."⁶¹ The advertisement made a claim about quality that was not tied to the origin of the product, and in doing so implied that users should be able to distinguish quality peppermint oil without resorting to a simple distinction based on the source nation. In 1811, Dr. Hayward of Norwich, Vermont, advertised "Genuine Essence of Peppermint, Tansy, Gum-Hemlock, and Checkerberry."⁶² By this time, the term Genuine was losing its connotation with British and was beginning to suggest quality and affirm that the products were really what they claimed to be, and were not adulterated with other substances.

Early American Medicine

The early history of American medicine is tied to the history of plant essences and patent medicines.⁶³ In the first half of the nineteenth century, physicians generally either trained as apprentices with practicing doctors or attended three- to four-month long Medical

⁶¹ *Eastern Argus*, 10/23/1806.

⁶² Dr. Hayward, *Pittsfield Sun*, 9/21/1811.

⁶³ The term patent medicine is inexact. English medicines were first marketed in the eighteenth century by individuals or single firms by royal patent, and chemical patents did not come into use in the U.S. until the twentieth. Nostrums that claimed "patent" pedigrees eventually lost their proprietary associations and were manufactured and sold generally. A characteristic of these more generic patent medicines was usually a distinctive container that made it easily recognizable to consumers. Essence of peppermint was usually sold in special vials alongside "patent" preparations such as opodeldoc, balsam of life, and hot drops. As a result, historians generally refer to peppermint essence as a patent medicine. Olive R. Jones, "Essence of Peppermint: History of the Medicine and Its Bottle," *Historical Archaeology* 15, no. 2 (1981).

Lectures loosely affiliated with colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth.⁶⁴ In either case, the students became acquainted with a *materia medica* that had its roots in antiquity and wound its way tortuously through the writings of medieval alchemists and early-modern natural philosophers. A germ theory of medicine was not firmly established until the final quarter of the nineteenth century, although scientifically-minded physicians like Charles Knowlton of Ashfield and Oliver Wendell Holmes of Boston began publishing their observations and theories of contagion as early as the 1840s.⁶⁵

The *materia medica* of the early nineteenth century contained a wild variety of substances, among which peppermint oil and essence were not only relatively benign, but surprisingly efficacious. Before 1850, physicians routinely prescribed substances like calomel (mercury chloride), antimony, and cantharides (Spanish fly), despite mounting evidence of their toxicity. The debate over medicines gradually expanded from specialist venues such as the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* into a public backlash against dangerous and ineffective prescriptions and other heroic treatments such as bloodletting. Frustrated with their physicians, many patients turned to Thomsonian herbalists, hydrotherapists, homeopathists, electerizers, and to a tradition of do-it-yourself medicine that was as old as the republic.⁶⁶ Peppermint was one of the few medicines upon which orthodox physicians and their critics agreed.

⁶⁴ Loosely affiliated: Medical Lectures were often associated with established institutions, but conducted off campus and held at arm's length by conservative college Presidents like Timothy Dwight at Yale or the trustees of Harvard and Dartmouth. William Henry Welch, "The Relation of Yale to Medicine," *Science* 14, no. 361 (1901).; Oliver S. Hayward and Constance E. Putnam, *Improve, Perfect & Perpetuate: Dr. Nathan Smith and Early American Medical Education*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998).

⁶⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Medical Essays, 1842-1882*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1893.; Dan Allosso, *An Infidel Body-Snatcher and the Fruits of His Philosophy: The Life of Dr. Charles Knowlton*. (Minneapolis: Stay Outside the Box, 2013).

⁶⁶ John Duffy, *From Humors to Medical Science: A History of American Medicine*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Edinburgh physician William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*, first published around 1772, spread rapidly through the English-speaking world and was the model for many home health manuals. Buchan mentioned peppermint several times and suggested peppermint water was preferable to brandy, for colic and other stomach ailments.⁶⁷ Peppermint products became not only key ingredients in many medicines prescribed by physicians, but a component of every family's home medical shelf.

In 1798, physician William Currie wrote a pamphlet on cholera, in which he offered a dozen different prescriptions for the various symptoms of the disease. Peppermint oil ("*Minth Piper*") was a component of all.⁶⁸ The 1788 edition of *The Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia almanack and ephemeris* cited peppermint essence as a "Recipe for the Cure of the most excruciating Pain in the Region of the Stomach, attended with severe Gripping"⁶⁹ Edinburgh medical professor William Cullen's two-volume *Treatise of the Materia Medica*, 1789, described "*Mentha Piperita*" as containing "more essential oil than any other species of mint." There was no doubt, Cullen said, "of its answering the purposes of any other species of mint; and the water distilled from it is manifestly more immediately antispasmodic and carminative."⁷⁰ In 1793, Isaiah Thomas's Worcester edition of *The Family Female Physician* included dosage instructions for Essence of Peppermint and the recommendation that Peruvian

⁶⁷ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine; or, the Family Physician: Being an Attempt to Render the Medical Art More Generally Useful, by Shewing People What Is in Their Own Power Both with Respect to the Prevention and Cure of Diseases. Chiefly Calculated to Recommend a Proper Attention to Regimen and Simple Medicines. By William Buchan, M.D. To Which Is Added, Dr. Cadogan's Dissertation on the Gout.* (New York: John Dunlap, 1772).

⁶⁸ William Currie, "Of the Cholera," (1798).

⁶⁹ William Goddard, *The Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia Almanack and Ephemeris, for the Year of Our Lord, 1788.* (Philadelphia: Goddard, 1787).

⁷⁰ William Cullen, *A Treatise of the Materia Medica by William Cullen... In Two Volumes.* (Philadelphia: Joseph Cruikshank, 1789).

Bark (quinine) should be administered in a glass of peppermint water.⁷¹

In the same year, William Currie's *A treatise on the synochus icteroides*, describing the Yellow Fever outbreak in Philadelphia, recommended "Small doses of a cordial mixture composed of the oil of peppermint and compound spirits of lavender, may be taken until the sickness abates."⁷² Dr. Benjamin Rush's *Account of the Bilious remitting Yellow Fever*, published a year later, copied Currie's peppermint prescription word for word.⁷³ In 1796, Samuel Hemenway's *Medicine Chests, with suitable directions* described Essence of Peppermint as "Good in pains of the stomach, colicky pains, attended with wind, in trembling and nervous complaints, and in sea sickness," and prescribed "20 or 30 drops" taken on sugar or in a cup of warm water.⁷⁴ In 1801, Samuel Stearns's *American Herbal; or Materia Medica*, which many historians consider America's first original herbal, listed peppermint as "a stimulant. It restores the functions of the stomach, promotes digestion, stops vomiting, cures the hiccups, flatulent colic, hysterical depressions, and other like complainees...Of the oil from one to two drops in sugar. Of the distilled water, from one to two ounces."⁷⁵ And in 1802, *The Bee* in

⁷¹ Alexander Hamilton, *The Family Female Physician: Or, a Treatise on the Management of Female Complaints, and of Children in Early Infancy*. (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1793). 335, 347.

⁷² William Currie and Thomas Mifflin, *A Treatise on the Synochus Icteroides, or Yellow Fever as It Lately Appeared in the City of Philadelphia.: Exhibiting a Concise View of Its Rise, Progress and Symptoms, Together with the Method of Treatment Found Most Successful : Also Remarks on the Nature of Its Contagion, and Directions for Preventing the Introduction of the Same Malady, in Future*. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794).

⁷³ Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever, as It Appeared in the City of Philadelphia, in the Year 1793*. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794). 220.

⁷⁴ Samuel Hemenway, *Medicine Chests, with Suitable Directions: Prepared by Samuel Hemenway, at His Shop in Essex Street, Opposite Union Street, Salem*. (Salem, Mass.: W. Carlton, 1796).

⁷⁵ Samuel Stearns, *The American Herbal, or Materia Medica : Wherein the Virtues of the Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal Productions of North and South America Are Laid Open, So Far as They Are Known; and Their Uses in the Practice of Physic and Surgery Exhibited; Comprehending an Account of a Large Number of New Medical Discoveries and Improvements, Which Are Compiled from the Best Authorities*. (Walpole, MA: David Carlisle, 1801). 9.

Hudson, New York, carried an advertisement for “*A few articles necessary for country life -- such as, Rawson's Bitters, Stoughton's do. Essence of Lemon, Bergamot, Lavender, and Peppermint—Oil of Peppermint.*”⁷⁶

Physicians considered peppermint not only a valuable remedy in its own right, but an important additive to many medicines, whose properties would complement those of the other active ingredients while making the overall mixture more palatable and digestible. In 1807, *Oram's New York Almanac* reminded its readers in its recipe for a “Cure for Dysentery” that “If a considerable portion of the essence of peppermint be added, it will be a valuable improvement of the medicine.”⁷⁷ In 1814, Connecticut publisher T.M. Skinner printed Howell Rogers’s 58-page manual, *On Essences and their Use*, which advised its readers on the uses and also the preparation of “a variety of tinctures and syrups.” Rogers described peppermint essence as a remedy that might be taken regularly “and repeated with safety.”⁷⁸ Practitioners and patients appreciated the fact that peppermint oil was safe at the dilutions used in essences. Many other remedies of the day, such as calomel and antimony, were highly toxic and unsafe even in the hands of doctors. Peppermint’s combination of effectiveness and relative safety made it a valuable addition to both the doctor’s bag and the farm-family’s medicine shelf.

One of the most feared and hated adversaries of professional medicine in the early nineteenth century was Samuel Thomson, a self-taught herbalist from Alstead, New Hampshire. As a young man, Thomson began trying to heal neighbors who had been

⁷⁶ *The Bee*, 12/28/1802.

⁷⁷ Abraham Shoemaker, *Oram's New-York Almanac, for the Year of Our Lord, 1807*. (New York: James Oram, 1806).

⁷⁸ Howell Rogers, *On Essences and Their Use and, on the Method of Preparing and Taking a Variety of Tinctures and Syrups*. (Colchester, Conn.: T.M. Skinner, 1814). 18.

abandoned by local physicians as hopeless cases. Although today Thomson's treatments seem to have little basis in medical science, at the time they appeared effective. At the very least, unlike the doctors' so-called "heroic" treatments Thomson's herbal preparations had the virtue of not damaging the patient further; thereby allowing for natural healing. Samuel Thomson's philosophy of medicine revolved around heat, based like some of the ideas of his contemporary physicians on Galen's four humors. Thomson's favorite herb for warming the patient's inner system was lobelia (*Lobelia inflata*). His second line of defense consisted of "Cayenne, Peppermint, Pennyroyal, or any warm article to assist in raising the inward heat."⁷⁹ Both mainstream physicians and their Thomsonian opponents had vials of peppermint essence on their shelves of favorite remedies.

From the eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century, peppermint oil was an important home remedy and a favorite of herbalists, as well as an ingredient in many orthodox prescriptions both for its own sake and as a way to make other ingredients palatable. As American medicine discovered germs and reformulated its *materia medica* around new scientific knowledge, enthusiasm for herbal remedies that had been favored by Thomson, one of the profession's most effective critics, slowly waned. By the end of the nineteenth century, peppermint had been largely forgotten by mainstream doctors, although "old wives" often enthusiastically continued using the herb and its oil in their remedies. Peppermint oil needed a new market, which it would create by making American peppermint a premium flavoring agent for confectioners around the world.

⁷⁹ Samuel Thomson, *A Narrative of the Life and Medical Discoveries of Samuel Thomson*. (Columbus, OH: Jarvis, Pike & Co., 1833). 77.

The Ranney Family

The history of the Ranney family in America begins, like many others, with a single immigrant believed to be the “progenitor of all the name in America.” Thomas Ranney was born in 1616 in Scotland. He probably emigrated to America as an adult in the mid-1650s after Cromwell’s Civil War, and was prosperous enough to be one of the original proprietor settlers of the “Upper Houses” of Middletown, Connecticut (now the town of Cromwell). Ranney seems to have arrived in Connecticut by about 1655, and in 1659 he married Mary, the eighteen-year old daughter of fellow-proprietor George Hubbard. At his death in 1713, Thomas Ranney’s estate was valued at £757, 19s, 10d. He had four sons: Thomas, John, Joseph, and Ebenezer, and three daughters: Hannah, Margaret, and Abygail.⁸⁰

The Ranney family prospered in Middletown for generations, and they named many of their sons Thomas, George, and Samuel, which makes keeping track of these generations a bit difficult. Although now all but forgotten, in the 1700s Middletown was the northernmost harbor on the Connecticut River accessible to ocean shipping, which made it the most important port between Boston and New York City. Its population in 1776 exceeded that of New Haven or Hartford. Ship-building, the West India Trade, and coastal trading had made the city wealthy, and steadily increasing property values made it possible for enterprising emigrants who arrived at the right time to leave the city with money in their pockets.

⁸⁰ Thomas Ranney’s surname was spelled Rany in the earliest documents and Ranny in his 1711 will. But Ranney was illiterate and signed the will with a “+” so it is impossible to be sure of the spelling or exactly where he was from. Charles Collard Adams, *Middletown Upper Houses; a History of the North Society of Middletown, Connecticut, from 1650 to 1800, with Genealogical and Biographical Chapters on Early Families and a Full Genealogy of the Ranney Family*. (New York: Grafton Press, 1908).

The euphemism “West India Trade” refers to the production of sugar on Caribbean islands, such as Barbados, using enslaved Africans. Sugar was a native of Europe introduced to the Americas as part of the Columbian Exchange. Although an ancient luxury, sugar became an item of mass consumption when the West Indies enabled “the links between colony and metropolis, fashioned by capital,” described by Sidney W. Mintz in his seminal commodity history, *Sweetness and Power*.⁸¹ Grinding and boiling sugar cane produces table sugar, and the initial boiling of the cane creates brown sugar and a by-product, molasses. The second boiling of the raw sugar (which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was often done in Europe using raw sugar shipped from the West Indies) produces white table sugar and a by-product called syrup. West Indians turned molasses into rum and Europeans distilled syrup with juniper berries to make gin.

But not all West Indian colonies made rum. Saint Dominique, the French colony that became Haiti, threw away all of its molasses because the French government, in an attempt to protect its domestic wine industry, had outlawed the distilling of anything not made from grapes. And even in the English colonies, there was enough molasses available to support an export market. Middletown became a center of rum distilling from Caribbean molasses.

At the outset of the American Revolution, British North Americans drank four gallons of rum annually per capita. That total is twice as much as all the alcohol modern Americans consume, and it only counts rum—not gin, hard cider, beer, ale, wine, brandy,

⁸¹ Mintz. 116.

or whiskey; all of which the colonists also consumed in substantial quantities.⁸² Before the Revolution, the mainland colonies contained 25 sugar refineries and 140 rum distilleries. After the war, these numbers increased. Among the new suppliers was a distillery opened in Middletown that produced 600 63-gallon hogsheads of rum per year through the early 1820s.⁸³

Thomas Ranney's great-great grandson George (whose father and grandfather were also named George) was born in the summer of 1746. "In early life," the genealogy reluctantly admits, "he was in the West India trade."⁸⁴ George Ranney's oldest son, Samuel Hall Ranney, was born in 1772 in Connecticut. Samuel moved to Ashfield with the family as a young boy in 1780, but he seems to have returned to Middletown frequently. Samuel's uncle Thomas and his cousin Roswell Ranney had remained in Middletown, but they moved to Ashfield when Samuel was twenty, in 1792. Two years later, Samuel returned to Middletown to marry Polly Stewart, a sea-captain's daughter from nearby Branford, Connecticut. Samuel's younger brother Joseph also returned to Middletown in 1801, married a local girl and remained in Connecticut, working in local quarries until 1818.

If Samuel Ranney returned regularly to Connecticut in the late 1780s and early 1790s, as seems likely, he may have learned the distiller's craft there. Middletown was a

⁸² W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic, an American Tradition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁸³ Adams. 16.

⁸⁴ George Ranney's experience with Middletown's triangle trade in molasses, rum, and slaves probably began in his youth, well before the American Revolution. It is not known whether Ranney ever went to sea, but by his early thirties, George had left the business and quit Middletown altogether. In 1771, George Ranney married Esther Hall, daughter of another Middletown founding family. The couple had eight children in the next nine years. The last, also named George, was born in 1780, the year the family moved to Ashfield, Massachusetts. The senior George bought "a 100-acre farm, most of which was a forest, and built a log house." Remembered as a short, stout man "of industry and perseverance," George cleared the land with the help of his four sons, and in 1798 built a two-story frame house that still stands today. *Ibid.*

center of rum distilling in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. The distillery established there just after the Revolution was owned by a relative on Samuel's mother's side, merchant William C. Hall. And in 1793, Ranney neighbor Selah Norton's general store in Ashfield advertised in the *Hampshire Gazette*, "Old Jamaican Spirits" as well as "New England Rum."⁸⁵ It's not difficult to imagine Samuel Ranney transporting Hall's Middletown rum and barrels of Caribbean spirits to Ashfield, and learning about distilling in the process.

Samuel was unorthodox from a young age: a freethinker of sorts. His bride, Polly, was the daughter of a privateer named William Stewart and a Middletown resident named Lucretia Braddock. Although reputedly descended from the Mayflower Braddocks, Lucretia was never married to William Stewart. When Stewart died in 1779 "in an engagement with the British at sea," he left his estate to a different woman and family. But apparently Polly's illegitimacy did not concern the sixth-generation descendant of one of Middletown's founders. Samuel married Polly in 1794, and Lucretia's legacy must have been a powerful one. Polly and Samuel's first two children were named Lucretia and Braddock. Their second son was William.⁸⁶

Traveling in Western Massachusetts, Samuel Ranney would hardly have been able to avoid coming in contact with people growing and distilling peppermint. According to an undated western Massachusetts newspaper clipping held at the Ashfield Historical Society, "In 1934, when the former Richard Pritchard house in Lanesboro, almost 150 years old, was being repaired, several documents were discovered. One was a receipt

⁸⁵ Mark Williams, *The Brittle Thread of Life : Backcountry People Make a Place for Themselves in Early America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). 209.

⁸⁶ Adams. 261.

dated Oct. 4, 1811, for 88 pounds, 14 ounces of peppermint oil valued at \$440."⁸⁷ This is consistent with local stories and with other documents such as a December 1800

Pittsfield Sun advertisement placed by Lanesboro brewer John Hart for a:

Distillery & Brewery, One mile east of the Meeting House in Lanesborough, Where may be had, Beer of the best quality by the Hogshead, Barrel, or less quantity as may suit the purchaser. Also, Essence of Pepper Mint, American and English, warranted genuine, in patent vials, by the single, dozen, gross or thousand. Mint Cordial by the Gallon.⁸⁸

Similarly, according to an 1885 history, about 1790 "At the Kitchen [a village in Lanesboro], Nathan Wood had a grist and a saw-mill, and a little later a distillery on the old Lanesborough road near the town line...Peppermint was grown quite extensively and the essence manufactured."⁸⁹

Coming from Middletown, returning there regularly as a young man, and traveling in Western Massachusetts gave Samuel Ranney all the exposure he needed to peppermint and distilling. Samuel and Polly made a farm adjacent to George Ranney's land to the south, and in 1821 Samuel built a brick house which still stands beside Route 116 in Ashfield. Samuel began raising and distilling peppermint around 1812, and his brother George, who inherited their father's house and land 1822, quickly turned his fields over to peppermint as well. It is likely that George and Samuel's brother Jesse (who had the farm just north of George's land) also planted peppermint.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Richard V. Happel, "Peppermint Oil".

⁸⁸ Phinehas Allen, *The Sun*, 12-9-1800.

⁸⁹ Ellen M. Raynor, Emma L. Petitchler, and James Madison Barker, *History of the Town of Cheshire, Berkshire County, Mass.* (Holyoke, Mass.: C.W. Bryan & Co., 1885). 75.

⁹⁰ Williams. 218.

Radical Ashfield

The town of Ashfield, Massachusetts, sits in the Berkshire foothills about twelve miles west of Deerfield. The 1879 *History of the Connecticut Valley* described Ashfield's location as:

well watered, though possessing no great waterpower...The town occupies an elevation of about 1200 feet high above Tidewater. The highest part in it is Peter's Hill...which is 1740 feet above the Tidewater. The surface of the town is broken into hills and valleys, and contains but a comparatively small portion of arable land. Indian corn succeeds well, but English grain is of secondary quality. Wheat is seldom sowed.⁹¹

Originally called Huntstown, after Captain Ephraim Hunt, who had led a company of men from Weymouth on a military expedition against Montreal during King William's War in 1690, the town was first settled in 1743-4, although its proprietors held several meetings to plan the settlement, in Weymouth, Hadley, and Hatfield beginning about 1738. By the time of the grant, nearly fifty years after the "Canada Expedition," most of Hunt's original company were deceased and there was a fairly lively trade in shares of the grant.⁹²

The first settlers of Ashfield were not all proprietors of the six-mile square grant, and the diversity of the early population seems to have set the tone for the town's social development. The settlers were a "group of friends and relatives that lived in Easton, Massachusetts," led by Thomas Phillips, Heber Honestman, and Richard Ellis. Phillips

⁹¹ L. H. Everts and Co, *History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers*. (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts, 1879).

⁹² Frederick G. Howes, *History of the Town of Ashfield, Mass, Volume I*. (West Cummington, Mass.: Wm. G. Atkins, printer, 1910). 14, 22, 51.

was son of Capt. John Phillips, proprietor of Lot 6 under the original grant. Heber was an African American, brought to Easton as a slave in 1711 and freed in 1722 by his master's widow. Heber bought a share of the grant for £20 from Josiah Pratt, the son of a Weymouth soldier. He was the nineteenth person to draw in the lottery for parcels, and "drew Lot #1, an already partially cleared piece of land at a 'Beaver Meadow' on the Bear River." Ellis was an immigrant, possibly "a Welshman, who had come to Boston as an indentured servant." Another account claims Ellis was a native of Dublin, who had agreed to an indenture in Virginia but had been sold for his passage by a ship's captain in Boston. After serving out his indenture, Ellis prospered and married the daughter of Capt. John Phillips.⁹³

Setting out from their homes around Weymouth in 1738, the settlers soon left the populated coast. The journey to Ashfield began on foot or horseback in Braintree. "Their route lay on the Old Bay Path from Boston to Springfield as far as Brookfield, where to shorten the distance they probably took the trail from there to Hadley, crossed on the ferry to Hatfield, came up the path to Deerfield, then by blazed trees followed the trail...up through what is now Conway to the new township."⁹⁴ The remoteness of the new settlement cannot be overstated. Although the village of Deerfield had been established on the banks of the Connecticut River in 1673, Ashfield was a long, hard climb through the woods from that outpost in the valley.

The town remained difficult to reach, and its elevation extended and intensified the winters (and still does). When the town officially incorporated as Ashfield, in 1765,

⁹³ Ibid. 17-8, 138. Williams. 57, 133, 223.

⁹⁴ Williams. 58.

it could only be reached by foot or on horseback over rough woodland trails. The first regular stage route, a private weekly mail service from Northampton via Whately, did not begin until 1789. In 1893, lifetime resident Henry Ranney noted the town was “peculiar in its extremely isolated condition, for none of the towns adjoining it, on the north, south, east, or west, had received its name or even its first inhabitant.”⁹⁵ But Ashfield’s isolation did not result in its residents feeling remote from the outside world and its concerns. From their earliest days, Ashfielders were intimately engaged in political and religious struggles often characterized as being more central to urban areas. By the time Samuel Ranney arrived in Ashfield, the seemingly isolated town was rife with religious and economic conflicts of national importance. These conflicts would help shape the development of the peppermint oil business the Ranneys built in Ashfield and later expanded to western New York, and Michigan.

The first Ashfield settlers were soon joined by Chileab Smith and his family. Smith was a poor man from Hadley who had distinguished himself by siding with revivalist theologian Jonathan Edwards against Solomon Stoddard and his elite supporters, known as the River Gods. Chileab Smith settled his family in Ashfield by 1751, and he and his son Ebenezer became notable Massachusetts Baptists. Religious differences exacerbated the wealth inequality among the settlers, driving a wedge between Ashfield residents. This social division was aggravated with the arrival of Israel Williams, the son of William “Hatfield” Williams, a wealthy, Harvard-educated River God and a relative of the Stoddard clan.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ H. S. Ranney's Centenary Address, 1893, H. S. Ranney papers.

⁹⁶ Williams. 249.; William G. McLoughlin, "Ebenezer Smith's Ballad of the Ashfield Baptists, 1772," *The New England Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1974). 140.

Ashfield's town history describes Williams as a man who "seemed unable to resist asserting himself from time to time." In 1762, Williams and his fellow River God proprietors called a Yale-educated "orthodox" minister to establish a Congregational Church in Ashfield. Jacob Sherwin was known for his "virulent opposition to [Baptist] separatists, [and] once ordained he busied himself preaching against the Baptists, and once even barged into one of their meetings and ordered them to disperse."⁹⁷ The college in New Haven would provide several ministers over the years to support the conservative Congregationalists. Against them, the Baptists would appeal to Eastern religious leaders, and ultimately to the King himself.

The town's religious controversy was more than just a contest of words. Until 1753, Massachusetts colonial law had exempted Baptists from attending or supporting the established, Congregational Church. On his arrival in town, Israel Williams used his influence in Boston to get the law changed, allowing the Congregational Church in Ashfield to tax *all* the town's inhabitants. Although he claimed to represent all the Congregational residents of Ashfield, Williams was actually trying to use the church as a tool of social control, if not of personal profit. Chileab Smith went to Boston in 1769 to protest the "Ashfield Law," carrying with him not only a petition from the town's Baptist residents but a "companion petition from a group of Ashfield Congregationalists suggesting, in Smith's words, that 'it is not all the other Society that would thus Oppress us.'" Signed by thirteen Ashfield congregationalists, the second petition stated that most of the community had "no objection a Gainst the anabaptest societys Being set free from paying to the maintenances of the other worship which they Do not Belong unto."

⁹⁷ Williams. 272, 287

Historian Mark Williams observed that many of the wealthy, River God supporters of Williams's hard-line position were not even fulltime residents of Ashfield. He concluded that the support Smith and the Baptists received from their Congregationalist neighbors "was a dangerous development for Israel Williams, for it set the non-resident proprietors apart from the majority on inhabitants in whose best interest they were supposedly acting."⁹⁸

The Baptists called attention to the irony of the River Gods' position, in Ashfield, Boston, and beyond. Following the Boston Massacre in March, 1770, Smith and his supporters sent a "biting petition" to the Massachusetts legislature. Invoking the principles of the rebellious Sons of Liberty, the Ashfielders wrote "That No Taxation can be equitable where such Restraint is laid upon the Taxed as takes from him the Liberty of GIVING his *Own Money Freely*." The conflict began to attract regional attention, and was even noticed in Philadelphia. Ezra Stiles, Connecticut's delegate to the Continental Congress and later President of Yale, noted in 1774 a degree of "coolness" in Congress toward the Massachusetts delegation "because of the persecution of the Baptists."⁹⁹

The leaders of the Congregational Church were undeterred, in spite of acting without the enthusiastic support they had claimed from most of the parish. The churchmen seized 400 acres belonging to the Baptists and sold the land at public auction. The properties consisted of "mowing lands, winter grain, orcharding, one dwelling house of a poor man's, and [the Baptists'] burying place," and they were disposed of "for a very small part of their value."¹⁰⁰ When early America's leading Baptist minister, Isaac

⁹⁸ Ibid. 295.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 297, 304.; Howes. 75 ff.

¹⁰⁰ Howes. 10.

Backus, described the events in Ashfield in his *Church History of New England*, he concluded, “this plainly discovers what wickedness is the consequence of supporting religious ministers by force.”¹⁰¹

In addition to his high-handed treatment of his neighbors, Israel Williams’s selection of Jacob Sherwin as pastor of the new Congregational Church was also problematic. The new pastor was an autocrat and the church was “constantly distracted by disciplinary issues that drove a wedge between Sherwin and many of his parishioners.” To make matters worse, in a town where several of the original settlers were formerly enslaved Blacks and poor Whites who had endured indenture, Sherwin was a slave-owner.¹⁰²

Thomas Hutchinson, the loyalist Governor of the Bay Colony, forwarded the Ashfield Baptists’ petition to London, perhaps thinking it would discredit the revolutionary cause. King George III’s Privy Council ruled in favor of the Baptists and the King decreed their property should be restored to them. This action of the Crown caused Ashfielders to ask some pointed questions when Boston’s Committees of Correspondence began soliciting support for their rebellion against the monarchy that became the American Revolution. Chileab Smith called the Sons of Liberty “Sons of Violence,” and his son Ebenezer denounced them from the pulpit and said “they were calling themselves sons of liberty and were erecting their liberty poles about the country, but they did not deserve the name, for it was evident that all they wanted was liberty from

¹⁰¹ Isaac Backus, *Church History of New England, from 1620 to 1804: Containing a View of the Principles and Practice, Declensions and Revivals, Oppression and Liberty of the Churches, and a Chronological Table*. (Philadelphia: Baptist Tract Depository, 1839). 101, 193.

¹⁰² Williams. 304.

oppression that they might have the liberty to oppress.”¹⁰³

During and after the Revolution, Ashfielders remained jealously protective of the freedoms for which they had fought. In October 1776, a Town Meeting rejected the idea that the state legislature should be permitted to rewrite Massachusetts’ Constitution without popular supervision, and resolved “to Opose the Least Apearanc of them Old Tiranical Laws taking place again.” The majority of Ashfielders continued to push for a much more egalitarian interpretation of liberty than envisioned by the River Gods and their elite allies in Boston. In October 1774, the town voted “to Give Liberty for all men to vote in this meeting that are town Inhabitance that are twenty one years old and upward,” at a time when forty percent of Ashfield’s taxpayers did not meet the property limits required for voters. And in October 1779, the Ashfield Town Meeting instructed the town’s delegates in Boston to advocate a “Legislative Court” to govern the State. Its members would be chosen by “ye Several Towns &...every Man being 21 years of Age who has not by his own Act forfeited his Freedom Shall be accounted free and have a Right to Vote.” Beginning a long tradition of abolitionism, Ashfielders declared that even slaves should vote. And they instructed the legislature’s “Business shall be to protect all Persons in ye free Enjoyment of their religious Sentiments So far as they are good and peacibul Inhabitants.”¹⁰⁴

When the Ranney family relocated from Connecticut to Ashfield in 1780, they discovered a town that held fast to its vision of liberty in spite of worsening economic conditions. At a 1783 Town Meeting, residents resolved “that we will not pay the five &

¹⁰³ Ibid. 303.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 320, 330, 335.

twenty shilling State Tax on the pole Nor no other State Nor County Tax or Taxes is or may be Assessed upon the Town of Ashfield until we are informed by Genl Cort or Some other Authority the perticular use the said Money is Designed for.” To prevent militia officers being called to use their authority to enforce the taxes, the Meeting called on the town’s officers to “Resine their Commissions.” Although it has been traditional to characterize the “regulators” of Shays’s Rebellion as debtors, peasants, and poor Revolutionary War veterans angry over scrip speculation, historian Mark Williams observed that the regulators of Ashfield were the town’s 1776 militiamen, acting as “the executive arm of a whole town in rebellion.” The townspeople’s continuing “stream of objections to the republicanism of the eastern elite,” Williams concluded, “contain a bold foray into a radical political culture that was neither traditional nor peasant-minded.”¹⁰⁵ Ashfield residents, far from feeling cut off from the religious and policial controversies of their day, thrust themselves into the forefront of national and even international issues.

Among Ashfield’s regulators were brothers Samuel and Lamberton Allen. Cousins of Vermont’s heroes, Ethan and Ira Allen, Samuel and Lamberton arrived in Ashfield around 1770 from Deerfield. Samuel was a Lieutenant in the Revolution who had re-enlisted three times and Captain of the company that marched from Ashfield to aid in Daniel Shays’s rebellion. The Allens appear often in town records, but they were disfranchised for refusing to accept official pardon and their names are conspicuously absent from the list of those who took the oath of allegiance following Shays’s Rebellion. Samuel was apparently a bit eccentric, and was remembered by old Ashfield residents as

¹⁰⁵ David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion : The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).; Leonard L. Richards, *Shays's Rebellion : The American Revolution's Final Battle*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).; Williams. 342, 349-50.

“Barefoot Allen.” He and Lamberton moved to Grand Isle, Vermont in 1780 after selling their mostly-wooded 100 acre “farm” to George Ranney.¹⁰⁶ Ranney took advantage of the opportunity to buy a flat, well-watered parcel when the Allens decided to move to an even more radical territory than Ashfield (Vermont did not become a state until 1791). George Ranney’s son Samuel continued the Allens’ tradition of leadership and freethinking, when he introduced peppermint to Ashfield and later helped move the peppermint industry west.

In the next chapter, we examine the history of Ashfield’s stills, the essence peddling business run by the Ranneys and their friends, the development of a wholesale peppermint oil market, and the expansion of the Ranney family across the western frontier.

¹⁰⁶ The 1800 US Census page for the township of Middle Hero on Grand Isle includes Lamberton Allen, Lamberton Allen Jr., Samuel Allen, Ebenezer H. Allen, and Enoch Allen, as well as Samuel Belden, a member of the Belden/Belding family of Deerfield and Ashfield that was also prominent in the peppermint oil business. Both Lamberton Allen and his brother Enoch were married to Beldings. Howes.

CHAPTER 2

ASHFIELD, ESSENCE, AND PEDDLERS

The remote Massachusetts hill-town of Ashfield was not the most obvious location for the center of an essence-peddling business. The first road into the town was a woodland trail through Conway, from Deerfield and the Connecticut River valley. Weekly stage and post service through Northampton was not established until 1789, and there was no post office until 1814 when Levi Cook became postmaster and devoted a corner of his saddle shop to distributing the weekly mail. All of Ashfield celebrated when in March 1824 a daily mail stage from Greenfield to Albany New York began making early-morning stops.¹⁰⁷ Although memoirs and town histories do not discuss it, it is possible that the opening of the South Hadley Canal and later the Northampton-New Haven Canal aided in the movement of goods such as the rum Samuel Ranney may have helped bring to Ashfield from New Haven. However, as we will see, most of the significant commerce in Ashfield peppermint was on an east-west axis.

The mail stage started from Greenfield at three o'clock each morning, reaching Ashfield via Conway between five and six. According to an old resident who remembered the service, "It was a lively scene when in the early dawn, with the bugle blasts, the four horse coach rolled into the street from the east with its eight or ten passengers, pulled up at the hotel to change horses, while Esquire Cook hurried to change the mail; then on through Spruce Corner and Plainfield...to Bowker's in Savoy, to

¹⁰⁷ Everts and Co. 740.

Adams, and on to Albany, where they arrived the next morning at three.” The fare from Greenfield to Albany was three dollars.¹⁰⁸

Peppermint oil had been carried through the Berkshires along the mail route between Ashfield and Albany long before Samuel Ranney brought peppermint roots to Ashfield. Lanesboro distillers had grown, processed, and sold peppermint oil and essence since 1800, and Pittsfield and Lenox entered the business in the 1820s.¹⁰⁹ But the unprecedented scale of the lucrative peddler trade Ranney developed brought Ashfield the lion’s share of the credit for propelling the peppermint oil industry through its first phase of development.

From the time that Samuel Ranney first planted peppermint roots in Ashfield, around 1812, the town’s peppermint oil business grew rapidly. Many histories of agriculture in the Early Republic focus on the subsistence-first nature of farming, especially in remote rural communities.¹¹⁰ Commodities such as wheat, barley, and apples had primary uses as food products. Surpluses might be fermented and distilled for storage, home use, or sale, but these uses were secondary. In contrast, peppermint was not a food and had limited value as a fresh herb. The only reason to plant fields of peppermint was to distill it and sell the oil. All the primary sources agree that although the stills of Ashfield were occasionally used to produce other spirits, they were built to process peppermint and other essential oils. Counting Ashfield’s stills in the 1820s and early 1830s thus shows the rapid growth of the peppermint business, and its abrupt

¹⁰⁸ Howes, 115-6.

¹⁰⁹ David D. Field and Chester Dewey, *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts, in Two Parts. The First Being a General View of the County; the Second, an Account of the Several Towns.* (Pittsfield: S.W. Bush, 1829). 86-7, 92, 177.

¹¹⁰ Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism*.

change around 1835.

Ashfield's tax records for 1826 show that Samuel Ranney's property consisted of "2 Houses 2 Barns & Sheds, 35 acres improved Land, 56 D[itt]o unimproved, 1 still & still house." Samuel's brothers had similar improved acreages, and presumably distilled their peppermint using his still. Samuel's cousin, Roswell Ranney, owned "2 Houses 2 Barns & Sheds, 1 still, still house & Cider Mill & other buildings, 1 sawmill, gristmill, 117 acres improved land, 100 Do unimproved." Although a later arrival to Ashfield than his cousins, by the mid-1820s Roswell Ranney was already one of the town's most prosperous farmers.¹¹¹

Roswell, the son of George Ranney Sr.'s younger brother Thomas, had arrived in Ashfield in 1792 at age ten. He was an energetic young man, and in 1821 was one of only ten farmers in the town who managed to harvest as much as 50 bushels of corn annually. In 1803, Roswell married Irinda Bement, a cousin of essence merchant Jasper Bement. Roswell was active in local politics, leading town meetings and serving twice as militia Captain and twice as Representative to the legislature in Boston.¹¹²

In 1828, Ashfield's tax assessors found more stills. Roswell's brother-in-law, Samuel Bement owned a "Still & House." Jasper Bement had "1 Still & House, 1/2 Cider Mill." A couple more cider mills appeared over the years, and since peppermint distilling is seasonal work, Ashfield's stills were occasionally put to other uses in the off-season. But the fact that Ashfield never produced a surplus of grain supports the claim made in all the old memoirs and histories that the main purpose of Ashfield's stills was distilling

¹¹¹ 1826 Town Valuation of Ashfield; 1826 Town Tax Documents.

¹¹² Williams. p. 70.; Ashfield and New England Historic Genealogical Society, *Vital Records of Ashfield, Massachusetts to the Year 1850*. (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1942). 249.

peppermint and other essential oils.¹¹³

By 1830, the number of peppermint distillers in Ashfield had increased dramatically. Tax assessors listed ten stills in operation. In addition to Samuel and Roswell Ranney and Jasper Bement, five other Ashfield farmers had built stills and still houses. Salmon Miller and Israel Williams each operated two stills. Although local distillers did not know it at the time, this was the peak of peppermint oil production in Ashfield.

Essence Peddlers

Itinerant sales or peddling probably began with the dawn of civilization. The practice was well established in Europe in the Middle Ages, and seems to have begun in the Americas as soon as Europeans settled here.¹¹⁴ Peddlers sold a surprisingly wide variety of goods in early America, ranging from small, inexpensive items such as pins and buttons to tinware, clocks, pottery, chairs, and even washing machines. Low population density and under-developed transportation networks made peddling a relatively efficient way to bring manufactured goods to rural markets, and the presence of a salesman in a remote farmyard or kitchen was a strong influence on rural people to consume goods produced beyond the bounds of home production or even their local market. Some historians have suggested that peddlers helped create a culture of consumption in early America.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Town Valuation for 1830, 6/12/1830; 1830 Tax Records.; Howes.

¹¹⁴ J. R. Dolan, *The Yankee Peddlers of Early America*. (New York: C. N. Potter, 1964).

¹¹⁵ Wright. Paul J. Uselding, "Peddling in the Antebellum Economy: Precursor of Mass-Marketing or a Start in Life?," *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* 34, no. 1 (1975).; David Jaffee, "Peddlers of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760-1860," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 2 (1991).

Most histories of peddling focus on two prominent groups of peddlers: the Yankee peddlers of Connecticut and the Jewish peddlers of the second half of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁶ Another equally fascinating and important group of American peddlers has been all but forgotten. Although essence peddlers were ubiquitous enough in the first half of the nineteenth century to become the subjects of songs, jokes, and cartoons, and the source of a slang term for skunk, a search for “essence peddler” in Worldcat turns up nothing, and a search in JSTOR returns only a 1949 article titled “The Social Significance of the Language of the American Frontier.”¹¹⁷ The fact that the article locates the origin of the term “essence peddler” on the American frontier in 1838, however, is telling. Young men from Ashfield were frequent enough visitors to remote frontier farmsteads that they were memorialized in language long after their disappearance from the American social scene.

Closer to home and to their own time, nineteenth-century historians remembered the trunk- and basket-carrying foot-peddlers of Ashfield in histories of the region. An 1888 history of Ashfield remarked that it was “not far from truth to say that about the first and second generations in the present century of New England youths, when they attained to years approaching manhood, invariably supplied themselves with a pair of willow baskets or tin trunks, and with these well filled with oils, essences, pins, needles, thread, etc., suspended from their shoulders with a yoke, started out from the parental fireside to ‘see the world’ and prospect for a situation in life.” Local historians recalled

¹¹⁶ David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).; Hasia R. Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

¹¹⁷ C. Merton Babcock, "The Social Significance of the Language of the American Frontier," *American Speech* 24, no. 4 (1949).

“*Many thousands* of these young men, full of life and energy, and Yankee sagacity, thus equipped, perambulated New York and the western States.” Young men from Ashfield visited “all the newer sections of the West,” and many found themselves homes and careers in the territories they explored as itinerant salesmen. Although a bit self-congratulatory, these accounts make the important point that Ashfield peddlers helped spread not only commerce into newly-settled western regions but some degree of the Yankee culture the historians regarded as “New England's best genius, independence and love of justice and liberty.”¹¹⁸

A few historians have joined Ashfield's locals in recognizing essence peddlers. Richardson Wright, an early historian of peddling, wrote that peddlers covered the entire settled area of the United States and “played an unforgettable role in the romance of our early widening frontiers.” Wright observed, “Even Horn's *Overland Guide to California*--the Baedeker of the forty-niners--contains the advertisement of a Mr. Sypher in Fort Des Moines, who is willing to supply peddlers...at the lowest possible rates.” “The essence peddler,” continued Wright, “was quite a different sort” from the typical Yankee peddler. “Usually a free-lance, he managed to scrape together ten or twenty dollars [and] fill his tin trunk with peppermint, bergamot, and wintergreen extracts and bitters. In the backwoods these bitters were in great demand. They were mixed with the local brand of homemade liquor...Other extracts were used as remedies and antidotes.” Undoubtedly the use of essences to flavor unpalatable local alcohol, in addition to the medical uses discussed earlier, would have substantially expanded the market for peppermint and other

¹¹⁸ E. R. Ellis, *Biographical Sketches of Richard Ellis, the First Settler of Ashfield, Mass., and His Descendants*. (Detroit: W. Graham, 1888).

strongly-flavored essences.¹¹⁹

An indication that Wright may have been correct about the popularity of essences as flavorings for alcohol can be seen in an 1802 advertisement by a Philadelphia distillery, which declared, "The Large Rum Distillery in New Street, No. 13. Is now taking in Molasses, returnable in good flavored Rum...Where also, may constantly be had on exchange or otherwise Anniseed, Cinnamon, Peppermint, Caraway...and other Cordials in usual request."¹²⁰

Some historians of the market transition have suggested that remote frontier settlements operated without commerce; a few have even claimed that settlers may have fled to the frontier to escape the "getting and spending" of eastern cities.¹²¹ Historians of peddling, in response, have argued that peddlers brought manufactured goods and market sensibilities to the remotest frontier outposts.¹²² However much peddling may be implicated in the market transition, it is clear that peddlers helped people moving to the frontiers retain a connection with Atlantic commercial markets that had existed since Europeans began coming to the Americas. Peddling was a continuation of a type of commerce that had existed in Europe long before the colonial period. As American families moved westward, away from coastal cities, peddlers kept them connected with economies beyond their remote rural communities. Many historians have characterized rural people as food and raw material producers for urban and export markets, suggesting that farmers in remote districts did not become consumers until merchants were able to

¹¹⁹ Wright. 25, 26, 56-7.

¹²⁰ *Gazette of the United States*, 6/12/1802.

¹²¹ It should be noted that even Allan Kulikoff, one of the most vocal proponents of the "escape" thesis, acknowledged "The rural economy of early America was clearly commercial." Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*. 17.

¹²² Jaffee, "Peddlers of Progress."

ship urban goods to their stores via rivers, canals, or rail.¹²³ Yankee peddlers who visited farms and villages in remote areas of their own regions as well as on the frontier were of great cultural significance. They brought news, ideas, and an opportunity to be consumers as well as producers to people who might not otherwise have had these options.

In some cases, historical references to Ashfield's essence peddlers have been mistaken for accounts of their Yankee confederates in Connecticut. A passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne's diary that often finds its way into such comingled accounts, actually mentions Ashfield by name:

Started for Northampton at half-past nine in the morning [from Worcester]...I rode outside nearly all day, and was very sociable with the driver and another outside passenger. Towards night, took up an essence-vendor for a short distance. He was returning home, after having been out on a tour two or three weeks, and nearly exhausted his stock. He was not exclusively an essence-pedlar, having a large tin box, which had been filled with dry goods, combs, jewelry, &c., now mostly sold out. His essences were of aniseed, cloves, red cedar, wormwood, together with opodeldoc, and an oil for the hair. These matters are concocted at Ashfield, and the pedlars are sent about with vast quantities. Cologne-water is among the essences manufactured, though the bottles have foreign labels on them. The pedlar is good-natured and communicative, and spoke very frankly about his trade, which he seemed to like better than farming, though his experience of it is yet brief. He spoke of the trials of temper to which pedlars are subjected, but said that it was necessary to be forbearing, because the same road must be traveled again and again. The pedlars find satisfaction for all contumelies in making good bargains out of their customers. This man was a pedlar in quite a small way, making but a narrow circuit, and carrying no more than an open basketful of essences; but some go out with waggon-loads. He himself contemplated a trip westward, in which case he would send on quantities of his wares ahead to different stations. He seemed to enjoy the intercourse and seeing of the world. He pointed out a rough place in the road, where his stock of essences had formerly been broken by a jolt of the stage. What a waste of sweet smells on the desert air! The essence labels stated the efficacy of the stuffs for various complaints of

¹²³ Walsh, *The Rise of the Midwestern Meat Packing Industry*. ; Bruegel.

children and old people. The driver was an acquaintance of the pedlar, and so gave him his drive for nothing, though the pedlar pretended to wish to force some silver into his hand; and afterwards he got down to water the horses, while the driver was busy with other matters.¹²⁴

Hawthorne's observations highlight some important details of the Ashfield peddler's work. Most were young men and many peddled for just a short time to raise a stake and enter another venture. Most traveled on foot, carrying wicker baskets of essences and tin trunks of other goods, suspended by webbing and sometimes hung from a wooden yoke. Occasionally peddlers traveled in wagons, but this was much less prevalent with Ashfield men than with tinsmiths or the Connecticut vendors of bulky items like clocks. More often, a peddler traveling a lengthy route planned ahead and shipped resupplies to post offices along the route. Sometimes, when sales exceeded expectations, peddlers wrote to the Ashfield merchants who supplied them, to have additional stock forwarded to the next town on their way. These requests depended on the post, because the telegraph did not reach Ashfield until the 1890s.¹²⁵

Hawthorne mentioned the "contumelies" experienced by peddlers. Anyone who has worked in sales can imagine the frustrations faced by door-to-door salesmen;



**THE CELEBRATED ESSENCE
PEDLAR,
Who distinguished himself by *palm-ing*
off peppermint.**

Figure 4: 1849 Illustration from a newspaper column titled "Independence Day: Order of the Grand Procession."

¹²⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1838).

¹²⁵ Michele P. Barker, *Peddlers in New England, 1790-1860*. (Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village, 1992).; Ranney.

however, in many remote communities, peddlers were welcomed, or at least tolerated, because they carried needed products. Although peddlers like the young men of Ashfield became subjects of cartoons, jokes, and even popular songs, there was great demand for the products they carried.¹²⁶ And despite contemporary accounts like Thomas Hamilton's 1833 "Men and Manners in America," which claimed, "The whole race of Yankee peddlers in particular are proverbial for dishonesty," the numbers of New Englanders making their fortunes as salesmen increased throughout the first half of the century.¹²⁷ In 1850, one account estimated, there were 10,669 peddlers travelling America's roads. A decade later, the number had grown to 16,595.¹²⁸ And as Hawthorne's peddler said, a man carrying a popular product into a remote region could gain satisfaction for any frustration he encountered by simply raising his price.

Although other itinerant salesmen offered lines of credit to their customers, and often priced products such as clocks and furniture to reflect carried interest and the risks and costs of collection, Ashfield peddlers dealt in cash.¹²⁹ They carried money, and as a result many traveled armed. In addition to essences, other wares, and the baskets and trunks used to carry them, Ashfield merchants like Jasper Bement and Henry Ranney occasionally sold pistols to the young men they sent out on the road. For example, when Sextus Lilly made his first peddling trip in July 1840, his bill in Bement's ledger included

¹²⁶ For example, "Why is the dust in such a rage?/ It is he yearly caravan/ Of peddlers, on their pilgrimage/ To southern marts; full of japan,/ And tin, and wooden furniture, /That try to charm the passing eye;/ And spices which, I'm very sure,/ Ne'er saw the shores of Araby." Connecticut poet Joseph H. Nichols, quoted in Wright. 29.

¹²⁷ Hamilton continued: "They go forth annually in the thousands to lie, cog, cheat, swindle, in short, to get possession of their neighbor's property in any manner it can be done with impunity. Their ingenuity in deception is confessedly very great." Ibid., 28.

¹²⁸ Dolan. 231.

¹²⁹ Priscilla Carrington Kline, "New Light on the Yankee Peddler," *New England Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1939). 85 ff.

10 dozen Essences, a variety of patent medicines, thread, needles, ink, pencils, combs, a basket for carrying the essences (67 cents), three yards of webbing (34 cents), a lock (12 cents) and a brass pistol (\$1.38).¹³⁰

Most of the peddlers of Ashfield were supplied by Jasper Bement and Henry Ranney. Other families like the Beldings were very active in the production and sale of peppermint oil. But Jasper Bement, with his son Joseph and their longtime friend and partner Henry Ranney, were the focus of Ashfield's peddler business.

Jasper Bement had been involved with peppermint since the 1820s. Bement was among the owners of a still and still house listed in the Ashfield tax records of the 1820s and early 1830s. He opened a general store in Ashfield in 1835, and either originated or quickly took over the provisioning of peddlers with Yankee notions and essences. When the R.G. Dun Company's local credit investigator reported on Bement in September 1841, he described the business as "General Store. Jewelry. Patent Med, Yankee notions, &c." and rated Bement's creditworthiness as "good." Two years later, the report read, "good, consid prop, mtgs [mortgages], money at interest &c. besides what he has in trade."¹³¹

Henry Sears Ranney (1817-1899) was the third son of George Ranney and the grandson of the elder George Ranney who had moved to Ashfield from Middletown in 1780. When his father moved the family to Phelps, New York, in August 1833, sixteen-year old Henry remained in Ashfield to pursue a career as a merchant. Henry clerked for Jasper Bement and seems to have lived in Bement's household for a time, preparing

¹³⁰ Jasper Bement Account Books, 1832-1840.

¹³¹ R.G. Dun reports, (1831).

himself for a commercial career in Ashfield and briefly in Boston. In 1893, Ranney remembered Bement as “a successful merchant; a public-spirited man of strong and sterling characteristics, the most pronounced and active abolitionist & free-soiler of this region.” Ranney had received his start in business working as a clerk in Bement’s store and “a member of his family for six years—during which time I failed to receive from him a cross or impatient word.”¹³²

Although he helped rural people remain connected to the wider world through the products he carried and his interactions with his customers, the Yankee peddler was not welcomed by everyone when he arrived in a new town. Local merchants often saw the itinerants as competitors, and as early as 1717 Connecticut peddlers (who as mentioned, often travelled with wagon-loads of big-ticket items) found themselves taxed twenty shillings for each hundred pounds of goods they carried into a particular town. By the middle of the eighteenth century, many states had enacted license fees for peddlers.¹³³ But again, these requirements were usually directed at peddlers carrying cartloads of high value items, rather than at the relatively inconspicuous Ashfield essence peddler. A desire to maintain this low profile may have encouraged some of Ashfield’s career peddlers to continue traveling on foot, carrying small stocks of goods with frequent resupplies along the way.

Historian Richardson Wright remarked, “We can trace the dislike of the town for the country through practically all phases of itinerant life.” Despite the fact that “had there been no peddlers there would have been no countryside distribution,

¹³² Ranney.

¹³³ Kline. 92-3.

and...manufacturing, even of the humblest household sort, could never have survived,” Wright said “the peddler’s foe was the established, settled, town merchant.”¹³⁴ But commercial rivalry wasn’t the only reason peddlers were unwelcome. Another cause, especially in the South, was that many peddlers were quite political. For example, career Ashfield peddler William Sanderson was an ardent abolitionist who mentioned “Liberty Party” and “Free Soil” politics regularly in letters to his friend and supplier, Henry Ranney. Along with the essences and “Yankee notions” in his inventory, Sanderson regularly carried copies of *Slavery As It Is, Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, a 225-page jeremiad written by Theodore Dwight Weld for the Anti-Slavery Society in 1839.¹³⁵ Ashfield peddlers like Sanderson continued the town’s long-standing tradition of political agitation, once again blurring the boundaries between local and national activism.

William Sanderson was one of Ashfield’s busiest peddlers in the late 1830s. In a single season, Sanderson made twenty trips, buying supplies from Jasper Bement every two and a half weeks. Bement or his clerk, Ranney, often sent Sanderson resupply orders to points as far from Ashfield as Brattleboro, Vermont and Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Sanderson’s average order size from Bement for a trip was about \$50. Sanderson paid 40 cents per dozen vials of Bement’s premium peppermint essence, 6 cents for pencils, 45 cents for razors, 37 1/2 cents for a gross of pearl buttons, and \$1.88 for a box of a

¹³⁴ Wright. 89.

¹³⁵ Kline. 93.; Barker.

thousand needles. It's not difficult to imagine Sanderson at least doubling his money on each trip.¹³⁶

Jasper Bement supplied over 120 peddlers annually. About half of them traveled at least once a month during the peddling season. Unlike Connecticut peddlers of tinware and clocks, who were usually working for wages, most of Ashfield's essence peddlers were self-employed. Bement's account books only include a couple of entries out of hundreds where the merchant seems to have paid a peddler to make a trip, and those entries could be interpreted in other ways. Bement had business



Figure 5: Jasper Bement essence vials, ca. 1840.
Ashfield Historical Society, photo by author.

relationships with people in many of the towns his peddlers visited, and peddlers often carried letters, goods, and cash for Ashfield businessmen. Nearly all the transactions with peddlers recorded in Bement's account books were inventories of goods, charged to the peddler. Bement outfitted most of his peddlers on credit, which is not surprising as most of the young peddlers came from local families that did regular business with Bement. All the records listed products charged at consistent wholesale prices, indicating that the

¹³⁶ Barker.; Bement.

peddler set the retail price of his wares and pocketed the profit.¹³⁷

Like Bement's other peddlers, William Sanderson took a wide variety of items, but by volume and by weight his most significant cargoes were always vials of essences. Peddlers regularly left Ashfield with baskets containing from twenty to a hundred dozen glass vials of essences, the most popular being peppermint. Essences were bulky, heavy, and fragile. They must have been uncomfortable to carry, but they were the peddler's core product line. Bement didn't have to pay the young men to distribute his products: their popularity with the peddlers' customers and their profitability made essences the leading product of Ashfield's salesmen.

After a several years peddling, William Sanderson gained enough experience and made enough money to start his own general store in the neighboring town of Whately. Still interested in politics, Sanderson corresponded with his friend Henry Ranney regularly. In the summer of 1845, Sanderson wrote, "The wind blows softly by my cottage, the cats fight nights, Whigs twist and turn to get into office and prevent slavery. Democrats brow beat them for so doing, but I can sit and read my *Heralds of Freedom* and enjoy the same which is listened to with profound silence. Not an abolitionist in the center of this town but my dear wife."¹³⁸ Two years later, Sanderson wrote again to congratulate Henry on his new baby girl and then went on for two additional pages about the slave power.¹³⁹

William Sanderson's interest in abolition was by no means an isolated instance of Ashfield peddlers meddling in national politics. Southerners were right to be suspicious

¹³⁷ Bement.

¹³⁸ Henry Ranney Papers, 1830s to 1890s, Letters received by Henry Sears Ranney, newspaper clippings.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

of Yankee peddlers—at least those from Ashfield. Jasper Bement and Henry Ranney were both active “free soil” abolitionists, and in the early 1840s formed the nucleus of a “Liberty Party” in Ashfield. In 1843, Jasper Bement campaigned for state representative as a Liberty candidate and lost, but a year later he won.¹⁴⁰

Although they were interested in their businesses, Bement and Ranney were passionate about abolition. In August 1844, Bement wrote to Henry Ranney from Syracuse, New York, where he had stopped on his way to Detroit. Bement touched briefly on business, and then offered detailed descriptions of several conversations he had enjoyed with “Liberty Men,” and the reactions of strangers to whom he had offered abolitionist tracts at a political gathering. Bement said he was introduced to “Mr. Jackson the editor of the *Democratic Freeman of Liberty* paper. He began with 30 subscribers and has now got 700. We are gaining ground in this quarter if I can judge from what I see.”¹⁴¹ A few days later, Bement wrote again that “the country seems all alive with Whig and Loco mass meetings. By inquiring I find a respectable number of Liberty men in almost every place.” Bement tells Ranney a local Liberty man solicited him to give a lecture to a group of nearly 200 people in Hannibal. In addition to the forty Liberty activists, Bement said “The Whigs present were rocked up. Asked questions and disputed. Some of our friends started for home in high spirits singing the Liberty Ball. Some of the Whigs were almost ready to vote for Liberty, but they think they must vote Clay in this time to keep Texas out.”¹⁴² In spite of being rural businessmen from a remote community in the hills of western Massachusetts, Bement and Ranney shared a lifelong involvement in national

¹⁴⁰ Howes. 217.

¹⁴¹ Henry Ranney Papers.

¹⁴² Ibid.

politics. They both represented Ashfield in the legislature in Boston, and they maintained a far-flung commercial network, as we will shortly see.

Wholesale Peppermint Oil

Peddlers were an ideal way to reach a widely distributed, rural retail market. But there were also concentrated urban markets, and each city and large town had its apothecaries and patent medicine manufacturers. In 1802, for example *The Philadelphia Directory* listed “Calvin Flora, peppermint maker, St. Tammany.” In 1804, the directory included “Boyl Jonathan, peppermint maker near 27 Brewers alley.”¹⁴³

Nor, as previously mentioned, was the only use of peppermint medicinal. In a society that drank about four times the per capita volume of alcohol as modern America, the market for flavored cordials was substantial.¹⁴⁴ In New York City, distiller Michael Miller announced to readers of the *Daily Advertiser*, “at his CORDIAL DISTILLERY, No. 11 Barley street, three doors eastward of Broad-way, Anniseed, Mint, and Peppermint cordials.”¹⁴⁵ And in 1804, *The American Distiller* included a section on “How to make peppermint essence.”¹⁴⁶

By 1805, production of peppermint essence was widespread enough that glass

¹⁴³ James Robinson and Abraham Shoemaker, *The Philadelphia Directory, City and County Register, for 1802 Containing, the Names, Trades, and Residence of the Inhabitants of the City, Southwark, Northern Liberties, and Kensington: With Other Useful Tables and Lists*. (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802). James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1804 Containing the Names, Trades, and Residence of the Inhabitants of the City, Southwark, Northern Liberties, and Kensington: To Which Is Prefixed, a Brief Sketch of the Origin and Present State of the City of Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: John H. Oswald, 1804).

¹⁴⁴ Rorabaugh.

¹⁴⁵ *Daily Advertiser*, 11/4/1803.

¹⁴⁶ Michael Krafft, *The American Distiller, or, the Theory and Practice of Distilling, According to the Latest Discoveries and Improvements, Including the Most Improved Methods of Constructing Stills, and of Rectification*. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1804).

manufacturers did not need to await orders from merchants like Bement. In 1805, broker William Little of 49 State Street, Boston, advertised a diverse variety of products, including “Window Glass [many sizes],...40 groce essence of peppermint Phials, an assortment of warranted Anchors.”¹⁴⁷ Perhaps Little’s supplier had produced a large volume of vials imprinted “Essence of Peppermint” for a specific customer and was selling a surplus quantity. But the fact that the broker expected to find a buyer simply by offering the vials within a list of disparate products suggests a fairly wide market.

An 1808 advertisement in Utica’s *Columbian Gazette* announced, "Drugs and Medicine, at the Sign of the Good Samaritan. Solomon Wolcott, Has received an addition to his former stock...1000 Ess. Peppermint...Instruments: Mortars, Scales and Shop Furniture...Peppermint Bottles, &c. &c."¹⁴⁸ And in 1809, an ad in the *New York Gazette and General Advertiser* advised of "Opium, &c. ...10 lb. Oil Peppermint, for sale by John Wade, 181 Water-street."¹⁴⁹ A four-ounce vial of peppermint essence contained only a few drops of peppermint oil, so ten pounds was enough oil to make quite a bit of retail product.

Wholesalers cast a wide net. In April 1814, *The Washingtonian* in Windsor Vermont carried an advertisement for peppermint oil for sale in Boston. At the "Wholesale and Retail Chemical and Drug Warehouse, No. 1, Liberty Square--Boston. Paul Spear, Jr. Has for sale” a long list of bulk products including “50 do. [pounds] Oil of Peppermint.”¹⁵⁰ City merchants advertised for distant buyers and also for suppliers of

¹⁴⁷ *Boston Gazette*, 11/18/1805.

¹⁴⁸ "Drugs and Medicine," *Columbian Gazette*, 2/9/1808.

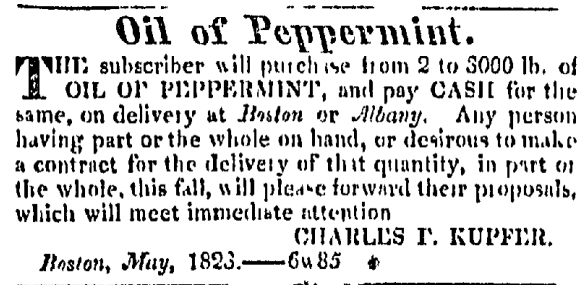
¹⁴⁹ "Opium, &c.," *New York Gazette and General Advertiser*, 2/17/1809.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Spear, *The Washingtonian*, 4/25/1814.

peppermint oil. In 1818, wholesalers “J. & T. L. Clark & Son, at 85 Maiden-lane” advertised 100 pounds of peppermint oil in the *New York Gazette and General Advertiser*, and J. Bissell & Co. advertised in *Pittsfield*, “will contract for 200 pounds of Oil Peppermint and 50 Oil Wintergreen, to be delivered the 1st October, and will pay cash on delivery.”¹⁵¹

By the 1820s, when the peppermint oil business was reaching its maturity in Ashfield, the volumes of oil that passed through the hands of urban wholesalers had also expanded rapidly. In May 1823, for example, Charles F.

Kupfer ran an advertisement in the



Oil of Peppermint.
THE subscriber will purchase from 2 to 3000 lb. of OIL OF PEPPERMINT, and pay CASH for the same, on delivery at *Boston or Albany*. Any person having part or the whole on hand, or desirous to make a contract for the delivery of that quantity, in part or the whole, this fall, will please forward their proposals, which will meet immediate attention
 CHARLES F. KUPFER.
Boston, May, 1823.—6485

Figure 6: 1823 Advertisement in the *Pittsfield Sun*.

Pittsfield Sun. Kupfer was the superintendent of the Boston Glass Manufactory, which had three factories on Essex Street, in South Boston, and in Chelmsford. The Manufactory made essence vials like the ones used by Jasper Bement in Ashfield, but Kupfer wasn’t above trying to fill the vials himself and take a bit of his clients’ profits. Kupfer announced in the *Pittsfield Sun*, whose readers included Hudson River and Erie Canal shippers, “The subscriber will purchase from 2 to 3000 lb. of OIL OF PEPPERMINT, and pay CASH for the same, on delivery at *Boston or Albany*. Any person having part or the whole on hand, or desirous to make a contract for the delivery of that quantity, in part or whole, this fall, will please forward their proposals, which will meet immediate attention.”¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ “Drugs and Chemicals ” *New York Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10/9/1818.; Phinehas Allen, *The Pittsfield Sun*, 1818.

¹⁵² Ibid, 7-10-1823.; Joan E. Kaiser, *The Glass Industry in South Boston*. (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2009). 20, 58.

Shipments of peppermint oil along the Erie Canal began in earnest, even before the canal was completed. Although construction continued to the west, the first 250 miles of canal between Brockport and the Hudson River opened in September, 1823. This eastern section of the canal passed through Lyons, New York, which was directly north of the peppermint fields of Phelps, where many former Ashfielders had settled. In 1824, the *Boston Commercial Gazette* reran a notice from a newspaper in Geneva, New York, of a “*New article of Domestic Manufacture*,” saying “Last week was obtained from the Bank in this village, on a check, between two and three thousand dollars, being the proceeds of sales of Oil of Peppermint, manufactured in the town of Phelps, by F. Vandemark & Co. The past season, and sold to a person in Massachusetts.”¹⁵³ Frederick Vandermark, as we will see, was the brother-in-law of Archibald Burnett: the Ashfielder who first carried peppermint roots to western New York.

The success and prosperity of Ashfield’s peppermint growers did not go unnoticed. In 1825, Northampton’s *Hampshire Gazette* ran a feature story that was reprinted by newspapers all over the region, including the *New Bedford Mercury* and the *Rhode Island American*:

Peppermint.—Medical plants are extensively cultivated as field crops in some parts of England and France, but in this country their culture is very limited, being confined to small patches in gardens, &c. Peppermint is however an exception... We are informed that several hundred acres are employed in its culture in Ashfield, and that the quantity of oil extracted from an acre of mint varies from 25 to 40 pounds. The process of cultivation

¹⁵³ “New Article of Domestic Manufacture,” *Boston Commercial Gazette* 1824.

is said to be tedious and expensive, but we are inclined to think there are but few, if any crops raised in this part of the country that make greater returns for the money and labor expended on them.¹⁵⁴

In spite of expanding awareness of peppermint's potential profitability and some large urban sales of wholesale peppermint oil, however, Ashfield continued to dominate the essential oil market through the 1820s. A letter about the products of Ashfield, written in 1824 and quoted in the *History of the Town of Ashfield*, "gives the value of peppermint oil made as over \$40,000 yearly." This is a significant sum: in comparison, the total value of the land and buildings in Ashfield in the 1826 Assessment was \$9,812.38.¹⁵⁵ An 1833 report prepared by Andrew Jackson's Secretary of the Treasury, Louis McLane, titled *Documents Relative to the Manufactures in the United States*, includes the following note regarding Ashfield:

This town has been somewhat celebrated for its manufacture of essences of various kinds, such as peppermint, hemlock, winter green, tansy, &c. It is estimated that 700 groce of essence, at \$6 per groce, have been manufactured yearly, for several years past; and the average amount of essential oils sold in New York, (exclusive of what has been used in the manufacture of essence in town) has been \$3,000 worth, annually, for ten years past. It is considered fair business, when the oil will sell for \$2 per pound; it is now worth \$5 a pound. April 23, 1832, Alanson Clark.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ "Peppermint," *Rhode-Island American*, 1825.

¹⁵⁵ I have not been able to locate the source document for this quote, and it has occurred to me that the number might be exaggerated or the result of a transcription error. But the other statistics and values cited in the discussion surrounding this quote are all very accurate, which lends credibility to this data. Howes. 126.

¹⁵⁶ Louis McLane, *Documents Relative to the Manufactures in the United States Collected and Transmitted to the House of Representatives, in Compliance with a Resolution of Jan. 19, 1832, 22d Cong., 1st Sess. House. Doc.; 308.* (Washington: D. Green, 1833).

The report lists \$4,200 in essences, plus another \$3,000 in peppermint oil sold in New York City, for a total of \$7,200. Given Ashfield correspondent Clark's statement that the New York wholesale receipts of \$3,000 annually were an average over the past ten years, and that peppermint oil averaged \$2 per pound, the report implies that in addition to supplying essence peddlers, Ashfielders supplied the wholesale market with about 1,500 pounds of peppermint oil per year. Based on frequent newspaper notices of large transactions and the large quantities offered and solicited in advertisements, this seems like a substantial underestimate.

The \$4,200 listed for essence sales must also be considered a wholesale price, since it corresponds with prices charged by suppliers of peddlers like Jasper Bement. Clark gives a price of \$6 per gross, and as shown, Bement sold his peppermint essence to peddlers at 40 cents per dozen. It is impossible to determine what the hundreds of peddlers taking essence into the countryside from Ashfield would have made on their sales. Some were probably better negotiators than others. But if the peddlers averaged 40 cents per vial, their earnings would have been easily consistent with the \$40,000 that Ashfield was reported to have made on oil annually in 1824. The wholesale prices reported by the Treasury Department are more relevant to comparisons with other industries, but since Ashfield's economy relied much more heavily on retail peddler revenue than its neighbors, estimates of the income derived from peddling suggest the general prosperity of the town. It is also significant that, in keeping with the town's longstanding tradition of egalitarian idealism, the widespread prosperity of self-employed peddlers seems much more democratic than the concentrated wealth of other industries.

The other manufacturing activities Ashfield reported in McLane's document were

forging axes and hoes, worth \$2,729; splitting 400,000 shingles, worth \$600; turning 700,000 broom handles, worth \$7,700; and making 3,300 pairs of boots and shoes, worth \$4,950.¹⁵⁷ If peppermint oil had been an exclusively wholesale business, its significance to the town would have been only equal to broom handles. The advantage Ashfield had over other regions involved in peppermint oil production was that Ashfield's economy was able to realize the retail value of the essences sold by peddlers who were overwhelmingly from Ashfield and nearby communities, while products like broom handles were simply sold in bulk at prices determined by a competitive wholesale market to "Hadley, Hatfield, and other towns on the Conn. River" that manufactured brooms. While some products such as shingles might have been produced by local free-lance workers, many were probably produced by wage-workers employed by sawmill owners. Rural communities were not immune to the shift from artisanal labor to wage labor; Ashfield was lucky to have had an economy built around a model of entrepreneurship that spread its rewards more widely.¹⁵⁸

Ashfield's \$23,179 of wholesale manufacturing income in 1833 was similar to that of similar nearby towns. Conway reported manufactures worth \$20,475, led by \$13,600 in horn combs. New Salem manufactured 10,000 palm leaf hats, worth \$27,500 when delivered to Boston and New York resellers, as well as a leather and lumber business worth \$9,550. The neighboring village of Buckland produced \$9,750 in manufactures, including 300 wooden clocks valued at \$7.50 each. In the river valley were

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Although he focused primarily on urban, immigrant labor, Bruce Laurie noted that "As late as 1860, more wage earners worked in farmhouses and in small workshops than in factories, and most used hand tools, not power-driven equipment." Laurie., 16.

larger towns like Deerfield, which manufactured \$58,600 in wholesale products including 205,000 brooms and 30,000 yards of wool satinet. But even when measured against these larger towns, Ashfield's widely-distributed retail income was substantial.

Another factor supporting claims of very high profits for Ashfield's peppermint essence business is the extreme variability of peppermint oil prices. Demand for peppermint-based products was relatively constant and predictable, but supply varied widely from season to season. It was not uncommon for peppermint oil prices to double from one harvest to the next. In 1836, for example, a list of wholesale prices published in New York newspapers quoted "Oil of Peppermint" at \$5.50 to \$6.00. In comparison, imported Opium was only \$3.75 for Turkish and \$3.95 for Egyptian.¹⁵⁹ In 1837, prices remained high. The *Pittsfield Sun* reported that December, in a notice reprinted as far away as Philadelphia, that "Among the items received on the Hudson by the Erie Canal, we notice the singular one of 6,000 lbs. of oil of peppermint, valued at \$30,000."¹⁶⁰ When costs of a product's key component, such as peppermint oil for peddlers' essence vials, fluctuated widely, prices tended to be maintained at levels where retail sales could remain profitable even at the highest component costs. This worst-case approach to pricing would lead to windfall profits for the peddlers, and especially for suppliers like Jasper Bement and Henry Ranney, when costs decreased.

In 1835, Ashfield's assessors began recording the town's assets in much greater detail. In addition to buildings and machines, financial assets and farm animals began to be counted and taxed. But for the first time, the assessors of 1835 found no stills. George

¹⁵⁹ "Wholesale Prices," 1836.

¹⁶⁰ "Summary," *Pittsfield Sun*, 12-21-1837.

Ranney had moved to Phelps, New York, in 1833 and Roswell Ranney was making final preparations to follow him. Roswell's taxable assets in Ashfield had dwindled by the summer of 1835 to a \$100 fractional interest in a sawmill, a single horse and cow, and \$3000 "Money at interest." One of the last members of the family to move to Phelps, Samuel Ranney had not yet begun selling off his assets. Samuel's 1835 assessment included houses and barns, acreage, and animals. But even Samuel no longer distilled peppermint oil in Ashfield.

By 1835, Ashfield merchant Jasper Bement, whose assets included a "Factory" and a "Shop" valued at \$700, still bottled essences but no longer distilled peppermint oil. Bement's other assets included four horses and a cow, "Stock in trade" worth \$350, which probably consisted of the essences and wares he supplied to his peddlers, and \$2000 "Money at interest." Bement's relative-by-marriage Roswell Ranney seems to have been one of the early conduits of Western New York peppermint oil to Ashfield. Jasper Bement's account books show the shift in Roswell's role, from local peppermint oil producer to broker of New York oil. In 1833 Bement's account books had recorded handling fees he had charged Ranney to process oil, when Roswell had owned his own still. In 1836, after Roswell Ranney had moved to Phelps, Bement's accounts recorded transactions with Ranney involving bulk peppermint oil. And in 1838, after three years without a home of his own in Ashfield, Roswell Ranney was once again taxed for a small "House & Garden" in town, valued at \$100, as well as a cow and \$3020 "Money at interest." Apparently, Roswell's business connections with Ashfield remained substantial enough to justify a part-time residence on the town's main street.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Town Valuation for 1838, 1838, Ashfield Tax Records. Bement. Town Valuation for 1838.

As families like the Burnetts, the Ranneys, the Beldings, and the Bements left Ashfield and expanded peppermint growing and distilling into western New York, the town's rocky, uneven fields were replanted with other crops or converted to pasture for the town's growing herds of sheep. By 1835, when peppermint stills had disappeared from Ashfield, the town was home to 7,748 sheep valued at \$1.25 each.¹⁶² Even Roswell Ranney, who no longer lived in Ashfield full-time, invested in the new venture. In 1838, Ranney was assessed for \$2,652.50 of "money at interest" and for 150 sheep.¹⁶³

In December 1833, the *New England Farmer and Horticultural Journal* and the *Boston Courier* reprinted an article from Greenfield's *Franklin Mercury* that serves as a retrospective of the Ashfield peppermint venture:

Essence peddling

There is not a town in the east, nor a prairie in the west of the United States, where the essences and the essence-peddlers of Yankee-land have not been seen and heard of: nor do we believe there is any business which has been so much celebrated and whose origin is yet so little known. It commenced about twenty years ago in Ashfield, in this county. The first pound of oil of peppermint ever made in this region, and we believe in this part of the country, was made there ... Great part of the surface of Ashfield, was formerly devoted to the cultivation of 'mints;' almost every house had its still, and a great many pretty properties were made there, while the place enjoyed a monopoly of the business... Vast supplies are now derived by the Ashfield merchants from Phelps, a town in the last mentioned state. It has been estimated that at least seventy of the young men of Ashfield make peddling their regular occupation... Flocks of twenty or thirty have sometimes taken their departure from the place in a single day to the east, west, north and south, bearing 'Goods from all nations lumbering at their back,' making money and driving bargains with invincible perseverance under the very noses of the stationary traders, and in spite of all the ingenuity of legislation which in all the states has strained every nerve to break them down... The number is of course

¹⁶² Chester Sanderson, Town Valuation for 1835, 7/15/1835, 1835, Ashfield Tax Records.

¹⁶³ Ashfield Town Valuation for 1838.

infinitely greater of those who have made this business an apprenticeship to regular country trading, and an avenue to moderate wealth.¹⁶⁴

In addition to the ready availability of western New York peppermint oil that could be purchased from family and trusted friends, another factor that may have encouraged Ashfield merchants like Jasper Bement to give up distilling was a growing temperance movement in the town. As an Ashfield minister recalled in a memorial address reprinted in the town history, “The inhabitants of this town...have suffered much from the scourge of intemperance...many of the distilleries, first set up for the distillation of mint, by a little additional expense could be employed for a part of the year in distilling cider. The minister described the movement he had led to discourage drinking, concluding that “although one or two distilleries, and a few retailing stores and some temperate drinkers stand in the way, yet the purifying process is in progress which will not stop until the whole town and region is reclaimed from the cruel grasp of this common enemy.”¹⁶⁵

Although Ashfield’s “temperate drinkers” such as Bement and Henry Ranney, who owned a tavern in Ashfield for many years, seem to have thought the prohibition movement’s goals were themselves a bit intemperate, everyone admitted there was some truth to their claims. In May, 1827, a group of Ashfield residents including a deacon of the church, his sons and several others, were washing sheep in the town pond. Under the influence, six men loaded two sheep into a large canoe and took it out on the pond. About ten yards from shore, the canoe sank. The deacon’s 18-year old son, a 28-year old

¹⁶⁴ "Essence Peddling," *Boston Courier*, 12/10/1833.

¹⁶⁵ Howes. 41-2.

neighbor, and two brothers, age 15 and 13, went under and did not resurface. The deacon, who had been watching from shore, jumped into the water and also disappeared. All five drowned.¹⁶⁶

While Ashfield's famous essence business was not blamed for the 1827 tragedy, townsfolk regarded the stills with increasing suspicion. And many of the farmers who had done the difficult, time-consuming work of growing peppermint had moved to the area around Phelps, New York in the early 1830s. Since the peppermint straw distilled into oil is bulky and perishable, distilling mint oil is always done as close to the fields as possible. When Ashfielders stopped growing their own peppermint, they no longer needed their stills. And the era of the Yankee essence peddlers persisted only as long as the single generation of merchants like Bement and Ranney who supplied them. Without peppermint and the widespread prosperity created by the peddler trade, Ashfield's prominence faded. The 1910 *History of Ashfield* remarks, "It seems hardly credible that the cultivation of a single crop should have anything to do with the lessening of the population of Ashfield, but facts go to show that the rise and fall of the peppermint industry here affected the population seriously."¹⁶⁷

The Ranney Migration, Part One

In the second half of the nineteenth century, many American farmers became enmeshed in commodity markets, sending their harvests and livestock to urban centers for processing into standardized food products. The details of this commercialization of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 45.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 103-4.

agriculture vary from place to place and are a key element of the hotly debated market transition. Although the argument over the market transition often devolves into disagreements over the definitions of terms such as Capitalism, the change in agency brought about by the rise of commodity agriculture and development of impersonal markets is a key to understanding the mentalities of rural people.¹⁶⁸ But too often, historians have restricted their view to commodities such as wheat that were most suited to undifferentiated aggregation, shifting power from atomized producers to central processors.¹⁶⁹ At its most extreme, farmers lost their independence and became mere raw material suppliers into an industrialized food system.¹⁷⁰ But the well-documented history of this declension tends to obscure the fact that many early American farmers were innovators who worked hard to increase the diversity and value of the products they offered. As Martin Bruegel has observed, early American farmers “straddled two worlds that historians and ethnologists have often tended to construe as incompatible.”¹⁷¹ When we fail to recognize that many rural people understood the complexity of the systems within which they operated, we deny the agency that seems very apparent in the actions and documents of the Ranneys and their associates.

Because most American farmers today grow monocultures of ever-decreasing diversity, it is easy to forget that since the beginning of the Columbian Exchange, Euro-Americans and others have been importing new plants and animals and spreading them

¹⁶⁸ Clark, *Social Change in America*.; Appleby, "The Vexed Story of Capitalism Told by American Historians."

¹⁶⁹ Parkerson.

¹⁷⁰ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*.

¹⁷¹ Bruegel. 42.

across the Americas.¹⁷² Early American farmers were always on the lookout for new opportunities both to feed their families more efficiently and to produce novel products for local and distant markets. John Rolfe's theft of high quality tobacco from the Spanish Empire breathed new life into the Virginia colony. The re-introduction of potatoes carried to Europe by the conquistadors after their discovery in the Andes, with Scots-Irish settlers in Maine created an industry that continues to this day. The American enthusiasm for chicken-breeding that produced a "Hen Fever" in the early 1850s with the opening of Chinese ports after the opium war and the introduction of premium livestock breeds such as Merino sheep suggest a mental flexibility and interest in innovation that we do not currently associate with American farmers in particular and rural people in general.¹⁷³

So perhaps it should be unsurprising that farmers like the Ranneys and their neighbors quickly took advantage of the opportunity to diversify and add value, once Samuel Ranney brought peppermint roots to Ashfield. It is worth restating, too, that the Ashfield farmers who grew and distilled peppermint between 1812 and 1835 produced a well-differentiated commercial product for a direct consumer market. Also, although most Ashfield farmers continued growing staples for their families and hay for their animals, there was no local-first, subsistence-to-surplus trajectory for peppermint. It was a commercial commodity from the outset. The peppermint oil industry challenges the paradigm that the undifferentiated nature of commercial agricultural products inevitably

¹⁷² In addition to Euro-Americans, Africans, Asians, and South Americans were instrumental in importing crops such as rice and alfalfa to North America. Edward D. Melillo, *Strangers on Familiar Soil : Rediscovering the Chile-California Connection*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).; Judith Ann Carney, *Black Rice : The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).; Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil : The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁷³ Geo P. Burnham, *The History of the Hen Fever. A Humorous Record*. (Philadelphia: James French and Co., 1855).; Anderson.

leads to the concentration of power in the hands of urban processors, and suggests that the traditional agrarian history of independent yeomen gradually drawn into urban-dominated commercial markets that eliminated their agency is incomplete.

The Ranneys were central to the growth of the peppermint oil industry in western New York and Michigan, but they were not the first family to carry peppermint to western New York. As we will see in the next chapter, peppermint roots were introduced to Phelps New York by the Ranneys' neighbor, Archibald Burnett. It is fair to say, however, that the departure of most of the Ranneys from Ashfield caused the abrupt end of peppermint-growing there.

Roswell Ranney's son Horace seems to have been the first Ranney to visit Phelps in 1832. The first Ranney family to sell off their stake in Ashfield and move to Phelps was that of George, the youngest son of the senior George Ranney who had first moved the family to Ashfield and the inheritor of the original family farm. Youngest sons typically inherited in rural Early America, because older sons often had started their own families and farms long before their parents were prepared to retire. Youngest sons were still in the household when the parents became too old to work the farm, and generally took over the work and cared for their parents in their declining years, in exchange for an inheritance.

George Ranney was well established in Ashfield when he decided to move. He had inherited the family farm in 1822, when his father George had died at age 75. The younger George had married Achsah Sears in 1811, and they had eight sons and a daughter who lived to adulthood. In 1830, George's property consisted of a house and barn, 46 acres of improved farmland, and 66 acres of unimproved land. Although

George's property was valued at only about a third of his cousin Roswell's, he was a substantial landowner running a successful farm in Ashfield.¹⁷⁴

George sold out and moved his entire family (except his third son Henry, who remained in Ashfield) to Phelps in August 1833. Apparently pleased with the prospects of his new home, George encouraged his relatives to join him. In February 1835, Roswell's son Horace Ranney bought a farm in Phelps for \$3,000. In June 1837, Roswell made the first of several purchases in Phelps, buying a farm from Frederick Vandermark for \$2,000. In February 1838, George bought a 105-acre farm on Flint Creek in Phelps, for \$5,000.¹⁷⁵ The substantial prices paid by the Ranneys show that the region was already very well established by the time they arrived in western New York, and that the Ranneys were quite prosperous after their years in Ashfield.

Samuel Ranney's move to Phelps in 1835 was certainly influenced by George's, Horace's, and Roswell's success there. But Samuel's decision to leave Ashfield seems also to have been precipitated by a new wave of social turmoil revolving once again around Ashfield's Congregational Church. In January 1834, Massachusetts finally disestablished the Congregational Church. Unlike New Hampshire to the north, which had separated church from state in 1790, and Connecticut to the south, which had banned government-supported religion in 1818, Massachusetts retained the Congregationalism of its Puritan colonial origins as the official State religion until 1833. Facing the sudden loss of its ability to forcibly tax the residents of Ashfield and compel their attendance, the church's leaders looked for other ways to retain their authority.

¹⁷⁴ Town Valuation for 1830.; Ashfield *Vital Records*. 258.

¹⁷⁵ Ontario County indentures (land sales).

The Ashfield church's solution came in the form of an evangelist named Mason Grosvenor, who was called to Ashfield in his first ministerial assignment after graduating from Yale's conservative divinity school. Grosvenor and the leaders of the Ashfield congregation immediately set to work combatting what they characterized as licentiousness in the town. Part of their program focused on prosecuting the town's physician, Dr. Charles Knowlton, for publishing America's first birth control manual. Another part involved admonishing residents whose attendance had lapsed and who had failed to pay their church tax (the minister and church leaders continued to use the word tax, in spite of the fact they were no longer able to compel contributions with the force of law).¹⁷⁶

One of the church's immediate targets was Samuel Ranney. The 62-year old farmer had neither attended services nor contributed to the congregation in years, and may have seemed an easy target for a church leadership eager to set an example to intimidate the flock. The new minister drew up a list of charges against Ranney, accusing him of "A transgression of the laws of Christ's kingdom by withholding his support both pecuniary and personal from the ministrations of the word to this church," and "A violation of his covenant vows, voluntarily solemnly and publicly made to this church and to god; consisting in almost entirely absenting himself for several years from the worship."¹⁷⁷

In addition to failing to contribute and attend church services, pastor Grosvenor wrote that Samuel Ranney had "denied the ~~existence~~ reality of a future state, and declared

¹⁷⁶ These events are described in great detail in my biography of Knowlton. Allosso.

¹⁷⁷ Mason Grosvenor, Ashfield Congregational Church Records, 1834.

himself not in the least responsible to the laws of Christ's Kingdom," which the minister declared "manifested contempt to this church, its laws its peace and its fellowship."¹⁷⁸

The church wrote Ranney a letter of admonishment, insisting that he confess and repent his transgressions and immediately resume his attendance and financial support of the congregation. The alternative, the church leaders warned, was excommunication.

Excommunication in a small, religious community such as Ashfield was no idle threat. Like shunning in other traditional communities, excommunication split families and ruined lives. Ashfield's church, under Grosvenor, had resorted to this punishment before, targeting another old farmer named Nathaniel Clark who had been overheard in a tavern criticizing the congregation's ongoing persecution of the town's doctor, Knowlton. Samuel Ranney didn't take the threat lightly, but his reaction was not what the church expected. On May 20th, at the conclusion of the four-week period the church had given him to consider their threat, Samuel Ranney delivered the following letter to Reverend Grosvenor:

To Rev Mason Grosvenor, Chairman of the Committee of Christ's Church in Ashfield,

Sir I received your letter of the 22d ult containing charges against me as a member of the church of which you are pastor, which charges I am requested to take into serious consideration, and I have done so.

The first charge amounts to this: "A transgression of the laws of Christ's Kingdom" by not paying away my money to support preaching.

Now as Christ's Kingdom is not of this world, and as I have no knowledge of any other world, nor consequently of the laws of any other world, you should not be surprised that I should transgress the laws you speak of inasmuch as I know nothing about them. I once thought that I did, but that was when I took names for things, and supposed that immaterialities were realities. And as to

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

pecuniary support, it cannot be expected I should give away my hard earning for what I consider of little or nothing worth.

The second charge is, “A violation of my Covenant Vows.” To this I have only to say, that the same consistency—the same honesty which required me to make these vows when I did make them, now require me to disregard them. As a man’s opinions and feelings are not voluntary nor under the control of his will, but are governed by circumstances, it is the height of absurdity for me to promise what my opinions and feelings shall be at a future time. The most I can consistently do or be required to do is avow what they are at the time being.

I therefore this day excommunicate the Church of Christ in Ashfield for my further support and membership. And I do hereby request the chairman of the committee of said church to read this at the meeting appointed for acting upon my case.

Your fellow townsman,
Ashfield, May 20 1834

Samuel Ranney¹⁷⁹

Samuel Ranney’s letter is remarkable in several ways. First, of course, in his dramatic, pre-emptive excommunication of the church. But also in his discussion of names and things, immaterialities and realities. The language suggests Samuel was not simply an old farmer who had lost interest in supporting the church, but rather was someone who entertained radical opinions about the role of religion in his life and in Ashfield society. The specific terminology Ranney used also suggests at least casual familiarity with the ideas of the local freethinker, Charles Knowlton, who had published a book on the subject, titled *Elements of Modern Materialism*, a few years earlier.¹⁸⁰ The fact that Knowlton was a country doctor living in Ashfield, and that Ranney was familiar with the argument of a 456-page secularist tome Knowlton had self-published suggests that in spite of its remote, rural setting, Ashfield was the scene of one of America’s earliest

¹⁷⁹ Spelling errors—including the possibly deliberate misspelling of the minister’s name—are original. Ashfield Historical Society, Samuel Ranney Letter, 1834.

¹⁸⁰ Charles Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism Inculcating the Idea of a Future State, in Which All Will Be More Happy, under Whatever Circumstances They May Be Placed Than If They Experienced No Misery in This Life*. (Adams, Mass.: A. Oakey, 1829).

philosophical challenges to organized religion. Knowlton had been prosecuted for selling copies of *Elements* at Amherst College, and had lectured to freethinking audiences in Boston and New York City. Once again, rural Ashfielders were at the forefront of an intellectual and cultural movement traditionally believed the exclusive interest of urban intellectuals.

Samuel Ranney's choice to sign his letter to the church "Your fellow townsman," when the expected, customary closing would have been "Your brother in Christ" also seems to stand as an accusation against people Ranney believed had wrongly put religious orthodoxy before social solidarity and as an expression of Ranney's wider, more cosmopolitan concept of citizenship. Ironically but unsurprisingly, the words "Your fellow townsman" were only true for a few more months. Samuel sold his farm and followed his brother and cousins to Phelps in 1835.

At the same time the Ranneys were settling into Phelps, they were setting the stage for the next phase of the family's expansion across America by purchasing land in Michigan. In spite of President Andrew Jackson's 1836 Specie Circular, which declared that western lands must be paid for at the Land Office in hard money rather than paper notes, in 1837 the Ranneys and many of their Phelps neighbors traveled to the frontier and bought land. Perhaps the elimination of speculation based on credit in the form of paper banknotes had convinced the Ranneys and other New Yorkers that the opportunity represented by western land was legitimate. In any case, on March 13, 1837, Samuel Ranney bought a farm in Phelps and on April 15, Samuel and his son William arrived at the Detroit Land Office and purchased a 160-acre and a 40-acre parcel.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ U.S. Land Office records.

Samuel's health deteriorated rapidly, perhaps exacerbated by the controversy in Ashfield, the move to Phelps, and the trip to Michigan. Years later, Henry Ranney described his uncle as "enterprising and successful, but...overtaken by some misfortunes as age drew on...he made his abode in Phelps, but was broken in health, and died the following year."¹⁸² Samuel Ranney wrote his will in April 1837, naming his wife Polly and his friend Russell Bement as executors. He died June 28, 1837, leaving his Michigan land to minor son Frederick. Samuel's estate inventory includes notes payable by Russell Bement, by Samuel's son-in-law, Michigan merchant Nehemiah Hathaway, and by local peppermint oil producers Vandermark & Company.¹⁸³ Samuel's wife Polly and their four children all ultimately moved to Michigan, where at least one son, Frederick, remained active in the peppermint oil business. In 1847, Henry Ranney received a letter in Ashfield from his cousin Frederick, who was living in Centerville, Michigan. Frederick wrote, "Dear Sir, I am obliged to call on you for the money on that peppermint oil that was sent last fall. I have some money to make out in a few days or sell property at a low price. Lucius nor Lewis [Henry's brothers living near Frederick in Michigan] cannot help me to money this fall therefore I shall expect it in a return letter. You must write on the receipt of this for time is short with me. Let me know what you can do."¹⁸⁴

Roswell Ranney continued to prosper in New York, where he built a large house, a barn, and outbuildings all of fieldstone. Roswell "dealt largely in peppermint and other essential oils," acting as a conduit for New York peppermint oil into Ashfield and other

¹⁸² Ranney.

¹⁸³ Samuel Ranney, Last Will and Testament, 1837.

¹⁸⁴ Henry Ranney Papers.

eastern markets.¹⁸⁵ Roswell kept between three and four thousand dollars “at interest” in Ashfield for years after he moved to Phelps, and as mentioned earlier, bought a small house in Ashfield in 1838.

In 1845, one of New York’s new peppermint merchants, Leman Hotchkiss, wrote to his brother Hiram, to tell him about peppermint oil “which old Ranney took to [New York City broker] David Dows and requested him to ascertain the most he could obtain for it.”¹⁸⁶ Roswell Ranney remained active in the peppermint oil business well into the 1840s, when the Hotchkiss brothers are typically believed to have controlled the market. Apparently Roswell was acquainted with the same people in New York City, and his opinion was worth something even to his rivals, the Hotchkisses.

A few days later, Leman wrote Hiram again to say “Old Ranney” had returned from his trip to New York and Boston and Leman had met with him. “He told me that if he had an offer for 10 Thousand pounds of oil for 10/ he would not take it. At the same time he said he had contracted 200# with one of his old customers in Boston & he no doubt should be obliged to pay 12/ to fill his contract.”¹⁸⁷

Roswell Ranney died September 4, 1848—apparently unexpectedly, because he had not prepared a will. He left an estate of \$44,215.43, consisting of real estate, bonds, mortgages, and notes, which was distributed equally among seven beneficiaries.¹⁸⁸ With Roswell’s death, Henry in Ashfield became the principal member of the Ranney family involved in the peppermint oil business. But the business had expanded and other

¹⁸⁵ Ranney.

¹⁸⁶ Hotchkiss Papers, 1845-9-15LBHtoHGH .

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 1845-9-17LBHtoHGH .

¹⁸⁸ Roswell Ranney Estate Inventory, 1848.

families had taken the center stage. We will focus on Phelps and its Peppermint Kings in the next chapter, and revisit the Ranneys as they carry the first peppermint roots to Michigan, establishing a peppermint oil business that straddled the country from Boston and New York to the pioneer farms of the Yankee West.

Ranney family tree

(numbers = generation)

1) Thomas Ranney (“progenitor of all the name in America”): b. 1616 Scotland. An original settler of Middletown CT. M. Mary Hubbard 1659 Middletown. D 1713 a. 97.

2) Thomas Ranney, s. Thomas, b. 1661, farmer. b. 1710 Chatham, d. 1727.

3) George Ranney, s. Thomas 2, b. 1695, d. 1725, a. 29.

4) George Ranney 2, s. George, b. 1723, lived in Chatham, d. 1804 a. 81.

5) Thomas Ranney, s. George 2, b. 1749, “settled in Ashfield around 1792,” d. 1823

6) Roswell Ranney (Captain), b. Chatham 1782, d. Phelps NY 1848, a. 66.

7) Horace, b. May 22, 1803, “removed, about 1832, to Phelps, N.Y.”

6) William Ranney, b. 1786, moved to Aurelius NY 1823, then to Elbridge in 1835, d. 1857. Farmer.

5) Francis Ranney, s. George 2, b. 1753, settled in Ashfield 1786, Revolutionary soldier, d. 1804, a. 51.

5) George Ranney 3, s. George 2, b. 1747, d. Ashfield 1822, a. 75

6) Jesse, s. George 3, b. 1775, “settled on the farm in Ashfield next north to his father’s; built a house on that farm, which he sold to his brother Joseph, and in 1818 removed to the large farm in Ashfield that he purchased of David Ellis,” d. 1861, a. 86.

7) James Ranney, s. Jesse, b. 1799, moved to Belding MI 1878

6) Samuel Hall, s. George 3, b. 1772, “settled in Ashfield on the farm south of his father’s. In 1821 he built a two-story brick house that is yet standing there. In 1836 he removed to Phelps, N.Y., where he died June 27, 1837; m. Polly Stewart...she died in Michigan about 1850.” His children lived mostly in Grand Rapids and Detroit, MI.

- 7) Lucretia, b. June 17, 1796; m. (1) Lemuel Sears; m. (2) 1820, Col. Nehemiah Hathaway.
- 7) Braddock, b. May 20, 1800; d. Sept. 6, 1803.
- 7) Harriet, b. Mar. 12, 1802; d. Aug. 22, 1803.
- 7) "William, born Oct. 23, 1805; he moved to Michigan in about 1838; was, in 1860, living in Iowa; postmaster and deacon."
- 7) Dexter, b. June 5, 1808; drowned Aug. 22, 1850, Grand Rapids, Mich.
- 7) Lucius, b. June 12, 1812; d. Feb. 1, 1815.
- 7) Julia, b. Nov. 7, 1815, d. unm. Sept. 1838
- 7) Emily, b. Jan 9, 1818; d. Apr. 22, 1837; m. Dr. James Davis.
- 7) Frederick Thompson, b. Mar. 12, 1820.

6) Joseph, s. George 3, b. 1777, d. Ashfield 1838.

6) George 4, s. George 3, b. 1789, "in Oct., 1833, he removed to Phelps, N.Y., where he died, Sept. 9, 1842, aged 53 years.

7) Alonzo Franklin, b. Sept 13, 1812. d. 1901 in Phelps.

7) George Lewis, s. George 4, b. Mar 10, 1815, d. Hillsdale MI April 1881.

7) Henry Sears, b. Mar. 5, 1817 Ashfield; m. (1) June 20, 1844, Maria Jane Goodwin, b. 1822; d. Jan 14, 1855; m. June 6, 1856, Julia A. Bassett, b. 1823; d. Aug. 25, 1890; d. Jan 23, 1899.

7) Lucius, b. Apr. 12, 1819, "lives at Allen, Mich.; farmer; town treasurer." d. Apr. 4, 1894.

7) Priscilla M., b. Jan. 19, 1822; m. Randolph Densmore.

7) Harrison Jackson, b. Mar. 4, 1824. m. Jan 10, 1856, Helen McConnell, d. Sept. 27, 1906.

7) Lyman A., b. Aug. 1, 1828; d. unm. Mar. 7, 1854, Van Buren, Ark.

7) Lemuel Sears., b. Jan. 7, 1831, "lives at Hillsdale, Mich., alderman; supervisor, former member of Legislature of Michigan."

7) Anson Bement., b. May 31, 1833, d. Hillsdale MI 1886.

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY BUSINESS AND MIGRATION

Phelps

The conclusion of the American Revolution brought a rapid increase of Euro-American settlers into Western New York. Indigenous peoples who had sided with Britain in the war lost their territories, and speculators took most of the eastern land forfeited by Loyalists. In 1790, when the United States government took its first national census, more than half of the Americans counted were under age sixteen. As this predominantly agrarian population came of age, sons of Yankee farmers seeking to begin their own farms found fewer parcels available close to home, containing less attractive land at higher prices. In 1780, after decades during which would-be settlers had been frustrated by the British Proclamation Line and afraid of strong native nations to their west, only one-fourteenth of white Americans lived beyond the relative safety of the old colonial settlements. By 1800 the frontier population west of the Appalachian Mountains expanded to 921,000, more than one-fifth of the country's white population.¹⁸⁹

But even on the new frontier, speculators and land companies controlled vast swaths of unimproved western lands. Historian Allan Kulikoff recounts, "Starved for funds, New York sold 22,000 square miles, almost half of the state's land, to developers. Two land companies—Phelps and Gorham and the Holland Land Company—held 6.2 million acres, much of the western half of the state."¹⁹⁰ Histories of western migration

¹⁸⁹ Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers*. 285.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 287.

describe Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham as “Two Massachusetts speculators” who “For \$100,000...bought preemptive rights to a vast tract in the western part” of New York and began the “Genesee Fever.”¹⁹¹ Older histories of the early frontier also recall that the Fever rose quickly after British and Indian incursions from Canada, Oswego, and Niagara, called the Border Wars, ended around 1779.¹⁹²

At the conclusion of Revolutionary hostilities, Western New York was a land of trappers, Indian traders, and small pockets of settlement such as the “one or two white families [who] had settled at Catharine’s Town, at the head of Seneca Lake.”¹⁹³ This pattern of sparse frontier settlement extended all the way to the French village and British garrison at Detroit, which may help explain why migrants to Western New York like the Ranneys so quickly looked farther west and bought parcels in Michigan even as they began making farms in Phelps.¹⁹⁴

Acquisition of western lands highlighted the competing agendas of rural settlers and urban speculators. Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham acquired the six million acres that became known as the Phelps and Gorham Purchase in an elaborate series of negotiations with the native Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy). Phelps and Gorham paid the Indians \$5,000 and promised a perpetual annuity of \$500. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts relinquished its western claims for a fee of \$100,000 that the speculators tried to pay in devalued Massachusetts scrip. When the federal government assumed the war debts of the states and rehabilitated Massachusetts currency, the

¹⁹¹ Holbrook. 17.

¹⁹² O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris Reserve*. (Rochester: William Alling, 1851). 79.

¹⁹³ Ibid. 127.

¹⁹⁴ Kenneth E. Lewis, *West to Far Michigan : Settling the Lower Peninsula, 1815-1860*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002).

speculators were nearly ruined.¹⁹⁵ The Purchase was concluded by 1789, and the establishment of townships quickly followed.

The town of Phelps, near a large stream called the Canandaigua Outlet, was one of the first settlements formed after the conclusion of the Purchase. Two employees of the land company, John Decker Robinson and Nathaniel Sanborn, drove a herd of cattle into the area and distributed them to the Indians on the signing of land sale documents. They operated a land office in a log cabin in return for grants of land. Robinson brought his family to the new town in 1789 and opened a tavern in 1793. By then, settlers from Western Massachusetts had begun flooding into the new township.¹⁹⁶

Many of Phelps's original settlers were from Conway Massachusetts, Ashfield's neighbor to the east on the road to Deerfield. Jonathan Oaks arrived in 1790 and settled at a crossroads on an old Indian trail that became known as Oaks Corners. The settlers told their families and friends about their new farms, and a steady stream of migration began from Conway, including the families of Benjamin Wheat, Captain Lemuel Bannister, Osee Crittenden, and Augustus Dickinson, whose daughter Fanny married Thaddeus Oaks. Their daughter, Lucretia Oaks, would later marry Phelps's Peppermint King, Leman Hotchkiss.¹⁹⁷

Solomon Gates arrived in 1790 from Conway with Jonathan Oaks. Gates's sister, Esther, was married to Ashfield merchant Selah Belding. Wells Whitmore of Conway also arrived with Oaks and became the town's first constable in 1793. Solomon Goodale, Phelps's first Town Clerk, was also from Conway. Since entire families from Conway

¹⁹⁵ Turner. 135 ff.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 224 ff.

¹⁹⁷ Helen Post Ridley, *When Phelps Was Young*. (Phelps, N.Y.: Phelps Echo, 1939). 10, 90.

often migrated together, the town's contribution to Phelps's early population growth was substantial. Jesse Warner left Conway with his five adult sons in 1796 to settle in Phelps.¹⁹⁸

Unlike the traditional story of western settlement, in which young people left for the frontier and then had only sporadic contact with their families back home, traffic from Conway to Phelps was not all one-way.¹⁹⁹ In spite of the difficulty of covering 250 miles over challenging terrain, many settlers traveled back and forth between Conway and Phelps regularly. John Salisbury first visited Phelps with Jonathan Oaks in 1790. He returned to Conway for a while, and then returned to Phelps in 1796, when a local history records he "came alone and walked all the way." Salisbury visited Conway again, married Elizabeth Banister and returned to Phelps with her and his brother Stephen's family (presumably not on foot). When Elizabeth died in 1806, Salisbury returned to Conway once again and married Polly Wilder.²⁰⁰

Just up the road from Conway, near the South Ashfield plain where the Ranney brothers had their farms, lived the Burnett family. The first Burnetts (sometimes spelled Burnet) to visit Phelps were brothers named John and Patrick. They arrived in 1794, and Patrick moved on but John remained. His son William Burnett was a town magistrate and became a Brigadier General of the militia after fighting on the Niagara frontier during the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 90 ff.

¹⁹⁹ Hal S. Barron attributed the generally declensionist view of migration's effects on rural New England to the "pervasive influence of Frederick Jackson Turner...[and] the agrarian myth." As discussed previously, Turner believed migration involved a cutting of ties with home that was extreme enough to cause a cultural break, resulting in civilization recapitulating itself on the frontier and creating a new American culture. Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind : Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 2.

²⁰⁰ Ridley. 123.

War of 1812.²⁰¹

Joseph and Lodowick Vandermark (sometimes spelled Vandemark) also arrived in 1794 from Pennsylvania. Lodowick was a millwright who operated a successful sawmill on Flint Creek in Phelps. Lodowick's children were Frederick (1785-1862), a farmer who later sold some farmland to Roswell Ranney, Experience (known as "Spiddy," 1793-1851), who married Archibald Burnett, and William, who also married a sibling Burnett and named his son Archibald, after the man who brought peppermint to Phelps.²⁰²

Archibald Burnett was the son of Archibald and Eunice Burnet, who had settled in Ashfield just after the Revolutionary War. Of their nine children, the three youngest, Andrew, Nahum, and Archibald, moved to Phelps after 1813. They are the source of the peppermint industry in Western New York.²⁰³

In the early 1810s, Archibald Burnet was a peddler working out of Ashfield, who like many others carried a trunk of wares and a basket of essences to the newly settled farms and villages of Western New York. Archibald liked the area and decided to stay, finding employment and lodging on the 400-acre farm of Lodowick Vandermark. Archibald married Vandermark's daughter Spiddy and bought a farm in the neighboring township of Junius on the nearby Canandaigua outlet. At about this time, Archibald received an urgent letter from his brother Nahum, who was still living at the family home in Ashfield on the road to Conway, near the Ranneys. Nahum wrote that he had important news that was too sensitive to relate in a letter, and urged his brother to come home

²⁰¹ Turner, 227.

²⁰² George S. Conover, *History of Ontario County, New York*. (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1893). 59, 353.

²⁰³ Archibald Burnett's name was also included on a list of early physicians who were members of the Ontario County Medical Society, established in 1806. Ibid. p. 182.; Henry S. Ranney, "Peppermint in Phelps," *Phelps Citizen*, 1893.

quickly. Archibald visited Ashfield and discovered the news was peppermint. Archibald walked back home to Phelps, carrying a bundle of peppermint roots in his backpack. He planted them in the mucky soil by the Canandaigua outlet, and the plants thrived. In a few years, peppermint fields could be seen on farms throughout Ontario and Wayne Counties.

Archibald and Nahum Burnetts' names begin appearing on Ontario County Tax Assessments and Indentures (land sales) in 1820 and 1822, respectively. This may be an artifact of the lack of complete records available for the 1810s. Or, rather than first planting peppermint on his own property, Archibald may have carried the roots to Lodowick Vandermark's farm while he boarded there. The Vandermarks were early adopters of peppermint and remained prominent peppermint farmers for generations. Archibald's brother-in-law, Frederick, was the recipient of the check for two to three thousand dollars recorded in the newspaper notice mentioned earlier, in payment for an 1824 shipment of peppermint oil to Massachusetts. Peppermint was already becoming an important cash crop in western New York during the period when Ashfield was the center of the peddler trade. The Vandermarks later became big suppliers of the Hotchkiss brothers, whose careers we will follow in Section Two.

In contrast to an historical tradition that often depicts westward migration as a cutting of family ties and a financial and cultural declension for the region from which people migrated, the connection between the Ashfield area and Western New York was so well-established and fluid that people, information, and products traveled easily in both directions. As peppermint became economically important in Ashfield, it was almost simultaneously planted and distilled around Phelps. However, as the hub of the essence peddling business, Ashfield remained the center of demand for peppermint oil and a

principal destination for New York oil shipments for another twenty years. Ashfield retained its preeminent position in the peppermint oil market until Western New Yorkers devised a new way to sell oil. The rise of wholesale and branded peppermint oil and the Hotchkiss brothers is the second phase of the peppermint oil story.

The Ranneys' Peppermint Kingdom

Although the New York peppermint oil business was later dominated by the Hotchkiss brothers (who both declared themselves Peppermint Kings), the Ranneys remained active in the business until the 1870s. And the Ranneys were responsible for introducing peppermint roots to southwestern Michigan, which became the third major growing region and the site of the final Peppermint Kingdom of Albert May Todd. So before turning to the Hotchkisses in Section Two and Todd in Section Three, we return for a while to the story of the Ranney migration.

On June 25, 1831, *The Genesee Farmer* reprinted a feature article from the *New York Sentinel* that discussed “the powerful influence, physical and moral, on our country” exerted by “locomotive engines [that] can be propelled at the amazing speed of from 30 to 50 miles an hour.” The article went on to predict that remote towns and villages would come to seem as if they were right next door and that this conquest of distance would have a profound effect on American society.²⁰⁴ To put this in perspective, imagine traveling from New York City to Buffalo. On foot or horseback, a traveler would be lucky to cover forty miles per day. The 440-mile distance between the two cities would require 11 grueling days of travel, for those hardy enough to make the trip at all. After 1825 a trip

²⁰⁴ quoted in Taylor.

on the Erie Canal was much less physically demanding, but not much faster. A decade later, in contrast, a traveler could step onto a train in New York City and after a single long day spent in the comfort of “the cars” could step off in Buffalo.

Steamship service began on Lake Erie in 1818, before the Erie Canal was even completed. From Buffalo, the lake opened a route to Michigan. Western New Yorkers took advantage of the opportunity, and went west to invest on the frontier. In July 1833, New York speculators Charles Butler and Arthur Bronson left Detroit to explore the new lands available in southwestern Michigan. After passing through the new townships of Coldwater and Sturgis, they stopped on the large prairie surrounding the village of White Pigeon. Butler wrote in his diary:

White Pigeon is a pleasant little village...situated in the center of an extensive and beautiful prairie 6 or 7000 acres. What is a prairie? It looks like the great ocean, for there is nothing to obstruct or intercept the view except here & there a house; a perfectly level plain without a tree or bush or stone; encircled in the background with the dense & noble forest which looks like the frame of the picture.²⁰⁵

Some of the New Yorkers who visited land offices on the frontier were speculators, but their numbers were decreased by President Andrew Jackson’s Specie Circular, an 1836 executive order that required land office purchases to be made in hard currency rather than on credit or using banknotes of questionable value.

During the winter of 1836-7, George Ranney worked in Michigan with two of his sons and his son-in-law, cutting timber on the Grand River.²⁰⁶ George had been the first member of the family to move to western New York, and within a few years of his arrival

²⁰⁵ Haeger. 67.

²⁰⁶ Ellis. 389.

he had expanded his interest to the new territory, which became a state in January 1837. On April 15, 1837, as previously mentioned, Samuel Ranney and his son William bought two parcels at the Detroit Land Office. Two weeks later, on May 1, Leman and Hiram Hotchkiss of Phelps bought 1,327 acres of western Michigan land and their uncle Calvin Hotchkiss bought 1,325 acres. A year and a half later, after Samuel Ranney's death, his son William Ranney returned to the frontier to visit the newly-opened Bronson (Kalamazoo) Land Office and purchase another 560 acres in September 1838. Henry Ranney's brothers and cousins were on the move to Michigan.²⁰⁷

The Ranney family correspondence preserved in Ashfield's Historical Society tells the story of a tightly-knit extended family that worked hard to maintain connections across time and distance. Henry Ranney saved the letters he received over six decades from relatives in Boston, New York, Michigan, Arkansas, the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) and California. Family members shared information and provided both emotional and financial support to each other, throughout the nineteenth century. Ranneys who went west to New York, Michigan, or even to the distant gold fields of Pikes Peak and California, remained securely attached to their family. They visited each other regularly, over the years, and between visits they wrote.

In May 1839, Henry Ranney received the first letter in a correspondence that spanned six decades. George Lewis Ranney wrote from Phelps, New York to his brother Henry in Ashfield. The twenty-four-year-old who went by his middle name, Lewis, opened his letter with the most important news, "our folks are well as usual." Lewis continued with news of his business ventures, "I am working at home this season... We

²⁰⁷ Michigan Land Office Records

have planted this season about 6 acres of mint, 9 acres of corn, 6 acres spring wheat, potatoes and oats sufficient, &c. Our people are going into the poultry line considerable this season, with near 50 chickens already.” Lewis then passed on news of their cousins, Samuel Ranney’s sons. “Dexter is yet in Michigan I suppose, William is a-building a new house in the West Village, Frederick is about here as usual.” Lewis concluded, “Mother says she calculates to send to you three pairs of socks. Father wishes you to send them \$50 or \$100 if you can, as he has had none from Michigan. Money is very scarce here now, probably will be until after harvest.”²⁰⁸

Lewis’s letter sets the template for the Ranney brothers’ correspondence. News of the family came first, then business and occasionally politics and neighborhood gossip. Although they would ultimately be spread across the nation, the brothers not only kept in touch, but did business together regularly. Henry Ranney’s and Jasper Bement’s peddler operation in Ashfield was the market for Lewis’s peppermint oil. And their father George’s call for money from Ashfield, since he could expect none from William in Michigan (presumably the return of a loan to his nephew), was not unusual. Information, money, and people all flowed freely between Massachusetts, New York, and Michigan. Later, celebrating the close family connection enabled by improved transportation, the brothers’ aged mother, Achsah Sears Ranney, began splitting her time between the three regions after the death of her husband, George, in 1842.

The Ranneys and their close friends prospered in Phelps even as they looked westward. Alonzo Franklin Ranney, Henry’s oldest brother, considered moving to Michigan several times, but ultimately spent his life in Phelps. Cousin William stayed in

²⁰⁸ Henry Ranney Papers.

Phelps for a few years before moving to Michigan. Relative-by-marriage Russell Bement lived on a 281-acre farm in Phelps and owned a brick store downtown. Russell's son, John Bement, moved to Philadelphia, where he worked for a glassmaker, sold essence vials to Henry in Ashfield, and later represented Hiram Hotchkiss's brand of peppermint oil.²⁰⁹ As these relatives and former neighbors fanned out across the growing nation, they retained the bonds of familiarity and trust formed in Ashfield.

By 1837, Henry had completed his commercial apprenticeship with Jasper Bement and opened his own store. In the spring of 1840, Henry's cousin Luther Ranney peddled essences, carrying 63 dozen vials in March and returning for another 53 dozen three weeks later. In July, Ashfielder Horatio Flower bought 84 dozen vials of essence for a peddling trip to the west that resulted in Flower's relocation to Phelps.²¹⁰ The R.G. Dun credit company's correspondent reported in 1842 that Ranney was a "clever young man." A few years later, Henry and his partner, Richard Cook, were "reputed safe and doing good business." On the tenth anniversary of their partnership, the R.G. Dun investigator described Cook and Ranney as "Good character business men, credit and business fair. Worth 2 to 3,000. Considered good for [credit] engagements."²¹¹ By this time Ashfield was no longer producing its own peppermint oil, and the change had been noticed by newspapers like the *Boston Daily Courier*, which ran a feature article titled "How Ashfield has gone out of peppermint business."²¹² But Henry Ranney remained the center of a wide web of peppermint oil distribution.

²⁰⁹ Phelps Assessments.; W.R. Cutter and W.F. Adams, *Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of the State of Massachusetts*. (Boston: Lewis historical publishing Company, 1910).

²¹⁰ Bement.

²¹¹ Dun and Bradstreet.

²¹² *Boston Daily Courier*, 1-24-1842, 1.

In April 1842, John Bement wrote from Philadelphia, to Richard Cook's brother Moses in New York City, "I have shipped this week 200 gross of vials of 1 3/4 oz, the very kind that is used in Ashfield." In a postscript, Bement added, "I wish Ranney would come here and see me."²¹³ It's unclear whether Henry visited his friend in Philadelphia, but soon he would have an opportunity to see Michigan. In May 1842, twenty-three-year-old Lucius wrote to his older brother of his arrival in Allen, Michigan, after a 10-day journey from Phelps. "I have a warranty deed for 160 acres of as good land as there is in Michigan," Lucius wrote. "For said land I paid \$148." The property is well situated, only "6 miles from Hillsdale Center which the railroad will be completed to from Adrian this season."²¹⁴

Lucius wrote his brother again from Allen in April 1843. "I traded one of my lots of land the other day," Lucius wrote, "for lot with 35 acres improved, house and barn." Lucius said he would delay a planned visit to Phelps because he had gone into the potash business. "We have made three times and we find it profitable," he reported, "therefore we intend to follow the business." Potash, made from the ashes of trees burned to clear farm fields, was often the first product western settlers shipped east to raise cash. "This part of the country is settling fast," Lucius wrote. "Just where there was forest one year ago, the same surface is now waving with wheat. The cars will run to Hillsdale Center this summer, 6 miles east from where this child is, and then you can come out here in a hurry if you please." Regarding the extended family, Lucius wrote, "As for Lewis, I saw him a few weeks ago. He was well and is doing well I guess. He and his partner will have

²¹³ Henry Ranney Papers. 1842-4-15JBtoMC.

²¹⁴ Ibid. 1842-5-15LuciustoHSR.

about 50 acres of mint to still this fall. You had better come out this fall and buy their oil. What is it worth now?”²¹⁵

Lewis Ranney had migrated from Phelps to Michigan with peppermint roots in 1835. Lewis was the first farmer in western Michigan to grow peppermint. He settled on the prairie near White Pigeon and got right to work growing and distilling peppermint for Henry’s peddler business. But he soon discovered that Ashfield was not the only market for his peppermint oil. Lewis wrote to Henry from Phelps in November 1843. He apologized, “I ought to have written a long time since but through the fall I occupy 20 hours in the 24 a-stilling therefore I wanted the rest for sleep.” Lewis reported that he had left Florence, Michigan with a load of peppermint oil in mid-October. “We brought down 594 pounds of oil we sold to Wells of Lyons at two dollars in advance and the rise eight months. I have been here about three weeks. I shall tarry until good sleighing, and then go back.” Philip C. Wells was a peppermint oil broker working in western New York and, later, Michigan. Wells and Hiram Hotchkiss often worked together, and both offered terms that included an advance payment at the current market price and a guarantee to pay whatever the price might rise to in the months between contract and delivery.

“Smith and myself intend planting 30 acres in the spring of mint,” Lewis concluded. “It is rather hard business, but I think it better than wheat.”²¹⁶ Growing peppermint involved planting root cuttings in plowed fields and cultivating throughout the season to keep out weeds that would ruin the distilled oil’s flavor. Peppermint was more labor-intensive than wheat, but also much more profitable. Lewis wrote again from

²¹⁵ Ibid. 1843-4-30LuciustoHSR.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 1843-11-13LGRtoHSR.

Michigan in February 1844. He had waited for snow in Phelps, but when it did not come he set out in a wagon.

We found very good wheeling most of the way,” Lewis wrote. “We got two dollars per pound for our oil we sold to Wells of Lyons. He shipt it to New York, ours was to be sold with his. His agent sold sooner than Wells expected they were going to and when Wells was informed of the sale oil was worth \$4.00 per lb in NY. Probably some Gum Game about it.

In spite of the swindle, Lewis reiterated, “Smith and I intend putting in thirty acres this Spring to mint and that in addition to what we have already in I hope will give us some oil next fall for Pocket Change.”²¹⁷ Since new plantings of peppermint averaged better than 25 pounds of oil per acre, the pocket change Lewis anticipated was substantial.

Henry continued bottling peppermint essence for peddlers, and like Jasper Bement, he expanded into other essences. In May 1844, Henry’s peddler Charles Sanderson wrote him from Leominster. He sent the letter with his brother, Henry’s politically-minded friend William, and asked “if it is convenient you may pay him that last bill, one half in essence as follows, one half gross peppermint, one half gross wintergreen, one quarter each cinnamon, hemlock, lemon, aniseed and Sassafras, one quarter gross sassafras in large bottles if you have it. One half gross oil spruce, the balance proportioned as above.”²¹⁸ A few months later, in August 1844, twenty-one-year-old Augustus Graves of Ashfield wrote to Henry from Franklin Massachusetts, during a peddling trip. Instead of Ashfield, however, Graves’s envelope was addressed to 76 Union St., Boston. Henry had moved to the city and begun a business partnership with George C. Goodwin, the brother of his new wife, Maria. The Goodwins were Ashfield natives whose father manufactured

²¹⁷ Ibid. 1844-2-15LGRtoHSR.

²¹⁸ Ibid. 1844-5-24CStoHSR.

surgical splints. “I shall be in Boston in a week or 10 days at the most and I shall want an assortment of essences,” Graves wrote. “I should like you to put up some essence of an extra quality, twice as strong as any I have yet had of you, without the alcohol being reduced...I think I shall want about two gross of 4 ounce essence in peppermint, lemon, Wintergreen, hot drops etc. (and four or five gross 2 ounce ditto) I shall be in sometime next week and shall want considerable stuff if you have the right sort.”²¹⁹ Although he briefly became a Boston wholesaler, Henry Ranney retained his ties to the peddler trade and soon returned to his home in Western Massachusetts.

When the R.G. Dun credit reporter visited Ashfield again in May 1847, Henry had returned from Boston and had resumed business on his own. The reporter wrote that Henry “manufactures oil of peppermint at Ashfield and has but little if any capital.”²²⁰ Augustus Graves wrote to Henry again from Middleborough Massachusetts, on another peddling trip, to order 29 dozen 2 ounce essences including six dozen peppermint, 12 dozen 4 ounce essences including six dozen peppermint, and 6 dozen half pints of peppermint in flat bottles probably supplied by Bement from Philadelphia. Graves also ordered cinnamon, wintergreen, hemlock, wormwood, spearmint, sassafras, anise, lemon, pennyroyal, goldenrod, Hot Drops, Balsam of Life, Balsam Honey, and Lee & B.’s Prestons Salts, “if you have them—no other.”²²¹

In August 1847, as mentioned previously, Henry’s cousin Frederick Ranney wrote from Centerville, Michigan, seeking payment for peppermint oil he had sent Henry the previous fall. In October Augustus Graves wrote again from Franklin to order 54 dozen 2

²¹⁹ Ibid. 1844-8-1AGtoHSR.

²²⁰ R.G Dun credit report.

²²¹ Preston Salts were ammonia-based smelling salts. Henry Ranney Papers.

ounce essences, including six dozen peppermint, as well as six dozen 4 ounce peppermints and other patent medicines including Carter's oil and opodeldoc.²²² In the spring of 1848, Jasper Bement wrote to Henry. As he had done years earlier, Bement quickly left business behind and turned his attention to abolitionist politics. "So Cass is to be the slave holders tool," Bement wrote, "to do their infamous work and Northern Locos will fall down and worship. Already the Greenfield Democrat has him out with a long article and lauds him to the skies, puts on a thick coat of soft soap. Oh the full blaze of the 19th century!"²²³ General Lewis Cass, who had been the territorial Governor of Michigan, was running for President on a platform of popular sovereignty that advocated letting new territories decide whether to permit slavery. Cass's presidential campaign in 1848 drove many anti-slavery northern Democrats into the arms of the Free Soil Party. In addition to running a widespread peddler business with a far-reaching supply chain, Ranney and Bement shared a keen interest in national politics.

In June, 1850, George Goodwin wrote from Boston to "Brother Henry," saying, "I received J. Bement's order and forwarded the goods in a day or two. Nothing particularly new. We would all be happy to see you Maria and children, can you come?"²²⁴ In contrast with the findings of some historians of this period and region that kinship networks were losing their importance as the foundations of business relationships, family bonds and close personal friendships were still central elements of widespread commercial networks such as those run by Ranney and his associates from Ashfield.²²⁵

²²² Ibid. 1847-8-28FTRtoHSR.

²²³ Ibid. 1848-5-30BementtoHSR.

²²⁴ Ibid. 1850-6-14GCGtoHSR.

²²⁵ Paul E. Johnson, for example, seems to accept the idea popularized by Tocqueville that very early in American history, most kinship networks were disrupted and "restraints of every kind were swept away by the market, by migration and personal ambition, and by the universal acceptance of democratic ideas." Paul

In addition to growing staples for the family and peppermint for the market, the Ranney brothers were always on the lookout for business opportunities and continued to provide financial backing to each other across the miles. In February 1851, Lucius wrote to announce that:

I and one of my neighbors bought a thrashing machine last fall. We paid \$250 for it, we hired a man to work with us which we worked at thrashing about two months and thrashed about 10,000 bushels of wheat which come to \$360. The hired help and expenses would not exceed \$60 and the machine is not damaged to the amount of \$30. We can thrash and clean fit for marketing 80 bushels in 60 minutes...the town of Allen raised about 30,000 bushels of wheat this year.²²⁶

Lucius also mentioned that he had been ill for a while, that he had rented out his farm for three years, and that he had "a little daughter" in September who "is healthy and of course a smart and good girl." Returning to business, Lucius wrote that "Lewis and [younger brother] Harrison intend to mint it some next season. They are doing tolerably well...The money I am owing you if you wanted I will try and borrow it if I can. Sickness and building will bring me rather short until next fall. If you can wait until next fall it would favor me some. I rather think that Lewis cannot pay you until then." In addition to the business deals they were doing together, the brothers maintained a strong network of emotional and financial support across the miles.

In 1851, Henry Ranney bought an old (1792) tavern in Ashfield, which he remodeled as a home with several apartments he rented out.²²⁷ Although he gave up his

E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium : Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

²²⁶ Henry Ranney Papers. 1851-2-2LuciustoHSR.

²²⁷ "Death of Henry Ranney," 1899.

general store, Henry remained active in the peppermint oil business. In October, 1851, Lucius wrote again with news that “Lewis is very sick with a swollen leg, the doctors call it a species of irrasiplas [erysipelas, a bacterial skin infection]...Unless it is checked and will work up into his bowels and kill him.” Lucius continued, “The demands you have against me I am afraid that I shall not be able to send you this fall. But I think and hope that I shall be able to go down next fall myself and pay you. Times are uncommon hard in the state this fall...As for oil peppermint, in consequence of Lewis’s health they did not raise any.”²²⁸ Lewis survived his infection, and wrote Henry in September, 1853 to say:

I read a letter a week or two ago of yours at Lucius stating that Marie’s health was very poor...My health in the main is quite good, able to do good fair days work. But not the nerve I carried in former years. I do not work very hard nor do not intend to. I have now only 40 acres of land 28 improved which I can work myself with a boy in the summer season very comfortably. My wife is quite a rugged woman and very ambitious and helps me a great deal from choice. Mother I believe has concluded to spend the coming winter at Phelps and Ashfield...What is peppermint oil worth, I planted 5 acres last spring? It has been too dry for it. Shall probably still about 30 or 35 pounds. I see it quoted at about 4.25 in New York papers.²²⁹

Lucius wrote a month later, saying “the season has been so very dry that peppermint is very small indeed. There is some New York buyers about, they offer about \$3.50 per pound. Lewis will have about 25 pounds. He has contracted a few pounds to the druggists in Hillsdale, Jonesville and Coldwater for five dollars per pound.”²³⁰ Although by this time New Yorkers like Wells and the Hotchkiss brothers were regularly visiting and sending agents to buy Michigan peppermint oil, Henry’s family ties enabled him to

²²⁸ Henry Ranney Papers. 1851-10-12LuciustoHSR.

²²⁹ Ibid. 1853-9-11LewistoHSR.

²³⁰ Ibid. 1853-10-4LuciustoHSR.

maintain a foothold in an increasingly competitive market.

In June 1854, Lucius wrote to Henry and to their mother Achsah, who was staying in Ashfield to nurse Henry's wife Marie in her final illness. Lewis had sold his farm and was looking for a small property near Lucius. Lucius also mentioned "the Bements have sold to John Baggerly and he has moved out here so that we have got them for neighbors once more. Mr. Bement's folks have bought 3 miles South of Hillsdale. He sold for \$2000 and bought for the same 80 acres."²³¹ Henry's wife, Maria Jane Goodwin, died in the Spring of 1855, leaving behind a ten-year old son, Ralph, and an eight-year old daughter, Ella. Several of Henry's brothers visited him that summer in Ashfield. In August 1855, Harrison Ranney wrote from South Allen Michigan, to Anson Ranney who had just arrived in Ashfield with their brother Lemuel. Harrison had arrived in Michigan too late from "Tah-le-quah," where he was working as a merchant's clerk, to make the trip to Phelps and Ashfield with his brothers. In addition to asking, "Why cannot Henry come out here this fall?" Harrison inquired about peppermint oil:

I wish you would ask Henry to find out if I could dispose of any Oil Peppermint, and how much and at what price, for if I could sell two three or four hundred pounds of Oil down there somewhere I would go down sometime this fall. Oil is worth about three dollars per pound in Florence this fall. Could I get four in Ashfield or Boston? I am expecting a letter from Louisville Ky telling me how much oil I can sell there and at what price. I may perhaps do something in that business this fall if all things are favorable.

"You be certain to find out about the Oil Peppermint," Harrison reminded Anson in closing. "I want to make one thousand dollars this fall. I may go to St. Louis with one lot

²³¹ Ibid. 1854-6-18LuciustoHSR.

of Oil. It is worth four dollars there.”²³² Although the prices of commodities were beginning to become more uniform as information about distant markets was distributed over the new telegraph network, detailed knowledge of particular commodities and their markets continued to offer well-connected sellers like the Ranneys a competitive advantage.

When Lucius returned home in Michigan after his own visit to Ashfield, he wrote Henry, “Harrison wanted I should write you a few lines this morning concerning the oil peppermint. He received your letter last Saturday and will start for Florence next Wednesday. He has not been out there yet but saw a young man from there a few days ago and he says they hold oil at four dollars a pound there. But Harrison thinks he can get it for \$3.50 or \$3 and rise, and will let you know the result as soon as he returns.”²³³ Henry brokered a deal for his brother, selling Harrison’s peppermint oil to his late wife’s brother, George Goodwin in Boston. In November 1855, Harrison wrote to Henry:

I recd your letter containing the draft two or three days since and am glad Goodwin is satisfied with the oil, for I took some extra care to get that which was good and pure. Lem[uel] and I are at Lewis now for a few days assisting him about husking out his corn. He has very good crop this year. Priscilla [their only sister, b. 1822] came out here some ten days since on a visit, will remain here some ten days longer. Her health is good, she is quite fleshy...Priscilla says she would like to see mother very much. That is the case with all of us. I suppose she will come out here in the spring. Please excuse bad writing for I have been husking corn so long that my fingers are like sticks.²³⁴

Henry visited Phelps, New York, and Allen, Michigan in 1856 with his children and

²³² Ibid. 1855-8-25HRtoABR.

²³³ Ibid. 1855-9-24LuciustoHSR.

²³⁴ Ironically, Harrison’s letters are among the most legible of all the brothers. Ibid. 1855-11-18HarrisonstoHSR.

his new wife, Ashfield resident Julia A. Bassett. In July, 1857, Lucius wrote Henry, “there is not a day passes but what I think of you and also think of what a fine visit we had together last fall.” As always, the letter begins with news of the family. “I suppose that you have heard that Harrison has a boy about three months old,” Lucius wrote. “Anson’s boy walks all over the house...I moved the house from across the road over near where you and I staked out, and I find it much better or handier rather, it also looks better.” Lucius continued, “Mother did not go out and Coldwater to see Mrs. Hathaway last fall, it did not seem to be convenient for her to go until she was afraid that Mrs. Hathaway was gone” [Mrs. Hathaway was their cousin Lucretia, Samuel Ranney’s daughter]. Lucius added a postscript, to his twelve-year old nephew and ten-year old niece. “Ralph can’t you take a basket of essences and take a trip out into Michigan and make a dime or two & see your kin, they would like to see you very much. Ella how can you manage to come out, try and study out some way can’t you. If you cannot don’t forget to write.”²³⁵

Although the Ranney letters were often filled with the details of the brothers’ business dealings, they were always primarily concerned with maintaining the close bonds of the family across the distances that separated them.

Lucius made another trip to Ashfield in late 1857. Returning home to Allen Michigan, he wrote Henry that he had stopped in Phelps on the way back and “I found Franklins folks well and Frank was making arrangements to move to Michigan in the spring.”²³⁶ However, with a national recession just beginning, Franklin changed his mind and ultimately spent the rest of his days in Phelps. The next letter Henry received was

²³⁵ Ibid. 1857-7-19LuciustoHSR.

²³⁶ Ibid. 1857-12-27LuciustoHSR.

from his brother Lemuel, who wrote at their brother Lucius's request "to inform you of their affliction. They have lost their little girl. Little Cally is dead. We buried her last Wednesday. She had the scarlet fever in its most malignant form...She suffered very much throughout her illness. It is a severe stroke on Lucius and Clarissa I assure you." In addition to the family tragedy, Lemuel filled his brother in on the local business climate. "The price of land has fallen 20 per cent since you were here last fall," he wrote. "How are the times down your way this winter? I hope not as tight as it is here."²³⁷ The Panic of 1857 began a recession that lasted two years and has been characterized as the first global recession. Many historians consider the widespread business failures in this period as the culmination of a trend that had begun two decades earlier, in the Panic of 1837. They describe a shift to a more impersonal style of business as "incremental movements in a long process of disentangling the claims of commerce from the claims of personal obligation."²³⁸ However, as we see from the activities of the Ranneys and as we will see in the business of the Hotchkiss brothers in Section Two, the abandonment of a "moral economy" of kinship networks in favor of impersonal "market ethic" was by no means immediate and universal.²³⁹

As his brothers in Michigan began to decrease their involvement with peppermint oil in the late 1850s, Henry cultivated other sources, again preferring to deal with

²³⁷ Ibid. 1858-2-9LemueltoHSR.

²³⁸ Christopher Clark has written extensively on this shift. The words are Naomi Lamoreaux's, quoted in *Social Change in America*, p. 119. Christopher Clark, *Social Change in America : From the Revolution through the Civil War*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

²³⁹ Clark said "The 'local' ethic valued the longer-term reciprocity between dealers embedded in a network of social connections; morality lay in accepting obligations and discharging them over time. The 'market' ethic emphasized quick payment and assumed a formal equality between individual dealers at the point of exchange." The Ranneys, and later the Hotchkisses, tried to remain in a system oriented towards long-term obligations and preference of some partners over others, by staying focused on the kinship network rather than the impersonal ethics of markets. As we will see in Section Two, this focus did not always lead to the best possible results. Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism*. 196.

relations and close friends whenever possible. In October 1858, Henry received a letter from Harrison Hawley Lawrence responding to an inquiry about the peppermint oil market in Michigan. Lawrence was related to the Ranneys through his wife.²⁴⁰ Lawrence wrote:

You wish to know the price of oil of peppermint. You say you would like to buy one or two hundred pounds of pure oil at a low figure. I have not got any oil on hand as I have just sold my crop of oil at two dollars per pound, but I know of good oil that can be had for 14/- per pound for the money. If you want old oil two years old I can get it for 13/- that I know is pure & free from weeds, for cash.²⁴¹ The most of the oil has gone forward from this place, but there is some small lots left yet of new oil. If you should make up your mind to buy one or two hundred pounds you had better send soon as there is not a great amount of new oil here, and I will get you a good article & fit it for transportation.²⁴²

Henry relayed Lawrence's information to his brother-in-law and former Boston partner, George Goodwin, adding a markup to cover his services as broker. Goodwin replied, "I have bought a lower figure than you mention. I sell considerable quantities of oil of peppermint to retail apothecaries in the country, but as I said I have been supplied at a

²⁴⁰ In a later letter, Lawrence mentions that his wife Mary has been away visiting and has stayed overnight with Harrison Ranney's family and seen Lucius and Lewis. Henry Ranney Papers. 1863-8-15HHLtoHSR.

²⁴¹ A note on currency: The Ranney correspondence of the mid-nineteenth century and the Hotchkiss correspondence we'll cover from the same period in Section Two frequently quote prices for peppermint oil in shillings rather than dollars and cents. Except during the inflationary Civil War years, the British Pound Sterling was worth between \$4.80 and \$4.90 throughout the nineteenth century. A British shilling was 1/20 of a pound, or, when exchanged for American currency, about 24 cents. However, this was not the way the Ranneys and Hotchkisses understood shillings. When early American merchants who were not involved in foreign exchange used shillings, they were referring to a tradition in which 1/- was worth 12.5 cents, or 1/8 (one "bit") of a Spanish Real. In this tradition, 14/- equals \$1.75. Oddly, in this alternate accounting, 20 shillings equals only \$2.50, or about half the actual value of a British Pound Sterling. *Emigration. Practical Advice to Emigrants: On All Points Connected with Their Comfort and Economy, from Making Choice of a Ship to Settling on and Cropping a Farm*. Earl Grey Pamphlets Collection (1834). p. 90.; "Notes and Queries," *American Journal of Numismatics, and Bulletin of the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society* 24, no. 2 (1889).

²⁴² Henry Ranney Papers. 1858-10-11HHLtoHSR.

lesser price, genuine and pure, and can purchase now at the same price.”²⁴³ Lawrence wrote again, a few days later, and reiterated, “If you should want, or your brother-in-law, 200 pounds of oil you had better send soon as there is but little here. I know of 300 pounds of good new oil that can be had for 14/- per pound for the money.”²⁴⁴ On October 29th, Henry wrote to Goodwin offering “100 lbs or more of pure, new, Oil Peppt, at \$2.00 per pound.” Henry offered his brother-in-law 90-day credit terms to sweeten the deal, and concluded “I am not urgent about making any sales, for I have not ordered any oil yet.”²⁴⁵ George accepted and in late November, Henry received another letter from Lawrence, stating that “I send by todays Express to G. C. Goodwin & Co. according to your order 100 lbs oil peppt of the first quality of new mint of this years raising. I have taken great pains in fitting it up for transportation.” Lawrence passed along news of some other peppermint oil deals Henry had inquired about, and concluded by mentioning, “I believe we intend paying your brothers in Hillsdale a visit in a short time.”²⁴⁶

In the following weeks, Goodwin in Boston wrote “Brother Henry” to say, “The oil of peppermint has been received and I think it is a first-rate article.”²⁴⁷ And Harrison Ranney wrote to update his brother on the family. “Mother is making 7 lbs butter per week from her cow this winter,” Harrison wrote. And “Lem is not doing anything this winter but thinks or talks of going to Pikes Peak in the spring. There is quite an

²⁴³ Ibid. 1858-10-22GCGtoHSR.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. 1858-10-25HHLtoHSR.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 1858-10-29HSRtoGCG.

²⁴⁶ This mention of a family visit to Hillsdale further supports my suspicion that Lawrence’s wife Mary and Harrison’s wife Helen were likely sisters. Although I have not been able to ascertain Mary’s maiden name, both women were born in New York and moved to Michigan as young girls. They were either sisters or close friends who had grown up together. Ibid. 1858-11-25HHLtoHSR.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. 1859-1-21GCGtoHSR.

excitement here about the Gold in Kansas.”²⁴⁸ Until statehood in 1861, the Kansas territory extended to the Rocky Mountains and included the Pikes Peak region that attracted over 100,000 “Fifty-Niner” prospectors. In March 1859, Lemuel and Anson Ranney set off for the gold-fields with three other local men. Anson rented out his farm and sent his wife and baby to stay with her parents.²⁴⁹

In the fall of 1859, Henry once again contacted H. H. Lawrence, to ask for 400 pounds of peppermint delivered at \$1.50 per pound. Lawrence responded that “Wells of Lyons is here at present. He is buying some and paying 12/- [\$1.50]. So you can see I cannot make enough at the offer you make to pay me for buying and fitting it for transportation.”²⁵⁰ Lawrence asked for a handling charge of \$2 per hundredweight, so he could make a small profit on the transaction. Henry agreed, and sold two hundred pounds of Lawrence’s peppermint oil to Goodwin for \$1.75, making \$46 profit on the deal, compared to \$4 for Lawrence.²⁵¹ The Ashfielder was clearly in the driver’s seat in these transactions, demonstrating the strength of the interstate network of friends and relations he controlled. But Henry Ranney’s interest in the peppermint oil business was decreasing. Although the deals he occasionally brokered yielded him good profits for very little effort, Phillip Wells and his associates the Hotchkiss brothers (who are the subject of Section Two) were already buying the bulk of the peppermint oil produced in Michigan. And unlike Wells and Hotchkiss, who were able to communicate between Michigan and New York by telegraph when necessary, Henry Ranney was limited to postal letters

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 1859-1-16HarrisontoHSR.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. 1859-4-10LuciustoHSR.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 1859-10-13HHLtoHSR.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 1859-10-31GCGtoHSR.

because the telegraph did not reach Ashfield until the 1890s.

In October 1860, Lawrence replied to Ranney's annual query, explaining that "the crop was not large on account of the drought, it has been very dry the latter part of the summer here. I raised 140 pounds of oil, which I sold a short time since for two dollars per pound. Messrs. Wells and Hotchkiss of Lyons New York has bought all the oil in the state. I do not know of a pound for sale. They paid two dollars per pound."²⁵² Henry used this information to close a transaction with his brother-in-law that had been left unresolved from the previous season. "A short time since I had advices from Michigan that Hotchkiss and Wells of Phelps and Lyons New York had purchased the whole of the oil of Michigan," Henry wrote for George Goodwin, "paying from \$2-\$2.50 for it, it is supposed, for the purpose of controlling the price...In relation to the oil sold by you," Henry concluded, "I leave it for you to make the proper account of sales, or if not convenient to do it in detail, then the net result."²⁵³ George replied apologetically, explaining that Henry's bill had been mislaid, and then sent Henry "our check for \$172.51 in payment for 93 pounds of peppermint at \$1.75 per pound and one years interest on the same at 6%. If this is entirely satisfactory to you we will call the account settled in full to date, if not we will try to make it so."²⁵⁴ The close personal relationship maintained by Ranney and Goodwin certainly facilitated the resolution of the outstanding issue. As we will see in Section Two, business dealings between people lacking such trust—even when related—were often much less amicable.

²⁵² Ibid. 1860-10-20HHLtoHSR.

²⁵³ Ibid. 1860-11-9HSRtoGCG.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 1860-11-21GCGtoHSR.; 1861-5-29GCGtoHSR.

Although Henry Ranney expended much less energy in his peppermint business than his rivals in western New York, his strong personal network allowed him to remain competitive. In 1861 Henry tried to get ahead of his competitors and contacted Lawrence over a month early, in late August. Lawrence replied, “I have 10 acres of new mint that looks the best of any I have seen. I think there will not be half the oil this fall there was last fall. Mr. Wells and Hotchkiss of Lyons New York is coming out soon with the intention of buying the whole crop.”²⁵⁵ Lawrence included a wholesale price list clipped from the August 21, 1861 *Western Chronicle* in Three Rivers, Michigan, that quoted “Peppermint Oil, 2 25 a2 50.” A few weeks later, Lawrence wrote again that he had distilled 218 pounds of peppermint oil from his 10 acres of new plants, which he would let go for 18/- [\$2.25]. “It is rather early yet to sell oil,” he wrote, “as most farmers are not stilling yet. But as you have dealt with me for some time past in the oil matter, I will offer as low as I dare.”²⁵⁶

Henry relayed Lawrence’s information to Goodwin, adding “I think my information is reliable, and as I know Hotchkiss and something of his circumstances and management, I think it likely that he and his partner may buy up pretty near the whole crop.”²⁵⁷ Goodwin replied that he would buy 100 pounds at \$2.50 or the full 218 at \$2.25. He mentioned the current price quoted in Boston was \$2.12 ½ per pound.²⁵⁸ The day he received Goodwin’s offer, Henry wrote to Lawrence with an offer. “My brother Frank at Phelps NY writes me that Hotchkiss is buying oil Pep there for \$1.75 per lb,” Henry

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 1861-9-2HHLtoHSR.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 1861-9-23HHLtoHSR.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 1861-9-7HSRtoGCG.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 1861-10-21GCGtoHSR.

wrote, “and is to allow the advance or rise in price, if any, ‘till the first of January.”

Henry told Lawrence that since they had been doing business with each other for several years, he preferred to continue dealing with friends and hoped they could settle a deal to their mutual advantage. H. H. Lawrence challenged Henry’s information from Phelps. He wrote, “you stated that Hotchkiss was buying oil pepp at 14/- [\$1.75] per lb. Oil cannot be had here for that price. Oil is held here at \$2.00 per lb now.”²⁵⁹ But Lawrence accepted Henry’s offer, and shipped his peppermint oil for 15/- [\$1.875] per pound, after receiving a “package of money” totaling \$410 in New England banknotes.²⁶⁰

While he was negotiating this transaction, Henry received a letter from his brother Lucius, who had been ill. “I was obliged to stop work entirely,” Lucius wrote. “Of course I had to commence doctoring and the more I doctored the worse I grew, and I tried a second doctor and the third and so on until I got so debilitated from the top of my head to the soul of my feet that I could not eat sleep nor rest in no shape.” In spite of his illness, Lucius reported that he had “just finished husking and digging potatoes. I had about 150 bushels of potatoes and about 1000 bushels ears corn. I had about 200 bushels wheat.”²⁶¹

One of the most remarkable features of the Ranney letters is the apparent obligation the brothers felt to stay in touch, even decades after they had all gone their separate ways. In spite of his illness, Lucius began this letter to Henry with an apology for not writing sooner that was typical of the brothers’ correspondence. “It is been so long since I have written to you that I am at a loss to know what to write first,” Lucius wrote.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 1861-11-11HHLtoHSR.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 1861-12-4HHLtoHSR.

²⁶¹ Ibid. 1861-11-17LuciustoHSR.

“It is been some two years since I have written to you, and on the other hand you cannot boast much of writing to me that time and for my part I feel ashamed that such a state of things should have occurred, but so it is.” There is no reason to believe the Ranneys were unique in this feeling: the archives are full of evidence of correspondence and visiting between extended families, friends, and even old neighbors from back east. Nineteenth-century Americans, at least in the Yankee West, were much more connected than history sometimes gives them credit for being. Perhaps we discount the connectedness of rural Americans in this period because, as Susan E. Gray has observed, the historiography of the Yankee migrations is complicated by the story they created for themselves “coeval” with settlement, and by “an interpretation that reigned from the 1890s to about 1950, to which the works of Frederick Jackson Turner are central.”²⁶²

The next peppermint harvest was affected by drought and also by war. Lawrence wrote to Henry Ranney in September 1862. He reported that “Of 14 acres I got but about 142 lbs oil and 4 acres of that was new mint. we are holding our oil at 22/- [\$2.75] per lb.” Three men from New York were in the fields, Lawrence wrote, “they offer 20/- [\$2.50] and the rise for oil,” but the farmers were holding out for a better offer. “The war is causing some excitement here,” Lawrence added. “Every young man has enlisted that is able to carry a musket. Drafting is soon expected here.”²⁶³ Henry offered Goodwin Lawrence’s oil at 25 shillings, or \$3.125 per pound. He explained that “The practice of those Yorkers (Hotchkiss &c.) is usually to offer or make a stipulated price, and grant the seller the advantage of the rise for a few months. They make such offers this year.”²⁶⁴

²⁶² Gray. 3.

²⁶³ Henry Ranney Papers. 1862-9-8HHLtoHSR.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 1862-9-13HSRtoGCG.

Goodwin dragged his feet, possibly hoping for a lower price. By the time he gave Henry his order a month later, Lawrence had sold his peppermint oil and reported there was none left for sale in the region.²⁶⁵

Henry contacted Lawrence early in the 1863 season and by the end of August, Goodwin had agreed “to engage about 200 lbs oil peppt.” This time, Goodwin wrote, “I am willing to pay the market price, but wish to secure it so that it should not this time slip through my fingers.”²⁶⁶ The following year, wartime inflation and drought combined to drive prices to levels that had not been seen since the early days of peppermint growing. “There is no established price,” H. H. Lawrence wrote in September 1864. “Those having any amount are holding at from \$8.00 to \$10 per lb. The crop is not $\frac{1}{4}$ of a yield to what we have formerly raised...I had but 120 lbs from 20 acres of land...I say to you if you want what I have, 120 lbs at \$6.00 per lb, you may have it.”²⁶⁷ Lawrence also wrote that he planned to hold his 500-bushel wheat harvest “until next Spring. If gold should advance much more, wheat will, which the prospects looks favorable for gold to advance still more yet.”²⁶⁸ Peppermint farmers were well aware of the risks and opportunities presented by inflation in the Civil War’s greenback economy, as we will see in greater detail in Section Two.

After the wartime price spike, Henry Ranney’s interest in the peppermint oil business waned. In 1867, Lawrence reported that oil was scarce because the crop had been winter-killed, and Henry bought just twenty pounds for Goodwin.²⁶⁹ The following

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 1862-10-22HHLtoHSR.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 1863-8-31GCGtoHSR.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 1864-9-16HHLtoHSR.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 1864-8-18HHLtoHSR.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. 1867-9-9HHLtoHSR.

September, Henry bought 200 pounds for \$3 per pound.²⁷⁰ Henry also heard from his son Ralph, who had survived his service in the 34th Massachusetts Regiment, and had taken up peddling.²⁷¹ Ralph wrote from Northfield, Vermont, while peddling up the Connecticut River Valley. "I can't think of anything that will impress one of the greatness of our country," Ralph wrote, "than to travel mile after mile by rail in a state like this and then look at the United States map and compare distances."²⁷² A few weeks later, Ralph wrote again to say, "A man was run over by the cars near the Depot at the crossing last night and his leg and arm cut off and otherwise badly mangled. He is yet alive. He was intoxicated at the time. Is now sober!"²⁷³

Henry Ranney effectively retired from the peppermint oil business when he was elected for a second time in 1868 to represent Ashfield in the Boston Legislature.²⁷⁴ George Goodwin approached Henry for more peppermint oil late in the 1868 season, and H. H. Lawrence responded to Henry's inquiry, "I am out of the business at present...I find I can get you two cans of oil 40 lbs at \$4.75."²⁷⁵ Although also



Figure 7: 1869 Henry S. Ranney photo for directory of the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

²⁷⁰ Ibid. 1868-9-10HHLtoHSR.

²⁷¹ Ibid. 1862-10-15HSRtoHHL.

²⁷² Ibid. 1868-9-13RalphtoHSR.

²⁷³ Ibid. 1868-10-4RalphtoHSR.

²⁷⁴ Ranney was elected to represent Ashfield in 1852 and 1868, "Death of Henry Ranney."

²⁷⁵ Henry Ranney Papers. 1868-10-25HHLtoHSR.

nearly out of the business, Henry brokered a final deal, selling Lawrence's oil to Goodwin for \$5.50 per pound.²⁷⁶

In August 1869, Lemuel Ranney wrote to Henry that, "We buried our mother a week ago today. She died on Saturday night August 7 at 11 o'clock, entirely conscious and able to talk up to the last moment...I suppose you know mother's age. It was 80 years three months and 27 days."²⁷⁷ Born in 1789, Achsah Sears Ranney saw remarkable changes in her lifetime. A pioneer settler of western New York, in later life she took advantage of the transportation revolution to travel regularly by rail between her children's homes in Massachusetts, New York, and Michigan. After her death, as the Ranney brothers aged their letters became less frequent and more filled with news of the deaths of family and friends. In 1877, Alonzo Franklin Ranney wrote to Henry from Phelps. "I think sometimes of selling my farm in order to get rid of so many tears and hard work," Alonzo wrote. "But just now it would be hard disposing of it except at a sacrifice." Alonzo invited his brother to come visit, reminding Henry, "It will be 20 years this fall since you are out here."²⁷⁸ In early 1881, Anson Ranney wrote,

Hoping you'll pardon me for my negligence in answering your very acceptable letter. I have sometimes thought that we would hardly know how many there were left of us, if we did not write each other and find out how many were living in how many dead...In regard to Lewis sickness and death he was not supposed to be dangerously sick but a few days before he died although his health had been poor for number of years...Last fall he was drawing a load of wood from his fields to the house and in loading the wood he fell from the wagon and hurt him quite bad which I think he never got over. It seemed to jar him all over and laid him up for some weeks...Sarah still lives on the place and Everett our boy is

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 1868-11-20HHLtoHSR, 1869-1-11GCGtoHSR.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. 1869-8-16LemueltoHSR.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. 1877-6-24AFRtoHSR.

going to work it this summer.²⁷⁹

Anson closed his letter by inviting Henry “and your wife to come out here to Mich on a visit. I would so much like to have you come and make us all a long visit. We ought to write each other oftener than we do.” Harrison Ranney wrote in 1885 from Clearwater, Minnesota, with news of cousins and old neighbors.²⁸⁰ In early 1886, Lemuel wrote, “I come to you with sad news. Brother Anson died last Wednesday after a short illness of one week... He says I intended to write to Henry today but I don’t feel able to and probably never shall again. I went up again on Tuesday morning and stayed with him until he died Wednesday about 11 o’clock.”²⁸¹ Lemuel also passed along information on the health of the surviving brothers and the death of their cousin, Samuel Ranney’s son Frederick. “I saw his son Frederick in Detroit about two months ago,” Lemuel wrote. “I also saw Charlie Hathaway [Lucretia’s husband] who is city inspector of buildings in Detroit.”

In 1893, Henry Ranney wrote a long letter to the editor of the Phelps Citizen, in answer to an inquiry regarding the peppermint oil business. Henry narrated the introduction of peppermint to Ashfield by Samuel Ranney, its transportation to Phelps by

²⁷⁹ Ibid. 1881-4-24Anson to HSR.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. 1885-9-8Harrison to HSR.

²⁸¹ Compared to other nineteenth-century family correspondence, the letters between the Ranney brothers are entirely devoid of religious references. Although some members of the family are remembered in local histories as belonging to churches (Lucius, for example, was a member of a Methodist Episcopal congregation where he was a church Steward), religion was never discussed, even in times of loss. The brothers retained their anti-slavery politics (Lucius is remembered as a lifelong Republican and Lyman wrote often from Tahlequah about his observations of slavery), but seem to have also retained some of the secular orientation of the prior Ranney generation. Alonzo Franklin Ranney may have been an exception: he was the only brother who spent his life in Phelps, in the evangelical “burned-over district” of western New York. But although there are references to Franklin in several letters, there are no letters written by him in the archive. *History of Hillsdale County, Michigan: With Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers*. (Salem, Mass.: Higginson Book Co., 2002), 871-2.; Henry Ranney Papers. 1886-3-28Lemuel to HSR.

Archibald Burnett, and the migrations of the Ranneys to Phelps. After over a thousand words, Henry remarked, "I find I have written more than I intended, but have been led on by personal interest with regard to the mint business, for in my youthful days I assisted my father in its cultivation and distillation, and later, during the 25 years that I was in the mercantile business. I manufactured and sold thousands of gallons of essences—mostly at wholesale rates in supplying peddlers."²⁸²

Henry Ranney died on January 23, 1899 at 81 years of age. Although he had been an abolitionist and a key figure in the essence peddling and peppermint oil businesses, the obituary in the local newspaper remembered Ranney primarily for the unprecedented fifty years he served as Ashfield's Town Clerk.²⁸³ Henry's two wives and five children all predeceased him, but four grandchildren and his brothers Alonzo Franklin in New York, Lemuel in Michigan, and Harrison in Minnesota survived him and carried the Ranney family legacy into the twentieth century.

The history of the Ranney family's involvement in the western expansion of the peppermint business illustrates the important role played by family networks in rural commerce. Although nineteenth-century economic changes tended to decrease the importance of personal loyalty and kinship networks, especially in cities, the close ties maintained by the Ranneys and their associates gave them a competitive advantage against rivals lacking these secure networks. In Section Two, we turn our attention to the Hotchkiss brothers, Hiram and Leman, who were the first Americans to declare themselves Peppermint Kings. Although their activities overlapped those of the Ranneys,

²⁸² Ibid. 1893-HSRtoPhelpsCitizen-PeppermintinPhelps.

²⁸³ "Death of Henry Ranney."

the Hotchkisses struggled throughout their careers with the limits of trust, with both strangers and with close family members.

CHAPTER 4

HOTCHKISS PRIZE MEDAL OILS

As discussed in Section One, the early history of the peppermint oil industry featured serial migration and the development of a strong family business network that gave Ashfield native Henry Ranney a competitive advantage relative to his rivals. The second part of the story overlaps significantly with the first, taking place primarily in New York and Michigan during the middle years of the nineteenth century. Like Ashfield's family-dominated peppermint business, the Hotchkiss enterprise was operated by two brothers and their families. However, unlike the Ranney operation, the Hotchkiss peppermint business involved a shift toward modern business practices that aligned with the Hotchkiss brothers' predilections for conflict and controversy. Although born and raised in rural western New York, the brothers operated an international business that included essential oil distilling, brokerage, branding, exporting, and banking—but also bickering, name-calling and quite a bit of litigation. Their story illustrates the difficult economic transition of the nineteenth century and suggests Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss viewed themselves not as peripheral players in a changing world of trade and finance dominated by New York City, but as formidable competitors at the center of their own commercial network.

Peppermint oil production in Western New York began in the 1810s following the introduction of peppermint roots by the peddler Archibald Burnett. By the time the Ranneys had begun settling in Phelps, many of their former neighbors were already living in the area, raising peppermint, distilling it, and shipping oil to Ashfield for the peddler

trade, and to Boston and New York City for use in medicines and cordials. But this is not the history remembered by contemporary western New Yorkers. A 1903 newspaper article, for example, described Hiram Hotchkiss as merely a small-time storekeeper in 1841 and included an account of Yankee peddler “Jim” Burnett dickering with Phelps farmers for their peppermint oil.²⁸⁴ The account became a key source for a charming but inaccurate article in *Yankee Magazine* in 1957, and is still typical of the error-filled storytelling perpetuated in commemorative celebrations such as Lyons’s annual “Peppermint Days” and interpretive materials at the H.G. Hotchkiss museum and the Museum of Wayne County History. Local accounts not only give Hotchkiss undue credit for developing the New York peppermint oil business, they understate his prominence in regional business *before* his entry into the essential oil trade. Local histories of Phelps and Lyons, New York (past and present) erroneously give credit to the Hotchkiss brothers as the “fathers” and first kings of the peppermint oil business. In fact, Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss originated little, but rather were important innovators who created one of America’s first globally-recognized brands and changed the way essential oils were marketed.

The Hotchkiss brothers were sons of a western New York merchant named Leman Hotchkiss and his wife Chloe Gilbert who had arrived in Phelps in 1811. Like the Ranneys, the Hotchkiss family was a widely-distributed clan whose first home in America had been in southern Connecticut, near New Haven. Leman Hotchkiss had moved to Phelps from Oneida Castle, about 85 miles to the east. Leman’s brothers William and Calvin had also migrated to western New York about the same time,

²⁸⁴ "Due to Yankee Shrewdness. Start of the Peppermint Crop That Has Given Wayne County \$20,000,000," *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, 1903.

becoming a Niagara County Judge and a wealthy landowner in Lewiston, near Niagara Falls. Twenty-six-year-old Leman opened a gristmill on Flint Creek that he named the Eagle Mill after seeing a bald eagle perch on its roof. The Eagle Mill prospered and Leman opened a general store that became the region's largest, reputedly doing over \$100,000 in annual business in the early 1810s.²⁸⁵

In 1816, Leman Hotchkiss opened a second store in Lyons, about ten miles north of Phelps. Leman opened a third store in nearby Newark in 1822, sending his twelve-year old son Hiram to work there as clerk while he trained his younger son, Leman Beecher, at the Phelps store. When the elder Leman died unexpectedly in 1826, his two sons took over the family businesses while their mother Chloe and their uncle William managed Leman's substantial estate. Chloe and William Hotchkiss retained control of the estate well into the 1830s, long after Hiram and Leman B. had reached majority. In January 1833, for example, the executors advertised a mortgage default sale of some Phelps properties contained in the estate. The Hotchkiss brothers probably received their first exposure to litigation and to trading in distressed assets, watching the ongoing administration of their father's complicated estate.²⁸⁶

The brothers learned their trade well. By 1829, eighteen-year old Hiram, his sixteen-year old brother Leman and their cousin William T. Hotchkiss, were partners in a general store and owned two mills in Phelps and a third mill in Seneca Falls. The combined capacity of the Hotchkiss mills was over 500 barrels of flour daily.²⁸⁷ The opening of the Erie Canal, completed in 1825, provided the Hotchkiss mills with a ready

²⁸⁵ Mabel E. Oaks, *Phelpstown Footprints*. (Phelps, NY: Phelps Historical Society, 1962). 54.

²⁸⁶ 1833 "Chloe Hotchkiss," Lyons NY *Western Argus*.

²⁸⁷ George W. Cowles, *Landmarks of Wayne County*. (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Company, 1895). 29.

market for flour in New York City. The Hotchkisses partnered with fellow western New Yorkers at the prominent Manhattan brokerage of Dows & Cary.

Ira B. Cary's first business had been making shingles on the banks of the Mohawk River during western New York's long winters and floating them to market in the city each spring. When New York's Governor, DeWitt Clinton, began constructing the Erie Canal, Cary and his partner John Dows immediately recognized the opportunity and became the first shipping firm to operate canal boats on the new waterway.²⁸⁸ Dows & Cary opened offices in Albany and New York, and ran fifteen boats on the canal by 1829.²⁸⁹

In the early 1830s, Dows & Cary was one of the leading flour commission merchants in New York. The firm sold flour shipped to them by merchant millers like the Hotchkisses, taking a commission on each transaction as well as charging fees for shipping and storage. As their business expanded, Dows & Cary also advanced money on inventories, charging interest, and discounted notes for their upstate clients. Discounting was a method of converting debt obligations to cash by selling promissory notes to financial institutions at a discount from their face value that reflected the interest. Discounting involved risk because the discounting firm was liable if the maker of the note defaulted. David Dows, John's younger brother, joined Dows & Cary in 1833 at age nineteen and became increasingly involved in managing the firm in the early 1840s during his brother's illness (John Dows died in 1844). As a young businessman of similar

²⁸⁸ James Emmitt and M. J. Carrigan, *Life and Reminiscences of Hon. James Emmitt as Revised by Himself*. (Chillicothe, OH: Peerless Print, 1888). 241.

²⁸⁹ Edwin Williams, *The New York Annual Register*. (New York: J. Leavitt, 1830). 129.

background, raised in Saratoga and apprenticed in Utica, and roughly the same age as the Hotchkiss brothers, David Dows was the firm's main contact with Hiram and Leman.²⁹⁰

By the mid-1830s, travel time from Buffalo to New York City had been halved from twenty days to ten. More importantly, freight costs fell by a factor of 20, from \$100 per ton to \$5. Over 150,000 tons of freight was shipped through the canal to Albany annually, including nearly three-quarter million barrels of flour.²⁹¹ Although the Hotchkiss brothers' shipments were a small part of this total, they were not insignificant. In December 1842, for example, David Dows wrote Hiram to acknowledge "receipt of your flour, 8442 barrels 948 half-barrels...amounting to \$3915.76."²⁹² Dows also warned the brothers that the company had already advanced Hotchkiss over \$10,000 on the season's flour shipments, and "it is quite certain we shall need some remittance and you may as well send at once say \$2,000." A week later, Dows wrote again to say he had sold 1388 barrels and 100 half-barrels of Hotchkiss flour for \$6,174.18." The proceeds would be applied against Dows & Cary's advances, but Dows noted that he still had over three thousand barrels on hand and "the demand is quite small generally."²⁹³

A year later, Dows wrote Hiram to warn him that his balance due had risen to \$32,840.44, and that "against this we have in hand unaccounted for 4993 barrels and 445 half barrels."²⁹⁴ Although at 1843? flour prices, the inventory held by Dows & Cary would easily cover the debt, David Dows's concern that the flour was unaccounted-for

²⁹⁰ *Harper's Weekly, a Journal of Civilization Collection - 1890* (1890). p. 283.; *Memorial. David Dows.* (Chicago: Rock Island Chicago and Co Pacific Rail Road, 1890). 9.

²⁹¹ U. P. Hedrick, *A History of Agriculture in the State of New York.* (Albany: New York State Agriculture Society, 1933). 248.

²⁹² Hotchkiss Letters: 1842-12-3DCtoHGH.

²⁹³ Ibid. 1842-12-10DCtoHGH.

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 1843-12-12DCtoHGH.

shows the seeds of a disagreement. Dows expected to have his advances repaid when the notes associated with them came due, typically in sixty days. Hotchkiss, on the other hand, felt no urgency; believing the value of the flour held in New York was adequate security to extend the debt. Hotchkiss expected to roll over his paper into new notes, adding interest and fees to the principal carried forward. After a few more months, Dows had sold off another 3,600 barrels worth nearly \$20,000 and the proceeds had paid down the outstanding balance.²⁹⁵ Although Hiram's perspective differed from Dows's, it was defensible for a product that sold quickly and at fairly consistent prices. If David Dows wanted his money faster, Hiram reasoned, all he had to do was sell the flour. As we will see, Hiram's assumptions regarding a ready market and stable prices were not so easily transferable to the peppermint oil business.

From Flour to Peppermint Oil

As merchants in Phelps in the 1820s, the Hotchkiss brothers were surely aware that families such as the Burnetts, the Vandermarks, and the Ranneys were all deeply involved in growing peppermint, distilling oil, and selling their output to merchants in Ashfield, Boston, and New York City. However, a publicity campaign begun by Hiram Hotchkiss and proudly carried on by his descendants after his death has distorted the facts to the point where newspapers, regional historians, museums, and even a published history of the peppermint oil industry incorporate the misinformation Hotchkiss had originally promulgated to boost his essential oil sales.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. 1844-3-21DCtoHGH.; 1844-4-26DCtoHGH.

According to the H.G. Hotchkiss Company's account, sometime in the 1830s, farmers began taking peppermint oil "with their wheat to the Hotchkiss store where Hiram accepted jugs-full in trade for goods. The supply grew until there were 1,200 pounds stashed in the store cellar."²⁹⁶ Hiram drove a wagon-load of oil down to New York City, says the story, only to discover that American oil was considered unmarketable—especially when compared to the premium oil produced in Mitcham, England. Undeterred, Hotchkiss "bottled some, shipped it to Hamburg and then waited." After a long wait, Hiram was informed that "His peppermint oil was declared by Hamburg authorities as the purest in the world." So, discovering "There were no large markets in America for the product," Hotchkiss decided to challenge the formidable international competition.

While the Hotchkiss account exaggerated the facts, there are some important elements of truth. Hiram's first international sale consisted of an unsolicited bulk shipment of peppermint oil to Hamburg, Germany, around 1839. The tale of this first shipment is told in several local histories and repeated in James E. Landing's compilation, *American Essence*. It is considered the beginning of the H.G. Hotchkiss Company, which dates its establishment from 1839 – although, as we will see, the changing nature of the Hotchkiss brothers' business and the ongoing, semi-secret partnership between Hiram and Leman makes setting precise dates problematic.²⁹⁷ Hiram shipped the oil in containers marked "Peppermint Oil from Wayne County, U.S.A. Guaranteed Pure by H. G. Hotchkiss." After waiting several months for a decision on the

²⁹⁶ H. G. Hotchkiss Essential Oil Co, *History of Hotchkiss Essential Oil of Peppermint*. (Lyons, N.Y.: The Company, 1980).

²⁹⁷ Landing, 27.

quality of their oil, the brothers received an acknowledgement that their shipment had been judged suitable for Hamburg customers. The notice included an order for more oil than Hiram had originally shipped. The Hamburg endorsement of Hotchkiss's oil was a turning point—the company dates its founding to this event, although various documents report the founding year as both 1838 and 1839. Hiram began moving his business from Phelps to Lyons in these years and began acquiring properties in foreclosure after the failure of the Bank of Lyons in 1842. In 1833, Hiram had married a Lyons resident, Mary Ashley, daughter of a physician who had migrated from Deerfield, Massachusetts around the turn of the century. They settled in a large estate known as the Hecox mansion in the center of Lyons, where they had twelve children.

Hiram's brother Leman Hotchkiss remained in Phelps, where he married Lucretia Oaks in 1844 and had three children before Lucretia's death in 1855. After losing his wife, Leman tried unsuccessfully to scale back his activities and to focus more on his own business and less on supporting his brother's. Leman and Hiram officially ended their partnership in the essential oils business in 1855, but their business interactions only became more complicated. The convoluted family-business dynamics of the Hotchkisses will be examined in detail in Chapter Six.

It is also true that there was not much opportunity for domestic sales of essential oils for the Hotchkiss brothers, until they found a market not dominated by their neighbors. Shipment of peppermint oil from Phelps to Massachusetts for the peddler trade was controlled by an earlier generation of men such as Roswell Ranney. Although Henry Ranney later stated he knew Hiram and his business practices, there is no evidence the Hotchkisses ever made any significant inroads into this older peppermint business.

Hiram and Leman did, however, take advantage of opportunities to buy oil from local farmers and ship it to New York City on the canal, along with their flour.

In an era before rolling mills and grain elevators (invented in 1842 in Buffalo by another Erie Canal shipper, Joseph Dart), flour from different sources was readily distinguishable on the basis of quality.²⁹⁸ But the standard for acceptable flour was easy to achieve and the processes employed were well-known. Unlike staples such as wheat and corn that required little post-harvest processing, peppermint was traditionally distilled on the farm, creating an opportunity to differentiate the end-product based on quality. The Hotchkiss brothers sought an advantage. They were looking for a product they could sell at premium prices. That product was peppermint oil, but it took the brothers several years to determine how selling oil differed from selling flour. Hiram and Leman's innovation was to build a brand name associated with consistency and quality. Although both brothers accumulated several hundred acres of land over the years and grew some peppermint of their own, most of the essential oil sold under Hotchkiss labels was grown and distilled by independent farmers, first in Western New York and later in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. The development of a Hotchkiss brand thus hinged on strict quality control and on effective marketing. The main focus of the Hotchkiss brothers' effort was a decades-long campaign to raise the prestige of their American peppermint oil in foreign markets.

Since peppermint's earliest days, British peppermint oil had always been considered vastly superior, commanding prices often three or four times greater than

²⁹⁸ William Cronon described the standardization and commodification of flour in the nineteenth century, and the corresponding decrease in the power of farmers relative to processors, in *Nature's Metropolis*. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

those received for American oils.²⁹⁹ Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss recognized that there was a substantial foreign market for peppermint oil that their American competitors had not tried yet to serve. British peppermint oil was considered the world's best, but its production was limited by the availability of farmland in the area surrounding Mitcham England. Demand was increasing both in Britain and on the continent. The brothers realized if they could convince foreign buyers Hotchkiss peppermint oil was comparable to British oil, they could sell their product in foreign markets at much higher prices and use the prestige derived from that success to command premium prices in America.

Throughout his career, Hiram Hotchkiss had an unfailing confidence in his unique personal capability to distinguish high quality peppermint oil. Hiram considered himself an infallible judge, easily able to spot oils tainted with weeds during distilling or deliberately adulterated afterwards. When he grew his own peppermint, Hiram paid crowds of farm workers to hoe his peppermint fields three or four times per season, to insure that at harvest there would be minimal contamination of the mint "hay." The difficulty Hiram often faced was convincing other people of his expertise, especially when this insistence frequently took the form of claiming that his own oil was obviously superior and that a rival's oil sold for less because it was old, of poor quality, or had been cut with turpentine. Although apothecaries and medicine manufacturers remained an important market for Hotchkiss oil, a rapidly-growing confectionary market offered the Hotchkisses their most significant opportunity. Mass-produced brand-name candies would not reach consumers for another half-century, but Americans were developing sweet teeth and small candy-making concerns operated in every city. Although Hiram

²⁹⁹ Landing, 61.

focused most of his energy on developing a distribution channel through commission agents and later exporters, confectioners were his target clientele. A 21-ounce bottle of peppermint oil, he announced, would flavor a thousand pounds of candy.

Sometimes Hotchkiss's own product did not meet the standards he claimed for it. In February 1843, for example, David Dows wrote Hiram acknowledging receipt of nine crates containing 53 cans of peppermint oil, valued at \$1916.63. Unfortunately, the oil had been contaminated with water which had rusted the inside of the containers and then frozen during shipment, bursting some of the cans.³⁰⁰ Luckily for Hotchkiss, occasional quality issues with the peppermint oil did not prevent Dows from doing business with the brothers, and in August 1843 the two companies entered a joint venture to operate a flour mill in Seneca Falls.³⁰¹ The soft demand for Hotchkiss's oil, however, did cause Dows & Cary to regard the product more skeptically than they did flour. In February 1844, David Dows wrote Hiram that "We have had a number of applications for HG&LBH oil but as yet none take hold."³⁰² Hotchkiss believed Dows & Cary did not push his oil as aggressively as they ought. For their part, Dows & Cary were frustrated that the oil, which Hotchkiss expected them to advance money on as readily as flour, languished in their warehouses. Later in the year, when the oil had been sold and Hotchkiss had shipped another batch, Dows reacted to Hiram's request to begin advertising his oil before they had received it, saying "It will not answer for us to advertise the oil till it arrives. It would be unpleasant to advertise an article and have a purchaser call and have

³⁰⁰ Hotchkiss Papers, 1843-2-22DCtoHGH.

³⁰¹ Ibid. 1843-8-8D&CContract.

³⁰² Ibid. 1844-2-8DCtoHGH.

to say to him we have not got it but expect to have this.”³⁰³ Hiram responded, “when the 21 boxes oil peppermint arrive containing 1820 5/16 pounds please advertise...that you have just received 89 cans of pure oil of peppermint from Ontario and Wayne County containing 1820 pounds and that the same will be warranted by you to be pure and unadulterated and that same is believed to be equal to the best English oil.” Hiram noted that he wanted Dows to try to sell the oil in a single lot because he suspected people buying oil in small parcels would be more likely to adulterate the product to “stretch” it.³⁰⁴ A few days later, Hiram wrote again:

We notice in the Journal of Commerce of the second instant and Express of the sixth instant the sale of 2500 pounds pure oil peppermint at \$2.63 1/2 per pound. This is no doubt the Wells lot and it was probably sold to Miller who no doubt will soon adulterate it, we believe our lot nearly the only lot Pure in your city. We want you to keep our lot of oil advertised till sold. We have seen but one paper in which it was advertised and that was the Journal of Commerce under date of the 26th instant. Advertise it in the Express, Tribune, Journal of Commerce. The style of the advertisement in the Journal of Commerce of the 26th instant suits us—only keep it before the people.³⁰⁵

Dows responded with a clipping of the advertisement he had placed, which unfortunately failed to bring any buyers.³⁰⁶ Three months later, Hiram wrote Dows again, remarking “our oil of peppermint does not seem to work off satisfactorily but is worth all we ask for it and why it does not sell is a mystery.”³⁰⁷ Dows responded “Miller says he sold his oil bought last fall without touching it. There appears to be no disposition on the part of any

³⁰³ Ibid. 1844-11-4DCtoHGH.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 1844-11-14HGHtoDC.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 1844-12-9HGHtoDC.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. 1844-12-16DCtoHGH.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 1845-3-14HGHtoDC.

of the oilmen to buy...we do not believe a sale could be made here at over 16 shillings [\$2.00].”³⁰⁸

Hiram’s patience with David Dows was beginning to fray. The day after he wrote Dows, Hotchkiss wrote to an exporter named George Morewood proposing a consignment deal to ship peppermint oil directly to Liverpool. “We are extensive dealers in the article and our object in making shipments to England would be to get the value (if possible) of a pure and unadulterated article, and if we could do so our shipments to England would be quite large, say about 5000 pounds annually,” Hiram wrote. He noted that American peppermint oil usually sold in England from 8/- to 12/- [\$1.00 to \$1.50], while British oil commanded at least 30/- [\$3.75]. “There can be no doubt in our minds,” he concluded, that a pure article of American oil is equal in value to the English. We would like to have your opinion in regard to this matter and whether your partners in England would be able to discriminate and get for a pure article its real value?”³⁰⁹ In May Morewood agreed to advance Hotchkiss \$342 for 120 bottles of peppermint oil which would be used as samples to attract customers in England.³¹⁰ Dows & Cary continued to insist “Nothing new in oil of peppermint, had no calls for it.”³¹¹ Several weeks later, David Dows reiterated his position, writing “We have had one applicant for oil since we wrote you, but he would not talk about it at your price and such has been the case with all that have applied.”³¹² But the Hotchkiss brothers were no longer Dows & Cary’s only

³⁰⁸ Ibid. 1845-3-19DCtoHGH.

³⁰⁹ Ibid. 1845-3-15HGHtoM.

³¹⁰ Ibid. 1845-5-25HGHtoDCOil.

³¹¹ Ibid. 1845-5-24DCtoHGH.

³¹² Ibid. 1845-7-3DCtoHGH.

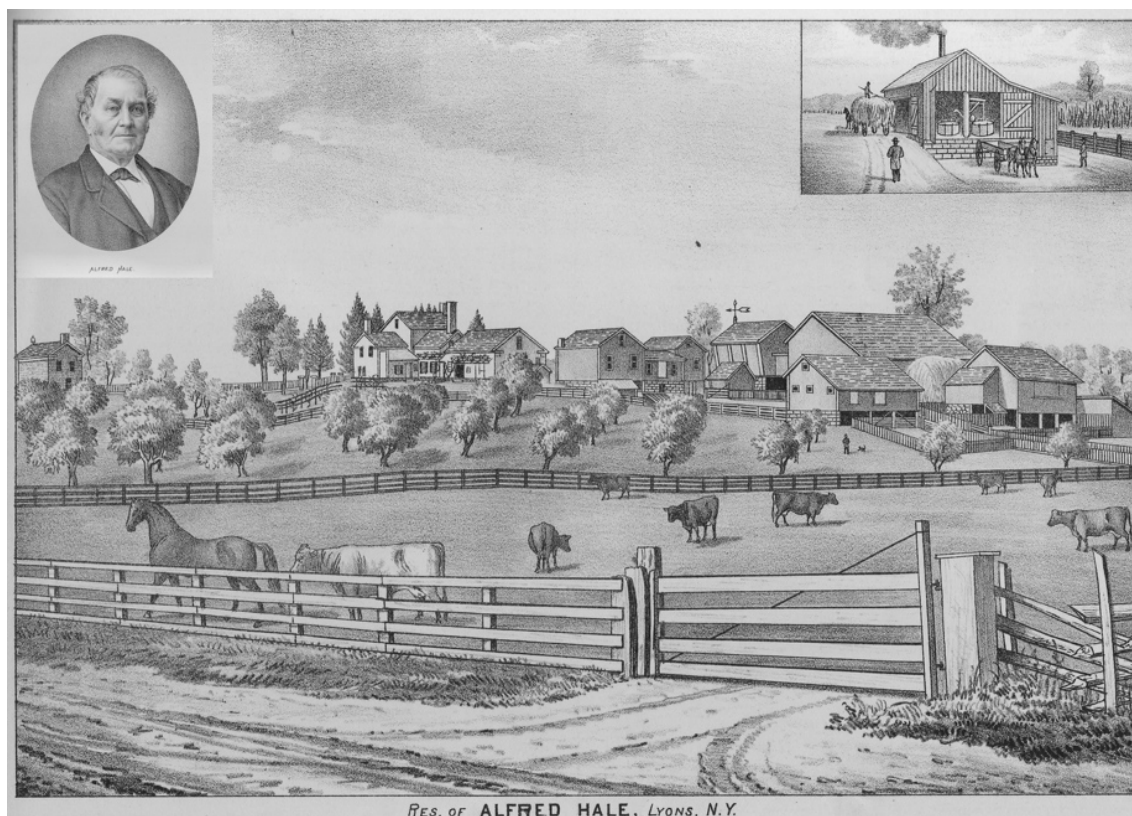


Figure 8: Residence of Alfred Hale with peppermint still in inset, from McIntosh & Everts's 1877 *History of Wayne County*.

contacts in the peppermint oil business. Leman wrote to Hiram in late summer 1845 that “Cary says he has just received a letter from a Gent in Michigan (White Pigeon) which says he shall during September have in about 6000 pounds oil of peppt & wants an advance of 8/- per pound.”³¹³ A few days later, Leman reported about “a sample of oil belonging to Hale which old Ranney took to David Dows and requested him to ascertain the most he could get for it.”³¹⁴ Alfred Hale was a peppermint farmer in Alloway, a village along the road between Phelps and Lyons. Although less famous than the Hotchkiss brothers, Hale and his sometime partner, banker William Parshall (whose son DeWitt married one of Hiram’s daughters), were also successful peppermint oil

³¹³ Ibid. 1845-9-4LBHtoHGH.

³¹⁴ Ibid. 1845-9-15LBHtoHGH.

merchants. The illustration of Alfred Hale's farm included in an 1877 *History of Wayne County* includes an inset showing workers loading mint hay into a still.³¹⁵

This was the last straw for Hotchkiss. Receiving a letter acknowledging the arrival of his samples in London, Hiram turned his attention to the problem of cracking the British market.³¹⁶ He immediately wrote Morewood to request "the best sample of English oil of peppermint they can procure in London... We wish to compare it with some we have on hand. We feel sanguine that we hold an article equal to the best English," Hiram insisted. He then added a postscript, soliciting his agents "to inquire of your friends in London whether we could in their opinion pack our oil *menth pip* in any more desirable size bottles or any better quality of bottles in our recent shipment for their market?"³¹⁷ Morewood responded that "a sample of the best peppermint oil grown here will be sent to you. It comes from Mitcham. The superiority arises from the soil we think. The cultivation has been attempted in other parts of England without the same success which attends at Mitcham."³¹⁸

Morewood also mentioned he did not think the bottles were an issue, but Hotchkiss held onto the idea that distinctive packaging would help him differentiate his oil. Although many histories of marketing tend to focus on the advertising of products to attract the attention of consumers, before a brand could be advertised, it had to be created. For example, when the sons of beverage merchant John Cadbury turned their focus exclusively to selling packaged cocoa in the early 1860s, they began creating a

³¹⁵ W. H. McIntosh, *History of Wayne County, New York; with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories*. (Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1877).

³¹⁶ Hotchkiss Papers. 1845-7-23MtoHGH.

³¹⁷ Ibid. 1845-7-28HGHtoM.

³¹⁸ Ibid. 1845-9-15MtoHGH.

recognizable brand. “Firms such as Cadbury...started packaging their products, not simply to protect them and preserve their quality, but also to *establish* their quality by the use of the company’s own name. Instead of leaving it to the retailer to determine which company’s products a customer would buy, they began to build their own relationship with the customer.”³¹⁹ Ultimately his focus on packaging led to Hotchkiss shipping his oil in 21-ounce cobalt blue bottles from the nearby Clyde Glass Works. The bottles, which each contained 1 pound 5 ounces of peppermint oil, had originally been designed for ink and had convenient fluted spouts. To guarantee his oil against the adulteration Hotchkiss always feared, he sealed his bottles with labels bearing his signature. In addition to his peppermint oil, Hotchkiss shipped 500 barrels of flour to Liverpool. The Irish famine was driving up the price of flour in England, and Hiram got \$5 per barrel for his shipment.³²⁰ In early winter, Leman wrote, “The Britannia arrived about 5 minutes before the cars left...there is great excitement in England and Ireland about wheat and flour and potatoes...Starvation seems inevitable. All excitement in England...therefore buy all the wheat you can...We have about 450 bbls in Lockville—get it shipped.”³²¹

In addition to handling the brothers’ flour exports, Morewood managed to sell the sample bottles of Hotchkiss peppermint oil for 17/- [\$2.125], which he informed Hiram was much better than the 7/- [\$.875] most other American oil sold for in London.³²² Hotchkiss continued negotiating with Morewood, pushing him to take shipments of a thousand pounds of oil packed in bottles and at the same time insisting on a price of at

³¹⁹ Mark Tungate, *Adland : A Global History of Advertising*. (Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2007). 9.

³²⁰ Hotchkiss Papers. 1845-10-23LBHtoHGH.; *The Northwestern Miller*. (Miller Publishing Company, 1882), 11.

³²¹ Ibid. 1845-11-23LBHtoHGH.

³²² Ibid. 1845-11-7MttoHGH.

least 16/- [\$2.00].³²³ Morewood countered that he could advance no more than \$1.50 per pound, and then only on the condition that Hotchkiss ceased shipping any additional oil to other British brokers.³²⁴ Morewood's dealers, he said, had been embarrassed to discover they were not the only source of Hotchkiss peppermint oil in their market. A few months later, Hotchkiss again asked Morewood to take a shipment of a thousand pounds of peppermint oil, and also asked Morewood to ship him a supply of the best Mitcham peppermint roots.³²⁵ Hotchkiss was planning on cornering the peppermint oil market, and wanted to plant only the best peppermint while everyone else was plowing under their old mint.

Hotchkiss planted the Mitcham roots he received, but there was not a widespread transition from the older peppermint (which had also originated in Mitcham) to the new. This may have been due to the facts that Hotchkiss immediately set about trying to reduce the overall planting of peppermint, and that Hiram and Leman were both reducing their focus on peppermint culture in favor of aggregating and marketing oil produced by others. Hiram and Leman both owned substantial acreages, and Hiram seems to have introduced the practice of flooding his peppermint fields in the winter to protect the roots from excessive cold.³²⁶ But by the mid-1840s, the brothers were more interested in cornering the oil market than in improving peppermint cultivation.

In the late 1845, Leman Hotchkiss had written his brother from Phelps with alarming reports of his conversations with "Old Ranney" about Roswell Ranney's recent

³²³ Ibid. 1846-9-26HGHtoM.

³²⁴ Ibid. 1846-10-1MtoHGH.

³²⁵ Ibid. 1847-1-18HGHtoM.

³²⁶ Landing. 45.

trips to Boston and New York City. Hiram was left suspecting that Ranney had been trying to corner the peppermint oil market, which led him to consider trying it himself. In 1846, peppermint farmers produced nearly 40,000 pounds of oil in western New York, and another 10,000 pounds in Michigan, 3,000 pounds in northeastern Ohio, and nearly 1,000 pounds in Indiana.³²⁷ Working with information from his British contacts, Hotchkiss estimated that the next year's demand in European markets would be about 12,000 pounds. In order to reduce the oversupply of American peppermint oil to a level where the Hotchkiss brothers could meet European demand at a reasonable profit, Hiram partnered with a New York brokerage called E.C. Patterson and Company, to pay Ohio, Michigan, and New York peppermint growers to plow under their fields.³²⁸ In one of the earliest recorded instances of market cornering, Patterson and his men contracted with 128 of the 210 peppermint farmers in New York, paying \$19,393.35 to take about 1000 acres out of production for two years beginning in March, 1847.³²⁹ Growers were allowed to keep only as many "seed" roots as they would need to replant after the contract expired, and they agreed to sell all their remaining oil to the partnership for \$2.50 per pound.³³⁰ By June, Patterson reported his agents had reduced New York and Michigan plantings substantially and "we have contracted for nearly the whole Ohio crop."³³¹ Although enough growers remained in New York and Michigan to meet domestic demand and peppermint oil production recovered quickly in those regions when the

³²⁷ Because peppermint requires long day-lengths to thrive, it is generally grown in latitudes with long summer photoperiods. Landing. 27, 181.

³²⁸ Ibid. 28.

³²⁹ Hotchkiss Papers. 1847-3-26HGHtoMreCorner.

³³⁰ Ibid. 1847ECPCContract.

³³¹ Ibid. 1847-6-15ECPtoHGH.

contract ended, most Ohio farmers never replanted, and by 1850 Ohio had ceased being a significant producer of peppermint.

Rumors of Hotchkiss and Patterson's activities began to circulate in England, and in midsummer Leman Hotchkiss wrote to his brother from New York City where he had met with Morewood. Rather than selling peppermint oil at current prices, the brothers wanted to hold it until scarcity drove up its value. "The price must advance to \$3 ½ to \$4 I think—perhaps to \$10," Leman wrote. The brothers decided to pay Morewood a fee of \$100 to hold their oil in inventory for an additional four months and to release it only after the conclusion of the next harvest.³³² But their control over the market was not as absolute as the brothers imagined. Hiram approached Stevens Trott and Company in Boston with an unsolicited sample of peppermint oil, which he assured them "will compare in quality to any ever sent to Boston." Hiram had gone on to boast, in the draft of his letter, that "we understand the article is mainly monopolized for about two years to come by a New York house," but he scratched out this section. He concluded, "if you could sell this lot say about 200 pounds at \$4 per pound...you may do so and we will forward the oil without delay...although we are inclined to think the article will go much higher before 1 January next."³³³ Stevens Trott replied that they had received Hotchkiss's sample and would show it to their largest buyer, but noted that "This article has receded in value as rapidly as it rose and would not bring above \$2.50 today."³³⁴ A couple of weeks later, Hiram received a telegram from Stevens Trott reporting that the buyer would take 100 pounds of oil for 28/- [\$3.50]. Hiram accepted the terms, remarking "We are

³³² Ibid. 1847-6-16LBHtoHGH.

³³³ Ibid. 1847-7-7HGHtoST.

³³⁴ Ibid. 1847-7-12STtoHGH.

inclined to think oil will go to 40/- per pound before 1 January next but we want to realize on part of ours immediately and we may be mistaken about its advancing so much.”³³⁵

E.C. Patterson continued to assure Hotchkiss that “The news from abroad are very favorable, considerable view having taken place in London, all is working right, it only requires time to carry the price very high, both there and here.”³³⁶ However, the Ranneys and their network were still very active at this time, both in New York and Michigan. This was the summer Henry Ranney received the letter from his cousin Frederick mentioned previously, looking for payment on a recent shipment of oil.³³⁷ And in the fall, Leman wrote to Hiram from Phelps that the Ranneys’ longtime associate “Mr. Belden [Belding] returned from New York today...I think he wants to buy some oil Pept...he seems to think 3 ½ is all that it is worth and said he would like to buy a few hundred pounds...I do not like the idea of selling to old Belden but still we must do so if we cannot get along for money we must have.”³³⁸ A few weeks later, Leman wrote from New York City:

I have been round to ascertain the present value pept oil and I can assure you that there is no price to this article, for instance you may call on a dealer and enquire the value of pept oil he will at once smile and enquire whether you wish to sell or buy...now the fact is I do not believe you could sell 1000# oil in this city at \$3 although I would not mention this to...anyone else but if you can sell our oil at 3 1/2 dont hesitate a moment...I called on Morewood today and told him to sell enough of our oil to pay his advances...I am very sorry we did not make an effort to sell Vanauken some oil before he purchased the Michigan...If Wells & Vanauken dont get stuck before they get through with pept oil then I am a Tea

³³⁵ Ibid. 1847-7-30HGHtoST.

³³⁶ Ibid. 1847-8-9ECPTtoHGH.

³³⁷ Ibid. 1847-8-28FTRtoHSR.

³³⁸ Ibid. 1847-9-9LBHtoHGH.

Pot, dont you hesitate at 3 1/2, Sell.

Leman concluded his letter with the suggestion, “Suppose you go & see old Belden it seems to me he would like 3 or 400 pounds.”³³⁹ By the end of the year, Leman announced, “Pept oil is very dull, everybody appears to be afraid of it. I think I shall ship 800# in Morewood’s hands and order it sold in London at once. My opinion is decidedly in favor of settling & not wait.”³⁴⁰

As more time passed, Hiram’s British agents began to lose confidence in his ability to limit the supply of peppermint oil and drive up the price. Hiram suggested to E.C. Patterson that the partners should make an arrangement “with some new house in the city of New York not now at all interested in oil of peppermint...and that holders agree to deposit all their pure oil and let this house advance in money or their credits to the extent of 12/- per pound...then have all sales made at a certain and fixed price.” Hotchkiss concluded, “We have all had so much trouble that it seems like a pity if nothing favorable should grow out of it. A concert of action would give tone and character to the market that would in my opinion be beneficial to all parties.”³⁴¹ Hiram was playing for time: this was the substantially the same deal he had already made with Morewood and the exporters were no longer receptive to his argument. “You cannot with any degree of fairness,” Morewood wrote, “ask us to hold the mint any longer under cash advances...When you consider the length of time we have been over advanced, the commission you are to pay is but little consideration. We therefore must settle a sufficient

³³⁹ Ibid. 1847-10-14LBHtoHGH.

³⁴⁰ Ibid. 1847-12-15LBHtoHGH.

³⁴¹ Ibid. 1848-2-11HGHtoECP.

quantity to cover our advances and if it will not bring \$3 we must sell it for less.”³⁴²

Hiram offered to repay \$1500 of the advances in exchange for the return of 750 pounds of oil in Morewood’s warehouse, and Morewood responded that he would take the money but would only return 600 pounds of oil.³⁴³ Morewood’s agent in London reported:

of your oil peppermint we have yet been unable to make any sales. It was put up at public sale last week in order to bring it before the trade, but not a single offer was made for it. After the sale...a party bid 12/- for the whole parcel, which however we did not accept upon what you had written to us. Regarding the probable sales for any further quantity which your friends Messrs Hotchkiss may be inclined to send over, it is really almost impossible to offer any opinion. There is a parcel at present time laying in the dock, in bottles and of similar quantity to ours, for which the holders sometime ago refused 14/-, but would now be pleased to her the offer renewed.³⁴⁴

Hotchkiss responded to Morewood, holding out for higher prices and claiming that the current low price of peppermint oil was actually deliberate; that he and his partners “intend to keep the oil market depressed till after setting time is over for the reason that should the market at this time be at a high figure it might induce the growers to break their contracts with peppermint company not to grow any this year.”³⁴⁵ Morewood was not taken in. He wrote, “The price at which you are willing to sell (\$3 per pound) cannot be realized...pure oil is now offered at \$2 cash.” He concluded, “We have in our opinion done all which can reasonably be expected from us by holding it for so long a time

³⁴² Ibid. 1848-2-15MtoHGH.

³⁴³ Ibid. 1848-3-3-MtoHGH.

³⁴⁴ Ibid. 1848-3-20MtoHGH.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. 1848-3-27HGHtoM.

against cash advance, and had you followed our advice you would have sold it when we could have got \$4 ½ for it.”³⁴⁶

Hotchkiss’s domestic sales were also suffering. John Bement, the Ashfield native who supplied Henry Ranney with essence vials for his peddlers, wrote from Philadelphia, “I find by making a little inquiry about oil that I cannot sell any at the price you ask.” Bement reported that Mr. Miller, the dealer Hotchkiss had accused of adulterating oil, “does not wish to do much in the article at present.” Although he had “called on two or three of my old drug friends, I thought it would rather injure the sale of what you have with Mr. Miller for me to be running about offering oil all over the city.”³⁴⁷ Hiram tried contacting other exporters, but was informed they were aware he was already consigning peppermint oil to dealers in London and that “I do not think you will ever obtain two thirds the price for English oil for any to be made. You have the best name now and I have no doubt you will keep it, but although we think your oil to be very good, it does not appear that any great difference in price will be given and I much fear the only principle use for your finest oil would be to mix with our Mitcham.”³⁴⁸ One of his new contacts sent a sample of Mitcham peppermint oil and asked Hotchkiss to enter it into the American Congress in 1850.³⁴⁹ Although Hiram declined to enter the sample in the exposition, he was inspired to send his own oil to the upcoming Great Exhibition at London’s Crystal Palace. Hotchkiss’s success at the first world’s fair was a turning point

³⁴⁶ Ibid. 1848-3-31MtoHGH.

³⁴⁷ Ibid. 1848-6-3BementtoHGH.

³⁴⁸ Ibid. 1851-3-21AMtoHGH.

³⁴⁹ Ibid. 1850-7-19AMtoHGH.

for his operation and an opportunity for Hiram to focus more exclusively on his essential oil business.

Prize Medal Oil

London's *Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations* ran from May through October 1851. The event that became known as the first world's fair was attended by six million visitors and over 14,000 exhibitors from 27 countries. Among the stars of the American delegation to the Crystal Palace were Borden's Meat Biscuit, Dick's Anti-Friction Press, Bond & Son's Astronomical Instruments, Goodyear's India Rubber, and McCormick's Reaper, which each won a prestigious Council Award. Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss's peppermint oil was among the 519 products entered from the United States and won one of the 102 Prize Medals awarded to Americans out of a total of 2,987 awarded.³⁵⁰ A bronze medal with portraits of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert was accompanied by a certificate signed by the Prince which still hangs in the lobby of Hiram Hotchkiss's former headquarters in Lyons, New York.

The Hotchkiss brothers entered their peppermint oil and also kiln-dried cornmeal from their Eagle Mill with the help of their friend Benjamin P. Johnson, the secretary of the New York State Agricultural Society who had been appointed by the Governor to attend the exhibition.³⁵¹ Johnson's influence on the judges helped secure a prize medal for the peppermint oil which was the first of many. The Hotchkiss brothers benefited from the publicity surrounding the award, and began to call their product "International

³⁵⁰ Ursula Lehmkuhl and Gustav Schmidt, *From Enmity to Friendship : Anglo-American Relations in the 19th and 20th Century*. (Augsburg: Wissner-Verlag, 2005). 31, 48.

³⁵¹ Hotchkiss Papers. 1851-7-2HGHtoAM.

Prize Medal Oil of Peppermint.” Sales increased, and the Hotchkisses took advantage of every opportunity to show their essential oils, receiving additional awards at shows in New York (1851), Paris (1855, 1873), London (1862), Hamburg (1863, 1868), Paris (1867), Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876), and Chicago’s World Columbian Exposition (1893). In his 1862 *Report on International Exhibition of Industry and Art*, Commissioner B.P. Johnson observed that following Hotchkiss’s 1851 London award, “large sales of his oils are made in England and on the continent.”³⁵²

While some scholars claim commodity branding is a product of modern capitalist markets and especially of multinationals and their marketing minions who’ve become today’s global “brand bullies,” others have traced “a complex system of commodity branding—applied to such goods as rice, tea, wine, scissors, and medicines—[that] had existed in late imperial China, where it can be traced back to the the Song dynasty of the 10th century.”³⁵³ Branding can thus be considered a bridge from the “anonymity of mass consumption” to the creation of “labels that attach (often highly imaginative) biographies to otherwise indistinguishable goods and packaging.”

Another critique, focusing on the “exclusively modern character of branding and its transformative effects in postindustrial societies,” implicate branded commodities “in the decline of modes of subjectivity based on kinship, class relations, and caste.” This perspective, associated with postmodernists such as Barthes, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Baudrillard, charges that branding is “a form of cultural alchemy specific to capitalist modernity...tying consumers to the exploitative conditions” of the market.” This

³⁵² B.P. Johnson, *Report on International Exhibition of Industry and Art, London, 1862*. (London: C. Van Benthuyssen, 1863). 30.

³⁵³ Citing Gary Hamilton and Chi-kong Lai in *The Social Economy of Consumption*.; Andrew Bevan and D. Wengrow, “Cultures of Commodity Branding,” (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016). 12-14.

perspective has been largely adopted, even (ironically) by marketers and scholars of marketing, where it is often “enthusiastically incorporated into professional brand-speak” as a blueprint for best practices.

However, the Hotchkiss brothers’ campaign to brand their products was one of the first such efforts in American history, during a period when the earlier subjective modes the postmodernists cite were still dominant. Studies of ancient branding draw a critical distinction between bazaar economies, where products are “unbranded and ungraded,” and brand economies, where goods are “standardized, strictly graded, and directly substitutable for one another.”³⁵⁴ The market the Hotchkisses operated in was beginning a very slow transformation from the bazaar to the brand. The key issue for an early brander like Hotchkiss was to raise the perception of his product *out of* the bazaar. Hotchkiss aspired to leave his generic American competitors behind, and make his peppermint oil the sole substitute for the undisputed leader, English oil from Mitcham.

Although Hiram Hotchkiss remained deeply concerned with defending his essential oils’ content and reputation as the purest, highest quality products available, after 1851 a greater part of his effort went toward branding and packaging. Hotchkiss wanted his products to be immediately recognizable as superior to their generic competitors. Hiram spent a great deal of time and money developing elaborately engraved labels for his bottles that reproduced the images of his prize medals. Innovative marketers like Hotchkiss were beginning to register a few specific names and labels with the Patent Office in the 1870s, years before U.S. trademark laws passed in 1881 and the nation’s first major brands such as Coca-Cola (1887) and Quaker (1895) began to appear,

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 22.

In an era before the widespread use of trademarked names and logos, Hotchkiss was a pioneer. Years later, another agricultural prize winner became a household name: the Washburn-Crosby Company in Minneapolis branded Gold Medal Flour after it won gold, silver, and bronze medals at the 1880 Miller's International Exposition in Cincinnati. When the Washburn company was merged into General Mills in 1928, the brand was retained and remains a staple on supermarket shelves. Although Hotchkiss never managed to achieve price parity with English peppermint oil, his higher profile enabled him to increase the distance between his own prices and those of less-well-known American oils. By the end of 1855, Hotchkiss peppermint oil was being quoted in England using English currency. Hiram's peppermint oil was selling for 24/ to 26/ sterling (\$5.76 to \$6.24), which although still less than the 36/ to 45/ (\$8.64 to \$10.80) received at the time for Mitcham oil, was a great improvement.³⁵⁵

Although professional advertising and especially the creation of registered brands and trade-marked slogans became more significant elements of national culture after the Civil War, American newspapers had been carrying advertisements, including the ads for peppermint oil mentioned earlier, since before the American Revolution. Patent medicines were among the earliest products extensively advertised in print, and their outrageous claims alienated many consumers and damaged the credibility of advertisers in general.³⁵⁶ Essences like those sold by Ranney's and Bement's peddlers had not needed elaborate labels, since the peddler was always there in person to make the sales

³⁵⁵ Hotchkiss Papers.1855-12-27HGHtoTC.; Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola: The Definitive History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).; "A Look Back on 150 Years," History of General Mills, <https://history.generalmills.com/the-story.html>

³⁵⁶ James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires; a Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961).

pitch. Hotchkiss's challenge to create the perception that his was a premium product without making ridiculous assertions customers would immediately reject.

Third-party endorsements offered an opportunity for advertisers to print positive statements about their products without losing credibility. Hotchkiss was not selling his products directly to household consumers, but rather through dealers to druggists and confectioners. So instead of running advertisements in newspapers, he printed pamphlets he could send to potential customers and use as packaging for his oils. Among the first was a pamphlet advertising "Hotchkiss' Prize Medal Oil of Peppermint, Spearmint, and Wintergreen." The pamphlet was dominated by an engraved image of the two faces of the medal awarded to the Hotchkisses for their peppermint oil in 1851, followed by an excerpt from a letter written by B.P. Johnson, New York's Commissioner for the exhibition. Johnson wrote that he had "called the attention of the Jury to your Oil of Peppermint," and assured his reader that "the attention which it has received from persons interested in the trade is evidence of its value, and I have no doubt you will find a ready market for it here."³⁵⁷ The letter was reprinted in German, French, and Spanish. The reverse side of the pamphlet included letters from the U.S. Commissioner to the exhibition and from President Millard Fillmore congratulating the Hotchkisses on their medal, along with a list of the names of the jurors. These letters were also printed in four languages. Hotchkiss mailed pamphlets like this one to dealers and potential customers, and used them as wrappers when packing his bottles into cases. However, the most important part of this promotional literature was the Hotchkiss product label itself.

³⁵⁷ Hotchkiss papers. 1851CertAd.



Figure 9: Signed label used to seal the cork of H.G. Hotchkiss peppermint bottle. From H.G. Hotchkiss collection, Cornell University, photo by author.

Hotchkiss had labels for his bottles engraved and printed by the American Bank Note Company. The labels included a main wrap-around label and a special sealing label that would be signed by Hotchkiss and glued over the cork. Hotchkiss

redesigned these labels every time his oils won another award. Cultural historians have suggested that advertising and packaging create a link between distant, impersonal manufacturers and consumers. “Wrapping gifts, tying bows, and attaching greetings,” one historian notes, “works to overcome a contradiction between the generic qualities of (modern) branded products and the social requirements of ceremonial exchange in contemporary American households.”³⁵⁸ While advertising is now understood by cultural critics, advertisers, and even to some degree by the public itself as an attempt to imbue market exchange with personal significance and even identity formation, it is important to remember that when the Hotchkiss brothers created their first labels, they were pioneers in uncharted territory.³⁵⁹ By creating a sealed product that the user would have to open, Hiram Hotchkiss allowed his customers to participate in creating a heightened significance for his products.

³⁵⁸ James Carrier, “The Rituals of Christmas Giving.” Daniel Miller, *Unwrapping Christmas*. (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993). 55 ff.

³⁵⁹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance : A Cultural History of Advertising in America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994).



Figure 10: Label for H.G. Hotchkiss peppermint oil bottle, H.G. Hotchkiss collection, Cornell University, photo by author.

By the 1870s, the main label for the 21-ounce bottle included the images of twenty medals. Leman Hotchkiss, after splitting his essential oil business from his brother's, continued using images of the awards "H.G. & L.B. Hotchkiss" had received together and added facsimiles of the additional awards he won on his own. Leman may have been involved in the design of the distinctive Hotchkiss packaging, but he was not the only other essential oil producer to adopt these techniques. While Hiram Hotchkiss's extreme attention to the details of his labels might have been expected to insure that his packaging would have been unique, the result was actually the opposite. Not only did Leman Hotchkiss emulate the style of labeling and pamphlets used during the earlier partnership, but many Hotchkiss competitors such as Hale & Parshall locally and A. M. Todd in Michigan began showing their products at expositions, winning prizes, and printing images of the awards on their labels. And at least once, counterfeiters apparently went to the trouble of reproducing Hiram's labels to sell peppermint oil disguised as a Hotchkiss product.

In July 1857, Hiram Hotchkiss published a pamphlet titled “CAUTION,” reprinting a letter from a Belfast Ireland dealer who wrote that after purchasing “in London some Cases of your Oil Mint, we were led by low quotations to change the place from which we got it, and have been supplied by an article that has been returned to us by our customers, as of inferior quality.” The dealer included labels from the returned bottles in his letter, which Hotchkiss sent to his engraver. “The Counterfeits are so closely imitated as to deceive any one,” the engraver reported, “rendering careful comparison with the original necessary, and a practiced eye, to detect the difference.” Among the subtle differences were the volume of the bottles, which were printed “21oz.” on the forgery where the original had been left blank so the volume could be handwritten, and a lithographed signature where the original had been handwritten. Hotchkiss followed these letters with a notice admonishing dealers and customers to pay close attention to the labels on bottles offered by dealers, and suggesting that when in doubt they were welcome to contact him and buy directly from his “Peppermint Oil Depot” in Lyons, New York.³⁶⁰

In spite of Hiram’s clarification, confusion lingered in the minds of Hotchkiss’s oil customers. The issue, however, was not counterfeiting but the ongoing presence of two Hotchkiss essential oil companies competing for the same dealers and customers. As Leman Hotchkiss explained in a warning pamphlet he printed in 1876, “The co-partnership formerly existing between H.G & L.B. Hotchkiss was dissolved in the year 1855. Please be particular and observe that each case is *wire corded*, and sealed with *red sealing wax*, and my seal affixed thereto.” Leman went on to state that since the

³⁶⁰ Hotchkiss Papers. 1857WarningLabel.

separation, L.B. Hotchkiss “has always been awarded the prize medal whenever his brands of Oils came in competition with any other brands, either in Europe or America.” Leman urged “dealers and consumers to pay special attention to the ‘signed’ and other labels and wrappers appended to each bottle...and to intrust the execution of orders only to honest men, or address them directly to me at the European and American Prize Medal Oil Depot, located at Phelps, Ontario County, New York, U.S. America.”³⁶¹ Leman repeated his warning in German, French, and Spanish for international customers. Although as Hiram had done years earlier, he claimed to have discovered “bottles with spurious labels counterfeiting his own, and filled with inferior oil,” Leman did not give a detailed explanation. It is unclear whether Leman’s warning was really about counterfeiting, or rather about the increasingly acrimonious competition he was carrying on with his brother Hiram, to which we will return in Chapter Six.

³⁶¹ Ibid. 1876Warning.

CHAPTER 5

HOTCHKISS PEPPERMINT BANK

The history of banking and business finance is a specialized sub-discipline, and the histories produced are often heavily freighted with equations and economic analysis. Insights shared in the sub-discipline rarely find their way into mainstream histories and are understood only with difficulty by a public accustomed to living in an era of a single, national currency and federally insured banking. The field has been saddled with many one-sided historical arguments, often for use in justifying new financial innovations. Greenbacks, the demonetization of silver in 1873, and the resumption of specie payments in 1879, for example, were hotly debated by historians during the financial panic of 1907 and the establishment of the Federal Reserve.³⁶² In particular, the reactions of rural people to the elimination of state banking during the Civil War have most frequently been recounted from an urban perspective, using urban sources such as national newspapers, legislative debates, and the literature of trade lobbyists.³⁶³ By contrast, the experience of

³⁶² Historical arguments mobilized to support political positions regarding a Federal Reserve included: Horace White, *An Elastic Currency*, "George Smith's Money" in *the Early Northwest an Address to the American Bankers' Association at Chicago, October 19, 1893*.; Wesley C. Mitchell, "The Value of the 'Greenbacks' During the Civil War," *The Journal of Political Economy* 6, no. 2 (1898).; Knox, *A History of Banking in the United States*.; Mitchell, *A History of the Greenbacks, with Special Reference to the Economic Consequences of Their Issue: 1862-65*.; J. P. Huston, "The Use of Credit Currency by Country Banks," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 36, no. 3 (1910).; J. Laurence Laughlin, "Banknotes and Lending Power," *The Journal of Political Economy* 18, no. 10 (1910).; Willford I. King, "Circulating Credit: Its Nature and Relation to the Public Welfare," *The American Economic Review* 10, no. 4 (1920).

³⁶³ See, for example, the account of Civil War financial legislation in the third chapter of Heather Cox Richardson's 1997 book, in which the historian is either unaware of or unconcerned with the overwhelmingly urban focus of her account and sources. Heather Cox Richardson, *The Greatest Nation of the Earth : Republican Economic Policies During the Civil War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Hotchkiss family members in nineteenth-century upstate New York illuminates some of the attitudes of rural people toward money, credit, and banking.

The Hotchkiss brothers, Hiram and Leman, began their lives as the apprentices and heirs to a wealthy upstate New York merchant. Early in their careers, the Hotchkisses became successful merchants and millers in their own right. By the early 1840s, they operated several stores and mills, and had developed a business shipping flour to New York City for urban consumption and export. The addition of peppermint oil to the brothers' businesses, and Hotchkiss oil's success in foreign markets, gave Hiram and Leman an opportunity to dominate a specialty market that was small relative to the flour market, but potentially highly profitable. However, as we have discussed, the vagaries of supply and demand for peppermint oil made it less attractive for traditional commission brokers such as early Hotchkiss partner Dows & Cary. In order to succeed as essential oil producers, the Hotchkiss brothers needed to secure financing flexible enough to accommodate the new business they were creating. When city commodities brokers and local bankers proved less amenable to their demands than they hoped, the Hotchkiss brothers stepped into the financial markets themselves and explored new ways to finance their operations.

As prominent businessmen in Phelps and Lyons, Hiram and Leman were members of a regional elite. Hiram married Mary Ashley, a physician's daughter, and Leman married Lucretia Oaks, the daughter of wealthy landowner Jonathan Oaks. As mentioned earlier, Hiram, Leman, and their uncle William Hotchkiss had all traveled to Michigan to purchase land in the spring of 1837, within weeks of Samuel Ranney's visit to the land office. The Hotchkisses had no intention of moving to the frontier, however.

Their investments were purely speculative, as were many of their land purchases in western New York. The brothers had watched their mother and uncle manage their father's estate in the 1820s and 1830s, and had become very familiar with the idea of buying foreclosures and distressed assets when opportunities arose.

The Hotchkiss brothers received valuable experience in the evolving financial sector when the Bank of Lyons failed on September 13, 1842. The bank had a paid-in capital of \$200,000 and a circulating currency of \$100,000, according to newspaper reports.³⁶⁴ It was one of ten New York banks established under the 1829 Safety Fund Act to fail in the years following the Panic of 1837. The bank had been incorporated by an act of the legislature in February 1832 and was profitable for several years, paying an 8% dividend to its shareholders in May 1838 in spite of a deepening recession.³⁶⁵ Early in 1842, the bank vigorously denied reports of its difficulties, but by the end of the year a state-appointed receiver was auctioning bank property.³⁶⁶ Using their close connections with the bank's directors, the Hotchkiss brothers determined that the bank's actual assets were \$307,323.40 and its liabilities \$692,173.75.³⁶⁷ The bank owned \$83,999.94 in real estate and had issued \$389,204 in bank notes. The Hotchkisses were able to make a four-page list of the debts on the bank's books, which totaled \$222,737.25. Hiram wrote to the state-appointed receiver, offering \$500 for real estate valued at roughly \$80,000 on the bank's books, slated to be sold the following month at auction.³⁶⁸ One of the properties he acquired was the Hecox mansion and farm, which became the Hotchkiss family estate

³⁶⁴ *Utica Daily Gazette*, 2/3/1843.; *Schenectady Cabinet*, 9/20/1842.

³⁶⁵ *Auburn Cayuga Republican*, 2/15/1832.; *Lyons Western Argus*, 5/9/1838.

³⁶⁶ *Lyons Western Argus*, 4/6/1842.

³⁶⁷ Hotchkiss papers. 1842-12-18BankAssets, 1.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 1843-9-14BankFailure.

in Lyons. Hiram also bought a portfolio of debts and judgments, which he tried to collect. Hotchkiss paid \$560.56 for a debt portfolio worth \$173,216.57, or about a third of a penny on the dollar.³⁶⁹ Over the next several years, Hotchkiss wrote letters like this one to a lawyer for a family who had owed the bank money:

I purchased at the receivers sale a judgment...docketed May 4th 1840 for \$712.34. I was a large Stock Holder in said bank at the time of its failure, & am in hopes to get a part pay on my stock by purchasing some of the assets of the bank, that is the reason of my purchasing said judgment. I understand from your letter that these gentlemen have all taken the Bankrupt Law. I supposed they had when I made the purchase, but I am one of those who believe the Bankrupt Law will be declared unconstitutional. But however I am willing to take for said judgment 2/- on the dollar if they see fit to pay it to me between now & 1st day of November next. Amount & Int up to Oct. 5th 1843----\$882.70. Say pay ¼ for it ----\$220.67. Yours very Respy. H.G Hotchkiss.³⁷⁰

There are several blank “waste books” in the Hotchkiss archives, filled with Hiram’s handwritten notes describing conversations with and letters to debtors over the years. Collecting on debts and judgments, for Hiram, became a process of negotiation in which Hotchkiss usually offered to take a fraction of the original debt as settlement, in return for ceasing to dun the debtor or his representatives. In several cases, Hotchkiss pursued the heirs of the original debtors and attempted to convince them to pay their father’s obligations.³⁷¹ The experience seems to have taught Hiram that, in contrast to the moralistic approach to credit taken by contemporaries such as Lewis Tappan, financial obligations were negotiable.³⁷² Although Hotchkiss mentioned in the letter above he

³⁶⁹ Ibid. 1843ReceiverSale.

³⁷⁰ Ibid. 1843-10-12HGHtoDreBankFailure.

³⁷¹ Ibid. 1844-6-14HGHtoMorrison.

³⁷² Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism*. 215 ff.

expected the 1841 bankruptcy law to be overturned (it was, at the end of 1843), and as a lifelong Democrat he had probably opposed the Whig-sponsored act, Hiram's behavior suggests that he had little respect for the "application of moral principles to business" that led to the establishment of the Tappan—later called R.G. Dun—agency that would impugn his character throughout his later decades.³⁷³

Family Finance

Early in their efforts to raise operating capital, the Hotchkiss brothers enlisted the help of their uncle, Calvin Hotchkiss. A brother of their father Leman, Calvin owned a large farm and invested in real estate around Lewiston, near Niagara Falls. In spring, 1845, Leman wrote to his brother regarding notes Hiram was trying to get discounted with the help of Calvin's endorsement, "I shall be very surprised if you fail to raise the money with such an endorser as Calvin Hotchkiss," Leman averred. "Certainly no man would refuse to discount such paper if he knew the man."³⁷⁴

It is important to note that even in the early nineteenth century, most commerce was conducted using credit. Early bank historian James S. Gibbons (1810-1892) explained in 1858 that "Commerce, in its broadest sense, is carried on by promissory notes."³⁷⁵ According to Gibbons, the use of promissory notes at every step in the cycle of the production, distribution, and consumption was orders of magnitude greater than the volume suggested by the discounting of commercial paper by banks. Gibbons wrote that "New York City banks did not discount paper until it was within two or three months of

³⁷³ Ibid.; R.G. Dun credit reports.

³⁷⁴ Hotchkiss papers. 1845-4-28LBHtoHGH.

³⁷⁵ Quoted in Hammond. 699.

maturity.” But most merchandise, whether agricultural or manufactured, “is sold from first hands to the jobber on a credit of eight months, more or less, for which the latter gives his promissory notes. The jobber sells in smaller quantities (by the piece or single package) to the retailer, on a credit of six months.” Historian Bray Hammond explained that “Most traders of all classes were heavy borrowers, few having capital enough to pay till paid; and this condition supplied the banks with promissory notes... These promissory notes were commercial currency ... and had commonly been transferred already by endorsement from one merchant to another in settlement of debts by the time they came into the bank’s possession.”³⁷⁶

“The market,” Gibbons had concluded, “carries millions of notes for what is already consumed and millions more for what is not yet sprouted in the furrow.”

Although Bray Hammond qualified Gibbons’ description, noting that in smaller markets such as Philadelphia it had been customary since the 1830s to discount paper at four to six months, most commercial activities were transacted without the aid of banks until the final stage, when debts that had been carried the better part of the year using commercial paper were finally converted to cash. This final conversion to cash was necessary because the products that had been grown or manufactured and had entered the distribution channel were finally reaching their ultimate retail destinations, where they would be sold to consumers for banknotes or coins.

Leman and Hiram Hotchkiss spent a great deal of their time traveling from bank to bank in western New York trying to raise money for their business. They had accounts at over a dozen banks ranging from local operations in Phelps, Lyons, Geneva, Newark,

³⁷⁶ Ibid. 700.

and Lewiston, to large institutions in Buffalo, Albany, and New York City. As the years passed, much of the responsibility for raising money fell to Leman. In the summer of 1845, Leman sent his brother a packet containing \$1660.31 in cash, which he said were the proceeds of a draft drawn on the “Seneca County Bank at 4 months predicated upon our recpt for 2200 bushels wheat at Newark.”³⁷⁷ Leman warned Hiram to try to keep the cash from reaching the Bank of Geneva, “because Cook may think we are skimming.” The brothers were operating at a larger scale than some local bankers found comfortable, but there was also already a degree of distrust between some of the more conservative bankers and the Hotchkisses. Leman concluded his note by saying he had tried to get yet another banker, Mr. Mercer, to discount \$3,000 at ten days or at six months, but had been refused the longer duration note. In the late fall, Leman sent Hiram \$500, which he said was “all I can possibly spare today. You must be aware,” Leman continued, “that we are about out of funds. I drew our draft yesterday at 10 days through the Seneca Co. Bank to pay our note...I also drew our draft yesterday through Bank of Geneva for \$2250 at 4 months on our recpt of 1831# Peppt Oil which is all we have except the old oil. It is impossible to get our note discounted at this time. You must hold onto all the money you can.”³⁷⁸ A week later, Leman wrote again to warn Hiram, “I went to Bank of Geneva yesterday and made out to get our draft discounted for \$3300 at 6 months. Mr. Cook hesitated some and said this would carry us through...Cook evidently does not want us to have any more—even on shorter paper I think.”³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Hotchkiss papers. 1845-10-24LBHtoHGH.

³⁷⁸ Ibid. 1845-11-7LBHtoHGH.

³⁷⁹ Ibid. 1845-11-15LBHtoHGH.

As time passed, the brothers developed a division of labor in their partnership, in which Hiram negotiated with farmers and New York merchants while Leman handled the financing. The archive is filled with hundreds of letters between the brothers regarding Leman's efforts to raise funds to support Hiram's deals. When the brothers tried to end their partnership and separate their businesses in 1855 (unsuccessfully, as we will see in the next chapter), Hiram was forced to seek other financial partners. His first choice was his uncle, Calvin Hotchkiss. In late 1855, Hiram wrote to his uncle, promising to be "as moderate as I can in respect to money calls as requested." Hiram assured Calvin, "When once you get acquainted with the Superior Mercantile & Banking houses with whom my drafts (predicated on actual shipments of property) are drawn on, I think you will be pleased with doing my Banking business & I am now (at the prospect of you doing it) as happy as a Lark."³⁸⁰

Although by 1855 Hiram was doing a substantial business in peppermint oil, he described his operation to his uncle in the more familiar and comfortable terms of mercantile banking. Historian Horace White, in an essay describing George Smith, a Chicago-based contemporary of the Hotchkisses, illustrated the typical situation of a buyer of agricultural products raising operating funds. The buyer "makes his note at the bank and offers for discount a draft...secured by a bill of lading. The bank discounts his paper and the amount is immediately credited to him as a deposit, and will be drawn mostly in the form of bank notes to be disbursed among the farmers."³⁸¹ In White's illustration, "each deposit is a discount," and White notes that it is an efficient way to

³⁸⁰ Ibid. 1855-11-24HGHtoCH.

³⁸¹ Writing in 1893, White was using the example of George Smith's money to argue for an elastic currency not controlled by the government. White. 4.

expand the money supply as needed because “as this is what the bank exists for and derives its income from, it will, in ordinary times, discount all of such paper that is offered to it by its regular customers.” This arrangement worked fairly well in the early stages of Hotchkiss’s career. The merchant (Hotchkiss) in White’s example would receive credit from his “correspondent” (Dows & Cary) when customers bought his flour. Customers’ cash payments in New York City would be used to offset the drafts Hotchkiss had written to draw on Dows & Cary at western New York banks. As we saw earlier, David Dows and Hiram Hotchkiss differed on how long Dows was willing to wait for his ultimate reimbursement. Dows preferred to have Hotchkiss pay his notes when they matured, usually in sixty days. Hotchkiss believed the flour in Dows & Cary’s warehouse was David Dows’s responsibility. It was up to Dows to turn that flour into cash to repay the note Hotchkiss had written. There was a certain logic to the argument, from Hotchkiss’s perspective. And in any case, Hotchkiss would have long since spent the money he had drawn at the Lyons banks, paying local farmers for the wheat he had ground into flour and shipped to New York in the first place.

From Hotchkiss’s perspective, he had monetized the flour. Once his barrels were on flatboats bound for the city (fully insured against accidents along the way), the transaction was complete in Hiram’s mind. He could turn his attention to the next wagonload of wheat arriving at his mills. Hotchkiss considered himself Rumpelstiltskin in this story, spinning western New York’s harvests into gold from straw. This is also an accurate depiction of how Calvin and Leman Hotchkiss operated on behalf of Hiram. The difficulty arose for them, and especially for Hiram when he became a banker himself, and

the chain of payments broke because the product Hiram was monetizing failed to become cash as automatically as flour.

Calvin Hotchkiss was less than impressed with Hiram's claims, and responded a couple of days after receiving his nephew's effusive letter:

You appear to rush ahead as if my funds was inexhaustible. I would simply inquire the necessity of crowding every thing to such a pitch as formerly, in the flour business. You say you have this oil business under your control, if so, why the necessity of pressing it to the greatest extent. It only goes to show you want to get rich at once. It is an old proverb, light comes, light goes...your over anxiety has tendency to keep up the price at home & lessen it abroad.³⁸²

Calvin concluded by calling Hiram's attention to a protested note enclosed with the letter.

"Two or three protests of the same kind," he wrote, "& how would your drafts stand in Buffalo, about (X No. 24) instead of (A No. 1)."

A few weeks later, another of Hiram's 45-day drafts for \$2000 was returned for non-payment, and the protest was sent to Calvin who had endorsed the paper.³⁸³ Hiram turned once again to his brother for help, but Leman responded. "I cannot get the note discounted to pay your note...it is no use to attempt continually of renewing paper—the only way is to pay up and then get fresh discounts. Now send the note to Buffalo & get discounted," Leman concluded, "and pay your note and not rely on me to meet your paper for I cannot do it."³⁸⁴ Calvin wrote to Leman about the issue, reminding his nephew, "Above all other things, endorsed paper ought to be attended to in time, not to

³⁸² Hotchkiss papers. 1855-11-27CHtoHGH.

³⁸³ Ibid. 1856-1-2TBtoCH.

³⁸⁴ Ibid. 1856-1-8LBHtoHGH.

be neglected a day. It operates against my feelings to be subjected to this annoyance for bestowing favors, but it appears Hiram feels rather indifferent to such matters of late.”³⁸⁵

Although Hiram may have learned from his experience collecting defaulted loans and foreclosed properties that debts were fluid and negotiable, his opinion was not shared by his uncle, his brother, or most of the local bankers he looked to for credit.

When money failed to flow as wide and fast as he desired from local banks, Hiram decided he would be better off doing their business himself. And in spite of Calvin’s expression of frustration at Hiram’s lack of attention to the details of his business, Hiram asked his uncle to be a principal in his new bank. Hiram believed he could avoid the difficulties he continually had with local bankers by opening his own Peppermint Bank. He asked Calvin to lend his name and reputation to the new venture—and also to lend him \$50,000 in government bonds Hiram would need to deposit with the state regulator. Calvin responded, “I have only to say that I have so many objections to make on this subject that I have not time to enumerate them all at this time.” Calvin’s



Figure 11: H.G. Hotchkiss Peppermint Bank \$1 banknote, H.G. Hotchkiss collection, Cornell University, photo by author.

main objection was that he wanted nothing to do with Hiram’s bank.

“Did you think it would please me to be named President,” Calvin asked. “If you did you are greatly mistaken. Such type of Butterflys does not take a deep root in my mind.”³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Ibid. 1856-1-14CHtoLBH.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. 1856-1-28CHtoHGH.

Free banking, the dominant regulatory system for antebellum banks, has taken too much of the blame for economic instability before the Civil War.³⁸⁷ Free banking refers to the ability of banks to be established without legislative charters, but does not imply that the banks were allowed to print money indiscriminately. Bankers were required to deposit government bonds with the state banking authority to back all the banknotes they issued. This allowed banks to hold fractional reserves, issuing notes in greater quantities than their reserves of specie, but still maintain a level of security in case of default. Through issuing banknotes and taking deposits, “American banks relied for their profit on the creation of purchasing power (the creation of credit).”³⁸⁸ New York’s 1838 Free Banking Act imposed a \$100,000 minimum capital requirement, later reduced to \$50,000. Early banks secured their circulating notes with government bonds. The banknotes were printed by the state comptroller’s office, which retained possession of the printing plates. Later banks were allowed to secure half their note issues with real estate mortgages, which gave them more flexibility but also made them more susceptible to market conditions. By the end of 1859, New York had “274 free banks with an aggregate paid-in capital of \$100.6 million [that] secured their note issues with \$26.5 million in bonds and \$7.6 million in mortgages.”³⁸⁹

Free Banks were highly leveraged, and it should have been easy for Hotchkiss to make money. Hiram deposited \$50,000 in bonds (borrowed from his uncle Calvin) and received \$40,000 in circulating banknotes, which differed from promissory notes in that they were of small denominations (\$1, \$3, \$5, etc.) and carried no interest. Hiram used

³⁸⁷ Rockoff.

³⁸⁸ Fritz Redlich, "On the Origin of Created Deposits in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," *The Business History Review* 43, no. 2 (1969). 204.

³⁸⁹ Bodenhorn, *State Banking in Early America*. 192.

\$10,000 to buy specie to cover note redemptions, leaving \$40,000 to lend. If Hotchkiss had made loans in the local market, the proceeds of these loans would have been used to pay for purchases and labor, ultimately finding their way back into the bank in the form of deposits. The banknotes would have reentered the market in the form of new loans, and the bank's assets would have grown (loans were counted as assets, banknotes and equity as liabilities on bank balance sheets). This was the type of banking Leman Hotchkiss and his son Thaddeus did very successfully, years later, in Phelps. Hiram, however, used his Peppermint Bank primarily as a payment arm of his essential oil business. Rather than loaning his notes into the local market, Hiram spent them in western New York and in Michigan to pay for oil. In effect, he loaned all his funds to himself.

Recently, monetary historians Charles M. Kahn and William Roberds have observed that currently "By value, most marketplace transactions in the United States are not paid for with government-issued currency or coin, but with privately-issued payments media" such as "checks drawn on bank deposits...credit and debit cards."³⁹⁰ The authors suggest that transacting business without cash was equally common in the past, and that historically the easy transferability of payments made in the form of drafts or promissory notes reduced "the incentive for monitoring by the original debtholders." In addition to state-supplied currency, Hiram Hotchkiss used engraved promissory notes to pay for his oil purchases. They looked like Hotchkiss's banknotes, but provided spaces into which Hotchkiss could enter amounts, like checks. Hotchkiss often sent packets of these notes, written in \$25 denominations, to his agents in Michigan to be used for paying peppermint

³⁹⁰ Charles M. Kahn and William Roberds, "Demandable Debts as a Means of Payment: Banknotes Versus Checks," *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking* 31, no. 302 (1999), 500-501.

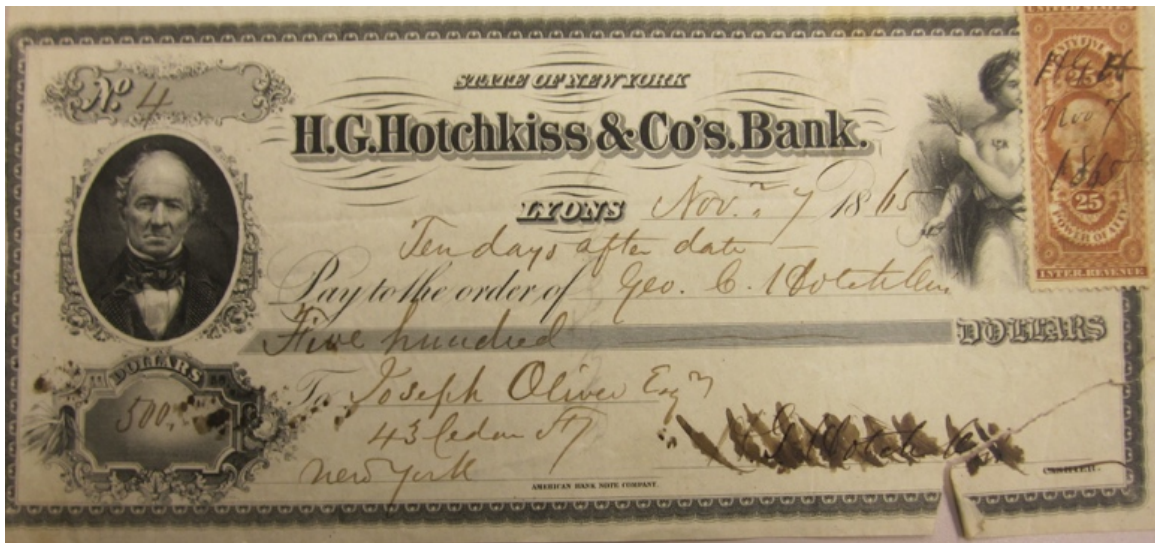


Figure 12: H.G. Hotchkiss engraved note, with Calvin Hotchkiss image.

farmers for oil. He intended that both the denominated banknotes and the engraved promissory “checks” would be considered as cash and used by farmers to transact their business, rather than being returned immediately to Lyons for conversion into specie. Hotchkiss regularly urged his agents to get the notes “a good circulation,” hoping that the notes would be used as currency in Michigan for a long while rather than being immediately returned to Hotchkiss in New York for redemption.³⁹¹ The circulation of currency frequently ended when banknotes were returned to the issuing bank for redemption into coin. However, gold coins were not the most convenient form of money for trading at a distance, since they were heavy and bulky and would need to be carried to distant cities in order to be spent on items that couldn’t be obtained in the local market. So when Michigan farmers sent Hotchkiss’s notes back to New York for redemption, the notes were often converted into drafts that could be presented to other bankers or merchants in places such as New York City where the farmers might want to spend their money. When Michigan residents or western New Yorkers wanted to buy products in

³⁹¹ Hotchkiss papers. 1860-9-5HGHtoPCW.

New York City, credit or banknotes could be redeemed for drafts on city merchants or banks that could be used to purchase goods or exchanged for cash in the city. The local banker collected a fee for facilitating this exchange, and was then able to put the banknotes back into circulation immediately in the local market—or, in Hotchkiss’s case, send the notes out to Michigan again.

Bank money (defined as circulation plus deposits minus the notes of other banks) in New York grew from \$4.62 per capita in 1830, to \$9.35 in 1840, \$20.73 in 1850, and \$33.95 in 1860.³⁹² The money held by Michigan banks, however, peaked in 1840 at \$2.36 per capita and then declined. Michigan residents may have been less active than New Yorkers economically, but they were also using money from eastern banks instead of their own. Similarly, while bank credit (defined as loans and discounts plus bills of exchange) in New York increased from \$6.61 per capita in 1830 to \$21.73 in 1840, \$30.88 in 1850, and \$51.63 in 1860, like bank money credit peaked in Michigan in 1840 at \$10.14 per capita before falling precipitously. Although Michigan had, like New York, instituted free banking in the 1830s, by the 1850s and 1860s the state’s banks were becoming less relevant as more Michigan residents became dependent on not only currency, but on credit and exchange services of eastern banks. Also, a great deal of western money found its way into the vaults of New York City banks where it was held as interest-earning bankers’ balances to facilitate the settlement of commercial transactions in the city. These balances were the source of highly profitable “call loans” that New York banks made to brokers on the Stock Market, making “the deposits of rural

³⁹² Bodenhorn, *A History of Banking in Antebellum America*. 62-4.

organizations in New York City banks...the major source of profits for New York bankers.”³⁹³

A couple of months after declining to join Hiram’s new banking venture, Calvin wrote his nephew again to complain at being asked by the Sheriff to pay for a judgment against the brothers on an unpaid note. “So you see what I have been subjected to in consequence of your inattention to this business,” Calvin wrote, noting that the charges and interest that had accumulated on the note since its due date probably amounted to more than \$100. “A man who suffers his endorsers to be sued & executions issued,” Calvin concluded, “is something I did not calculate on when I endorsed your note. Such a man as will do this is deserving of no credit.”³⁹⁴ Soon after, Leman wrote again to Hiram, that he had “recd the \$1300 note this morning and I observe a protest attached to it. This is mortifying to me and causes me a good deal of trouble and I have got to spend my time now in writing an explanation to Uncle Calvin. It is just as easy,” Leman advised, “to be a little ahead as a little behind if you will get accustomed to it. I fear you will never be a good Peppt Banker.”³⁹⁵

In mid-1856, Hiram wrote to Abraham Bell and Sons, a New York City merchant to whom he had been consigning flour and peppermint oil, and who he had hoped to use as his “banker” in the city. Hiram complained, “It appears I have entirely misunderstood my arrangement with you. I supposed I was at liberty to draw any amount under \$2000 if my business required...by leaving with you as collateral security my brothers paper

³⁹³ Richardson. 73.

³⁹⁴ Hotchkiss papers. 1856-3-14CHtoHGH.

³⁹⁵ Ibid. 1856-4-10LBHtoHGH.

endorsed by Calvin Hotchkiss, but it appears otherwise.”³⁹⁶ The Quaker merchant

politely explained to Hiram:

The arrangement for keeping of thy account was based on accepting thy drafts (expected to remain out two or three months) drawn against cash or business paper (of which we now hold none) in our hands. Such drafts to thee considered cash when accepted and the interest not to be charged till drafts were paid. But as soon after opening the account, thee changed the mode of drawing, and we could not be expected to loan thee thy account funds at 5% interest, we have since kept thy account to the usual way debiting and crediting all money received and paid for thy account and charging thee 1% on all time collections advising thee when overdrawn.³⁹⁷

Hiram turned once again to his brother for support, and despite commenting “I think you will make a hell of a banker if you don’t know when your notes fall due,” Leman sent him a \$2000 note to forward to Bell. Hiram wrote to Bell, “I herewith hand you LB Hotchkiss note at four months for \$2000, endorsed by myself and Calvin Hotchkiss Esquire of Lewiston.” Hiram challenged Bell to verify Calvin’s credit with officials of the Marine Bank and the Hollister Bank in Buffalo, assuring Bell, “you will find Mr. Calvin Hotchkiss is worth several hundred thousand dollars and entirely free from debt. The note you can rely upon it will be promptly met at maturity.” Hiram assured Bell that Leman would pay the note when it matured and that Calvin’s assets backed Leman’s promise. He asked Bell to send him “\$1500 in country currency per express, and balance please place to my credit.”³⁹⁸ Bell returned the note to Hotchkiss, noting “We are not at present discounting and therefore return Leman B Hotchkiss note \$2000 which we have

³⁹⁶ Ibid. 1856-5-20HGHto ABS.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 1856-5-22ABStoHGH.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. 1856-5-24HGHtoABS.

no doubt is very good.”³⁹⁹ As Gibbons described antebellum banking, “The second common function of banks about 1857—the purchase and sale of exchange in the form of bills drawn for the sale of goods—combined the transfer of funds with lending...Dealing in exchange fetched the banks a fee or discount for the service as well as interest on the credit advanced.”⁴⁰⁰ Bell & Sons were willing to extend credit to facilitate deals in New York City, but they did not wish to be Hotchkiss’s bankers. Interregional Exchange, which had begun in international trade and had spread in the domestic market as westward conquest of native peoples increased the distances involved in commerce, involved not only the lending of money, but its transportation from one city to another. Before the era of telegraphs and trains, the expenses and risks involved in moving money between distant cities had been substantial; even as technology made these transfers easier, the associated fees decreased only slowly. The final major function of banks before the Civil War was “the purchase and sale of domestic exchange in the form of bank notes, checks, or drafts.” Dealing in local exchange “involved an enormous and continuous volume of small domestic transactions, whereas exchange in the form of bills involved fewer but larger ones, to a considerable extent seasonal and either foreign or inter-regional.”

Gibbons concluded that “The bulk of these dealings were in bank notes, which were bought, sold, or sent back to the issuing banks to be redeemed.”⁴⁰¹ To review, the four main functions of antebellum banks, in order of importance and profitability, were: 1) discounting promissory notes; 2) Interregional exchange; 3) local exchange; and 4)

³⁹⁹ Ibid. 1856-5-26ABStoHGH.

⁴⁰⁰ Hammond. 700.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. 702.

lending money in the form of deposit credit. Technological change and legislation during the Civil War eliminated the first three of these functions, leaving the fourth as the remaining “essential function of banks.” To clarify this final function, bank historian Hammond noted “It is perhaps advisable to repeat that though bank deposits originate mostly in lending, most depositors are not borrowers but receive the money they deposit from others who are; they receive it in payment of wages, salaries, and purchases.”⁴⁰² While this description may seem counterintuitive to those of us among the traditional class of bank depositors, Hammond’s description represents an important insight which Hotchkiss understood: ultimately, all money is debt. Another way of expressing this is through the relationship between bank deposits and circulation, and the specie that backed them. In 1859, for example, Michigan bank deposits and circulating banknotes totaled \$887,671 with the support of only \$42,018 in specie (4.73%). Even in New York state, with its financial center in the city and its conservative regulations requiring government bond deposits for note issue, \$138,973,788 in deposits and currency were backed by only \$28,335,984 in specie (20.39%).⁴⁰³ The relationship of bank assets to money in circulation is very complicated, and confusion surrounding its history is exacerbated by the changing public understanding of money resulting from the United States government’s creation of greenbacks during the Civil War and by political battles that raged throughout the balance of the nineteenth century over a return to a specie standard. It is important, as we review national changes such as Civil War monetary policy and the return to a gold standard in 1879, to consider the effect of systemic

⁴⁰² Ibid. 704.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. 716.

changes on the attitudes and actions of self-interested rural businessmen such as Hiram Hotchkiss.

Hotchkiss's Peppermint Bank and its rival

As noted earlier, for a number of reasons the price of peppermint oil varied much more than the price of flour. Supply factors such as the amount of peppermint harvested and oil distilled each season were difficult to control—although the Hotchkiss brothers and E.C. Patterson had a significant influence when they set their minds to corner the market. Demand factors, like the premium a customer might pay for a “Prize Medal” peppermint oil rather than the product offered by Hothckiss’s competitors, were potentially more susceptible to pressure. All the factors, in Hiram Hotchkiss’s mind, were amenable to his influence—especially because, unlike perishable wheat flour, peppermint oil was a storable asset. Hiram’s ability to bottle oil and warehouse it for many years while he waited for the best price broke the simple equivalence of goods to cash described in Horace White’s illustration of commodity financing. Instead of a constant flow of commodities in one direction and money in the other, Hiram may have imagined himself at the center of a fractional reserve system, where a lot more money circulated than the actual value of the commodity that might be called on to redeem it. This point of view caused problems when Hiram negotiated with other brokers and bankers. It became a disaster when Hotchkiss tried to become a banker himself.

Hotchkiss always believed his oil should command a higher price than the market offered at any given time. He had several reasons for this belief, each of which may have

been justified at different times. Hotchkiss believed his peppermint oil was purer than the oil offered by his competitors. Hiram regularly accused his enemies (and sometimes even his friends) of adulterating their oil, of buying tainted oils, of mixing good oil with bad, and of putting their labels on inferior products.⁴⁰⁴ Hotchkiss also believed he could use his skills as a marketer to raise the perceived value of his oils, constantly pushing his prices toward the value of the English Mitcham oil he aspired to match. And finally, Hiram believed he could control, or at least anticipate, changes in supply that would allow him to hold oil during periods of surplus and sell it only when scarcity had driven up the price. All these beliefs caused Hotchkiss to regularly break the straightforward flow of goods and cash that typified White's commodity model.

The difficulties began early in Hotchkiss's career, when Hiram's peppermint oil didn't leave Dows & Cary's warehouses as smoothly as his flour had, causing conflicts over the drafts and notes Hotchkiss had written to draw funds against his shipments. If the essential oil market softened and Hiram's oil languished in Dows & Cary's New York warehouse, the commission agent could be forced to carry both the advanced principal and a growing interest balance for months. Hotchkiss used the proceeds he anticipated receiving from the sale of one batch of oil to buy the next batch of oil or support his family, saving little or nothing as a reserve. This mode of operating was merely frustrating when the agent and Hotchkiss disagreed on how low a price Dows & Cary

⁴⁰⁴ Like the character in Melville's novel, Hotchkiss had a complicated relationship with confidence (mostly in himself) and suspicion (of anyone who failed to act in accordance with his wishes). Herman Melville, Hershel Parker, and Mark Niemeyer, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade: An Authoritative Text, Contemporary Reviews, Biographical Overviews, Sources, Backgrounds, and Criticism*. (New York: Norton, 2006).

should accept to clear their inventory. It became exponentially worse when Hiram entered the international market.

Hiram needed what came to be known at the end of the nineteenth century as an “elastic currency.” An elastic currency is defined as a money supply that “will expand when there is an active demand for it and contract when the demand subsides,” and has been something economists, bankers, and their historians have debated since the nineteenth century. In 1893, for example, when bankers argued over the merits and problems of the National Banking system developed since the Civil War, Horace White (1834-1916) delivered a lecture to the American Bankers’ Association on “*George Smith’s Money*” in the *Early Northwest*.⁴⁰⁵ George Smith had run an insurance company and an unchartered bank in Illinois. After the Panic of 1837, Smith issued notes redeemable in gold and silver and backed by the solvency of his businesses. By 1854, Smith’s was the only bank in Illinois and “George Smith’s money” accounted for 75% of the currency used in Chicago. White’s lecture on Smith focused on the relationship between trade and currency. An elastic currency was needed, White argued, but “How can we get this kind of currency? We cannot get it from the Government, because the Government cannot know when the demand for money is increasing and when it is diminishing.”⁴⁰⁶ White noted that both checks and notes were “Pieces of paper promising to pay gold [that] came into use in the first place as labor saving machines merely to avoid the trouble of carrying gold.” Smith’s key innovation, White argued, was that his Wisconsin Marine and Fire Insurance Company issued its “certificates of deposit...in

⁴⁰⁵ White.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid. 1.

denominations of \$1, \$3, \$5, and \$10.” Occasional “runs on his institution for specie...were always met with abundant bags of coin,” and Smith’s money became a trusted currency, eventually reaching a circulation of \$1,470,235.⁴⁰⁷ Smith operated what would now be called a fractional reserve bank without government supervision; the moral of White’s story was that prudent business practices could be relied upon to make such a system more responsive to economic cycles than inefficient government intrusion.

Hiram Hotchkiss’s story offers an important counterexample. Chicagoan George Smith was technically a wildcatter issuing unsanctioned currency, but his money was sound. Hotchkiss, issuing legal banknotes printed by the state comptroller, used them in a way that damaged his own finances and the local economy. Like Smith, Hotchkiss understood that small denomination banknotes made better circulating currency than randomly-denominated promissory notes carrying a string of endorsements on their backs. However, Hotchkiss’s main use for his currency was as a means to pay his own debts, especially to the large number of farmers who supplied him with peppermint oil. Hotchkiss preferred sending engraved promissory notes, disguised to look like currency, to Michigan where they would get a “good circulation.” Hotchkiss intended his paper to be used in place of cash for long periods before being returned to the Peppermint Bank for redemption (or ideally, to stay in Michigan forever). And unlike Smith, Hotchkiss’s “money” actually depended less on bags of gold coins kept on hand to redeem banknotes as on the elaborate web of credits and debits surrounding his essential oil business. In a real sense, Hotchkiss’s bank was based not on gold, but on peppermint oil.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. 2.

It may seem strange that Hiram Hotchkiss managed to convince farmers to take his notes, bankers to take his paper, and his relatives to support his banking venture. Hotchkiss was a leading peppermint oil merchant, so he had leverage when dealing with farmers. And Hiram Hotchkiss was not just a miller or a peppermint oil merchant. He was a prominent regional businessman, interested in many of the economic development schemes pursued by western New Yorkers. For many years, Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss had been at the center of a series of legal and lobbying actions aimed at getting a line of the Auburn and Rochester Railroad built through their property in Phelps.⁴⁰⁸ In the fall of 1856, Hiram rode with former Governor William H. Seward, from Lyons to Geneva. He took the opportunity to lobby for another of the Hotchkiss family's pet projects of internal improvement: a ship canal they wanted built around Niagara Falls (through their uncle William Hotchkiss's property). Hiram reported his conversation to his uncle Calvin, who responded he believed Seward "was very much in favor of the construction of the Niagara Ship Canal, but expressed a belief it would not be accomplished until a change in the administration (as much as to say when he became President)."⁴⁰⁹ The end of 1856 saw credit tighten, and cash became very scarce in western New York. It was bad timing for a canal, but good for Hotchkiss's banking aspirations. In spite of their disagreements, Calvin went ahead with Hiram and endorsed his project. By the end of the year, the Hotchkiss Peppermint Bank was operating, and Calvin wrote Hiram, "if the Peppermint Bank is discounting freely, to send me a good amount, and I will soon put the money in circulation."⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ Hotchkiss papers. 1846-1-30LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. 1856-11-17CHtoHGH.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. 1856-12-29CHtoHGH.

In early 1857, Leman endorsed another \$2000 note for his brother, although he again vented his frustration, saying “I think your way of continually asking for renewals of your paper has a very bad effect on your credit & prevents you getting accommodations when you might other wise get them.” Leman reminded his brother that he had been working hard to repair his credit, and had avoided protests or even renewals on his paper for over a year. “It is disreputable,” Leman concluded, “for any decent man not to perform his engagements.”⁴¹¹ Although Calvin welcomed a new source of funds to inject some cash into the distressed local economy, he remained uncomfortable with the lax way his nephew attended to business. Several weeks later, Calvin wrote Hiram regarding “your draft on Abraham Bell & Son for \$2000 at four months, which I here return as I am entirely out of all kinds of Banking business or discounting or endorsing.” Calvin said he planned to devote himself solely to his own business and chided Hiram sarcastically, “I do consider it is generally bad policy for (a young man like me) to branch out into many kinds of business, it is better for a man to attend to one branch of business well than 1/2 doz. neglected.”⁴¹²

But as Hiram soon discovered, his uncle Calvin had not really gone out of the banking business—he had just switched partners. Leman returned from a trip to Lewiston a few weeks later and informed his brother in a note, “I can

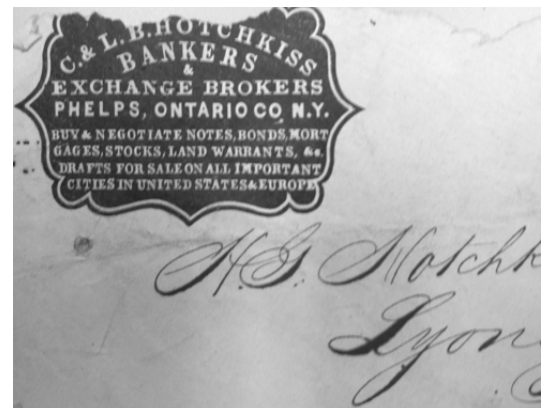


Figure 13: An envelope printed with the names of Calvin and Leman B. Hotchkiss, Bankers.

⁴¹¹ Ibid. 1857-2-27LBHtoHGH.

⁴¹² Ibid. 1857-4-25CHtoHGH.

make arrangements with Uncle Calvin to enter into the Banking and Brokers business, but it will be under stringent circumstances.”⁴¹³ Leman would take over the role Calvin had played, financing Hiram’s businesses, but he warned Hiram, “You can readily see it will not answer for me to be associated with any man unless he meets his engagements—neither will I be. I speak plain for I know there is but one way for me to sustain a character.” The next letter Hiram received from his brother was on letterhead announcing, “C & LB Hotchkiss, Bankers & Exchange Brokers,” and signed as “LB Hotchkiss, Cashier.”⁴¹⁴

Later that summer, Calvin Hotchkiss wrote to Hiram regarding a letter Hiram had received from William Seward, explaining why a Niagara River survey the Hotchkisses had requested had been delayed.⁴¹⁵ In early 1858, Calvin wrote again that “If Seward & Douglass would take up this subject my impression is something might be accomplished.”⁴¹⁶ In the spring of 1858, a credit investigator for R.G. Dun reported on Calvin and Leman Hotchkiss:

Calvin H is a bachelor and lives at Lewiston. LB is sole executor of his wife's estate, which is worth \$60 to \$70,000. And he is possessed of RE in the amt of nearly \$80,000 and would certainly be worth \$60,000 clear. Calvin H we are advised is worth \$300 to \$400,000. And LB is a widower and lives at Phelps. They do a lucrative Banking business, but confined to selling Exchange, buying notes, bonds, mtgs, etc.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹³ Ibid. 1857-5-29LBHtoHGH.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid. 1857-6-12LBHtoHGH.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid. 1857-7-13CHtoHGH.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. 1858-1-8CHtoHGH.

⁴¹⁷ R.G. Dun credit report. Calvin & LB Hotchkiss 1858-59.

In May 1858, the Eagle Mill that the Hotchkiss brothers' father had built burned to the ground.⁴¹⁸ Hiram considered rebuilding, but was unable to find an adequate source of capital for the project. This was the beginning of the end of Hiram's interest in the flour milling business, but not of his dependence on family for financing. In late 1859, Hiram again approached his uncle several times seeking financial support. Calvin responded, "I have rec'd your three letters, but did not think proper to answer them; for the reason that you did not mention a syllable in regard to the payments you were to have made me long ago. I think you have treated me in a most shameful manner, and I am determined not to put up with such treatment any longer. You & Leman have speculated on my capital about long enough."⁴¹⁹ When Hiram continued to pursue him, Calvin wrote, "I...threw [your letter] down in disgust. The idea of heaping injury upon injury & insult upon insult was more than I could stand... You and Leman ought to be ashamed to treat me in this way, after befriending you in advancing a large amount some 14 years since."⁴²⁰ Several more months passed, and Calvin wrote to remind Hiram, "I do not wish, nor will I consent to have my name engraved as Banker, when in fact I have no immediate interest or supervision in the matter."⁴²¹ When Hiram went ahead without his uncle's approval, Calvin protested, "I was surprised & vexed to think you should go on in direct violation of my wishes & instructions." Calvin said he had expressly forbidden Hiram to engrave his image on banknotes with the title "Banker" and explained "my name should be used only as President and that was merely to give circulation to the notes, where I was

⁴¹⁸ Hotchkiss papers. 1858-5-20LBHtoHGH.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 1859-9-12CHtoHGH.

⁴²⁰ Ibid. 1860-4-20CHtoHGH.

⁴²¹ Ibid. 1860-8-11CHtoHGH.

known, and it was for your benefit that I consented to that.” If he had been fraudulently described as banker, Calvin warned “I will not advance one dollar toward forwarding the institution.”⁴²²

On the first of September 1860, the New York Bank Department acknowledged receipt of \$50,000 in bonds deposited for “H.G. Hotchkiss & Co. Bank” and the printing of \$40,000 in circulating notes.⁴²³ The banknotes and the preprinted promissory notes Hotchkiss would send to Michigan for circulation were all engraved with Calvin’s likeness on them, rather than Hiram’s, to improve their prestige. Although some historians have argued that the first half of the nineteenth century was a period of “monetary chaos” during which wildcatters and counterfeiters prevented Americans from feeling safe about the nation’s currency and economic prospects, this claim is based on a misunderstanding. Historian Stephen Mihm suggests that antebellum schoolchildren were taught to discount because so many suspect notes were only accepted at a discount from par value. However, an 1857 newspaper reported “it is a favorite maxim with some to to ‘keep bad money in circulation’ for they say it makes no difference whether a bill is counterfeit or not, as long as it will pass around freely.”⁴²⁴ A Michigan historian wrote in 1911 that “counterfeiting and issuing worthless ‘bank notes’ ...was not looked upon as a felony as it would be today. Of course it was taken for granted that it was a ‘little crooked,’ but the scarcity of real money, together with the necessity for a medium of exchange, made almost anything that looked like money answer the purpose.”⁴²⁵ The

⁴²² Ibid. 1860-8-17CHtoHGH.

⁴²³ Ibid. 1860-9-1CooktoHGH.

⁴²⁴ Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). 223 ff.

⁴²⁵ Daniel S. Mevis, *Pioneer Recollections: Semi-Historic Side Lights on the Early Days of Lansing*. (Lansing, MI: MARULA, 2017). 33-4.

relative lack of alternatives was one of the reasons Hotchkiss's engraved promissory notes could be used in place of cash in Michigan. Even Allan Pinkerton remarked in his memoir that "they preferred a good counterfeit on a solid bank to any genuine bill upon a shyster institution."⁴²⁶ In fact, the reason children learned to discount in their heads was not because people feared banknotes were counterfeit, but because so many promissory notes passed from hand to hand at a discount from their face values. And finally, the primary evidence does not support the claim that currency was widely discounted. Even Hiram Hotchkiss's banknotes were accepted at par (or rejected altogether) until the federal 10% tax imposed in 1866 created a de-facto discount that ended their circulation.

Calvin Hotchkiss may have allowed himself to be convinced to continue supporting Hiram's Peppermint Bank because the family was still deeply involved in lobbying for the Niagara Canal project. As the one family member with a personal relationship with the new Secretary of State, Hiram was crucial to this plan. In early 1862 Hiram received a letter from his other uncle, William Hotchkiss, who wrote "Our Niagara Ship Canal must be built. I hope you have had the desired interview with Seward," William continued, "altho' his mind must be taxed heavily by the complication of our national affairs."⁴²⁷

Although the Hotchkiss family presumed their project would be among the most important issues facing the Lincoln administration, William Seward and the Republican government in which he was Secretary of State had more pressing problems than building a canal around Niagara Falls to compete with Canada's Welland Canal. The Civil War,

⁴²⁶ Mihm. 10.

⁴²⁷ Hotchkiss papers. 1862-1-12WHtoHGH.

which Republicans had expected to win quickly, dragged on at incredible expense. Unable to raise funds in New York's money market, Republicans claimed they were driven to "emergency legislation when the banks suspended specie payments and destroyed the nation's money."⁴²⁸ Before the formation of the Republican Party, "some Western Whigs, notably Abraham Lincoln, had called for a new national bank to provide a secure currency."⁴²⁹ The Legal Tender Act of 1862 and the National Banking Act of 1864 created a single national currency and a network of nationally-chartered banks dominated by a handful of commercial banks in New York City. The ability of state-chartered banks to issue their own banknotes was eliminated in 1865 by a prohibitive 10% tax on state bank note circulation beginning in 1866, forcing a rapid increase in the number of state banks joining the national system. The original National Banking Act had included a section allowing state banks to issue national banknotes; the provision was eliminated only after the legislation had passed on the basis of this promised compromise. In the six months after the tax on state bank notes passed, the number of national banks doubled as many state banks "quickly realized that their future survival depended on allegiance to the national system."⁴³⁰ Bank legislation had not been an apparent priority of the new Republican Party when it came to power in 1860, leading historians to disagree over the degree to which the government had intended the new laws as gifts to New York City bankers. Some argued the radical reforms had been "designed to accommodate the economic interests of Northeastern businessmen and capitalists, to the

⁴²⁸ Richardson. 66.

⁴²⁹ Ibid. 67.

⁴³⁰ David M. Gische, "The New York City Banks and the Development of the National Banking System 1860-1870," *The American Journal of Legal History* 23, no. 1 (1979). 59.

detriment of Western and Southern agrarians.”⁴³¹ Others countered that, in spite of including a large contingent of Northeastern Whigs, the Republican coalition was really based on a fundamental faith in the “political and social virtues of ‘free labor’ [and that] almost all of the early Republican leaders subordinated differences in economic philosophy to the basically moral question of slavery.” What is clear is that as time passed, the new laws increasingly favored urban financial interests. For example, the first version of the National Banking Act, in 1863, had included apportionment limits that required the \$300,000,000 of new national currency issued under the act to be distributed evenly between the regions of the nation. Since “country banks were the largest issuers of state notes, and conversion to the national system meant the loss of [that] privilege,” there was legitimate worry that without provisions to insure adequate currency outside the major financial centers like New York City, the economic activity that had been powered by free banking in states like New York and Michigan would be severely curtailed.⁴³² This concern was not addressed by the new Banking Act passed in 1864.

The U.S. Treasury suspended specie payments at the end of 1861, and two weeks later gold began to trade on New York commodity markets. Daily quotations were distributed by new telegraphic wire services and printed in newspapers nationwide, giving the value of 100 gold dollars in United States notes. A quotation of 200, for example, meant that it took \$200 in greenbacks to buy \$100 in gold coins or that \$1 in the new, inflationary currency was worth only 50 cents in the old. At its worst, the value of the new greenbacks fell to 35.09 cents relative to the gold-based dollar, on July 11,

⁴³¹ Ibid. 22.

⁴³² Ibid., 40.

1864.⁴³³ Government officials such as Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase attributed the devaluation of greenbacks not to inflation, however, but rather blamed “the rise in the value of gold caused by nefarious speculation.”⁴³⁴ Shipments of new American gold from California remained relatively stable, even as the destination changed. Gold shipped from California to New York City decreased from \$32.6 million in 1861 to \$10.3 million in 1863, but at the same time shipments to England (which remained on a gold standard) increased by \$24.4 million.⁴³⁵

Hiram Hotchkiss continued operating his Peppermint Bank in spite of the tax on his state-issued currency and the establishment of competing national banks. As a Democrat, he may have hoped the 1864 election would put an end to his disagreement with federal banking policy. Hotchkiss had benefitted from being a New York banker. In the antebellum currency market, banknotes issued in Eastern states “tended to have either the same contemporaneous discount rate, or discount rates that varied within a small band.”⁴³⁶ During times of financial stress, banks, banknote brokers, and the reporting agencies that published discount rate data “would advise their customers not to accept western banknotes, or to be wary of them.” Western banks were considered riskier, because information reaching eastern authorities was often incomplete, inaccurate, and untimely. Although the fear of counterfeiting was in fact much lower than has recently been portrayed, during periods of economic uncertainty it was safer for western farmers to use eastern banknotes even if they came from a less-than-ideal source like Hotchkiss.

⁴³³ Mitchell, "The Value of the "Greenbacks" During the Civil War." 139, 154.

⁴³⁴ Salmon Chase, quoted in Ibid. 140.

⁴³⁵ Ibid. 141.

⁴³⁶ Jane Knodell, "Interregional Financial Integration and the Banknote Market: The Old Northwest, 1815-1845," *Journal of Economic History* 48, no. 2 (1988). 291.

Salmon Chase has been described by his contemporaries and by historians as a financial neophyte. Some have suggested that as a former Democrat, he came from a Jacksonian tradition of distrust for central banking. Others such as Hammond have observed that whatever his initial inclinations, Chase became a principal actor in a “bloody combat” between federal and state authority. Hammond also notes that Chase, who would later take Roger B. Taney’s seat as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, disagreed with that court’s decision in the *Briscoe* case regarding the legality of state bank notes. Chase argued that state bank notes “certainly fall within the spirit if not the letter of the constitutional prohibition of the emission of ‘bills of credit’ by the states and of making by them of anything except gold and silver coin a legal tender in payment of debts.”⁴³⁷ Economic historian Gary Gorton observed that during the antebellum free banking era, “large numbers of firms entered banking and issued debt in the form of perpetual, non-interest-bearing, risky debt claims, offering the right of redemption on demand at par in specie.”⁴³⁸ Gorton claims that before the Civil War “there was no domestic coin between the 50-cent piece and the \$2.50 gold dollar.” This is not entirely true: The United States minted a wide variety of coins of lesser denominations, including half-cent pieces, several different sizes of pennies, 2-cent and 3-cent pieces, nickels, half-dimes, dimes, twenty-cent pieces, quarters, half-dollars, and (except for a period from 1804-1836) dollars. Gorton sought to explain why “wildcat banking was not a pervasive problem during this period.” Wildcat banking refers to the practice of issuing more currency than could possibly be redeemed with the securities controlled by the bank.

⁴³⁷ Hammond. 724.

⁴³⁸ Gary Gorton, “Reputation Formation in Early Bank Note Markets,” *The journal of political economy*. 104, no. 2 (1996). 347.

Unfortunately, Gorton was not able to quantify the significance of note issue in the commerce of the period. “It is not clear,” he admitted, “whether bank notes circulated across different states and regions in significant amounts.”⁴³⁹ In fact, despite the subsequent focus of historians on banknotes, they were far from the center of antebellum business finance.

The activities of the Hotchkisses in their flour and essential oil businesses during this period suggest that interest-bearing promissory notes and drafts written against inventories were much more common tools of trade than small-denomination banknotes. Another reason the practice of overprinting currency may have been less prevalent is that, unlike wildcatters such as Chicago’s George Smith, many free bankers in western New York considered themselves more as facilitators of business than as printers of money. Calvin and Leman Hotchkiss, for example, focused on exchange. Even Hiram Hotchkiss, who was motivated by a desire to see his notes get a good circulation in Michigan, focused more on (his own) business credit than he did on issuing notes. As economic historian Willford King remarked in 1920, “To the average citizen bank deposits seem entirely different from bank notes, but in fact they are very similar. Both are promises to pay on demand...[and] As a matter of fact, bank deposits are the principal circulating medium of the United States, nearly all important purchases being made through their use.” This is the point missed by Gorton and many later historians. Even for bankers such as the Hotchkisses, the compounding of credit operations was more significant than the

⁴³⁹ Ibid. 353.

issuing of new notes. “The right,” King argued, “to loan and reloan a million dollars for an endless period is practically equivalent to the ownership of a million dollars.”⁴⁴⁰

Introducing the National Banking Act in January 1863, Senate Finance Committee Chairman John Sherman said, “All private interests, all local interests, all banking interests, the interests of individuals, everything, should be subordinate now to the interest of the government.”⁴⁴¹ National banking and the destruction of state banks became a regional issue. In committee, “John Henderson of Missouri tried to set the minimum capital stock of a national bank at \$300,000 in order to prevent the establishment of national institutions in rural areas at all.” When the bill came to a vote, 23 Republicans from New England, New York, and New Jersey joined the Democrats to oppose national banking.⁴⁴² *Harper’s Weekly* celebrated the law’s passage, announcing that national banking would “institute such a connection between the public credit and the banking interest as shall, on the one hand, give the President virtual control over all the banks in the country, and, on the other, make every stockholder and banknote holder in the land an underwriter, so to speak, of the Government bonds.”⁴⁴³

Arguing for the prohibitive 10% tax on state bank circulation the following year, John Sherman declared “the power of taxation cannot be more wisely exercised than in harmonizing and nationalizing and placing on the secure basis of national credit all the money of the country.”⁴⁴⁴ It was clear that the administration’s banking legislation’s goal was not to secure America’s currency (which had been sufficient to the needs of

⁴⁴⁰ King. 742.

⁴⁴¹ Richardson. 87.

⁴⁴² Ibid. 89.

⁴⁴³ Ibid. 91.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid. 92.

commerce without government intervention) but to put the nation's financial system to work funding the war effort. Although all Democrats and some Republicans worried about the "centralization of power and force here in the Federal Government...to destroy all the rights of the States...[and] to wield this as an empire," it became obvious to all that "Congress must either repeal the banking law or contract the circulation of state banks."⁴⁴⁵

The federal government had succeeded in establishing national banks and greenbacks, but "by April 1864 state banking had become identified with disloyalty...and gold speculation had become the Treasury's most pressing problem."⁴⁴⁶ On April 15th, Sherman introduced a bill to outlaw trading in gold "under penalty of a fine or a prison term or both." To support the federal government's control over the currency and the banking system, "the bill stipulated that only greenbacks or national currency, not state bank notes, could be exchanged for gold."⁴⁴⁷ The government hoped that by outlawing the exchangeability of anything but the inflationary greenbacks with gold, they might curb inflation. Lincoln signed the bill into law in June 1864, but trading in gold continued and the value of greenbacks relative to gold continued to drop. Embarrassed by the market's flagrant disregard of their authority, the government repealed the law two weeks later. Angry newspaper articles and congressional speeches identified defenders of state banking with the hated gold speculators. Lincoln replaced Treasury Secretary Chase with William Pitt Fessenden. Although Fessenden had at first opposed the Legal Tender Act, he now argued for "discriminating legislation" to shore up the national currency by

⁴⁴⁵ Richardson. 101.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid. 95.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid. 97, 99.

eliminating state bank notes. In January 1865, Fessenden endorsed a currency bill that would make it illegal for national banks to circulate state bank notes. New York's Democratic Senator Francis Kernan objected, saying "if the national banks, with the great advantages they enjoy, cannot compete successfully with the State banks, it simply shows that the latter serve the interests of the business community, and should not be destroyed."⁴⁴⁸

Kernan's fellow Democrat Hiram Hotchkiss not only continued operating his Peppermint Bank in defiance of the new federal banking policies, he took advantage of every opportunity to profit from the inflation caused by the Legal Tender Act. When New York banks and the federal government suspended specie payments, Hotchkiss began redeeming his notes in greenbacks. As inflation drove the value of the federal notes down to 35 cents on the (gold) dollar, Hotchkiss profited. Although peppermint farmers were also aware that the changing value of money required them to ask more for their oil, Hotchkiss managed to stay a step ahead. In early November 1864, Hiram received a letter from his sons, suggesting "the way gold is this morning we had better buy all the oil we can at \$4.50 and \$4.75."⁴⁴⁹ The day after the Presidential election, Hiram telegraphed his sons, "Uncle Abe is elected & Gold is up to 258 at 1 o'clock PM...I greatly fear that you are both asleep & do not try to secure the oil."⁴⁵⁰ Hiram's sons responded that they would be happy to buy all the oil in Wayne County, if he would send funds.⁴⁵¹ A week later, Hiram wrote his sons again, that "As gold is falling 235 today at 1 o'clock I should

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid. 100-1.

⁴⁴⁹ Hotchkiss papers. 1864-11-1GCHtoHGH.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. 1864-11-9-HGHtoGCH.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. 1864-11-9GCHtoHGH.

think farmers would sell a little...now at a fair price.”⁴⁵² The next day, Hiram observed, “Gold has declined as low as 218 today & Peppt Oil buyers are holding off. I guess I done well to sell ahead. So hurry up the packing as fast as possible.”⁴⁵³

Although he used his understanding of currency fluctuations to profit on inflation in the oil market, Hiram’s attention to the details of his banking operation had not improved. Calvin wrote an angry letter to his nephew at 2:30 AM on the morning of March 9 1864, complaining of “five Protests and one returned Certificate of deposit, "which met me like the shock of an Earthquake and you may well Judge why I write you at this unseasonable Hour. The reason is that I could not sleep...this is something I never drempt of, when I went into this Banking business merely for your benefit." Calvin lamented, "As to giving you any advice, it would be like a feather in the wind, and you would perhaps consider it an insult.”⁴⁵⁴ The banking relationship was further damaged when Calvin sent Hiram notice of a “Sheriff Sale” at which the county sheriff announced, “By virtue of two Executions issued out of the Supreme Court...I have seized & Taken the following described property, about 60 acres of wheat on the ground, Five Horses, seven Oxen, four cows and fifty tons hay, the Property of Calvin Hotchkiss, which I shall expose for sale...on the 26th day of December 1864.”⁴⁵⁵ Calvin wrote the sale of his property was "a transaction which never happened to me before," and warned, "if you do nothing to stop this sale, then my property must go for what it will bring. My health is quite poor, so that I am not able to travel, otherwise, I should be out to see you." A few

⁴⁵² Ibid. 1864-11-16HGHtoGCH.

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 1864-11-17HGHtoGCH.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. 1864-3-9CHtoHGH.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. 1864-12-21CHtoHGH.

months later, Calvin wrote again to "H.G. Hotchkiss Esqr., Banker &c." that "In six days my farm will be sold by the Sherriff of this County, to Pay Your debt you owe to DeWitt Parshall. Write me on the receipt of this whether You are ready to pay the debt to the Sherriff, or whether you intend to let him sell my farm. I want an immediate answer."⁴⁵⁶

At the end of 1865, Hiram received a final letter from Calvin:

I will never write to Strong & Mumford to delay proceeding agt H.G. Hotchkiss & Co.s Bank another day. I have been humbugged about your damd Bank...I do not want to hear any thing more about that cursed Bank which has given me so much trouble. It has been generally reported throughout the County that I had failed, in consequence of my farm being advertised at Sherriff Sale. I wish you not to write to me again on this Bank subject, as I heard enough of such damned trash. I wrote to Leman...that I must proceed to foreclose the mortgages, as I could not see any prospect of you & him ever bringing your business to a close.⁴⁵⁷

Calvin also ridiculed Hiram's suggestion that he was planning to convert his Peppermint Bank under the new National Banking law, telling his nephew "the time has passed for such a business."⁴⁵⁸ Calvin Hotchkiss died on June 28, 1866, and with him went any hope Hiram may have had about borrowing the bonds he would need to securitize a new banking venture. The Peppermint Bank carried on its business for another year, despite the devaluation of state banknotes caused by the implementation of the federal government's 10% tax. In January 1867, the *Syracuse Journal* reprinted a story from the *Lyons Republican* stating the "rumor of the failure of H.G. Hotchkiss & Co.'s Bank of Lyons, which has found its way into some of the newspapers, has no foundation." The

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. 1865-3-24CHtoHGH.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid. 1865-10-26CHtoHGH.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid. 1865-10-16CHtoHGH.

apparent cause of the rumor was that “for some reason the Metropolitan Bank of New York has latterly thrown out its notes, and that they are only taken at ten per cent discount on deposit at the banks,” because all state bank notes were subject to a 10% tax.

Hotchkiss’s notes, the newspaper assured its readers, “are, however, current about town at par, as heretofore, and are being redeemed in greenbacks at the Hotchkiss Bank.”⁴⁵⁹ It is unclear exactly when Hotchkiss’s Peppermint Bank shut its doors, but local histories record that its end corresponded with the destruction of state banking.

The elimination of state banking produced the rural problems the banking Act’s opponents had feared. Not only was there inadequate money in the hinterlands to support business growth, there simply were not enough banks. The number of national banks grew only slowly: by 1890 there were fewer than 3,500.⁴⁶⁰ By 1897, after 33 years of National Banking, Midwestern businessmen attending the Indianapolis Monetary Convention complained about the lack of adequate banking facilities in their states and lobbied for decreases in the capital required to start a bank and for the establishment of branch banks which were illegal under federal law. Branch banking, which critics argued would just increase the power of the central banks allowed to open branches, was not expanded. Instead, the demand for rural and small-town banking services was met by a new wave of free banking laws passed by the states in the 1880s and 1890s. Like antebellum free banking laws, they allowed new banks to be established without legislative charters; they also reduced the restrictions imposed by national banking regulations. The states set much lower capital requirements, allowed their banks to make

⁴⁵⁹ *Syracuse Journal*, 1/22/1867, 8.

⁴⁶⁰ Eugene Nelson White, "The Political Economy of Banking Regulation, 1864-1933," *Journal of Economic History* 42, no. 1 (1982). 35.

loans on real estate restricted by national banking law, and established very low or nonexistent reserve requirements. By 1900, there were nearly 4,500 state-chartered banks, mostly serving rural hinterlands.⁴⁶¹

Sociologists Bruce G. Carruthers and Sarah Babb have observed “Money works best when it can be taken for granted, when its value, negotiability, and neutrality can simply be assumed.”⁴⁶² Their observation applies, ironically, to the historians studying money—especially to those who focus on a period when the value, negotiability, and neutrality of currency was less stable than it is today. Banking historian Howard Bodenhorn suggested, “To most historians, the lessons of free banking were clear. Banking, left to its own devices, was inherently unstable. Unless banks were closely supervised, banking and financial markets degenerated into chaos, causing substantial losses to the public, and eventually slowed real economic activity.”⁴⁶³ This is an incorrect assessment, Bodenhorn argued, since both state banks and national banks habitually issued fewer notes than the market required for optimal growth. Ohio Senator John Sherman had told the Senate in February 1865, “The national banks were intended to supersede the state banks. Both cannot exist together.”⁴⁶⁴ He meant that the national banks would never survive while state banks were permitted to “carefully keep out their state circulation.” For the new currency and the banks using it to succeed, state banks and their circulating notes had to disappear. The tax on state bank notes enacted in 1865 drastically reduced the number of state banks but failed to eliminate them. Four years

⁴⁶¹ Ibid. 34.

⁴⁶² B. G. Carruthers and S. Babb, “The Color of Money and the Nature of Value: Greenbacks and Gold in Postbellum America,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 101, no. 6 (1996). 1556.

⁴⁶³ Bodenhorn, *A History of Banking in Antebellum America*. 214.

⁴⁶⁴ Hammond. 733.

later, Chief Justice Chase read an opinion (*Veazie Bank v. Fenno*) acknowledging that the legislation was designed to eliminate state banks. Although the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the tax on banknotes damaged the cause of free state banking, the banks could not be eliminated as long as they could fulfill the remaining function of banking in the postbellum era, deposit, the importance of which even Bodenhorn underestimated in his focus on banknotes.

Hiram Hotchkiss's state bank, however, had always been more focused on financing his own business operations than on taking deposits and lending funds in the local market. Although frustrated by changing regulations, Hotchkiss's adventure in banking ended with the death of his uncle Calvin, whose wealth had guaranteed Hiram's obligations in spite of extreme stresses that may have shortened Calvin's life (he died at age 74). In later years, as we will see, Hiram's financial woes increased. Hotchkiss's approach to financing, and especially his belief that debt was negotiable, were increasingly unpopular in a period when businessmen sought to operate on more objective, rational terms. A comparison of R.G. Dun reports on Hiram and on his brother Leman are revealing. The entry begins in 1858, noting "HG and LB Hotchkiss & Co. are not in partnership. LB resides at Vienna [Phelps] and is said to be well off. HG has a large amt of RE in his hands but I am informed he owes a good deal of money. He pays many of his debts at the end of execution. No one can tell me what he is worth."⁴⁶⁵

A couple of years later, another entry on Hiram states, "Cannot say how good he is. Has large amt of property in his hands. Appears to owe considerable. Is sued quite

⁴⁶⁵ R.G. Dun credit report. 9/8/1858.

frequently.”⁴⁶⁶ In 1869, the reporter commented, “Cannot say what his respons is. He owes a great deal of money and has been sued a great many times and many executions have been returned unpaid and are still unpaid. He has considerable property in his hands but he never pays I believe until the end of an execution. Difficult to tell whether he is worth anything or not. I cannot say.”⁴⁶⁷ In 1873 another reporter added, “Has considerable property in his hands but very much encumbered, and doubt collection could be enforced vs. him. Is not regarded reliable and has no credit here.”⁴⁶⁸ In 1877, the reporter noted that Hiram had tried to divest himself of his property to avoid attachment, saying “The firm is now HG Hotchkiss and Sons. HGH swears that he has nothing...neither his word nor note passes current here...All the RE is in the hands of Mrs. HGH and daughters.” The reporter concluded Hotchkiss “owes largely and would like to owe more, but he is too well known here.”⁴⁶⁹ A final entry at the end of 1889 concluded the story on a note altogether unlike the heroic tale told by local histories and Hotchkiss company memorials:

He declines to make any showing whatever. The firm is composed of Leman, Calvin, and Hiram G. Hotchkiss Jr., the three sons of Hiram G. Hotchkiss...have served the business and him since 1873. They do a business of immense proportions shipping all over the world, their principle markets however being London and Paris. They market highly superior grade of extract, receiving many first prizes and medals at Paris, London and other exhibitions. Their business respect and...standing however is at the lowest point. They have plenty of property however in the family but keep transferring it from one to another, so that it is utterly out of reach. As a firm are considered thoroughly irresponsible, never known to pay anything they can get out of, will beat everyone they can,

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid. 4/1860.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid. 1/17/1869.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid. 7/10/1873.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid. 10/12/1877.

have absolutely no credit, and should be dealt with accordingly by outsiders. They are a hard lot, do not ever pay debts for living expenses around town, and are not trusted here out of sight.⁴⁷⁰

In contrast, Leman prospered, especially once he managed to break free of his brother. In 1867, Leman was reported “to be good for anything he agrees to pay, and [says] that he pays a larger tax than any three men or firms in Phelps. Considered good.”⁴⁷¹ Two years later, the reporter wrote, “Owns \$100,000 or more RE in and around the village of Phelps, has \$40,000 in the Air Cure at Clifton, has \$50,000 in the bank, he is a shrewd and careful manager and deals largely in peppermint oil and makes money. He is considered very sound and all right.”⁴⁷² In 1879, the reporter added, “Owns large amt RE and his children also have some inherited from their mother. This RE is free and clear. He has cash to purchase oil and is supposed to be worth \$250 to \$300,000.”⁴⁷³

Hiram Hotchkiss operated his business using a code of ethics that was at best, problematic. Hiram’s treatment of partners, and especially relatives such as Leman and Calvin Hotchkiss, was deplorable. Cultural historian Warren Susman noted that Emerson’s seminal definition of character, “Moral order through the medium of individual nature,” was challenged at the end of the nineteenth century by a growing interest in personality and performance.⁴⁷⁴ The differences between Hiram Hotchkiss’s business practices and those of his brother Leman and Uncle Calvin may be an early example of a shift from character to personality as a determinant of success, as Susman

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid. 12/7/1889.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid. 9/20/1867.

⁴⁷² Ibid. 5/19/1869.

⁴⁷³ Ibid. 5/2/1879.

⁴⁷⁴ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Kindle locations 5468, 5605.

suggested. We will consider these differences in more detail in the next chapter. But Hotchkiss's behavior was not based on ignorance, rather on his early experience as a businessman in western New York. Hiram understood how business was traditionally conducted, but he felt free to bend or break the rules whenever it pleased him, relying on his charm and on personal relationships to win people to his point of view or retain their support in spite of his actions. Hotchkiss understood the principles of banking as they were developing during his lifetime, but had no respect for them. He used his banking operations to finance his own business. He suspected that anybody who presented his notes at the counter of his bank was looking for specie, and he developed strategies to delay payment or meet demands for payment with new requests for credit. Ultimately, Hiram's interest in banking was completely subordinated to his obsession with being Peppermint King. It is ironic that Hiram Hotchkiss *is* remembered as the Peppermint King in western New York, while his brother Leman, who was ultimately much more successful and left a valuable inheritance to his children—and who had probably sold as much peppermint oil as Hiram in his lifetime—is all but forgotten.

CHAPTER 6

THE DARK SIDE OF FAMILY BUSINESS

Hiram G. Hotchkiss is remembered in Lyons as “a most interesting personality. He was a man of almost gigantic stature, and in his youth was regarded as a remarkably handsome man. He was most positive in his convictions and when he had decided on a course never was swerved in the slightest degree. He never forgave an injury nor forgot a favor.” The account of Hotchkiss, printed across eight columns just a day after his death from information undoubtedly supplied by his family, continued:

He was hospitality personified, and was never so happy as when surrounded by his numerous family and their friends. He rarely left his home except to go back and forth to his business, to which he attended with the greatest regularity up to almost the very day of his death, and for occasional visits to New York or abroad. He wanted people to come to him, and whoever came, be it friend or foe, was certain of a royal welcome.⁴⁷⁵

The obituary tells the inaccurate story mentioned previously of how Hiram had singlehandedly invented the peppermint oil business, lists all the awards Hotchkiss had won for his peppermint oil, and claimed “He was just as cordial to his most inveterate business and political enemy as to his friends.”⁴⁷⁶ Although the account went to great lengths to portray Hiram as a benevolent, self-made entrepreneur who had always put the needs of his family, friends, and community before his own, this was not the case. In spite of the social mores of his time, and against the repeated protests of business

⁴⁷⁵ Clyde NY *Democratic Herald*, 10/28/1897.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

partners, friends, and family, Hotchkiss was a monomaniacal autocrat who blustered and bullied his way toward a success that despite his claims, he never really achieved.

The story of Hiram Hotchkiss's business conduct illustrates the extent to which he believed the rules of society did not apply to him. It also suggests what those rules were, providing a clear outline of social mores in nineteenth-century western New York. We saw how strong family ties supported business in positive way in the story of the Ranneys. Hiram Hotchkiss's story is a counterpoint, illustrating the ways friendship and family loyalty could be betrayed and perverted to enable intolerable behavior. It is generally accepted by contemporary historians that kin networks and long-term friendships determined the flow of investment funds and products in nineteenth-century western New York. Historian Paul Johnson observed that "Individual fortunes were meshed with social networks...and entrepreneurial activity was typified by caution and cooperation, and not by ungoverned individual ambition," resulting in "a remarkably orderly and closed community of entrepreneurs."⁴⁷⁷ Hiram Hotchkiss's career offers a counterexample to Johnson's largely accurate narrative, and helps illustrate the boundaries of acceptable behavior by following the actions of one who habitually transgressed them.

Hotchkiss's behavior worsened over time as he gradually abandoned his inhibitions. When Hiram began his career, he was a family man who seemed to appreciate the contributions others made to his success. As he began doing business in New York City, he expressed his gratitude for the support of family and friends. In the spring of 1845, Hiram wrote to his wife, Mary, from the city:

⁴⁷⁷ Paul Edward Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. (New York: Hill & Wang, 2004). 22.

My dear dear dear wife,
I arrived a few days since from Albany and have the most of my time made it my home at Mrs. Dows and am treated by her family very kindly. I have not yet succeeded in making sales of my oil but am in hopes soon to effect the sale so that I can come home...I have since my return here from Albany been the most of my time engaged in putting up a small lot of oil to ship to England and Germany. I have been putting it up in small packages merely to send out the sample lots, so that if it does well I can ship more extensively hereafter...You must keep Sophia [Gilbert, a cousin] with you till I return, as you must have been very lonesome without her company...I fear you are out of money and I wrote Lehman go over to Lyons and see if you was right side up...⁴⁷⁸

A few weeks later, Hiram wrote Mary again that “Ellen seems perfectly delighted with her visit. She went with Sarah today to the museum. The fact is dear I am proud of our daughter Ellen...I am really quite at home with Mrs. Dows. She makes me very comfortable.”⁴⁷⁹ In addition to demonstrating his warm feelings toward Mary and his children, the letters reveal that when he visited New York Hiram often stayed with the widow of John Dows, the older brother of his broker David Dows. At the beginning of his career, Hiram mixed friendship with business. Hotchkiss hosted his partners in Lyons for summer holidays, and letters about the joint ventures the brothers undertook with Dows & Cary in real estate and flour milling are often warm and personal.

Hiram’s business relations with his relatives also began well. Although they often disagreed, at the outset of their partnership Leman and Hiram were relatively tolerant of their differences. In August 1845, at the beginning of the peppermint harvest, Leman chided Hiram gently, “Now my dear Brother I am really surprised how you can work

⁴⁷⁸ Hotchkiss papers. 1845-5-21HGHtoMH.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. 1845-8-16HGHtoMH.

yourself up to such a pitch when you know I have no funds on hand...However I have concluded to do the best I can.”⁴⁸⁰ A couple of weeks later, Leman wrote Hiram again, complaining “It is very inconvenient for me to get along with our business without a horse & buggy. I was compelled to ride on horseback to subpoena witnesses 14 or 15 miles and it is not very pleasant in this hot weather.”⁴⁸¹ Although the brothers were already involved in litigation against their neighbors (in this case, over the Auburn and Rochester Railroad), they were united by family loyalty against the outsiders. Hiram loaned Leman his buggy for the hottest weeks of the summer, and Leman was pleased. Later in 1845, Leman sent his brother a report on the progress of their railroad suit, writing, “I have no doubt they will pay our \$6000 judgment & buy our farm at a good round price & make Vienna [Phelps] the principal stopping place.”⁴⁸²

But even when feelings of friendship existed with outside business partners, they were fragile and easily swept aside if Hiram felt he had been ill-treated. At the end of 1845, the Hotchkiss brothers’ relationship with David Dows exploded, when Hiram claimed Dows had skimmed profits on his flour sales. Hiram wrote an angry letter to Dows “setting forth his base conduct,” which at the last minute he decided not to send:

David Dows

You poor insignificant wretch, I wish to address you a few lines, to let you know that I know what a scoundrel you are. I let your previous frauds pass unnoticed...do you suppose that I do not understand the base frauds you attempted to commit upon one who you know placed confidence in you? I will begin, take up sales you pretend to have made for us of 1105 barrels in October and November 1845. Do you suppose I do not understand how you made them,

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. 1845-8-16LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 1845-8-30LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁸² Ibid. 1845-12-13LBHtoHGH.

did you not make sales in the first place on your own account, then after a few days had passed did you not after seeing that those sales were bad ones take flour on your own account of your customers, at the same prices, to make up for those sales that were likely to turn out bad and report them as having been sold to the same parties? Did you not after having made sales of your own flour pretend to your customers that their own brands were sold to the same parties, sometime afterwards when you thought you saw the market was about advancing, and when the market did advance thereby making large sums of money, did you not make sales of a large amount of flour and afterwards when the market had a downward tendency pretend it was on hand, did you not in your communication to some of your customers pretend at a time when the flour market was about to fall or advance as the news of the steamer made it, pretend that you had sold several thousand barrels...did you not with a view to obtain remittances hold out encouragement that the market would probably do better when you had made the sales previous, did you not pretend that a large amount of our flour was sold on my arrival in New York in April when you would have pretended that the flour was still on hand had I not been there? Did you not try to get an acknowledgment of the correctness of your account before your clerks, which you knew was false? Did you not want me to leave the city without asking to see the property you pretended was still on hand? Did you not send one of your clerks in the country to tell a few persons that he had sold the flour and that he knew it was right, when he and you too know that he lied? Have you not made false charges of storage and insurance, cooperage and cartage, and that too against the person with whom you knew meant to deal fairly by you, your poor insignificant wretch...⁴⁸³

Leman calmed his brother and convinced Hiram to let him draft the letter the Hotshkisses ultimately sent to Dows & Cary. Unlike Hiram's letter, Leman focused his remarks on the salient points of their disagreement and seemed genuinely interested on resolving those differences:

We regret to inform you, when your Mr. Cary was here last we informed him of our dissatisfaction in regards to your statements made to us as respects the sale and charges on the property which we have consigned to your house and which we believe was sold or great part of it at higher prices than those reported to us.

⁴⁸³ Ibid. HGHtoDavidDows.

Since last September such consignments consist of the following property, to wit Bbls of flour, wheat, oil, & beans. And the only a/c [account] of sales we have received from you is one under date of the 11th Dec 1845 of 1105 Bbls flour & also your a/c sales of 1471 Bbls flour, 1800 56/60 bushels of wheat & 36 bushels beans, under the date of May 8, 1846, and an a/c sales and shipments of flour and wheat and oil of peppermint and beans to England, under date of June 29, 1846. The last a/c sale was sent by Mr. Cary, we have not now in our possession & assume Mr. Cary when here took it back. If he did not we have mislaid it & would be glad if you would return the same to us if he took it back with him, if not send us another copy of said sale & shipments. To all the above-mentioned a/s sales we regret again to inform you are not satisfactory, & we do not believe represent the sales or disposition of the property shipped to you as above stated, and as it is important to us to have a true and accurate statement from you, of the disposition of each and every parcel of property consigned to you as above, we beg of you to furnish us with one, of our identical property otherwise we shall be under the necessity of filing a bill of discovery against you, which we assure you would be very painful to us. By rendering us true statement of the a/c sales of our identical property, to whom sold, and if any part of it was put into store where the same was stored, and how long the same remained or now remains in store, and if any part of it was shipped to any domestic or foreign port, when the same was so shipped... By rendering us a true and accurate a/c of all transactions in regard to our property sent to you as above stated, which as our agents are bound to do, you would confer a great favor upon us. And when you take into account that a refusal on your part will be viewed as a very suspicious circumstance, we think you will do so without delay. Please let us hear from you at your earliest convenience on the subject.⁴⁸⁴

A lawsuit ensued which dragged on for over a decade. However, the complaint in the suit was not about shipments of flour sold at prices higher than reported. It was about 197 cans of peppermint oil, originally shipped to Dows & Cary but later repossessed by Hotchkiss and transferred to George Morewood for shipment to England. At issue was the ownership of the oil when it was transferred to Morewood.⁴⁸⁵ Hiram had tried to deflect attention from the fact he had broken his agency agreement with Dows & Cary by

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. HGHtoDCComplaint.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid. 1846SupremeCourt.

claiming that David Dows had betrayed him first.

Although the Hotchkiss brothers remained allies against the outside world, tensions rose and tempers occasionally flared. At the end of 1845, Leman warned Hiram, “I really hope you will not hereafter allow your ass to run away with your head. I suppose you are aware,” Leman added, “that we cannot loan money unless we pay interest on it.”⁴⁸⁶ Hiram began to depend on his brother to finance both their flour-milling operation and Hiram’s growing peppermint business. Leman often found himself riding from town to town to get promissory notes discounted. He grew frustrated when Hiram expected him to avoid payment and refinance the debts when they came due. Leman conformed to standard business practices and believed the brothers should pay their debts rather than compounding them. After a decade of frustration, Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss executed a contract that purported to be a settlement of their business affairs. The document included inventories, consignments of peppermint oil, notes and judgments, and even lists of the household items each brother planned to keep. According to the contract, “This is the basis agreed upon for a settlement between HG Hotchkiss and Leman B Hotchkiss in Lyons Nov 6th 1855...it is further understood all old Claims, Debts, Judgments, Bonds, Mortgages & Notes not inventoried herein...belong to the firm of HG & LB Hotchkiss.”⁴⁸⁷ Leman’s thirty-one year old wife Lucretia had died in the summer, leaving him with five children to care for and a substantial inheritance of local Oaks Corner real estate to manage in trust for them. Hiram agreed to assume most of the outstanding debt, but the continuing existence of the “HG & LB Hotchkiss” company mentioned in the

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid. 1845-11-27LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid. 1855-11-6Settlement.

document indicates the brothers were not actually severing their business ties even though that was the story they told outsiders. This was a fateful mistake on Leman's part.

The meaning of the 1855 settlement was unclear, even between the brothers. As part of their agreement, the brothers had split several debts and judgments, each agreeing to pay half. In February 1856, Leman forwarded Hiram a judgment in favor of David Dows, for which he had paid his share.⁴⁸⁸ The next day, Leman sent another judgment he had paid his half of, saying "I want you to pay your part without making any words at all."⁴⁸⁹ In March, only a few months after signing the contract, Leman wrote Hiram to complain that "I do not feel satisfied at all in your course about our money arrangements. I gave you my paper for \$3300 endorsed by Uncle Calvin and not one dollar as yet has been apportioned to pay what was intended. Your financial skill is not at all satisfactory and will not pay our debts here."⁴⁹⁰ Their benefactor Calvin Hotchkiss, whom the brothers had assured they had settled their affairs, wrote Hiram that "I cannot see why you and Leman should hold on so tenaciously on so much real estate when you could realize 50 pr cent more than it is actually worth. I would recommend to you to calculate the difference between 7 pr cent income, & 7 pr cent outlay in buildings & and other 7 pr cent in costs & taxes, and 25 pr cent loss in credit. Not having much experience in the world, I should like the advice of a shrude practical financier on this subject."⁴⁹¹ Leman

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid. 1856-2-27LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid. 1856-2-28LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid. 1856-3-17LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid. 1856-3-17CHtoHGH.

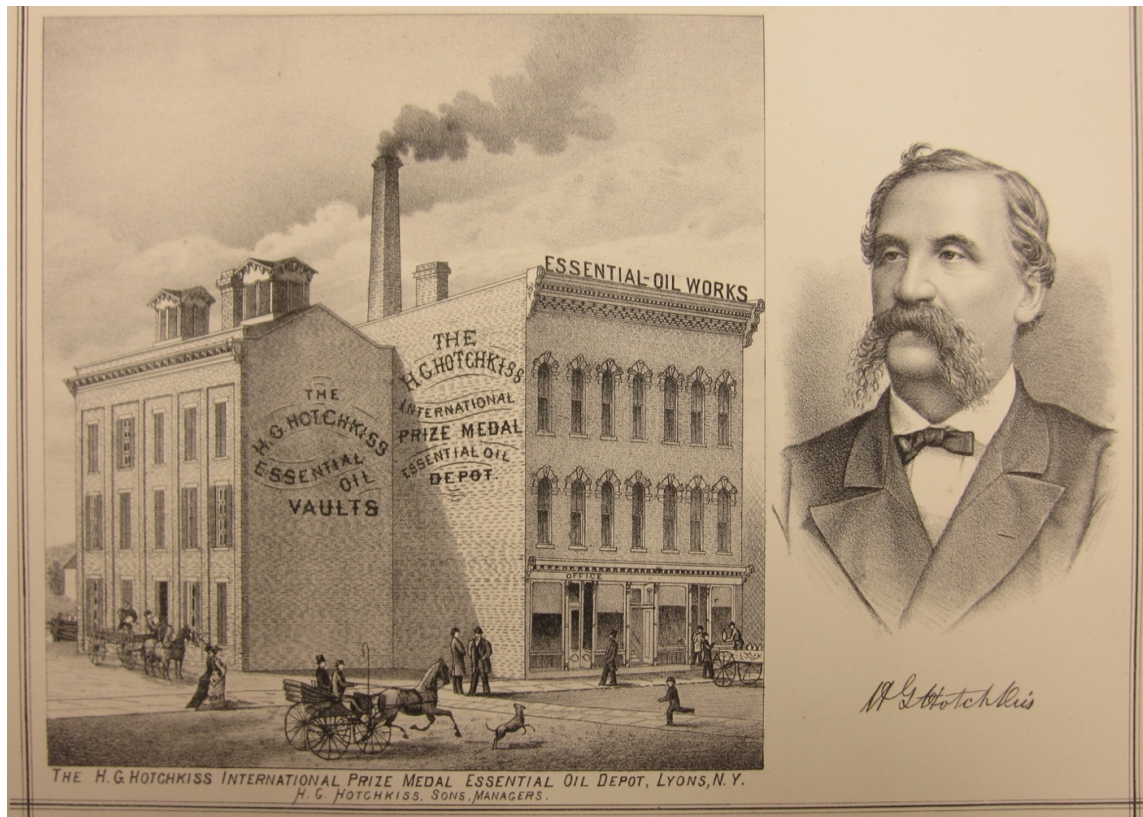


Figure 14: H.G. Hotchkiss and his Essential Oil Works, from McIntosh & Everts's 1877 *History of Wayne County*.

wrote a few weeks later that, “I gave you my paper for \$3300 to relieve me from all my liabilities at Lyons, and not for you to use in your business at all, and when the paper is paid I want my liability to be released, and I want no shuffling about it... You do not seem to appreciate my situation at all, but keep constantly annoying me about business contrary to our agreement.”⁴⁹² Days later, Leman wrote again to inform Hiram he was closing up his house, moving back to the family homestead, and sending his children to live temporarily with relatives:

Now Hiram I regret to be obliged to be continually informing you of our agreement made between us on the 6th Nov last and you seem to be continually

⁴⁹² Ibid. 1856-3-27LBHtoHGH.

endeavoring to bring about a state of things directly opposite to the agreement & understanding. I am willing to live up the the letter of our agreement with my Brother and treat him in business matters as I would any one else—it is disgusting to me and contrary to my nature to take a different course... You do not seem to realize my situation at all and I sometimes think you dont care. I have five small children entirely dependent upon me and together with my other business and perplexities I think I am excusable in refusing entirely of being mixed up in your business...by Tuesday I shall be pretty well scattered and broken up & I assure you this is a very unpleasant move.⁴⁹³

Hiram responded the next day:

Your meanness toward me is is perfectly shocking to my nerve. Your paper...has not thus far been worth a 'tird' to me...I have reduced your liability by increasing my own about \$5000 since our settlement. I did not expect to be treated in this contemptuous manner by you. I expected you would be willing to 'help' meet or carry along these matters. I only agreed to assist in carrying along the 'thing' with a view only of being accommodating & brotherly to you. In return I only get kicks, and am accused by you of shuffling, and an intimation that I am using your paper to carry on business. How in Hell did you suppose the liabilities could be met unless your paper could be made available for you know I had no money. I suppose & expect per today's mail to get a refusal from you not to endorse the \$4000 note so I can arrange the Doct. Chapman notes & Judgt. It would be all of a piece with your other contemptible treatment.⁴⁹⁴

Hiram's focus on his own interests at the expense of his brother's did not go unnoticed.

Their cousin William T. Hotchkiss wrote to implore, "Oh Hiram Hiram, be a man, give Leman your portion...and for the sake of the business reputation of the whole Hotchkiss family dont play baby and fool any more. Forgivingly Your Friend and Cousin..."⁴⁹⁵

Calvin added his criticism, noting "a distinction ought to be made between business

⁴⁹³ Ibid. 1856-3-30LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. 1856-3-31HGHtoLBH.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid. 1856-4-13WTHtoHGH.

matters and that of joking...You claim to be a business man and a great financier, and as such, you never ought to suffer your paper to be dishonored or your endorsers Credit suffer by reason of any neglect.⁴⁹⁶

Leman's health began to suffer, which he attributed to the breakup of his family and the stress of being forced to deal with Hiram's bad finances. He wrote Hiram "I have been a bed all day...I feel quite strange and my powers of comprehension seems to be diminished... You are too careless and negligent in your engagements to suit my constitution and I cannot stand it at all."⁴⁹⁷ Leman wrote a few weeks later to see if Hiram had satisfied the Chapman judgment,

mentioning "My health is a little better but I feel satisfied that I cannot bear any perplexity at all. Since my apoplectic attack my nervous system seems to be in a very bad state."⁴⁹⁸ The following week, Leman responded to Chapman's demand for satisfaction, assuring the doctor that his brother was good for the money, and asking "at all events don't sue me. I would go to Lyons to attend to this business, but my health is so poor that I cannot under a few days."⁴⁹⁹ Chapman responded that he planned to attach the assets of both the brothers, and Leman admonished Hiram to settle up so he would not be sued again.⁵⁰⁰



Figure 15: Leman Beecher Hotchkiss, from Phelps County Historical Society, photo by author.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. 1856-4-14CHtoHGH.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid. 1856-6-23LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid. 1856-7-8LBHtoHGH.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. 1856-7-19LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid. 1856-7-25ChapmantoLBH.; 1856-7-29LBHtoHGH.

The brothers continued to market their essential oils under the HG & LB Hotchkiss brand, but Leman suspected Hiram had stopped regarding him as an equal partner. In the fall of 1856, Leman wrote to challenge Hiram, “Have you taken the Paris Prize Medal in your individual name? If you have, you have done wrong!”⁵⁰¹ Hiram assured his brother, “I have done nothing at Paris to undermine you & the sooner you get over such feelings the happier you will be.”⁵⁰²

Leman accepted his brother’s explanation and continued reluctantly helping him finance his peppermint oil business. In 1857, Leman wrote Hiram to say he had paid an overdue note, saving his brother from another lawsuit. The creditor had declined to take Leman’s note in payment because “He felt very much dissatisfied after he giving us 2 years to pay he thought we ought to fulfill our promise...The fact is I have more trouble & perplexity on your business than I do on my own.”⁵⁰³ Their uncle William Hotchkiss, who had requested repayment of a loan he had made to Hiram, wrote “Your conduct is inexcusable and is past endurance, your promises are mere trash and worthless...You talk that you ‘must have capital in your business,’ this is most insulting and you know it full well or ought to know it...Others require capital in their business as well as yourself.”⁵⁰⁴ Hiram’s reputation continued to deteriorate. In early 1858, Leman informed him that “it was currently reported between here & Lyons that you had failed...heard it from 4 or 5 different sources.” Leman was losing patience, and wrote, “What a splendid credit you maintain. I hope you will change your name to Goff at once expressly for my benefit.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid. 1856-9-18LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁰² Ibid. 1856-9-22HGHtoLBH.

⁵⁰³ Ibid. 1857-7-9LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. 1857-5-9WHtoHGH.

You pledged me your word that your note would be promptly met at maturity and if you fail to pay it, you can go to the devil hereafter for I will not allow you to prostrate my credit in this way.”⁵⁰⁵

Hiram’s growing tendency to ignore the needs of even his family was demonstrated in the spring of 1858. The brothers’ mother, Chloe Hotchkiss, wished to move back to the area from New Haven, where she had been staying with relatives. Leman wrote, “Something has got to be done and I can see no other way, only for you to take Ma in your charge.”⁵⁰⁶ Hiram felt he was too busy and suggested his brother should take care of the matter, and Leman replied, “It is useless to multiply words abt my taking Ma in my house for I cannot do it and you ought to know that it would be impossible for me to do so. I have five small children and no one to oversee them but myself... You have paid Ma five dollars within the last five years and I have paid her over \$800 in cash and you will please ponder over that.”⁵⁰⁷

As protests for nonpayment and executions against Hiram increased, Leman tried again to separate himself from his brother’s business. He wrote, “Now Hiram the only way I can see in order to save our selves from ruin & disgrace is to discontinue all business with you...now for god sake never ask me to negotiate any more of your paper.”⁵⁰⁸ A day later, he added, “I am not only compelled to pay your debts but I am compelled to run over to Lyons not only once but at least two or three times every time you have a debt falling due...I see plainly you are determined to ruin my credit if you

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. 1858-3-26LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid. 1858-5-15LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. 1858-5-17LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. 1858-7-16LBHtoHGH.

can.”⁵⁰⁹

By late 1858, Calvin Hotchkiss had also lost patience with his nephew. Calvin wrote, “I once had confidence in your word as well as your Obligations, but as you pay no regard to either, of course my confidence is exhausted...If you should make me a remittance as requested, it would be needless to send any of your own paper as I should not present it at any bank where I am doing business.”⁵¹⁰

When Hiram felt threatened, he often looked for distractions he could use to attack his antagonists. When Leman tried to end his involvement in his brother’s finances, Hiram found another way to retaliate. In the fall of 1858 the brothers went to war over the quality of their respective brands of peppermint oil. Although they were both using a shared HG & LB Hotchkiss label, the brothers were each producing their own peppermint oils in Phelps and Lyons. Hiram accused Leman of shipping adulterated oil, writing:

Mr. Cavender has brought me a sample of the Ohio oil of Peppt and just as I expected it is not worth \$4 per lb. being adulterated with wild Pennyroyal which grows spontaneously all over Ohio. How to protect myself from your consummate ‘ignorance’ and headstrong belief that you are a judge of Oil of Peppermint I Know not. I dare say you will still persist that the oil is pure, and that you will bottle it and stick to it that it is pure oil, and the brand will be completely annihilated and I reduced to poverty and distress by your cursed ignorance.

You are no judge of oil of Peppt & what oil you purchase should be packed here...and I tell you once and for all that I will not be identified with your bottling this lot of oil. So send it off in tin and sell it for what you can get & pocket the loss. You have no right to put my name or your own either on the bottles of this lot of oil. It is useless for me to say any more to you...Let me hear from you just what you intend to do with this lot of oil & if you intend to bottle it.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid. 1858-8-17LBHtoHGH.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid. 1858-9-27CHtoHGH.

I have no patience with your performances...you are such an ass in your judgment of Peppt Oil.⁵¹¹

Leman responded, "as for my Ohio oil I know it to be perfectly pure & as good as any oil ever made. You are at liberty to examine it and apply your test and if it does not come up to the quality of any Wayne County oil by your own test, I will give you a check on the Artisans Bank for \$250, at sight. Col VanAuken examined it today and he says it is very beautiful indeed. I will not nuckle to you in judging oil at all."⁵¹² A few weeks later, Leman wrote that he could no longer do business because he was ill and had lost his sight.⁵¹³ Hiram responded, "Dear Brother, I am sorry you are troubled with your eyes and would like to see you if I could leave home." He closed the letter by reminding Leman not to pack the Ohio oil and asking him to renew another note.⁵¹⁴

Leman was forced to hire an assistant to handle his correspondence and business. A few days before Christmas, the assistant wrote to Hiram that "in consequence of the illness of LBH who has been confined to his room for five weeks nearly, it has been impossible for him to attend to business at all, being the greater part of the time in great pain and a portion of the time unable to stand...The doctors say that LBH has lost the sight of the left eye."⁵¹⁵ Hiram responded on Christmas day, writing "I am absolutely obliged (for I cannot do any other way) to renew my note...no bank can do anything for me & I have written to Uncle C that as soon as you are able to go that we must meet there and arrange our matters satisfactorily. I feel bad to hear that you are so afflicted with your

⁵¹¹ Ibid. 1858-11-3HGHtoLBH.

⁵¹² Ibid. 1858-11-5LBHtoHGH.

⁵¹³ Ibid. 1858-11-22LBHtoHGH.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid. 1858-11-24HGHtoLBH.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid. 1858-12-21LBHtoHGH.

eyes, & how to get along without your assistance I know not.”⁵¹⁶ Leman’s illness was inconvenient for his brother, because Hiram could not refinance his debt without Leman’s guarantee. The assistant informed Hiram in early 1859, “LBH has met with a great misfortune by the loss of the sight of one of his eyes...he is expecting to go to Lewiston soon, where he will communicate your damnable conduct toward us to Uncle Calvin.”⁵¹⁷ Leman decided he was too ill to make the trip to Lewiston, and wrote Hiram, “I have repeatedly informed you of my health but you either do not believe or are determined not to understand that I am in a very bad situation. I am almost blind and therefore must not tax myself with writing a long letter to you...I want you to come here alone and have a personal interview with me...”⁵¹⁸ Calvin reiterated, “it is highly necessary that you & Leman should settle your old copartnership business according to your former agreement. It is perfectly unwarrantable for such old matters to be delayed any longer.”⁵¹⁹

In spite of Leman’s illness, Hiram continued to harass his brother about his peppermint oil. In February 1859, Hiram wrote:

Mr Cavender informs me that you had packed in glass the adulterated Ohio oil Peppt and that you still pretend to believe that it is pure. I am perfectly astonished and I will never consent to your branding that trash...Your astonishing ignorance of the quality of oil Peppt perfectly astonishes me.

You have no right to destroy me by your willfulness for if ever a man wanted to make any thing to get out of embarrassment I am that man, and altho my losses last year were considerable I live in hopes of doing something hereafter in Oil Peppt to extricate myself unless by your willfulness you destroy what little

⁵¹⁶ Ibid. 1858-12-25HGHtoLBH.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid. 1859-2-5LBHtoHGH.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid. 1859-2-9LBHtoHGH.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid. 1859-2-21CHtoHGH.

reputation I have acquired by packing adulterated oil Peppt.

I cannot stand it & I will not to be annihilated completely and I shall tell Uncle Calvin just how you act in regard to this matter. I forbid you from branding that lot of Ohio Oil Peppt which purchased abt 1000 lbs and I shall hold you responsible for all the damage you do me. Take notice of what I say. I have nothing further to say on this disagreeable subject.⁵²⁰

Leman responded, "I have made up my mind never to broach the subject of Oil Peppt to you again, but if you should refer to the subject to Uncle Calvin, I hope you will simply tell the truth. Bear in mind to tell him that you condemn my Ohio oil without having seen it, and that I offered you 250 dollars in Cash to come here and test it...Your being a damned jackass I am not to blame for. I am not at all satisfied with your knowledge of the Michigan & Indiana Oil, to pack it and brand it in my name and I shall hold you accountable for all the damage you do to me by doing so."⁵²¹ Calvin had no wish to be dragged into the argument, and wrote Hiram "I do consider it is a most disgraceful feature in both of you, to be eternally quarrelling, and hope you can reconcile all your difficulties between yourselves."⁵²² But the quarrel continued. A few days later, Leman informed Hiram he had received a letter from London:

that our brand of oil was not in as good repute as it had been formerly, and it is also talked in New York that we purchase Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, & Black River Oil in the New York market and take it home and bottle it and then return it to New York and get a dollar a pound more for it. This report must be applicable to you in all respects, as I have not had a pound sold of my brand, and if you continue to pack Opodeldoc you must take my name from the brand, for I will not allow my reputation to be injured by you in this respect. If you wish to purchase Michigan Oil buy it there, if you wish to purchase Indiana Oil buy it there...and

⁵²⁰ Ibid. 1859-2-24HGHtoLBH.

⁵²¹ Ibid. 1859-3-2LBHtoHGH.

⁵²² Ibid. 1859-3-7CHtoHGH.

for God sake keep out of the New York market in purchasing oil.⁵²³

Leman concluded, “I have always and do now uphold your brand and keep it up to the standard of mine, but if you continue this system you cannot expect me to uphold it any longer. In future please send me samples for inspection and I will aid you in selecting Pure Oil.” A few weeks later, Leman wrote to inform Hiram he was no longer using the “HG & LB Hotchkiss” label, but had begun packing oil solely under his own name. “My oil is packed under my own hand writing and my own individual Label and if it should not turn out equal in quality to yours you can readily see with half an eye that it would result in ruination of my brand and be a great benefit to you and your opinion to the contrary is poppycok. You say my Ohio oil is bad bad bad. I know that is a lie lie lie.”⁵²⁴

Leman understood that his agreement to share responsibility for the debts of the partnership had been a grave mistake. In the summer of 1859, Leman wrote Hiram “You will please refer to our settlement papers of Nov 6th 1855 and not appear so ignorant as you pretend...I have paid my part and am released on the notes.”⁵²⁵ Although they had agreed to pool their resources and purchase western oil together, Hiram and Leman began competing with each other for Michigan peppermint oil, each sending agents into the field to buy directly from farmers. Hiram had ceased trying to remain polite in his letters to his brother, even when seeking favors. He wrote asking Leman to help him get extensions on three notes coming due, and concluded his letter, “Do you still persist in packing that Ohio Oil in Glass...you chuckle head.”⁵²⁶ A week later, Hiram wrote to his

⁵²³ Ibid. 1859-3-16LBHtoHGH.

⁵²⁴ Ibid. 1859-4-6LBHtoHGH.

⁵²⁵ Ibid. 1859-6-16LBHtoHGH.

⁵²⁶ Ibid. 1859-11-22HGHtoLBH.

brother, demanding his half of a shipment of Michigan oil that Leman had purchased (for which Hiram had not paid his share), “You do not send that order for the Western Oil. You do not reply to my letter. Never could I have believed that you would have put yourself out & done what you have done for the last 2 months to destroy my business.”⁵²⁷ Hiram was beginning to believe that people who did not behave as he wished were either ignorant or willfully set on his destruction. The next day, he wrote again:

Indeed Leman since I have been on the stage of action I have never had anything effect me so than I have to see your determination to destroy my business. I have long felt that it was your intention to do so, but I could not have believed that you would resort to the means you have done to accomplish it. I feel bad.”⁵²⁸

In spite of his claims to hurt feelings and the fact they were nominally buying oil together, Hiram continued disparaging his brother’s product. Leman responded:

HGH...observe your remarks abt oil Peppt which is perfectly disgusting as has been the case for a long time & unless you discontinue your misrepresentations abt my oil I will never have any thing further to say to you on that subject. If my oil is not good of course you are greatly benefited & you know it, but that part of your yarn is a darn foolish lie & you know it. I have called on every man that I have sold oil to & every man says there has never been any complaint and every one is perfectly satisfied, but on the contrary I hear some of your oil—I mean HG Hotchkiss New Brand—is not quite as good as formerly. This I have direct from the parties & I can prove it right to your face, and I challenge you to do the same by my brand which is easily distinguished by my individual label. I will further inform you that your charge agt me for injuring the price of oil is false...on the 25th day of this month I have got to pay for the Michigan oil & if you want the one half you must be prepared to pay over to me the amount—under the agreement with your agent PC Wells—the oil to be mine unless you perform and fulfill the agreement. I am to forfeit the oil if I fail to pay for it on the 1st day of

⁵²⁷ Ibid. 1859-11-28HGHtoLBH.

⁵²⁸ Ibid. 1859-11-29HGHtoLBH.

February in Michigan. So be prepared on your part.⁵²⁹

Leman denied Hiram's charge that he had "injured the price" of oil by shipping an inferior product. It was probably truer that Hiram's profits had been eroded by the brothers' competition for oil in Michigan, which had driven up the prices they paid to farmers. But responsibility for that price inflation was at least half Hiram's. In the summer, anger boiled over and Leman wrote his brother, "Your god darn ill treatment has got to be stopped for I will not stand your god darn ill treatment any longer."⁵³⁰ Hiram responded, "Your contemptible letter is in my shit house," but he included a new note in the letter that he asked Leman to take in place of one coming due.⁵³¹ Phillip Wells, Hiram's Michigan buyer wrote him, warning "if you and LBH are in competition the

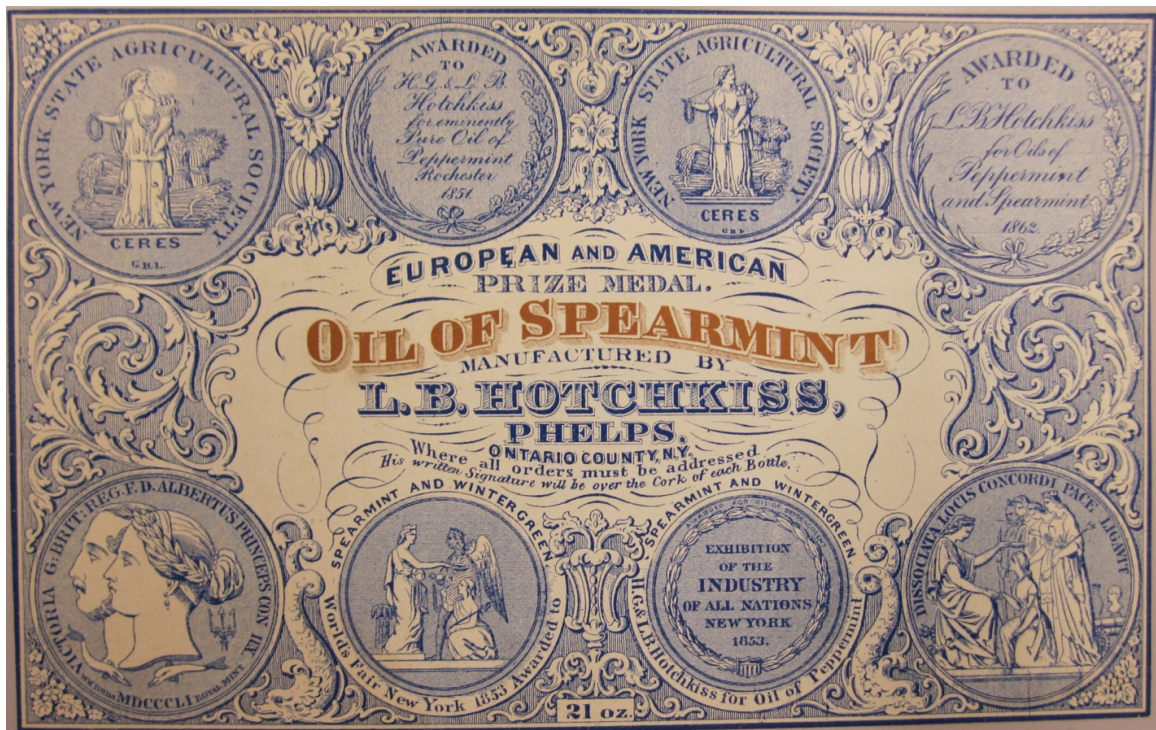


Figure 16: One of Leman Hotchkiss's labels, from the Phelps Historical Society, photo by author.

⁵²⁹ Ibid. 1860-1-9LBHtoHGH.

⁵³⁰ Ibid. 1860-7-6LBHtoHGH.

⁵³¹ Ibid. 1860-7-7HGHtoLBH.

result will be that you will run the price up so that neither will make any money this fall in oil.”⁵³² The difference between Leman and Hiram’s buying trips to Michigan, however, was that Leman sent agents with packets of cash. Hiram couldn’t send cash, but he could send his Peppermint Bank’s notes. Wells wrote Hiram again, asking him to “Send me more of your certificates of deposit. They go first rate and will get a long circulation and it is the best kind of business for a bank.”⁵³³ The Hotchkiss Peppermint Bank’s engraved promissory notes were used in place of currency by Michigan farmers, which helped Hiram compete with his much more solvent brother. Hiram sent packets of \$25 certificates for distribution to the farmers, and urged his agents to try to make small down-payments with promises of full payment on delivery of the oil.⁵³⁴ Hotchkiss’s policy of paying “the rise” in price between contract and delivery was forced on him by his inability to pay farmers in full up front, allowing other buyers to offer more for the yet-to-be-distilled oil.

In late summer 1860, Leman told Hiram through his assistant that he could not loan him \$2,000. Hiram responded, “You promised to let us have your draft on NY at 1/2 per ct prem for \$2000 til abt middle or last part of Sept when our currency from the Bank department will be here & we can pay you out of it...Dont be afraid of your friends & send it along. Yours truly, HG Hotchkiss, Banker.”⁵³⁵ Leman wrote, “This institution is not in the habit of lending money without having something to show for it. If you wish to borrow \$2000 till the 15th of Sept next with int at 7% send your certificate of deposit and

⁵³² Ibid. 1860-8-16PCEtoHGH.

⁵³³ Ibid. 1860-8-21PCWtoHGH.

⁵³⁴ Ibid. 1860-8-22HPtoHGH.

⁵³⁵ Ibid. 1860-8-27HGHtoLBH.

we now think we can lend it to you.”⁵³⁶ Hiram sent “our man Jno Kraufman over to Vienna to get your sight draft on NY for \$2000 as promised us. We can give you our currency for it within 20 or 30 days. We hand you a certificate of deposit for \$2000 for dft & exchg. We have to pay for the balc of our State Stocks tomorrow & I am all ready if you let us have the \$2000 as agreed. Now dont fail to send it to me.”⁵³⁷ Although Hiram was depending on his brother to help him buy securities to send to the State Bank Department, he was also plotting against Leman in Michigan. Hiram received a letter the same day from his agent Phillip Wells:

I shall pay out all the \$500 tomorrow for oil and will ship it next day. It won't buy 300 pounds and then I will be out of money again. If Delemus [Latin for destroyer, one of their code names for Leman] comes on with money which he will he will sweep all the oil in spite of me. Now I warned you of all this ever since last year and your reply has always been that I should not want for money. If I had no competition I could wiggle them along and accommodate you. But you do tie a man's hands and feet and throw him in the water and of course he will sink and I don't like to be made ass of. But you give me money and I can hold my own with him and if I can't I won't complain. Now you see all how the thing stands with me here you can raise 5 or \$6000 for 30 days.⁵³⁸

Hiram responded, “How would HG Hotchkiss & Cos Bank certificates of deposit circulate in Michigan? Our bank deposits this day \$50,000 state stocks in the bank department at Albany and I shall get some bank bills next week or week after and as soon as they are registered and will send you some of them...” “Lempus Oilutus” [Leman] would be astonished if he knew how you was hustling in the oil. He dont know that King

⁵³⁶ Ibid. 1860-8-29LBHtoHGH.

⁵³⁷ Ibid. 1860-8-30HGHtoLBH.

⁵³⁸ Ibid. 1860-8-30PCWtoHGH.

Philip is one of the wide-awake. We will learn him not to play grab as he did last fall.”⁵³⁹

A couple weeks later, Hiram sent Wells “10 \$50 Bank HG Hotchkiss & Co certificates at sight, or if they wish to hold them three months they get 5%, if six months 6%. The proprietors of this bank are worth \$500,000 and Delemus dare not say otherwise.”⁵⁴⁰

Hiram’s boast counted his uncle’s net worth in spite of Calvin’s insistence he did not want to be involved. Calvin had urged his nephew to stick to the business he was good at, writing “My opinion is that, by mixing up all kinds of advertisements, on business Letters, such as Banking &c goes to show, You are straining to catch a Lyon & only get a mouse.”⁵⁴¹ Hiram sent another packet of cash to Wells, saying:

I sent you in this mornings mail 20 HG Hotchkiss & Co Bank certificates amounting to \$750 and now I hand you per express herewith the following: 20 \$25 Cuyler Bank certificates of deposit, \$500, 20 \$25 HG Hotchkiss & Cos Bank certificates of deposit, \$500. Amount sent today per mail and express \$1750 and the whole amount sent to you thus far is \$8600, and all the oil I have thus far received is 61 cans. N.B. If anybody refuses to take HG Hotchkiss & Cos bank certificates, I hope you will piss on them.

Hiram wrote Wells again later in the day, sending another \$750 of his notes and urging his agent to try to insure that the notes would not be returned quickly to the Peppermint Bank, explaining “You see the certificates are payable at sight (for the law requires every bank certificate to be paid at sight) but if the holder sees fit to hold them three months they get 5% if six months 6%. Please circulate them to the very best advantage to this bank for they will find out by and by that this is an undoubted institution and no

⁵³⁹ Ibid. 1860-9-1HGHtoPCW.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. 1860-9-13HGHtoPCW.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid. 1860-9-15CHtoHGH.

mistake.”⁵⁴² Wells responded that the notes were “just as good here now as the Geneva banks,” but he warned “on the whole I would make them payable as sight as it will look a little like kiting...Delemus said you gave him encouragement that you would go in and buy the oil together and when he found out you were fooling him...he feels like a dog with a sore head.”⁵⁴³ The following day, Wells reported, “Delemus acts perfectly rabid and crazy. He don’t know what he is about now or care what he does or says.”⁵⁴⁴ But Leman had cash to pay the farmers, and a few days later Wells complained, “Your sweet Delemus is making a perfect ass of himself. He is around after my men that I have contracts with offering them 17/- per pound for their oil to get it away from me. Now I am afraid he will get some away from me if I don’t get more money soon to take this oil. He tells them he has the money ready...If they let him have the oil now and not I, I ought to give him a god damn pounding and if you say give him a flogging I will...He is a poor miserable lying underhanded scoundrel...”⁵⁴⁵ Wells promised to meet the higher prices Leman offered, but farmers were unsure he would have the money to pay them on delivery.

The next week, Hiram wrote Wells “I wish you would pay out the certificates in small parcels to the growers if you can and not in such chunks. \$875 of HGH & Cos Bank certificates were presented and paid the day before yesterday. They kept out about 10 days and came I think from Kalamazoo.”⁵⁴⁶ Hiram complained to Wells, “Oh Phillip

⁵⁴² Ibid. 1860-9-15HGHtoPCW.

⁵⁴³ Ibid. 1860-9-16PCWtoHGH.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid. 1860-9-17PCWtoHGH.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. 1860-9-20PCWtoHGH.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. 1860-9-27HGHtoPCW.

how shamefully Leman uses me, my feelings cannot be described.”⁵⁴⁷ But a day later

Hiram and Leman signed a contract stating:

It is agreed between Hiram G Hotchkiss & Leman B Hotchkiss that all the oil of Peppermint remaining unsold from this day at noon and not delivered shall be purchased by them on joint account and to be equally divided between them each party paying for their half of the oil. This arrangement shall continue until the first day of January 1861. Lyons Oct 3 1860⁵⁴⁸

A few days later Hiram wrote Leman to say he would not be able to pay his notes coming due, and complaining that Leman would not take his Peppermint Bank certificates to cover the debt “and circulate it as you agreed.”⁵⁴⁹ Leman responded, “All I can say is if your customers deal with you as you do with me I feel confident that HG Hotchkiss & Co Bank is a short lived concern, at all events I cannot live under such treatment from you.”⁵⁵⁰ Leman added the next day, “Your note due the 14th discounted by Rochester City Bank will be protested as I cannot pay it. Self preservation is the first law of nature.”⁵⁵¹

The brothers agreed the following year to buy western oil together, to avoid inflating the price with their competition. At yearend, Leman wrote to Hiram that he planned to go to Michigan to pay for peppermint oil and have it shipped to him in Phelps. “If you prefer,” he wrote, “I will have the oil marked in your name but it must be shipped to me & remain in my possession until you pay for it, or rather your share.”⁵⁵² Hiram responded, “I have acted in good faith with you and you are now pissing on me...I tried

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid. 1860-10-2HGHtoPCW.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid. 1860-10-3AGREEMENT.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid. 1860-10-11HGHtoLBH.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid. 1860-10-11LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid. 1860-10-12LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁵² Ibid. 1861-12-11LBHtoHGH.

to get Chad [a cousin] to go to Vienna yesterday & try & reason you out of your shitten position but he said it was no use.”⁵⁵³ Leman replied, “according to your own statements I have advanced on oil a much larger sum than you have...if you think such treatment is pissing on your agents—I hope you will never make another contract with me.”⁵⁵⁴ But, as usual, blood was stronger than water and Leman continued doing business with his brother. A month later they signed a new contract:

HG Hotchkiss hereby agrees to sell to Leman B Hotchkiss and Leman B Hotchkiss hereby agrees to purchase of HG Hotchkiss Two hundred cases of Oil of Peppermint, Eighteen bottles in each case and twenty three 10/16ths net oil in each case delivered in the New York Central RR Depot in Lyons at the rate of Two Dollars and Sixty cents per lb. less 2 1/2 per cent and freight to New York...It is understood that if either party forfeits this contract the one so forfeiting it shall pay to the other party Three Thousand dollars as liquidated damages...The oil to be delivered within 90 days.⁵⁵⁵

A few months later, Calvin wrote to inform Hiram that his cousin William T. Hotchkiss had died. He chided Hiram for spending too much of his time in New York City, writing “I should think it would be highly necessary for you to be at home in order to attend to the daily Protests on your Certificates of Deposit...I should like to know what object you have in view, in issuing Certificates, unless you have the means to meet them when presented.”⁵⁵⁶ In late 1864, Hiram wrote to his young cousin Chad, who was working for him full-time along with Hiram’s sons while Hotchkiss spent increasingly long periods at the Astor House in New York City:

⁵⁵³ Ibid. 1861-12-14HGHtoLBH.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid. 1861-12-16LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid. 1862-1-13AGREEMENT.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid. 1862-4-24CHtoHGH.

I want you without fail to go to Rochester [to see lawyers] & shew them the complaint of Calvin Hotchkiss against me to dissolve the partnership between Calvin Hotchkiss & myself. Said complaint you will see is made out by Strong & Mumford attornies & served on me on the 28th day of October...I would like to have till the 1st of January to answer it...have them prevent any default being taken against me...of course you must not let any one know any thing abt it at Lyons.⁵⁵⁷

Chad wrote to warn Hiram that his property was about to be seized and auctioned by the Sheriff, adding "My opinion is not worth much but I think you had better get through with your business as soon as possible and come home."⁵⁵⁸ Hiram answered, "I feel very bad to think I am again advertised by Sherriff Bennett & it astonishes me beyond measure that in my absence I must be kept in such a state of mind that I can hardly do my business here with any satisfaction...Uncle Calvin...threatens to sell me out of Lyons if I do not remit some money this week. He keeps me in perfect Hell."⁵⁵⁹ Hiram's wife Mary wrote to him in the city:

My dear husband,
I confidently expected you home this morning, as I got the letter from you yesterday. I think I never felt so angry and outraged in all my life as I have the last two days. Yesterday morning Bart Rogers, Bostwick Dickerson, and half a dozen others came here and took away my cows and sold the pigs. Today Bostwick is taken away two loads of hay and is just driven the carriage out of the yard and is coming back for the sleigh. Bart and Dick have gone to the long barn to sell the oxen. Old Bart sent in for the key to the smokehouse but I would like to see him get it out of my pocket. Now you come home if you don't stay but one day. It is dreadful to have to put up with such insults. Do pay up all such infernal scamps if you have to sell everything you have and live in Ashanti. Yours in

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. 1864-11-12HGHtoGCH.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid. 1864-11-19GCHtoHGH.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid. 1864-11-21HGHtoGCH.

haste, MWH.⁵⁶⁰

A couple of days later Hiram wrote to Chad, “If ever I was annoyed & perplexed I am now by my ‘Lyons’ friends. You say my property is to be sold on Saturday next & that no postponement can be effected unless I pay \$1100 which I cannot do this week..by the Eternal, such treatment is enough to craze a saint...If you have not paid out the \$1000 which I sent you day before yesterday hold onto it and bid my property in.” In spite of the fact that his property was on the block, Hiram was even more agitated about buying peppermint oil before his brother got to it. He concluded, “Secure all the Wayne County oil you can for I do not believe we can get any from the West. Leman B is so treacherous.”⁵⁶¹ To compound his trouble paying his debts at home, Hiram was told by his Michigan oil buyer “Now I wish you to send me \$1000 currency—greenbacks if you can, as other currency don’t go as well with us at present. Your currency is new and farmers don’t know much about it, and are afraid of most any kind of currency except greenbacks.”⁵⁶² Hiram disregarded Wells’s request and wrote, “I send you \$1000 of my currency which I presume will answer as well as greenbacks as it is just as good.”⁵⁶³

At the end of 1864, Calvin Hotchkiss’s farm and property were seized by the Sheriff because Hiram had defaulted on a mortgage Calvin had allowed him to write on the property. Calvin threatened to withdraw the bonds he had loaned to Hiram for deposit with the state banking department. Hiram asked Leman to intervene with their uncle, but Leman informed him “I wrote to Uncle Calvin urging him to extend time for you, and he

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid. MHtoHGHoutraged.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid. 1864-11-24HGHtoGCH.

⁵⁶² Ibid. 1864-12-2HPtoHGH.

⁵⁶³ Ibid. 1864-12-7HGHtoHP.

replied he would extend time if I would step in and be security for the money you owe him. What an idea this...can't take your currency for I have no money in New York, I was compelled to buy a draft myself for \$10,000 on Saturday to meet my paper."⁵⁶⁴

In summer 1866 Leman wrote to Chad, asking why Hiram was still in New York City. "Is he afraid of his creditors? or what is the matter?"⁵⁶⁵ Hiram's wife Mary wrote of her own annoyance:

My dear,

Do you know that we have waited breakfast for you three mornings? I expected you Sunday and as I got the letter I was sure you would be here yesterday, but yesterday brought the letter that should have come Sunday. And this morning I was sure you would be here, but neither you nor a letter. But I made up my mind to write, for fear you will not be here tomorrow...There were a half-dozen men here when I got your letter yesterday, waiting for money. O'Keefe keeps their time, so I gave him \$20 to divide amongst them...I told him he would have to wait till you got home. He said you were never coming, that everybody said that you owed so much money you dare not come home. Mrs. Hotchkiss, you need not look for him, he will never come to Lyons anymore, and I must have my money right away...So if you do not want to have me mobbed, I hope you will send some money to pay him.⁵⁶⁶

A few weeks later, Mary wrote again:

You seem to think that we do not use the money you send home in your business, but we certainly do except what we must have for the necessities of life. Our pork barrel is empty, ditto the beef, and our hams are all gone, and take it all in all we are about as poverty-stricken as anyone you'd wish to see. I never had any idea that it required so much money to carry on your business, and I could not believe it if I did not know where every dollar goes. I can't see where the profit comes from. I was in hopes to take in some money for pasture to help out but that is out of the question. Every man that has applied has the same answer, I have an

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid. 1865-5-29LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid. 1866-7-12LBHtoChadreHGH.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid. MHtoHGHbreakfasts.

account against Mr. H and if he can't take my cow he must pay the money and of course there is nothing more to be said.⁵⁶⁷

Mary wrote again, "Now my dear you must look at things just as they are...think I would be perfectly willing to sell everything we have, and live in a log cabin to see you out of debt. To see you a free man, for where can you find a greater slave than the man that is chained with debts, but I'm afraid I shall never see that day. Oh what is the pleasure of calling these broad acres and stately buildings ours when we know they are not. It is very poor comfort for me, I believe I am getting blue so I will stop."⁵⁶⁸ Mary and Hiram's sons bore the brunt of the anger felt by local farmers and merchants Hotchkiss neglected to pay. The family was united in their agreement that this was no way to do business, Mary informed Hiram, "But what is the use of fretting? You never will see things or do things like other people. You seem to have a mania for doing things against your own interest. Is there nothing that will ever bring you to your senses?"⁵⁶⁹

As Hotchkiss spent more of his time living at the Astor House and doing deals in New York City, his behavior became even more erratic. In early 1874, Hiram received an angry letter from New York City oil brokers, Horner & Quetting:

Your childish and not business-like letter of 23d to hand. We can but believe you are in your dotage and you have told us so many lies about our present transaction that we concluded to have no more business transactions with you until this is finished. We mean what we say as our name is not Hotchkiss, and now Mr. H, unless you at once give us some positive assurance that you will forward our oil speedily and without further talk or ceremony, you will oblige us to come to Lyons and take possession of our goods, and see whether we can make you fulfill

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid. MHtoHGHmoneyforLeman.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid. MHtoHGHtreatChadbetter.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid. MHtoHGHvexed.

your engagements. The meanest rascal and lowest thief would not be guilty of the miserable, dirty lying trickery which you have practiced on us since the commencing of this bottling, and be assured Mr. Hotchkiss, if we have to come to Lyons again, we will make it very unpleasant for you and perhaps for both of us. We are utterly disgusted with you and wish you to beware how you drive a desperate man to the wall. We really wish you would come to your senses and would not provoke people who have been your best friends and staunchest supporters. Your whole behavior is really disgusting and we would rather break stones on the highway than make our living dealing with such a man as you are.⁵⁷⁰

Hiram's brother Leman made regular trips to the city throughout his career, but spent no more time there than business demanded. He wrote, "It seems strange to me that you can spend so much time in New York and not have time to attend to your own business at home and leave your endorsers in the lurch. I don't think you will make anything in the end by this course."⁵⁷¹ When his brother finally refused to bail him out, Hiram tried to get Leman's son Thaddeus to endorse his notes, but his nephew was less willing than Leman had been to let the bonds of blood pull him into the financial drama. Leman wrote, "you god darn scoundrel. Thad says he will not endorse any mans note that pays so little regard to protect his endorsers & gives them so much trouble as you do. I suppose it would be your highest ambition to get all of my children involved with you, but I don't think you will be able to accomplish it."⁵⁷² As for the note, Leman declared "you will have to pay it or be shoved into bankruptcy."⁵⁷³

As months passed without Hiram's return, his son Calvin wrote that "everyone seems to think around here you are in Wall Street and anything I can say will not make

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. 1874-2-24H&QtoHGH.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. 1874-4-11LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁷² Ibid. 1874-4-16LBHtoHGH.

⁵⁷³ Ibid. 1874-4-23LBHtoHGH.

them believe different.”⁵⁷⁴ Protesting Hiram’s claim that he needed to stay in New York until the price of peppermint oil rose, his son Leman wrote, “Now do take some advice and sell and come home for you are losing at least \$4000 by neglecting your farm. Don’t be foolish and hang onto your oil any longer for it has reached the top notch, it will go no higher and unless you sell you will be very sorry. Your idea about oil going any higher is perfectly foolish and visionary. Sell sell sell at all hazards for it is going a good deal lower and you are making a good thing at the present price and you will lose if you hold it.”⁵⁷⁵ Hiram’s son wrote again the next week, “There seems to be no doubt in the minds of Lyons people that you are losing all your profits in stocks and I assure you your family are very uncomfortable on that account for your creditors are all out of patience with you.”⁵⁷⁶ In order to avoid having property seized, Leman said his mother Mary had transferred the deeds to the family’s land holdings to his sister Emma. A few days later, Leman wrote again that “Mother wants you to send money enough to pay the Maki execution as the sheriff holds an order of arrest against her and he says they are pressing him very hard. The amount is \$175.”⁵⁷⁷ Hiram tried to make other arrangements to avoid Mary’s incarceration, but the creditors were out of patience. Mary sent a telegram, “Mr. Williams refuses. Send money tomorrow. Answer or I go.”⁵⁷⁸ A few weeks later, Hiram invited Mary and their daughter to visit him in New York. Leman wrote his father that “Mother feels quite hard about this and is quite mad over it. She says that instead of inviting her and Alice to watering places you might better take the money it cost and pay

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid. 1874-4-25CaltoHGH.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid. 1874-4-25LHtoHGH.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid. 1874-6-5LHtoHGH.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid. 1874-6-11LHtoHGH.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid. 1874-7-1MWHtoHGHTele.

up some of these matters. These things are working on Mother very much. She feels them worse than I ever knew her to before and I do hope you will attend this at once.”⁵⁷⁹

Leman wrote a couple of days later, that “Mother is very anxious about the mortgage on this house. Wilson wrote that he would commence foreclosure unless interest was paid this week. Have you paid it? I do not see how you are going to get out of your difficulties.”⁵⁸⁰ Hiram wrote that his feelings were hurt by her selfish refusal to vacation with him, and Mary replied:

Will you please inform me for what you claim my sympathy? You seem to be having a good time spending the summer at the best hotels and watering places, leaving me here with all the care of everything, and your creditors to contend with. And I would like to know in what my selfishness consists? Is it because I ask you to pay your honest debts? I’m sure I can’t think of any other favor I have asked of you, I think the selfishness is on the other side.⁵⁸¹

In the fall of 1874, Hiram sent Chad to Michigan to compete against his brother Leman for oil, and Chad wrote, “I must have money. You must be crazy to think I can compete with men with plenty of money...If you were here trying to buy oil with drafts people that had oil would laugh at you.”⁵⁸² Chad reported that Leman had partnered with Horner & Quetting to buy oil, and Hiram replied “head off the shit ass. Keep good natured with him & maybe he will leave soon...Now let LB and Horner paddle their own canoe & we will paddle ours. Keep your eye on both of these gay deceivers.”⁵⁸³ Chad responded, “Now if you dont send some funds I shall not try to do business any longer...PS You

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid. 1874-7-20CaltoHGH.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid. 1874-7-22LHtoHGH.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid. 1874-7-26MWHtoHGH.

⁵⁸² Ibid. 1874-9-29GCHtoHGH.

⁵⁸³ Ibid. 1874-10-5HGHtoGCH.

speak about everything in your letters but sending home funds to do your business
with.⁵⁸⁴

After the failure of his bank, Hiram's finances continued to deteriorate. To escape his creditors, in 1877 Hiram transferred his peppermint oil business to his sons. The R.G. Dun credit reporter wrote "The firm is now HG Hotchkiss & Sons. HGH swears that he has nothing...and stated that he was out of the firm on account of judgments."⁵⁸⁵ Hiram continued spending most of his time in New York City, where he acted as the company's salesman. As before, Hiram wrote his sons regularly with instructions and often made commitments on behalf of the company. Occasionally, the sons objected. In spring 1877 they wrote complaining of another deal Hiram had done with their rivals Horner & Quetting, "You did this business contrary to our wishes and against our judgment. We told you how to do it and avoid trouble. But no, you must have your own way as you always do in the end and now you can fix this matter as we shall have nothing more to do with it."⁵⁸⁶ Later in the year, one of Hiram's sons wrote:

we hope you will see the folly of buying tin oil hereafter. I (the writer) think I can recall to your mind that at the time you made the purchase of this oil we are now holding in tin, that I advised you very strongly and we had some very hot words about your buying this oil at any price. But you was determined to buy it and now we have it on hand and will probably be obliged to hold it over another year and then in all probability we will take not to exceed 12 shillings per pound for it. Again I must say that the blockheads are right and you are wrong.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid. 1874-11-6GCHtoHGH

⁵⁸⁵ R.G. Dun credit report. 10/12/1877.

⁵⁸⁶ Hotchkiss papers. 1877-3-12SonstoHGH.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid. 1877-4-11SonstoHGH.

Hiram's sons continued running the business from Lyons, while Hiram visited customers in the city. Without the support of Calvin Hotchkiss, who had died in 1866, or their uncle Leman, who died in 1884, Hiram's sons were unable to prosper. In spite of the fact that Hotchkiss essential oils were a premium brand with an international market, Hotchkiss's sons lost money. In 1887, the R.G. Dun reporter noted a change in the company's situation:

Hiram Hotchkiss Jr., Leman Hotchkiss, Calvin Hotchkiss...the above comprises the firm of HG Hotchkiss & Sons, but the business is carried on entirely by the senior HGH. He...years ago...got buried in debt so deeply that he was obliged to do business in the sons names. After a time he got the boys in so deeply that he was obliged to do business in the name of his wife and daughters. And of late many of the old judgments against him have outlawed and he is now on deck again and the boys under.⁵⁸⁸

Hiram took control of the company back from his sons. He continued sending them daily letters of instruction, from his hotel in New York or the offices of whichever broker he favored at the time. His sons gave up trying to wrest control from Hiram, who continued to believe in his own invincible authority as Peppermint King. In 1888, he wrote bragging, "I told one of Horner's brokers, Mr. Downer today, that Horner did not amount to a fart in the peppermint business now, and presume he told Horner what I said."⁵⁸⁹ In 1889, the Dun report was updated, and the sons declared "Worthless. Can't collect a dollar of them, and they will not pay debts for living expenses about town. Their father,

⁵⁸⁸ R.G. Dun credit report. 12/7/1887.

⁵⁸⁹ Hotchkiss papers. 1888-7-17HGHtoSons.

HG Hotchkiss does all the business now and HGH & Sons do nothing in their own name. They work for the old man and they are a hard lot, and will beat anyone they can.”⁵⁹⁰ Hiram’s sons remained under his thumb for the rest of his life. Hotchkiss finally moved back to Lyons, incorporated his company in 1894, and remained in complete control until his death. In 1895 Hiram wrote his son Calvin from his home a few blocks from the company’s offices:



Figure 17: H.G. Hotchkiss ca. 1895, Cornell University, photo by author.

You annoy me very much by not coming here and let me know what is going on. Has Emery’s oil arrived at depot? I want you to write Emery today accepting his offer contained in his letter which I send you and received yesterday. Accepting his offer for another shipment as stated in his letter at \$1.50 per pound. Don’t fail to write today as he requests in his letter. Send me oil paint and drug reports.⁵⁹¹

When Hiram Hotchkiss died on October 27 1897, he was memorialized in the 8-column article cited earlier, and remembered in a three-column obituary in another local newspaper as “the Peppermint Oil King and the best known essential oil man in America or Europe.” The obituary went on to say:

In the course of his dealings he has paid to Wayne County farmers millions of

⁵⁹⁰ R.G. Dun credit report. 2/9/1889.

⁵⁹¹ Hotchkiss papers. 1895-4-1HGHtoCal.

dollars; has enabled many a man to pay for his farm; has assisted thousands of men in raising mortgages and has done more for the poor man than any other person who has ever lived in this community...He leaves men unnumbered who, regretting his sad end, will enjoy the memories of a pleasant friendship. While Mr. Hotchkiss was a resolute man—a great man in his business, and a distinguished citizen of the commercial world and this community, it was in his home that he won and held the admiration of his fellow men. There the seriousness of business was never revealed and there his genial spirit held full sway. There resoluteness gave way to gentleness; there sympathy, kindness of heart, and genuine love for his household and their friends, and a hospitality as boundless as the prairies of the west, were always to be found. No man was ever kinder, few more charming, none more indulgent.⁵⁹²

These memorials, published under the supervision of Hotchkiss's family, described the man they wished he had been. The memorials became local history, and Hotchkiss is now remembered as a groundbreaking entrepreneur and a great benefactor of Wayne County. The heroic image of Hotchkiss portrayed in local histories conforms with the social norms of the era, in spite of the fact that Hiram Hotchkiss called attention to many of these norms by continually breaking them. Hotchkiss took unfair advantage of business partners, friends, and relatives whom he often treated quite brutally. Hiram was unable to understand any point of view but his own, and attributed malicious intent to anyone who failed to do what he wanted. He used the bonds of friendship and especially of family to convince people to help and support him, even when it was clearly not in their best interests. Hotchkiss was a bully who browbeat his opponents into submission and avoided his obligations until many creditors simply gave up and wrote off his debts. But in spite of his faults, Hiram Hotchkiss is remembered as a successful businessman of great charisma and jovial good nature. Lyons still celebrates an annual Peppermint Days

⁵⁹² Wayne *Democratic Press*, 11/3/1897.

summer festival, which for years was funded by the company that Hotchkiss's heirs ran until 1982 when the firm was sold to the William Leman Company of Indiana. In 2003, the Leman company was purchased by Essex Labs of Salem Oregon. Essex still sells Hotchkiss peppermint oil, which it calls "the oldest trademarked and continually produced essential mint oil recipe in the USA."⁵⁹³

⁵⁹³ <http://essexlabs.com/products.html>

CHAPTER 7

CRYSTAL WHITE

Albert May Todd was born in June 1850 on the homestead of William Alfred and Mary May Todd in Nottawa, Michigan. The Todds had arrived in Nottawa in 1836, less than a year before Michigan statehood and the resulting flood of land purchases by new settlers like the Ranneys and speculators like the Hotchkisses. Alfred and Mary Todd had met and married in Marcellus New York, about forty-four miles east of Phelps and Lyons. Albert was the youngest of 10 children, and although the family was not exceptionally prosperous, his mother had received an unusually thorough education in the classics and tried to provide her children with an exposure to the arts and humanities like her own. Albert was remembered as an apt pupil who added his own interest in science to his mother's love of literature and art.

As a boy, Albert became familiar with the peppermint plants local farmers grew and with the stills they used to process mint hay into oil. He amused himself by tinkering with the stills to try to improve their yields and the quality of oil they produced. In the mid-1840s Michigan farmers had begun steam-distilling peppermint, substituting large wooden vats with steam-tight covers for the copper kettles traditionally used to boil peppermint leaves. Super-heated steam passed through the dried mint hay in these vats, carrying the essential oil away to condense in copper worm tubes.⁵⁹⁴ This innovation allowed steam boilers to be kept at full heat while “charges” of mint hay were packed into the vats and removed, resulting in much faster and more efficient distilling. Todd

⁵⁹⁴ Landing, 36-7.

improved the placement of the steam jets to such a degree that he was later able to file a patent for his improvement.

In 1866, the Michigan peppermint harvest was half its normal level due to winterkilled roots, driving up prices.⁵⁹⁵ In 1868, Albert and his older brother Oliver planted their first field of peppermint, the same decade that the Michigan Ranney brothers and their friends such as H.H. Lawrence were shipping peppermint oil to Henry Ranney and his customers in New York and Boston, and the Hotchkiss brothers were competing with each other to buy Michigan oil for their own brands. The Hotchkiss's ongoing battles over the quality of peppermint oil induced Leman to begin advertising in the early 1860s that he had developed a "process of rectifying this oil unknown to any other person."⁵⁹⁶ Leman Hotchkiss's claim to have found a way to improve on the raw oil supplied by the farmers may have stimulated Albert Todd's interest in distilling and chemistry.

Todd extended his education beyond the homeschooling he received from his mother by attending the newly-built Union High School in nearby Sturgis. The only member of his family to attend the school located about ten miles from the family farm, Albert graduated first in his class in 1873 at age 23 and enrolled in Northwestern University to study chemistry the following fall. Albert self-financed his attendance with the earnings he and Oliver shared on their peppermint plantings.⁵⁹⁷ Todd managed to

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid. 45.

⁵⁹⁶ Rochester *Daily Union and Advertiser*, 11/18/1862. 2.

⁵⁹⁷ Todd family tradition holds that Albert May Todd was essentially a self-made man, paying his own way in college, his travels in Europe, and his subsequent business ventures. The evidence seems to support this portrayal, since Todd's parents and siblings were never remarkable financially. The only Todd sibling who did moderately well financially was Oliver, who later moved to Kansas, Idaho, and Oregon where he grew peppermint that Albert bought from him. Other evidence of Albert's self-reliance includes the numerous intricately detailed ledger books he left, which document his rapid rise from small-scale peppermint farmer

complete two years of college work in a single year, but his health suffered so he left the university and used the money he had saved for tuition to fill a backpack and make a walking tour of Europe and England. Todd later recalled “the foundation of my art collection...was made when during my first trip to Europe I undertook to obtain copies of the old masters.”⁵⁹⁸ He bought reproductions of famous artwork painted by gallery-certified copyists to begin his art collection. Todd also visited the peppermint fields of Mitcham England, where he discovered peppermint farmers planting a superior variety of *mentha piperita* called Black Mitcham.

After a summer abroad, Todd returned from Europe refreshed and healthy and immediately set to work on a number of projects. He partnered with Albert Drake, one of the officers of Sturgis’s Union School, in a dry goods mercantile business. Drake was an established merchant in Sturgis, and his esteem for Todd probably opened doors to business opportunities and credit. In spite of a decade-long recession in the 1870s, Todd expanded his ventures beyond peppermint distilling and dry goods. Todd built ice-houses and cut ice on nearby ponds, which he sold to railroads for chilling meat and produce. He bought out his brother Oliver, who had decided to move westward to Kansas (and later to Idaho and Oregon), and opened “The Steam Refined Essential Oil Works” in Nottawa. Albert began buying oil from local farmers and redistilling it using a new steam process he had developed. Although only twenty-five years old, Albert had an edge on eastern businessmen such as Ranney, Hotchkiss, and Wells who were the peppermint farmers’ previous customers. Todd was a local grower himself, and he was well-known among the

to local merchant, ice-house operator, peppermint oil broker, and ultimately the Peppermint King he became.

⁵⁹⁸ A.M. Todd, “Copy of Some Rough Notes Hastily Written at the Request of the Ladies Club of Mendon Describing Some of the Objects in my Art Museum and Library,” undated.

members of the local business community. Without a family fortune to fall back on, Todd seems to have rapidly expanded his enterprises through hard work and scrupulous attention to the details of his business. Equally importantly, Todd had a technological advantage. He discovered that the yellow or light amber color of most American peppermint oil was caused by resins that damaged the oil's flavor, and he developed a proprietary method to remove them. In 1875, he began marketing his Crystal White brand of peppermint oil and menthol crystals, identifying himself on the product labels as Albert M. Todd, Distilling Chemist.⁵⁹⁹ Todd bottled his oil in clear glass, to emphasize its unique purity.

1876 was a busy and eventful year for Albert May Todd. In January, Todd married Augusta Mary Allman in Sturgis. He continued selling ice to the railroads and dry goods with Drake. In the summer and fall, he handled 11,000 pounds of peppermint oil, which he estimated was "about half the crops of Mich and Indiana entire."⁶⁰⁰ By the mid-1870s, Henry Ranney was out of the peppermint oil business and western growers were probably growing tired of the drama that surrounded each annual buying trip of the dueling Hotchkiss brothers and their surrogates. Todd was developing a reputation for honest dealing and may have seemed an attractive local alternative to the generally unpleasant eastern buyers of peppermint oil.

After the harvest, Todd spent ten weeks at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, where he won a gold medal for Crystal White Peppermint Oil. Todd visited New York City after the Exposition and met with Hiram Hotchkiss. Hotchkiss wrote his

⁵⁹⁹ *Sturgis Journal*, 3/831999.

⁶⁰⁰ A.M. Todd papers. 1877-1-18AMTtoOllie.

sons that he had “a long interview with Todd today who has returned from Philadelphia. He wants us to make him an offer for 2000 pounds oil of peppermint subject to approval...telegraph me on Monday morning your best offer and I am to meet him at noon Monday...he says he is offered \$2.50 and that he made some small sales in Philadelphia at \$2.60. Don’t know whether he lies or not.”⁶⁰¹ On Monday Hiram wrote again, expressing his impression of his young rival: “I do not think Todd adulterates oil but I do think he is a poor judge of quality.”⁶⁰² For his part, Albert was more generous with his assessment. He wrote to his brother Oliver in January 1877 with a copy of his new card and news of his activities:

Of course you all know I was in Philada. Spent 10 weeks there and after a hard fought battle, was victorious...I had the pleasure among other things of meeting Gov. Hayes in Phliada and had a pleasant chat with him. Enjoyed the Ex very much...I have commenced shipping direct to Europe. I am doing well but I tell you I haven’t left a stone unturned to push business to a successful issue. I have to fight men of ability — and experience, and withstand the assaults of jealousy. I have made some fine additions to my library but do not have much leisure for improving myself mentally and I am afraid I do not improve morally or religiously as much as I ought. In the course of a couple months I hope to have some leisure for study and physical exercise.⁶⁰³



Figure 18: Albert M. Todd's business card, ca. 1877. Although he was still quite young, Todd's card with its gilt facsimiles of prize medals announced his intention to challenge the Hotchkisses at their own marketing game. A.M. Todd Company archives, photo by author.

⁶⁰¹ Hotchkiss letters. 1876-12-2HGHtoSons.

⁶⁰² Ibid. 1876-12-4HGHtoSons.

⁶⁰³ A.M. Todd papers. 1877-1-18AMTtoOllie.

Todd visited Hiram Hotchkiss's sons in Lyons in January, but they were away when he called.⁶⁰⁴ Todd also called on Hale & Parshall in nearby Alloway and sold them a thousand pounds of peppermint oil.⁶⁰⁵ He sold some spearmint oil to the Hotchkisses, since very little (if any) spearmint was grown in western New York.⁶⁰⁶ Along with peppermint, spearmint oil would become a very important product for A. M. Todd's company.

Todd's proprietary process attracted attention; some of it unwelcome. In 1878, Todd wrote to an employee, instructing him to investigate a dealer named H.D. Cushman in Three Rivers, Michigan, whom he discovered had "stolen and are using my crystalizing process...and is putting up a building for doing it more extensively." Todd said Cushing had developed a glass bottle called a "Menthol Inhaler" which he thought was "all right, but I shall stop him from making any of the crystals themselves for I cannot give them what has cost me years of care and expense for nothing." Todd wrote, "They have not yet I think got on to my refiners so I will get them patented & now instruct you to let no one in the refining room, nor give any one any information as to any parts of my business or apparatus either refiners or otherwise." Todd remarked "They are tenfold more vigilant & careful than we have been, and we will have to keep our business closer or it is lost."⁶⁰⁷

In 1880, Albert Todd received a patent for his "Crystal White Steam Rectified"

⁶⁰⁴ Hotchkiss letters. 1877-1-17AMTtoHGH.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid. 1877-1-27HGHtoSons.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid. 1876-12-18AMTtoHGH.

⁶⁰⁷ A.M. Todd papers. 1878-10-1AMTtoIW.

process for distilling peppermint oil. The process and the hardware he also patented became centerpieces of Todd's essential oil business. Four decades later, this description still appeared on the labels of A.M. Peppermint Oil:

The 'Crystal White Steam Rectified' Oil of Peppermint is distilled from the finest plants of *Mentha Piperita* (when in full bloom), which are cultivated with scrupulous care in a soil and climate peculiarly adapted to their most perfect development. The oil, after having been distilled from the plants by improved steam processes, is placed in a specially designed receptacle, and steam, which has passed through a second quantity of fresh Peppermint Leaves, is conveyed to the oil in a long pipe and blown through it by means of curiously constructed perforated cylinders and accessories invented especially for the purpose. The finest parts only are evaporated by the steam and recovered, while the inferior parts, which in natural oil cause bitterness and rancidity, are separated and cast away. To make certain Absolute Perfection, this process is repeated. By this method, the oil is refined in a manner unequalled, and none of its vitality is impaired, since steam heat only is applied; while under the usual process by direct heat, much of the vitality is lost. Further information, with Tests for detecting adulterations, and Testimonials of Superiority from the Leading Consumers of the World, will be sent on application. To prevent adulteration, the Manufacturer places his Copyright Label upon each bottle and can, and over the cork, his seal; and all orders should be sent him directly at his factory.⁶⁰⁸

In 1880, Albert Todd imported a large supply of Black Mitcham peppermint roots from England.⁶⁰⁹ He planted these in Nottawa and when local farmers began seeing the improved yields and and quality of the oil they produced, Todd began selling roots. Hiram Hotchkiss had imported a shipment of Mitcham roots in 1845, but at the time he and E.C. Patterson had been more interested in reducing the planting of peppermint than

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid. 1920Label.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid. 1925-10-18newspaper.

in shifting to a better peppermint plant. And unlike Hotchkiss, Todd was a peppermint farmer as well as a processor and distributor. By 1900, Black Mitcham was the “dominant commercial peppermint plant in the United States.”⁶¹⁰ In

March 1884, Todd received a patent for “An Improvement in



Figure 19: Todd's headquarters in downtown Kalamazoo. The sign above the door read, "A.M. Todd, Manufacturing Chemist." A.M. Todd Company archives, photo by author.

Process of Producing Crystals from Oil of True Peppermint.”⁶¹¹ And in September 1884, Todd received a Trademark for the term “Crystal White” in the category of “Essential and Volatile Vegetable Oils and their Products.”⁶¹² To emphasize the transparency of his oils, Todd packaged them in clear glass bottles. Menthol crystals never became as big a part of Todd’s business as oils. This may have been due to others figuring out his process before he could protect it, but was probably mostly because menthol could be made more easily and economically from lower-quality mint called *mentha arvensis* or Japanese mint.

In 1886, Todd published an article in the *Proceedings of the American Pharmaceutical Association* on “The Oil of Peppermint.” He traced the history of the herb and its uses and discussed current conditions in the peppermint oil industry. Todd mentioned that he had managed to get yields as high as 18 pounds of oil per ton of mint

⁶¹⁰ Landing., 61.

⁶¹¹ A.M. Todd papers. 1884Patent.

⁶¹² Ibid. 1884TradeMark.

straw, but had also seen poor cuttings yield as little as 1.5 pounds per ton.⁶¹³ Todd's article combined historical research made possible by his growing library of antiquarian texts (including many of the alchemical and natural history volumes quoted in the Introduction) with cutting-edge science, establishing him as one of the foremost authorities on the subject.

Albert Todd's focus on the scientific growing and distilling of essential oils was not just a marketing technique. Todd had begun his peppermint career tinkering with stills to improve their efficiency. His interest in peppermint oil led him to study chemistry at Northwestern, and he called himself a manufacturing chemist. Todd pioneered the use of fractional distillation to separate the various constituents of peppermint oil, which gave him the unique ability to vary the blend of these constituents based on the flavor profile desired by a customer. The A.M. Todd Company retained this strategic edge, and based their success on an ability pioneered by Albert Todd to produce blends that meet their clients' subjective tastes by manipulating the objective properties of natural oils.

In 1891, Todd bought a large house in an affluent neighborhood in Kalamazoo, and moved his family there. Albert and Augusta had five children, William Alfred, Albert John, Paul Harold, Allman, and Ethel May. According to newspaper reports, Todd controlled half the American essential oil business and was beginning to be called Peppermint King. After a few months operating in rented space, Todd moved into a building he built downtown, on the corner of Kalamazoo Avenue and North Rose Street. The four-story, twenty-four room building was the Todd Company's headquarters until

⁶¹³ Association American Pharmaceutical, *General Index to Volumes One to Fifty of the Proceedings of the American Pharmaceutical Association from 1852 to 1902, Inclusive*. (Baltimore, MD.: The Association, 1886).

1929, and stood until 1971 when it was torn down to make room for a new Kalamazoo County Administration Building. The sign on the building's front read "A.M. Todd, Mfg. Chemist."

In 1893, Albert Todd's peppermint oil won a prize medal in Chicago, and Todd's letterhead began to carry a notice in red at the top, announcing "Five Highest Awards—Medals and Diplomas— World's Columbian Exposition, for Finest Essential Oils; Distilling Apparatus; Essential Oil Plants; Fine Chemicals; Chemical Library; Etc."⁶¹⁴ In 1893, Todd entered politics with an unsuccessful run for mayor of Kalamazoo, and was elected to Congress in 1896, a topic explored in detail in the next chapter.

Unlike the Hotchkiss brothers, who devoted little of their energy to actually farming peppermint, Albert M. Todd was very interested in improving mint farming and agriculture in general. In 1895, Todd purchased a large peppermint farm in the marshy mucklands of Allegan County, near the town of Fennville. Todd set to work improving the farm he renamed Campania, digging over ten miles of drainage ditches and straightening the stream that flowed across the property.⁶¹⁵ Todd established a second plantation he called Mentha in Van Buren County, west of Kalamazoo. He installed fifteen miles of ditches, connected to a 4-mile long main ditch. Although Todd continued to buy and redistill the peppermint oils of an increasing number of farmers, his own farms were a vital source of oil, as well as being the sites of botanical as well as social experiments.

Throughout his life, Albert Todd kept extensive handwritten records in a series of

⁶¹⁴ A.M. Todd papers. 1897Congress.

⁶¹⁵ Landing. 59.

ledger books. In 1897, Todd's annual balance sheet for his operation showed assets of \$134,119 and liabilities of \$56,589. The net value of his company was \$75,529.⁶¹⁶ His success sparked some jealous reactions. A neighboring oil dealer wrote to Hiram Hotchkiss complaining "Todd came back from New York City and says he will buy 10,000 pounds next week and 10,000 the week after and pay a good big price for it, so he says to farmers around here."⁶¹⁷ And an employee of Todd's quit the company, stole the names of Todd's farmers and customers, and tried to go into business for himself. In March 1897 Felton D. Garrison began writing to everyone on Todd's customer list. "I have been in the Crystal White Works for about 5 years," he said, "and know that I can give you just as high quality of oil as that brand at a lower price than you paid for the last you bought." Garrison offered sample bottles at \$2.50 per pound and assured Todd's customers, "My brand will be known as Dew Drop and will be made only from the purest oil that I can find." Garrison also wrote to peppermint farmers, saying "The prices are near \$1.00 per pound yet and if your oil is Prime American I might better this a trifle."⁶¹⁸ Garrison worked furiously, sending handwritten letters to Todd's entire client list in just a few weeks. He shipped samples to many, but it is unclear whether his oil posed a credible threat to Todd. Felton Garrison died of tuberculosis a year later, and his Dew Drop brand disappeared.

Although he spent quite a bit of 1897, 1898, and early 1899 in Washington as a member of the 55th Congress, leaving the business in the hands of his sons, Todd took the time to respond to a letter from his brother James, who lived in nearby Burr Oak

⁶¹⁶ A.M. Todd papers. 1897ToddCoStatement.

⁶¹⁷ Hotchkiss letters. 1894-10-18APEtoHGH.

⁶¹⁸ Western Michigan University local history archives. FDGarrisonLetters.

Michigan and raised peppermint there. Albert wrote in early 1899, "I have not bo't any for about a month, as I have all I can use for 3 or 4 months unless trade improves. I think 80¢ is all that could be obtained now in New York after paying shipping expenses, for prime quality, and I would pay you this if you wish to send it here."⁶¹⁹ Later in the summer when he had returned from Washington and resumed the day-to-day running of his business, Todd discovered "The mint crop this year will be a small one, owing to the devastation of the cut worm. I have lost 200 acres myself," Todd told the *Grand Rapids Herald*, "and the yield of the other land will be much reduced." But Todd added, "this will not affect us so much, since the price of peppermint is now down below the cost of production. It has driven the small growers out of the business, and the large growers will produce much less mint in hope that the restricted production will cause a raise in prices."⁶²⁰

Albert Todd exhibited his peppermint oil at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1900 and won another gold medal.⁶²¹ Crystal White Oil of Peppermint won first prize again the following year, at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo New York. With Hiram Hotchkiss's death in 1898, control over New York's H.G. Hotchkiss and Sons essential oil company passed to Calvin Hotchkiss and then to H.G. Hotchkiss Jr.

⁶¹⁹ A.M. Todd papers. 1899AMTtoJamesTodd.

⁶²⁰ "Lost 2,000 Acres of Mint. Crop Will Be Short Says Ex-Congressman Todd," *Grand Rapids Herald*, 1899.

⁶²¹ The Paris Exposition was the event Daniel Rodgers described to open his history of transatlantic Progressive thought. Rodgers mentioned the socialist International convened in Paris in 1900 and Todd's acquaintance Jane Addams was "Drawn to Paris as a delegate to the international women's congress and a juror for the 'social economy' section of the fair." Todd, like Addams, would have been attracted by the examination of the "painfully disruptive revolution in human relations" triggered by the intersection of technological change and the "social ethics of the marketplace." Although he did not write anything that survives regarding this aspect of the exposition, it is highly likely Todd was aware of and influenced by the fair's social pavilion. *Daniel T. Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). 9, 10.

Although the Hotchkiss brand remained powerful, western New York peppermint production fell behind Michigan and Indiana, and even the Hotchkisses depended almost entirely on western farmers for their oils. Using hardier, higher-yielding Black Mitcham plants, Michigan farmers produced over 100,000 pounds of oil annually throughout the 1890s and in the peak years of 1894 and 1897 placed 175,000 and 172,000 pounds of oil on the market.⁶²² As Todd observed in the newspaper and mentioned to his brother, the oversupply caused peppermint oil prices to fall from \$2.84 per pound in 1892 to less than a dollar per pound in 1899. But Todd was also aware that low prices were encouraging some farmers to turn away from peppermint and grow other crops like celery, which was an important cash crop for muck-farmers around Kalamazoo. He knew that in spite of low prices caused by oversupply and the depression of the 1890s, reduced supplies of oil ultimately would drive up prices.

On December 31, 1901, the A.M. Todd Company. Ltd. was formed as a “partnership association” capitalized at \$100,000. A thousand \$100 shares were issued and distributed to family members. Albert Todd took 850 shares and gave 50 shares each to his wife Augusta and his sons William and Albert James. William became Secretary of the company and “Bert” became Treasurer. Among the company’s assets were listed Campania Farm (1640 acres), “Lands in Van Buren County” which became Mentha Farm (1850 acres), Sylvania Ranch (7000 acres), and the headquarters in Kalamazoo. Also listed were 350 cattle, 32 horses, machinery patents, and label trademarks.⁶²³ In 1902, a local newspaper announced, “Todd puts his business on a profit-sharing plan.”⁶²⁴ The

⁶²² Landing.

⁶²³ A.M. Todd papers. 1901AMTLtd.

⁶²⁴ Ibid. 1902ProfitSharing.

plan consisted of paying very low monthly salaries to the company's principal shareholders (Todd and his family), and instead basing most of their compensation on profits. Todd's ongoing focus the company's profitability insured that he and his descendants would continue to develop innovative solutions to the changing markets they served. Also around 1902, posters were put up in Chicago calling for "Farm Workers for A.M. Todd Co.'s Mint Farm, 60¢ per hour - 10 hours per day. No Lost Time. Good Board \$1.05 per day, Free Room with Plenty of Showers and Laundry Facilities. Free transportation - No Fees. Leave Chicago Grand Central Station 11 a.m. daily except Saturday and Sunday."⁶²⁵ Although it seems unimpressive today, 60¢ per hour was a substantial wage at the turn of the twentieth century. Farm labor paid an average of 50¢ *per day* in 1899, net of room and board. Even ironworkers, the highest-paid manufacturing workers, received wages of only \$2.03 per day which did not include their housing and food expenses.⁶²⁶ The opportunity to earn nearly \$5 per day after room and board was unprecedented. Todd traveled to Chicago regularly to meet with customers such as William Wrigley, who had begun packaging chewing gum with his baking powder in 1892. He also maintained political connections in Chicago, including Jane Addams, who had co-founded Hull House with her partner, Ellen Gates Starr, in 1889.

After lower prices drove farmers out of peppermint production, prices rose again as Todd had expected. The surplus oil the company was holding in its warehouses began to appreciate in value. In the fall of 1902, newspapers across the nation carried stories claiming "Todd has a corner on mint oil, holding 95 per cent. of mint and essential oils of

⁶²⁵ Ibid. 1901FarmWorkers.

⁶²⁶ Conference on Research in Income, *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century. A Report of the National Bureau of Economic Research*, New York. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). 462.

the world.” According to the Michigan Telegram:

A.M. Todd Company, limited, has secured 95 per cent. of the peppermint and essential oil crop of the world, amounting to a practical corner. The price of peppermint oil, which a month ago was \$2.50 a pound, is now \$5. As the total crop this year is about 190,000 pounds, the total value will be \$900,000, and the advance amounts to nearly half a million. New York speculators have kept down the prices and the growing of the essential oil plant has been unprofitable. Todd says that under the new arrangement the growers will reap profits. The crop of the present season is only two-thirds as large as usual. the heavy rainfall has produced the smallest crop in ten years.⁶²⁷

Aside from pointing out that higher prices benefited peppermint farmers, Todd did not address the claim that he had cornered the market. Todd sent an “Outlook” letter to his customers and the press, explaining the situation:

The total American crop is the smallest for many years, not exceeding 130,000 lbs., which is less than one-third of the crop of 1896, and practically only one-half of the world’s annual consumption (250,000 lbs.), besides which there is used in Asia and Europe about 100,000 lbs. of ‘Japanese Peppermint’ so called. This year, owing to their small crop, the Japanese will not be able to export over 50,000 lbs., causing an unusual export demand for American Oil. In the year 1896 they exported 192,079 lbs. During the four years from 1895 to 1898 inclusive, a surplus of American oil was produced which brought the markets below the cost of production, resulting in the abandonment of the industry by many growers who plowed up their fields and allowed their distilleries to rust and decay...owing to an extremely wet season (the rain-fall being the greatest ever known in the history of the state) many farms were inundated since low lands are now almost exclusively used, the result being that the crop obtained is still smaller. In many cases it was impossible to cultivate with horses at all (which is the usual manner), requiring the work to be done by hand at far greater cost per acre, while the yield was much less than ordinary. In many places it was impossible to plant the ground which had been prepared, and in some cases, fields which had been planted were

⁶²⁷ "Has a Corner in Peppermint," *Charlotte Observer*, 1902.

abandoned.

Illustrating these conditions, we would mention that on one of our new farms representing an investment of over \$50,000, and where we should have secured over 5,000 lbs. Oil, only 600 lbs. was obtained, costing over \$6.00 per lb. One grower in St. Joseph County who had about 350 acres and had in good seasons over 10,000 lbs., this year, owing to winter killing and rains, secured but 1,800 lbs. At Decatur, where 130,000 lbs. were produced in 1896, but 19,000 lbs. were obtained this year.⁶²⁸

Todd went on to warn his customers to be wary of dealers selling oil of questionable “QUALITY. Owing to scarcity and consequent higher value, the temptation to adulteration which has always been practiced more or less, will be increased. We have had samples submitted to us for analysis, sold as ‘Prime’, containing over 40% adulteration, some adulterants costing not over 10c per lb. so that the mixture is sold at a large profit materially below the cost of pure quality.” Todd mentioned that in the past one of these adulterants had been “Japanese Mint,” which he explained “is no true peppermint (*Mentha Piperita*) but is (*Mentha Arvensis*), having many of the characteristics of pennyroyal.”⁶²⁹ Albert Todd’s passion for keeping “Japanese Mint” away from his peppermint was carried on by his heirs. In 2010 Todd’s grandson and his brother-in-law, both officers of the firm, remarked they would be damned if they’d ever let *Arvensis* get through the company’s doors.⁶³⁰

To emphasize his concern, Todd sent out a second letter to customers and journalists in 1902, titled “Pure vs. Adulterated Oil Peppermint.” Todd called attention to the fact that due to current scarcity, lower-quality “resinous, weedy, and adulterated Oil

⁶²⁸ A.M. Todd papers. 1902Outlook.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ personal conversation with Winship Todd and Ian Blair, June 15, 2010

Peppermint, which accumulated during the period of overproduction from 1897 to 1900,”
was entering the market. Todd offered an example of the economics of adulteration:

To illustrate:

An oil of pure quality costs to produce, per lb. - \$1.80

Selling to consumers @ per lb. - 2.00

The adulterer buys and mixes:

4 lbs. pure, cost @ \$1.80 per lb. - 7.20

1 lb. adulterant - .10

5 lbs. adulterated oil cost to him - \$7.30

He sells this to consumers @ \$1.80, realizing - \$9.00

Todd explained, “Everything of value in this (4 lbs. pure @ \$2.00 per lb.) would have cost the consumer only \$8.00, so, in buying the ‘cheaper’ oil, he is paying \$1.00 for 1 lb. of injurious substance costing 10¢.” Todd concluded that even if the adulterant was only a dilutant and did not compromise the quality of the oil, the buyer would still have been better off “to obtain their supplies direct from actual producers of established reputation.”⁶³¹

By late 1902, the price of peppermint oil had risen significantly. A.M. Todd Co, Ltd.’s Price List of Essential Oils, dated October 23, 1902, listed two varieties of peppermint oil. Crystal White Double distilled was priced at \$3.50 per lb. and Super-Extra Natural at \$3.15. The form also left blank space for handwritten quotes of “Production of other growers.”

Crystal White Double Distilled Oil Peppermint was Todd’s rectified oil, described

⁶³¹ A.M. Todd papers. 1902Adulteration.

as “produced from the finest cultivated plants of True Peppermint (*Mentha Piperita*) grown and distilled by us in the most perfect manner with approved appliances, and is not only GUARANTEED ABSOLUTELY PURE, but also UNEQUALLED IN FLAVOR, STRENGTH, SOLUBILITY, WHITENESS, etc., and is recognized throughout the world as the HIGHEST STANDARD OF QUALITY.” Super-Extra Natural was a lower-priced unrectified oil produced on Todd’s own farms, described as “the finest oil possible to produce, as above, from select cultivated plants of True Peppermint, but is not submitted to a double distillation. It is ABSOLUTELY PURE and EXTRA CHOICE IN EVERY RESPECT, and is unsurpassed by the highest quality of any other producer.”

In addition to being a peppermint farmer and controlling a patented processing technology, Albert Todd wanted to be known as a *local*, able to provide detailed, timely information on Midwestern oil production. “Regarding the production of other growers,” the price sheet continued, “we would state that being situated in the center of the producing district, and being able to personally inspect all fields of growing plants, etc., we are able to purchase with better discrimination than would otherwise be possible, and can supply the trade on the most advantageous terms.” In addition to peppermint oil, the price list included Spearmint Oil (\$5.00), Wintergreen Oil (\$2.10), Wormwood Oil (\$5.50), Tansy Oil (\$5.00), Sassafras Oil (.75), and True Fireweed Oil (\$2.50). The payment terms Todd offered were net 30 days with a discount of 1/2% for payment in less than ten days from invoice.⁶³²

Unlike Hiram Hotchkiss, who had considered his ability to distinguish quality a special talent, Albert Todd also tried to establish his reputation as an authority on

⁶³² Ibid. 1902PriceList.

scientific measurements of purity and quality. In 1903 he sent out another letter regarding adulteration. Todd quoted extensively from a recent report in Britain's *Chemist & Druggist* where "It has been recently shown by the British Chemist, E.J. Barry, B.Sc., F.I.C. that nearly every sample of Oil Peppermint coming under his observation recently is impure." Todd quoted an excerpt, listing the specific gravities and optical rotation results of ten samples of oil. Todd noted the chemist's conclusion that all ten specific gravity results were "too low for perfectly pure Oil of Peppermint...and that the optical rotation in every sample is less than that required for pure quality." The British chemist had concluded, "Under these extraordinary circumstances consumers will do well to scrutinize the quality of their purchases with the utmost care, and in the case of doubt...to employ an expert chemist to verify the quality."⁶³³ In contrast to Hiram Hotchkiss who had simply declared himself an expert judge of quality and purity, Albert Todd claimed there were objective, scientific standards of quality and that he had the credentials to insure they were met.

Todd was also careful to position himself as a reliable conduit of information from peppermint producers to essential oil consumers. By the beginning of the twentieth century, more than 90% of America's peppermint crop was grown within 100 miles of Kalamazoo, so Todd was well situated to gather intelligence for his customers. In May 1903, Todd wrote his customers to advise them that the shortage of peppermint might continue. Although higher prices had caused growers to try to increase their plantings, Todd warned "the month of March, however, opened extremely warm, causing the roots to sprout, and was followed in April by one of the most severe blizzards ever known in

⁶³³ Ibid. 1903 Adulteration.

that month, extending over the entire Peppermint producing district with a fall of snow averaging about twelve inches.”⁶³⁴ The snow had been followed by heavy rains that had prevented many farmers from planting new roots. In the fall, Todd wrote to his brother James in Burr Oak, who had offered to gather statistics from farmers in his area. Albert sent a printed form and asked James to note “their names, the Post Office address, the number of acres planted this year, with the amount of oil produced, and the total number of acres which they distilled this year including old and new, and the total amount of oil produced; and you may also note down any remarks regarding the crop and its quality, etc. so far as you should happen to learn.” Todd cautioned, “You will perhaps find some growers rather reticent about giving information, and it will accordingly not be advisable to urge them too ‘strenuously’.” Albert also said James could convey the Todd Company’s interest in buying the oil, but not make any commitments to prices and quantities. Todd was aware the growers were hoping for price rises, “and they are generally holding at from \$2.25 to \$3.00, and in some cases as high as \$4.00; but there is no prospects at present of these higher prices being reached.” Albert also asked his brother “Whenever any of the buyers come into that territory you perhaps better ‘phone us to let us know what they do... We have the ‘Bell’ telephone both in our office and home.” Albert reminded his brother that if he called after 6 PM the rates would be less and that he could of course reverse the charges.⁶³⁵

In March 1904 Todd wrote his customers that planting was slow and that due to snowmelt “A great many of the fields have been completely covered with water for ten

⁶³⁴ Ibid. 1903Outlook.

⁶³⁵ Ibid. 1903AMTtoJamesTodd.

days to a depth of eighteen inches, and unless this can be promptly carried off a large proportion of the roots will doubtless be drowned out, as they have been much weakened by the extreme winter.”⁶³⁶ In September the Todd Company sent a follow-up letter noting that “Distillation of the new crop of Oil Peppermint is now practically completed and results prove that our predictions for a small production made some time ago were correct...the total crop will be about thirty-five thousand pounds smaller than last year’s, and less than two-thirds of a normal yield.” Todd went on to caution that although prices were rising, “There is however some rejected adulterated stock on the market, which will again probably be offered under changed labels. As these oils consist largely of adulterants costing from 5¢ to 10¢ per pound an enormous profit is made whenever a sale can be effected even at the lower prices. It is needless to state that the consumption of such oil is ruinous to manufacturers of fine confectionary and pharmaceuticals.”⁶³⁷

The A.M. Todd Company continued working on innovations that would improve peppermint distilling and farming. In early 1906, the company hired a Kalamazoo patent attorney to research mechanical root planters. The lawyer’s search returned three designs similar to the company’s planter, but different enough to enable the filing to go forward.⁶³⁸ In November 1907, Todd’s employee John Shirley received a patent for his invention, which he immediately assigned to Albert James Todd, company treasurer. In

⁶³⁶ Ibid. 1904SpringOutlook.

⁶³⁷ Ibid. 1904FallOutlook.

⁶³⁸ Ibid. 1906Patent.

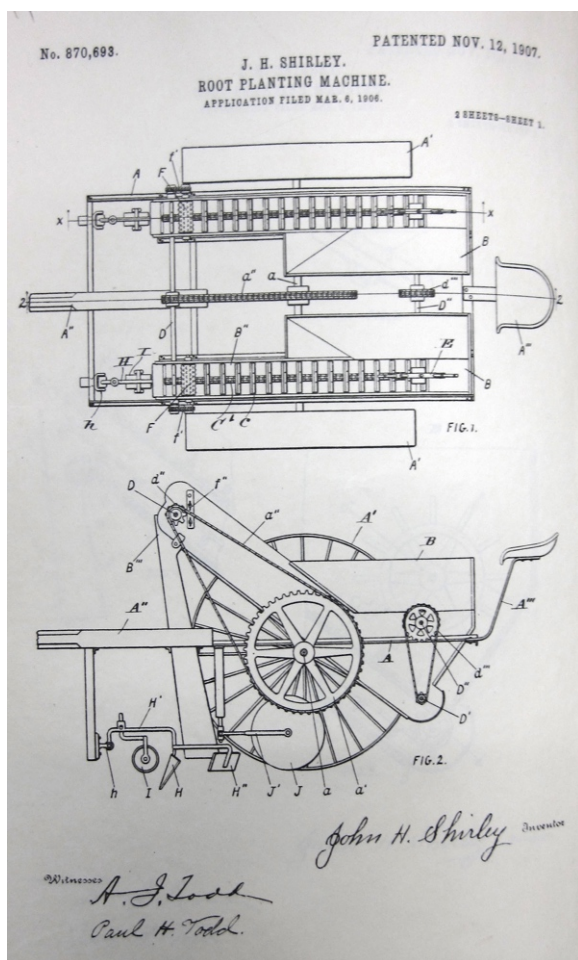


Figure 20: John Shirley's peppermint root planting machine, patented in 1907 for the A.M. Todd Company.

normal quantity of 30,000 pounds.”⁶³⁹

While the Todds took business very seriously, they remained a very close family and retained their sense of humor. In June 1909, Albert Todd wrote to his son Paul, who was completing his course in Botany at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Paul wanted to take a summer capstone course in plant hybridizing, but his father was not convinced it would be extremely valuable, and suggested that Paul either take the time to relax before coming to work during the stilling season, or take a tour. Albert wrote two

October 1908 a Kalamazoo paper printed news of a visit by the president of the H.G. Hotchkiss Essential Oil Company, Calvin Hotchkiss. Michigan’s peppermint crop yields, Hotchkiss estimated, were 50% to 60% of normal. Hotchkiss estimated 150,000 pounds of new peppermint oil would be supplemented by about 75,000 pounds of oil held over from the previous year. Hotchkiss also reported that in Wayne County New York, “the planting was about one-third of the previous season’s extent, but with the yield favorable, the aggregate of the new crop and undisposed stocks from the former production will reach the fairly

⁶³⁹ Ibid. 1908-10-5CHNews.

pages about the pros and cons of different tours Paul could take of regions where the company had interests. Then, closing his letter, Albert remarked, “I had momentarily forgotten that sometimes other equally strong attractions (or ‘attachments’) are found in Universities, especially where Co-eds participate. I am willing to presume that it is purely plant breeding that you had in mind, and shall not intrude into any of your secrets, but if it really is some fair Co-ed, just tell me whether she is a blonde or brunette!!”⁶⁴⁰ Also, in January 1910, the Todds celebrated the wedding of their youngest child, Ethel May Todd, to Edwin LeGrand Woodhams, an Englishman who was overseer of the Mentha plantation.

As the first decade of the twentieth century ended, the A.M. Todd Company’s preeminence in the essential oil business was becoming apparent. In 1908, the company’s balance sheet showed a value of \$346,935, of which \$225,722 consisted of the company’s farms and headquarters.⁶⁴¹ The following year, merchandise inventories of \$104,836 boosted the bottom line to \$478,049.⁶⁴² Not only was the A.M Todd Company beginning to dominate the domestic and export businesses Hotchkiss had pioneered, but they had discovered a new markets that had not existed when the Ranneys and Hotchkisses had dominated the peppermint oil business, that would soon overshadow exports and druggists. Tooth powders based on soap, chalk, and charcoal evolved into toothpaste when Colgate mass-produced jars of the new product in 1873 and began manufacturing tubes of toothpaste in 1890.⁶⁴³ Firms like Colgate, Pepsodent, and

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid. 1909-6-14AMTtoPaul3.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid. 1908ToddCoStatement.

⁶⁴² Ibid. 1909ToddCoStatement.

⁶⁴³ “History of Toothbrushes and Toothpaste,” Colgate-Palmolive Company.
<http://www.colgate.com/en/us/oc/oral-health/basics/brushing-and-flossing/article/history-of-toothbrushes-and-toothpastes>

Kolynos began to use large quantities of peppermint and spearmint oils to flavor their toothpastes.⁶⁴⁴ Gum chewing began in colonial America using the resins exuded by native trees such as spruce and balsam. Products based on tree-resins were marketed in the 1850s to the 1870s, when they were overtaken by paraffin-based gums made from byproducts of Pennsylvania's new oil industry.⁶⁴⁵ By the 1890s, gums based on chicle were gaining in popularity. A 1895 news report stated that 90 percent of the gum consumed in America was made from chicle, the gum of the Central American sapodilla tree of which four million pounds was imported annually.⁶⁴⁶ Although earlier chewing gums were attacked as dangerous and foul-tasting, manufacturers flavored their chicle-based gums with peppermint, spearmint, and wintergreen. Taking advantage of the traditional medicinal legacies of these herbs, advertisements for the new chewing gums claimed they aided digestion, perfumed the breath, cleared the voice, and offered a healthy alternative to chewing tobacco.⁶⁴⁷ In addition to Wrigley, who began shipping chewing gum in 1892, other companies such as Beech Nut, Fleer, Sen Sen, Beemans, Zeno, and American Chicle had also entered the rapidly-growing gum business. In March 1910, Albert Todd wrote his son Paul from New York, saying "I am glad to tell you I succeeded in contracting to American Chicle Co. 10,000# Natural Peppt @ 2.00 tho they had just bot 7000 of Rudd @ 1.90 & wanted me to sell at \$1.75."⁶⁴⁸ On the strength of this new business, the Todd Company incorporated in 1911. And on January 1 1912, the company's \$130,847 of merchandise and \$285,400 of real estate contributed to a total

⁶⁴⁴ Landing. 77.

⁶⁴⁵ Kerry Segrave, *Chewing Gum in America, 1850-1920: The Rise of an Industry*. (2015). 4.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid. 22.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid. 126.

⁶⁴⁸ A.M. Todd papers. 1910AmChicle.

value of \$543,052.

Unlike Hiram Hotchkiss, who had micromanaged his sons, Albert Todd had enough confidence in his children that in 1912 and 1913, he and Augusta spent fourteen months in Europe. Todd vacationed, added to his art collection and library, and studied the public utilities systems of Austria, Bavaria, Belgium, Denmark, Egypt, England, France, Greece, Holland, Italy, Norway, Prussia, Saxony, Scotland, Sweden, and Switzerland. He collected documents and reports and took over 500 photographs of public utilities. The children kept Todd apprised of major business developments and he offered occasional advice. In January 1913 Albert J. Todd wrote to his parents. He mentioned “Our higher priced Wrigley contract starts and we will avoid many of the delays we were obliged to encounter last year so unless something unforeseen happens I think we will have the best year on the farms we have ever had. I think our total profits will be in excess of what they have ever been before by fully twenty thousand dollars unless conditions should again be awry and we unable to exercise any control over them.”⁶⁴⁹ In March Todd wrote to his children from Berlin, about business. He suggested furnishing a social hall above the general store in their company town, Mentha:

The hall above the store is an unusually beautiful and well-lighted room and is suitable for social amenities for the employees and such others as might be invited, while at the same time the walls afford excellent opportunity for attractive pictures, which I will be glad to personally furnish as well as what furniture and so forth may be necessary. Such a place would I think add largely to the morale as well as the happiness of the employees, and thus also add incidentally to the stability of the building and the pleasure of all the members of the community.⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid. 1913BerttoMother.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid. 1913SocialMentha.



Figure 21: Todd's Mentha farm community, including in the distance a 5-story barn that was the largest in America when it was built in 1899. It has been moved and is now part of the Gilmore Auto Museum in Hickory Corners, MI.

Todd's farms, Mentha and Campania, were the largest mint-growing operations in the nation. Between 1911 and 1928, Mentha produced 361,870 pounds of spearmint oil and 84,163 pounds of peppermint.⁶⁵¹ Yields averaged about 30 pounds of oil per acre, and Todd used the farms' production to make his Crystal White and Super Extra Natural oils. Todd applied for a trademark on the "Super-Extra-Natural" name, but the regulators considered it too descriptive.⁶⁵² In spite of this setback, Todd continued working to differentiate his products on the basis of objective, scientific measures. In 1915, Todd received a reply to a letter he had written to Dr. C. Kleber at Clifton Chemical Laboratory in Passaic New Jersey, regarding U.S.P. specifications for rectified peppermint oil. Kleber agreed with specifications that required "rectified Oils of Peppermint from which the first fractions (containing sulphides and lower aldehydes) and also the tarry residue

⁶⁵¹ Ibid. 1911-28Mentha.

⁶⁵² Ibid. 1917TMDenied.

have been removed as these have a bad odor and irritating properties.” However, Kleber believed the U.S.P. standard really only applied to oils used for medicinal purposes, and that commercial users ought to be able to make up their own minds. Kleber also stated, “Regarding the content of Di-methyl sulphide it seems to me that all Peppermint plants grown for some time on American soil produce this very undesirable substance, that Mitcham plants are generally free from it, but will gradually assume under the influence of American soil and climate the character of the American plants with production of sulphides.”⁶⁵³ Todd had improved the quality of American oils by importing Black Mitcham roots from England, but he continued experimenting in his laboratory and at Mentha, to produce a better peppermint.

Todd’s continual effort to improve his plants paid off very quickly in spearmint. As the close relative of peppermint became more popular with chewing gum and toothpaste manufacturers, Todd introduced a new variety of Scotch spearmint (*mentha cardiaca* G.) that one of his suppliers had found in a Wisconsin garden. Scotch spearmint was hardier than native spearmint, and produced as much as 50% more oil. Todd planted Scotch spearmint at Mentha, and it quickly became the standard plant for producing spearmint oil.⁶⁵⁴ The Todd Company’s balance sheet for 1917 included \$243,010 in merchandise (mostly oils held at Kalamazoo) and \$411,000 in real estate at Mentha, Campania, Kalamazoo, and Sylvania for a total value of \$775,343.⁶⁵⁵

While Michigan and Indiana gained ground each year as the centers of peppermint production, the Todd family also helped introduce peppermint to the Pacific

⁶⁵³ Ibid. 1915USPChemist.

⁶⁵⁴ Landing. 78-9.

⁶⁵⁵ A.M. Todd papers. 1917ToddCoStatement.

Northwest. Albert's older brother Oliver had moved west from Michigan in 1873, when he had sold his stake in the Nottawa partnership to Albert. Oliver settled first in Kansas and then in Idaho, where he planted a little peppermint. When he made plans to grow peppermint in higher volume in 1912, Oliver decided to try the lowlands beside the Willamette River in Oregon. In December 1916 the *Pacific Drug Review* reprinted an article from the *Oregonian* about "Oregonians Distilling Peppermint." The article announced, "Four thousand pounds of peppermint oil, distilled from plants in the upper Willamette Valley...is being shipped by O.H. Todd, of Eugene, the brother of A. M. Todd." The oil was distilled in Albany Oregon, "where for four years a number of farmers have been growing mint very successfully and where there are approximately 250 acres planted to peppermint."⁶⁵⁶

By 1920, the A.M. Todd Company was the acknowledged leader in the essential oil market, and Albert Todd was known as the Peppermint King or sometimes simply as "Peppermint Todd." Over the years, Todd had educated his customers and the industry press on measuring the purity and quality of oils. One of Todd's letters to his customers included detailed descriptions of twelve scientific tests they could use to measure the purity and quality of essential oils. Taking advantage of this improved knowledge, Todd's labels carried detailed specifications stating, "The Sp. Gr. of the Crystal White Oil Peppermint at 15°C is never below .903 and never above .913," and included a space where the results of a polarity test on the can's contents could be penciled in.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁶ "Oregon Ships Peppermint Willamette Valley Growers Get \$1.55 on 4000 Pounds of Oil," *Oregonian*, 1916.

⁶⁵⁷ A.M. Todd papers. 1920Label.

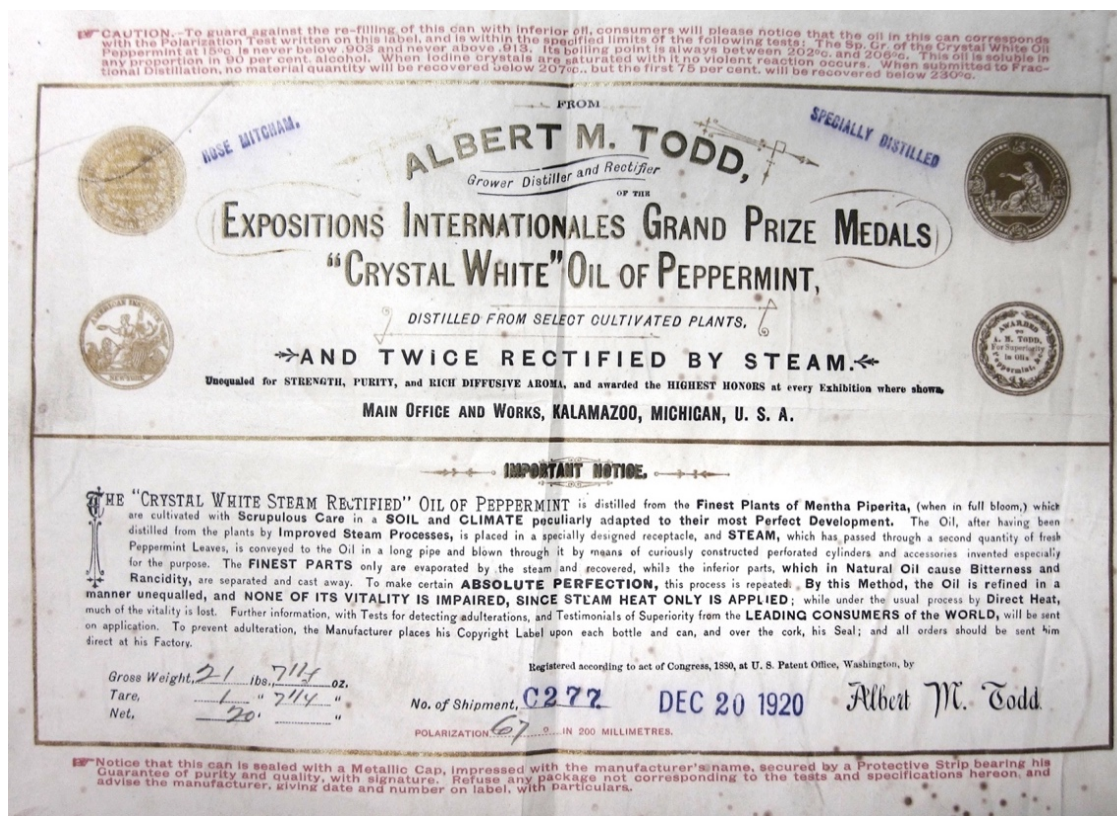


Figure 22: 1920 A.M. Todd Peppermint Oil label with detailed specifications including handwritten results of polarization test of the contents. A.M. Todd Company archives, photo by author.

Another notice in red stated, “this can is sealed with a Metallic Cap, impressed with the manufacturer’s name, secured by a Protective Strip bearing his Guarantee of purity and quality, with signature. Refuse any package not corresponding to the tests and specifications hereon, and advise the manufacturer, giving date and number on label, with particulars.”⁶⁵⁸ Todd used security devices developed by the Hotchkisses, but the products his seals and signatures protected were validated not merely by the authority of his name and reputation as a judge of subjective oil quality, but by scientific measurements of specific, objective chemical properties of the oil he sold.

As Albert Todd aged, he began turning over responsibility for the family business

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

to his children. Although Albert Todd still held most of the company's stock, the shareholders now included Todd's younger children Paul, Allman, and Ethel, and Ethel's husband, "LeGrand." The children took control when Todd turned his attention to politics or traveled. Including his fourteen-month trip in 1912-13, Albert Todd visited Europe eight times between 1907 and 1923. During that time, he shipped home 26 cases of art objects weighing over 30,000 pounds.⁶⁵⁹ When his children wrote him to get his counsel, Todd gave his opinion but left most decisions to them. In March 1920, for example, the children wrote to their father in Los Angeles for advice regarding a large land purchase they were contemplating, to expand their farm at Mentha. Todd wrote a four-page explanation of why he wouldn't buy the land, if it was up to him. He admitted, "You will probably think I am holding a pessimistic view or at least an ultra-conservative one, and you are tolerably right in so assuming." Todd admitted, "I have no doubt but that were I twenty years younger I would feel much more optimistic, so I do not feel that you should be held back by my timidity...since you are young and will have to shoulder the responsibility, to do as the majority of you think best."⁶⁶⁰ Todd wrote again a few days later, reiterating that he was against the purchase but would go along if they really wanted to buy the land. Todd advised them not to pay over \$50,000, but "I should leave this to you," he said, "for as the care and responsibility will rest with you, I think you should have the right to decide whether it should be bought or not."⁶⁶¹

Todd's confidence in his children paid off. In the 1920s, while Paul Todd was managing Mentha, he worked with operators there to design a new still that would

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid. Norris1.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid. 1920-3-9AMTtoChildren3.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid. 1920-3-15AMTtoChildren.

recover the oil in the distillate waste water. Their new processing plant recovered an extra 26,273 pounds of oil in its first eight years of operation, from water that would otherwise have been discarded.⁶⁶² And the brothers took over major accounts like Wrigley, with whom they developed an innovative new relationship. In 1919-20, Wrigley bought 55,000 pounds of peppermint oil from the Todd Company. In the summer of 1920, before the buying season commenced, company treasurer “Bert” Todd wrote a new contract with Wrigley:

We are to act as your buying agents for Oil of Peppermint and are to supply you with 50% of our purchases from this date until we have furnished you 40,000 lbs. Natural quality. You are to pay us 60¢ per pound over our cost for the Oil purchased for you f.o.b. Kalamazoo, in drums; drums to be returned to us when they are empty. You are also to provide the money with which to pay for these purchases as rapidly as we advise you the purchases have been made and the Oil ready for delivery to us.⁶⁶³

The Todd Company’s role in this agreement was that of a purchaser, on their own behalf and for Wrigley. Rather than trying to guess what the price of oil might be, the Todd Company promised to make the same effort they would make on their own account, and share the oil they bought evenly. They predicted they would probably be able to buy oil at \$4.50 per pound, but promised to advise Wrigley of changes in the market. Wrigley agreed to the deal, and the Todd Company ultimately delivered 55,000 pounds of peppermint oil for a total price of \$311,362.34 (about \$5.66 per pound), plus a fee of

⁶⁶² Ibid. 1930Stroud.

⁶⁶³ Ibid. 1920Wrigley.

\$33,000. In 1921, the price of peppermint oil had declined substantially and Wrigley offered to buy 35,000 pounds at \$1.65 to \$1.75 including the Todd Company's 35¢ per pound fee. Bert Todd responded that the prices they were currently paying farmers were between \$1.50 and \$1.60, so if he agreed to \$1.75 including his fee, he would be selling the oil for \$1.40 per pound, below his cost.⁶⁶⁴

The transparency of the arrangement gave the Todd Company much more

leverage than they would have had if the prices they'd paid farmers had been invisible to the customer. Wrigley paid more than they had wanted to pay, but they could be confident that they had paid market prices rather than an arbitrary negotiated price. The arrangement worked, and in 1921 the Todd Company balance sheet included \$351,112 in merchandise and \$595,939 in real estate. The company's total value was \$1,071,659.⁶⁶⁵

The purchasing agent agreement was only one of several creative marketing arrangements Albert Todd and his sons tried the 1920s. In 1923, The Todd Company contracted with Wrigley to sell them between 25,000 and 60,000 pounds of spearmint oil annually for five years, for the fixed price of \$3.00 per pound.⁶⁶⁶ Unlike peppermint oil,



Figure 23: 1911 correspondence between Wrigley and the A.M. Todd Company specifying the terms of their purchasing-agent agreement.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid. 1921Wrigley1.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid. 1921ToddCoStatement.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid. 1923WrigSpmtContract.

which they bought from farmers at market prices, much of the spearmint oil the Todd Company would need to fill Wrigley's orders was produced at Mentha. For the rest, the company signed a contract with George Wattles in Colon Michigan, to plant 150 acres of spearmint in 1923 and 200 acres in 1924, and to sell the spearmint oil to the Todd Company for \$2.25 per pound. The Todd Company agreed to advance Wattles \$5 per acre in May and \$5 per acre in June against the proceeds of the oil sales in the fall.⁶⁶⁷

George Wattles was the General Organizer of the American Society for Equity's Essential Oil and Mint Grower's Branch, which was organized in 1906 to fight "speculators from the east as well as the west [who] depressed the market."⁶⁶⁸ Apparently the fixed-price deal gave the activist confidence he was being treated fairly by the company he had once suspected of cornering the essential oil market.

In 1927, an assessment of "The Mint Industry in the United States" reported that Michigan and Indiana produced 450,000 pounds of peppermint oil annually, which accounted for 85% to 90% of all the oil produced in America.⁶⁶⁹ The article listed the main uses of peppermint oil in their order of importance, "1st, chewing gum, 2d, dental creams, 3d, confections, 4th, medicinal purposes." The article noted that after the first distillation the water "which flows from these receivers is conducted to a special building where the patented Todd equipment for removing the oil from distillate water is in operation. This equipment the writer was not permitted to see, and in fact no mention was made of it by the officials who explained the operation of the still...The Todd still is equipped with six 200 horsepower boilers of which five are in operation when the

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid. 1923WattlesAgt.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid. 1906GeoWattles.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid. 1927MintIndinUS.

distilling equipment is used to its fullest capacity.” The article also stated that there was nearly no remaining peppermint production in western New York. After price increases in 1925 and 1926, a few New York farmers had ordered roots from Indiana to replant, but even so “while 50 acres was set as the maximum it is likely that the actual average is much less” and only six growers had reported any plantings. The article mentioned that the Hotchkiss Company of Lyons depended entirely on oil from Michigan and Indiana, although the author noted that the western oil was probably rectified and blended to make it fit the flavor profile expected of Wayne County oils.⁶⁷⁰ Of course, since peppermint oil was rarely kept more than a few years, it is impossible to know how the Hotchkiss oil of the 1920s compared to the Hotchkiss oil of the 1850s. The flavors of A.M. Todd’s essential oils also probably changed over time, but at least Todd’s oils had been subjected to thorough chemical analyses that helped insure recipes for clients like Wrigley and Colgate would remain as consistent as possible. In the final chapter, we will look more closely at the science involved in contemporary peppermint oil production.

Albert May Todd retired from the peppermint oil business in 1928, when the company moved from



Figure 24: A.M. Todd Company headquarters, opened in 1928 when Albert Todd retired as President of the company. Photo by author.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

downtown Kalamazoo to its newly-built headquarters on Douglas Avenue. In a 60-year career, Todd had helped establish Michigan as the center of both the peppermint and spearmint oil businesses. He had invented new technologies and pioneered agricultural processes that improved the yield and quality of essential oil production. Although a strong salesman and a charismatic leader, Todd established his business on a scientific basis and promoted objective standards of purity and quality. And Todd treated his family, workers, and business associates fairly and with respect.

Albert Todd educated and trained his children to succeed him in his business, and then gave them the opportunity to run it without interference. They were remarkably effective, improving the company's performance during their father's lifetime and continuing it successfully after his death. The A.M. Todd Company remained a privately-held corporation throughout the twentieth century, always headed by a member of the Todd family. The Todd Company remained the world leader in peppermint and spearmint oil and continued its strong relationships with manufactures like Wrigley and Colgate. In 2010, the company for the first time appointed a chief executive who was not a family member. In 2011, the A.M. Todd name and the company's product portfolio and intellectual property was sold to WILD Flavors, a German firm that had invented the Capri Sun fruit drink in 1969. WILD GmbH is owned by global conglomerate Archer Daniels Midland.

CHAPTER 8

SOCIALIST CAPITALIST

Albert May Todd grew up in rural Michigan. His home state is remembered as a Grange and Greenback region, but also for the founding of the Republican Party in 1854.⁶⁷¹ Settled largely by farmers from New England and western New York like the Ranneys and their neighbors, the state acquired a Yankee sensibility that placed a high value on education.⁶⁷² Michigan's public school system had been established in its 1835 Constitution and in legislative acts passed in 1837 when the territory achieved statehood. Education



Figure 25: The Sturgis Michigan Union School Albert Todd attended in 1873.

was so important to the new residents of Michigan that a school was “often the first institution...in a newly settled community of the state. The school embodied a confident

⁶⁷¹ Todd told the story of “The Advent of the Republican Party” in a Congressional speech in 1899. It began, he said, at a convention that attacked slavery and resolved to defend “the first principles of the republican government and against the schemes of aristocracy” in Jackson, Michigan on July 6 1854. “After reading this patriotic declaration of principles,” Todd commented, “is it to be wondered at that those who founded the Republican party, seeing that corporate greed had seized its control for the purpose of destroying its splendid early history, should be forced to find another political home where they could still serve the cause of human liberty?” *Unis Etats and Congress, Congressional Record: Vol. 30-32, Proceedings and Debates of the 55th Congress, Session/United States of America, Congress.* (Washington: Government printing office, 1897). 2482; Carl C. Taylor, *The Farmers' Movement, 1620-1920.* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971). 187.

⁶⁷² Lewis. 100.

vision of the future for its citizens.”⁶⁷³ As communities grew and enrollment in the ungraded schoolhouses established with each new township increased, the state built union schools in towns and cities. Like the earlier one-room schoolhouses, union schools housed all the region’s students in a single building. But they contained separate rooms for the various grades.

After a childhood spent following news of the Civil War in a predominantly Republican community of transplanted Yankees and studying with his liberally educated mother, Albert May Todd attended the Sturgis Union School about ten miles from his home as a young adult. He enrolled in the school’s newly-opened high-school department and graduated in 1873, at the age of 23. While his six fellow graduates had focused on Science or English literature, Todd’s concentration was Classics.⁶⁷⁴ But he had developed an interest in science while processing peppermint and tinkering with stills, and Todd used his earnings from his peppermint oil business to enroll in Northwestern University in Evanston Illinois to study chemistry for a year. In 1874, after a year of college, Todd took a backpacking trip across Europe and England, visiting museums, galleries, and peppermint fields and absorbing the culture and politics of the continent and Britain. Early exposure to education, art, foreign cultures, and politics broadened Todd’s horizons and opened his mind to new ideas. Travel to Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City as a young businessman gave Todd a cosmopolitan perspective. All these experiences propelled Todd toward public service, and into a much more egalitarian style of politics

⁶⁷³ Roy Strickland, *An Honor and an Ornament: Public School Buildings in Michigan*. (Lansing: Michigan Dept. of History, Arts and Libraries, 2003).

⁶⁷⁴ *History of St. Joseph County, Michigan: With Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks and Important Manufactories, from Original Sketches by Artists of the Highest Ability*. (La Crosse, Wisc.: Brookhaven Press, 1999). 76.

than might have been expected for an affluent businessman from the Midwest. Cultural historian Daniel T. Rodgers described the creation of a transatlantic Progressive movement as a relatively urban intellectual development. Albert Todd's political career suggests Rodgers' depiction may have missed an important rural element in the transfer of European ideas into American politics.⁶⁷⁵

Albert Todd first ran for office in the Kalamazoo mayoral race of 1893. He ran as a Prohibition candidate and polled only 193 votes. Although Todd respected the impulse that had founded the Republican Party, he had no illusions about the party's transformation during the Gilded Age.⁶⁷⁶ The following year, Todd ran for mayor again and received 192 votes, probably from the same core constituency of local prohibition activists. This was too narrow a base of support, so when he decided to run for Congress in 1895, Todd ran as a fusion candidate. Fusion, defined as "electoral support of a single set of candidates by two or more parties, constituted a significant feature of late nineteenth-century politics, particularly in the Midwest and West, where full or partial fusion occurred in nearly every election."⁶⁷⁷ Democrats' success in fusing with Populists, Free Silverites, and others elicited a Republican program of "electoral reform of the

⁶⁷⁵ For example, when Daniel T. Rodgers described the Public Ownership League of America, he mentioned three of the league's urban intellectual vice presidents, Frederic Howe, Edward Dunne, and Jane Addams, but not its rural founder and president, Albert M. Todd. (Kindle location 3118) The transatlantic transference of social experience and policy models Rodgers described in *Atlantic Crossings* seems heavily weighted toward academic and urban contributors to the dialog of cultures in the Atlantic world. Even when he discussed agrarian movements, Rodgers remarked that "In a spectrum framed by the issues of the urban, industrial cores, the farmers' parties occupied no stable, predictable place," despite the fact that during much of the period he described, farming was the occupation of the majority of working Americans and more than half the population lived in rural settings. (6570) Perhaps Rodgers focused on urban academic sources because there truly were very few rural people with Progressive ideas. But Todd, like La Follette, attacked the railroads in Congress. And Todd, like Bryan, visited Europe and returned "enthusiastic about the idea of municipal ownership." (3052) Perhaps rural Progressives like Todd are not found because they are not looked for. Rodgers.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid. 2482.

⁶⁷⁷ Peter H. Argersinger, "'A Place on the Ballot': Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (1980). 288.

1890s [that] involved a conscious effort to shape the political arena by disrupting opposition parties, revising traditional campaign and voting practices, and ensuring Republican hegemony—all under the mild cover of procedural reform.” By the early 1890s, Michigan Republicans had experienced more consistent fusion



Figure 26: Albert M. Todd campaign button, 1896.

opposition than any other state, and in 1893 a new Republican legislature decided to “purify elections and prevent fraud” by outlawing fusion. As one Republican legislator candidly explained, “We don’t propose to allow the Democrats to make allies of the Populists, Prohibitionists, or any other party, and get up combination tickets against us.”⁶⁷⁸

Todd ran for Congress in defiance of the new Republican law, on a fusion ticket including endorsements from the Democratic Party, the Populists, the Free Silver Party, and Prohibition. Albert Todd grew up during a period when the Democratic Party was considered by most Michigan residents as the party of slavery. But he entered politics at a time when the Republican Party had abandoned the ideals that had created it.⁶⁷⁹ Outsider movements like Prohibition, Free Silver, and especially Populism appealed to Todd’s sense of justice and rural self-determination. Todd’s electoral defeat was announced by Kalamazoo newspapers that assumed only his Democratic voters would be counted. But

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid. 296.

⁶⁷⁹ Lewis. 371; Heather Cox Richardson, *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010). 301.

Todd challenged the constitutionality of the anti-fusion law and sued for a *mandamus* ruling requiring the election committee to count all his votes. In March 1895 regional newspapers and even the *New York Times* ran a story announcing “Michigan’s Anti-Fusion Law is Upheld—It Compels a Candidate to Elect on Which Ticket He Will Run.” The Michigan Supreme Court validated the Anti-Fusion Act passed by the legislature, “but held that, as the time limit under which Todd could have made his selection expired without giving him an opportunity of electing on which ticket he should run, the mandamus prayed for in his case was granted.”⁶⁸⁰ Todd entered Congress as a nominal Democrat—the first to represent Michigan’s Third District since the Civil War.

Todd wrote to his “Friends and Patrons,” informing them that he had been elected a Member of Congress but assuring them “my business will be carried on without interruption, under the management of my sons, who will also refer to me promptly all questions needing my personal attention, so I trust we may continue to receive your confidence and patronage.”⁶⁸¹ He offered to assist his customers and supporters with any concerns they might wish him to call the the legislature’s attention. At least one of his important customers took Todd up on his offer, and on March 23, 1897, Albert Todd presented Congress with “Memorial of William Wrigley Jr. & Co., of Chicago, protesting against the proposed duty on gum chicle—to the Committee on Ways and Means.”⁶⁸²

Among the many petitions Todd presented to the Clerk of the House was an April 1897 petition from the City Councilors of Detroit and the Detroit branch of the United Garment Workers Union, protesting the passage of a bill restricting the sale of railroad

⁶⁸⁰ *The New York Times*, 3/25/1895.

⁶⁸¹ A.M. Todd papers. 1896Friends&Patrons.

⁶⁸² *Etats and Congress*. 154.

tickets.⁶⁸³ The so-called anti-scalping bill was of great concern to many of Todd's constituents, and would consume much of his energy over the next couple of years. Although he regularly presented protests and petitions from his constituents on issues such as pensions for veteran and cigarette and liquor sales, Albert Todd spent most of his time fighting "the Money Power." Early in the first session of Congress, Todd spoke against the Dingley tariff bill, saying it had been sponsored by "great corporate interests who seek protection from foreign competition, that they may combine among themselves, crush out small producers, and exact unjust tribute from the great mass of people who are the consumers and purchasers." Instead of raising rates higher even than the 1890 tariff, Todd proposed, "So far as the collection of the Government revenues is concerned, we should stop, for once and forever, this present system of taxing the necessities of life for the encouragement of trusts, and we should maintain our National Government, as we do our State and municipal governments, by direct taxation of all wealth, that of the rich and poor alike, according to that which they possess."⁶⁸⁴ The Dingley bill had the support of Congress's Republican majority and active cooperation from President McKinley, who had preceded Maine Congressman Nelson Dingley Jr. as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and had introduced the 1890 tariff that bore his name. The Dingley tariff act became law in July 1897 and became the longest-lasting tariff with the highest rates (52%) in United States history.⁶⁸⁵ Todd rebuked House Republicans in a speech on the floor, saying:

⁶⁸³ Ibid. 841.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid. 339, 343.

⁶⁸⁵ M. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform : Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). 219.

You of the majority have, many of you, voted to pass this bill against your better judgment, and against the judgment and protest of those overtaxed and overburdened people whom you represent, because your leaders sold the influence of your once glorious party to the usurers and trusts who now dictate its policy; and under the party lash and the rule of your caucus you have been driven, at the loss of your independence and manhood, like lambs to the slaughter for the banquet of princes.

Todd's speech covered twenty pages of the Appendix to the *Congressional Record*, and ranged from his opposition to the tariff to the case for bimetallism and a warning against the trusts and plutocrats he believed were taking control of the nation. If they weren't stopped, Todd said, "it requires no prophetic eye to discern the consolidation of political power following hard after the consolidation of wealth. Then the masses in the cities will become the hotbeds of sedition, and the masses in the country will subside into a peasantry without hope."⁶⁸⁶ Although, unlike Hotchkiss, Todd never complained of problems with banks in his own business operations, he objected to concentration of power in the hands of Wall Street bankers. Todd supported bimetallism and Populist proposals to reorganize banking and the money supply on a more democratic basis. The fact that Todd was a successful businessman helps highlight an aspect of rural Populism that is not widely noticed. Unlike many of the portrayals of Populists, Todd was not anti-business but anti-monopoly.

Todd also called for an income tax, saying that a recent law (the Wilson-Gorman Tariff Act of 1894) imposing a 2% tax on incomes over \$4,000 had "rested on the simple principle that the opulent ought to be taxed as well as the poor...whose wages and modest profits derived from daily toil."⁶⁸⁷ Todd supported a tax on incomes like his own,

⁶⁸⁶ Etats and Congress. Appendix, 330.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid. Appendix, 325.

but said “against this principle the money power arrayed itself in solid phalanx. Plutocracy filled all the trenches with its mercenaries for the defense of its citadel.” The law, which had attempted to reduce the rates set by the McKinley tariff and make up the deficit with income tax, had been struck down in 1895 as unconstitutional (*Pollock v. Farmers’ Loan & Trust Co.*). Todd called the decision “an example of what the Supreme Court could do in shoring up and fortifying the system of human bondage.” It would take the 1913 passage of the 16th Amendment to establish an income tax in the U.S. Many manufacturers took positions on issues such as tariffs based on the effect they would have on either competing imports or their own exports. By the 1890s, the A.M. Todd Company was a leading exporter of peppermint oil and Todd was always concerned about the introduction of low-quality imports, especially “Japanese” oil made from *Mentha arvensis*. However, Todd believed he was able to deal with these challenges in the market rather than by recourse to government action.⁶⁸⁸ Todd believed tariffs were a tax on working people who were the consumers of protected products, for the benefit of large corporations that did not care to improve the competitiveness of those products.

Although Albert Todd was already a successful businessman in the 1890s when he entered Congress, many of his ideals closely matched those detailed in the People’s

⁶⁸⁸ Even after Albert Todd handed over control of his company to his sons, the A.M. Todd Company relied on its ability to out-compete its rivals in the market. In 1922, during a period of rapidly rising peppermint oil prices, the protective tariff on imported essential oils was raised from 25¢ per pound to 25% of the oil’s value. Indiana peppermint growers, suspecting a foreign conspiracy to regulate American exports for the benefit of the Japanese oil producers, lobbied their Congressman to raise the tariff rate on Japanese oil to 100%. The bill failed to pass the House, but peppermint oil producers got some relief in 1923 when the U.S. Department of Agriculture ruled under the statutes of the Pure Food and Drug Act that any product labelled “mint” or “mint flavored” must contain natural peppermint oil and could not be flavored with Japanese mint. Strict labeling of mint products to prevent fraud was an approach that better fit the Todd attitude toward competition and the role of government than tariffs. Peppermint was further protected under the *United States Pharmacopeia*, which specifically designated that anything compounded from natural peppermint oil must use material distilled solely from the plant *Mentha piperita*. Landing, 93-4.

Party platform of 1892. Todd was a lifelong resident of Michigan, which shows Populism addressed concerns held by rural people outside the South and West, as typically portrayed. Additionally, the fact that a prosperous capitalist was an opponent of railroads and monopolists and a supporter of Populism suggests the traditional understanding of the Populist movement as a resistance effort of down-and-out farmers is flawed.

Populism made sense to a successful Midwestern entrepreneur, but both contemporary and historical descriptions of the movement may have failed to appreciate that because they misunderstood the nature of American business. The American people, Todd said, had been tricked into thinking that the nation's business interests were the interests of the money power. It was more than a mistake to believe the interests of most businessmen were aligned with those of Wall Street financiers and monopolists: it was a misunderstanding that served the agenda of the money power. Business, Todd declared, included "all the honest and rational industries of the people, applied first to the soil, secondly to the shops, thirdly to the stores and streets; last of all and highest of all, to the intellectual and moral resources of the nation." It did not belong to the plutocrats, Todd argued:

The idea that business is that high-up, occult, and shadowy fact that we see in spectral outline behind the bond, behind the stock exchange, behind the secret conclave of millionaires banqueting at night is one of the false and pernicious aphorisms which the enemies of public liberty have promulgated by a subsidized press to delude the people and lead them to their own destruction.⁶⁸⁹

As an independent businessman who had made his own fortune, Albert Todd was a living

⁶⁸⁹ *Etats and Congress*, 328.

example of rural entrepreneurship that shared the values of rural Populists. Todd was not a paternalistic patron of rural voters, pandering to their concerns to garner votes. Nor was Todd beholden to wealthy sponsors or patrons rather than the voters of Michigan's Third District. Todd felt completely free to fight for values he shared with his constituents and attack fraud and corruption when he saw it. On February 5 1898, Todd made a speech about an armament appropriations bill (H.R. 7441), attacking the Carnegie Steel Company:

If there is any one thing that should fill the American people with amazement and alarm, it is the unblushing effrontery with which powerful corporations that have for years plundered the nation ask and receive from Congress the privilege to dictate the laws upon our statute books and continue their system of spoliation...As the effect of this bill, with certain other measures now pending before Congress, will be to continue squandering fabulous sums in purchasing from disloyal and dishonest corporations munitions of war at extravagant prices, I desire to refresh the memory of Congress and the nation upon some stupendous frauds recently perpetrated upon the Government by the corporation in whose interests these measures are to be passed.⁶⁹⁰

Todd reviewed evidence described in Report No. 1468 of the 53rd Congress, which had established that Carnegie Steel had a few years earlier supplied the navy with 8,958 tons of armor plate costing nearly \$5.5 million. Although Carnegie had charged the U.S. Navy over \$600 per ton for this armor (more than twice the rate most other nations paid for comparable plate, Todd said), the company delivered "Worthless armor plates...containing 'blowholes' over 18 inches long [that] were filled with shavings. The opening was then plugged, and the surface was afterwards planed and covered with dust

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid. 169.

to hide the defects.” Todd said “False sets of books...were kept for the use of the Government inspectors, and another set showing the actual defects were kept by the company in secret.” The 900-page report, which Todd quoted extensively, also concluded that Carnegie employees had manipulated testing machinery and armor plates to improve test results and increase the apparent tensile strength of the armor. Todd concluded:

Mr. Chairman, it is well known that since the enactment of the Dingley [tariff] law the trusts have become more solidly allied for the purpose of controlling the production and advancing the price of everything which the nation will need in time of war. These trusts have the nation by the throat. The Carnegie Steel Company has now practical control of a trust whose capital is stated to be nearly \$100,000,000 and is more powerful than ever. Surely the evidence of its treason is such as alone to demand that the Government cease from further patronizing it. And in view of the iron hand with which these trusts seek to rule the nation, I believe that the nation’s safety demands that immediate action be taken by Congress for the erection of Government works for manufacturing armor plate, ammunition, and arms.⁶⁹¹

Todd’s suggestion regarding a government-owned munition works was an opening remark for his ongoing advocacy of public ownership. A few weeks later on February 28 1898 Todd proposed an amendment to a bill (H.R. 6358) authorizing the Nebraska, Kansas, and Gulf Railway Company to build and operate a line through the Indian Territory. The amendment restricted the railroad from offering free passes to politicians, issuing stock or bonds exceeding the actual cost of the line, or purchasing mines or other properties unrelated to operating the line as a common carrier. But the key feature of the amendment would have given the government a ten-year option to buy the railroad from the company for 10% over the cost of construction. A point of order was raised, and

⁶⁹¹ Ibid. 172.

Todd's discussion of government ownership of the line was ruled not germane to the bill in question. Todd admitted he had nothing in particular against the company under discussion, but thought a public ownership provision should be added whenever new railway projects were authorized.⁶⁹²

Albert Todd was a dues-paying member of the Academy of Political Science, the American Political Science Association, the American Social Society, the American Economic Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Stable Money League, the Fabian Society, the American Academy of Social and Political Science, the Proportional Representation League, and the National Municipal League. He also contributed regularly to Kalamazoo's Cooperative Society.⁶⁹³ Todd had a large library and read widely, but he was not easily tempted by the more utopian strains of contemporary social thought. As the owner of several large properties including Mentha and Campania, Todd was not an advocate for public ownership of all land, as suggested by Henry George. And as the president of a thriving business, Todd did not favor state ownership of all industry as proposed by the Nationalist Clubs extending the ideas of Edward Bellamy. Todd's opposition to the abuses of workers and customers and the defrauding of the government by railroad corporations and monopolies made him a natural ally of Eugene V. Debs. Todd sent contributions to the Debs brothers and to Eugene Debs's defense committee during his incarceration. Albert Todd did not despise business; he objected strenuously to monopoly and the abuse of power enabled by concentrated wealth.

⁶⁹² Ibid. 2301.

⁶⁹³ A.M. Todd papers. List of organizations receiving regular membership dues, Todd ledger book.

Todd took advantage of his business background, which included extensive experience shipping and receiving freight via American railroads, to cut through what he considered the absurdity of Congress's subservience to wealth. On March 19 1898, Todd commented on an amendment:

For over ten years Congress has had official knowledge through reports of Postmasters-General, Congressional Committees, and the debates in Congress relative to the extortionate rates paid the railroads for transporting the mails. It has been repeatedly shown from undisputed and official authorities that the service for which the Government pays the railroads \$8 per 100 pounds for a distance less than a 500-mile basis the railroads obtain for 40 cents per 100 pounds... Their greedy appetite still unsatisfied, and emboldened by success, they have demanded and received an additional and stupendous compensation of over \$3,000,000 annually (and now you propose to make it \$4,000,000), for what? For absolutely nothing! Yet under the absurd claim of 'car service' they get several millions annually in addition to compensation already colossal. What would an individual shipper, a business firm, or a corporation say if, after paying simply the regular tariff rates for freight, the railroads were to demand more under the claim of 'car rental?' The railroads would not dare suggest it. But the Government, after paying over ten times the rates charged private shippers for a like service, does not object to allowing the people to be further fleeced to the tune of three to four millions annually. Gentlemen on the other side talk about 'national honor' and a 'business Administration.' Here, gentlemen, is an opportunity to prove your sincerity. Let us apply in the administration of the public business the same care, common sense, and honesty we apply in private business.⁶⁹⁴

Albert Todd's opposition to the Money Power did not make him an opponent of imperialism, however. On March 30, 1898, Todd introduced "a joint resolution (H. Res. 209) declaring war between the United States and the Kingdom of Spain, and recognizing the independence of the Republic of Cuba."⁶⁹⁵ But if the United States was going to war,

⁶⁹⁴ Etats and Congress. 2991.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid. 3401.

Todd expected American businesses to pitch in—or at the very least to refrain from profiteering. On May 2 1898, Todd called the House’s attention to the fact that:

The president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, Mr. Frank Thompson, is now at the head of the [war] transportation business of this Government. Mr. Blanchard, president of the Central Traffic Association, has just received a similar appointment in the interests of the other roads, so that no competition will be allowed for the Government business, and that the plunder shall be equally divided among the lines he controls...Under this system there is no one to represent the interests of the Government, and it results in a wholesale plunder of the Treasury and the money needed to carry the war to a successful conclusion.⁶⁹⁶

Todd introduced “A joint resolution (H. Res. 254) of inquiry, directed to the Secretary of War, requesting information regarding the rates paid the railroads for transportation of troops and Government supplies; whether competition exists; and how the public welfare is affected by the appointment of a railroad president and other railroad officials to assume official control of Government transportation.”⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 4503-4.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 4524.

Todd also made a speech in May 1898 supporting another Populist proposal from the platform of 1892, a Constitutional amendment mandating the direct election of Senators. He elaborated, adding that in addition to direct election, America should consider direct legislation through initiatives and referenda. Todd gave the example of Switzerland's recent purchase of their national rail system for 1.2 billion francs in February 1898, following a referendum that passed with more than a two-to-one majority. The first result of direct



Figure 27: Undated postcard of a crusading Albert M. Todd, A.M. Todd Company archive, photo by author.

legislation in Switzerland, Todd said, “was the total abolishment of the lobby, ‘the third house.’ The bribers gone, the professional politician soon became unknown as such, and then in turn political parties were dissolved, and now partisanship never warps the judgment of the voter...To-day Switzerland is a model republic.”⁶⁹⁸ Todd concluded by introducing “a bill to purify the public service, and to prevent unjust discriminations by corporations against citizens of the United States.” Todd attached an appendix for the record, including an article describing the Swiss railroad initiative in detail and the constitution of the Direct Legislation League of Philadelphia.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid. 4821-4.

On May 12 1898 Todd presented sixty-five petitions from Michigan unions and organizations, “protesting against the passage of the bill forbidding railroad ticket brokerage.”⁶⁹⁹ The so-called anti-scalping bill, introduced by New York Republican James Sherman, was seen as class legislation. Although Sherman said the bill “had been repeatedly recommended by the Interstate Commerce committee, that it had support of newspapers and commercial bodies, and that over 3,000 petitions in its favor had been presented to the House,” organizations such as the National Building Trades Council and the American Federation of Labor opposed it.⁷⁰⁰ During Congressional hearings, a representative of Samuel Gompers declared the bill was written in the interest if the railroads, but:

It is not in our interest, we believe. It is legislation which proposes to restrict the privileges of the citizen...It is more reaching in its vicious spirit than the proposed attempt to make more moral, more honest, the ticket broker...but the bill as proposed declares that having purchased a railroad ticket...and this ticket being a certificate for service and the railroad not having performed that service...I shall not have the liberty to dispose of that ticket to whomsoever I please.⁷⁰¹

On the bill’s final day, during a four-hour debate, Todd made a long speech defending his proposed amendment which would have eviscerated the bill by prohibiting the railroads from imposing “any restrictions or limitations as to when or by whom any ticket may be used after having once been purchased from the common carrier issuing the same or any

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid. 4883.

⁷⁰⁰ Quoted in *The Chicago Tribune*, 12/8/1898. 12.

⁷⁰¹ *Ticket Brokerage Hearings Had on December 16, 1897, January 6 and 7, 1898, and January 15, 1898, before the Committee on Interstate Commerce of the United States Senate on the Bill (S. 1575) to Amend an Act Entitled 'an Act to Regulate Commerce.'* 382 P. O. (U.S.A. 55th Congress, 2d Session, Senate. Document No. 128, 1898). 218.

legally authorized agent.”⁷⁰² The point of the amendment was to insure as the union representative had suggested that any ticket-holder would be able to use, give away, or sell a rail ticket in the same way they could any other personal property. Although the bill was ostensibly directed at ticket-brokers, Todd said the true “object of the bill is, by making it a crime to buy and sell railroad tickets except through the men whom the railroads appoint, to entrench the railroad pool behind another bulwark of law and enable them to advance and maintain rates already oppressive.” As an example of the wickedness of railroads, Todd spoke at length about the Credit Mobilier scandal of 1873, which he said had been systematically erased from public memory. The House committee report on the subject, he said “is extremely difficult to procure, copies having been destroyed as far as possible to remove from public view the great crime committed...within less than an hour after Mr. Garfield’s nomination to the Presidency nearly every copy had been sequestered from the Capitol, he being among the number implicated.” Todd digressed to discuss the Standard Oil Company’s collusion with the railroads in a section of his speech titled “The History of a Corporate Crime.” He then quoted extensively from the 1887 Pattison report on the Credit Mobilier scandal. Todd remarked he was adding all this material into the record “For the purpose of placing in the debates of Congress for the use of the future historian who shall write ‘The History of the Rise of Corporate Imperialism.’” Todd’s amendment was defeated, the bill passed the House 119-101, and Todd’s colleagues voted to have his speech stricken from the Congressional Record (it was printed instead in the Appendix).

Albert Todd did not win re-election to Congress. In November 1898, he was

⁷⁰² Etats and Congress. Appendix 3-17.

narrowly defeated by Michigan's Secretary of State, Republican Washington Gardner, 21,182 votes to 19,864.⁷⁰³ Todd spent the final months of the 55th Congress arguing against government waste and corruption. In the summer of 1898, Todd proposed an amendment to a naval appropriation bill (H.R. 3483) for the war in Cuba, suggesting a decrease in the amount budgeted for transportation over the next six months from \$44 million to \$20 million. Todd cited several examples of railroads grossly overcharging the military, even in excess of the rates they charged the general public (which Todd suggested were already abusive). The amendment failed.⁷⁰⁴ On January 28 1899, Todd spoke against a bill to increase the size of the standing army in peacetime. He offered an amendment that "The Army of the United States shall in time of peace consist of the same numbers as the peace footing authorized by existing law." The amendment also directed the President "to recall the military and naval forces of the United States from the islands of the Philippines whenever the United States Government shall have evidence of the formation of a stable and independent government in those islands by the inhabitants thereof." Todd argued that the Filipinos "have already adopted a republican government of their own."⁷⁰⁵ This amendment also failed. Finally, in February 1899, before the new Congress began in March, Todd offered another amendment lowering the appropriation for troop transportation. He argued that the railroads were gouging the government, and remarked:

While on this subject of railroad transportation I desire to refer to the fact that

⁷⁰³ A. J. Halford, *Official Congressional Directory for the Use of the United States Congress, ... Compiled ... By A.J. Halford. 56th Congress, 2d Session, 2d Edition* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901). 50.

⁷⁰⁴ *Etats and Congress*. 6184.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 1216.

whenever I have had the honor to address Congress or to offer amendments for the protection of the public from the avarice of trusts, gentlemen on the other side, who are the agents and attorneys of these trusts, have endeavored by disorder, ridicule, or sneers to prevent a fair hearing; and ‘points of order’ would be raised, it being well understood that whatever is opposed to the onward march of the trusts is subject to a ‘point of order.’ I have always considered it an honor to be opposed by such influences, and believe that he whose work here has not earned the antagonism of the opposition has not merited the approval of his conscience or the public.⁷⁰⁶

Todd’s final amendment failed, but he was undeterred. In September 1899 newspapers across the nation ran stories about a large anti-trust conference held in Chicago. Albert Todd was a member of executive committee of the new organization which was reported to be “national in scope and non-partisan in character, and is to be amalgamated finally with the National Anti-Trust League.”⁷⁰⁷ In 1900, Todd ran for mayor of Kalamazoo, but was defeated by Republican Judge A.J. Mills. Todd decided not to run for Congress in 1900, and a Grand Rapids newspaper remarked “this is something to be sincerely regretted...It was Mr. Todd who brought the prohibitionists, democrats, populists, silver republicans, and socialists together in one grand combine...no other man in all Michigan could engineer the formation of such a political trust.”⁷⁰⁸ Of course, after the passage of the anti-fusion law, Todd would not have been able to achieve the same upset victory he had managed in 1896.

But being out of office did not keep Todd out of the national spotlight. Todd made the news again in 1900, when papers everywhere ran a story titled “Socialists to Start a

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., 2840.

⁷⁰⁷ "Against the Trusts Temporary Organization Is Effected at Chicago," *Duluth News-Tribune*, 1899., "Will Be Largely Attended Conference at Chicago to Discuss Questions of Trusts," *Omaha World Herald*, 1899.

⁷⁰⁸ "Mr. Todd Will Not Run," *Grand Rapids Herald*, 1900.

College.”

Forced out of the colleges and universities endowed by the rich, several leaders of socialistic thought in the United States and England have determined to organize educational institutions of their own, and in connection with them settlements are to be established where the believers in the ideas of socialism may make their homes...Behind the movement...are Mayor Samuel Jones of Toledo, N.O. Nelson, the St. Louis manufacturer, Mrs. E.D. Rand, who endowed the chair formerly held by Prof. Herron at Iowa College, and A.M. Todd, “The Peppermint King,” of Kalamazoo, Mich.⁷⁰⁹

The school would come to be known as the Rand School of Social Science, after its main benefactor, Mrs. E.D. Rand. Caroline Amanda Sherfey Rand was the daughter of a Burlington Iowa merchant and widow of Elbridge Dexter Rand, founder of the city’s Congregational Church and wealthy livestock and lumber baron. Mrs. Rand’s daughter, also named Caroline, married Christian socialist George Davis Herron, who along with Eugene V. Debs, Jane Addams, and Annie Diggs founded the Social Reform Union.⁷¹⁰ When Mrs. Rand died in 1905, she left \$200,000 to establish a school for socialist education, naming her daughter and Herron trustees. The school opened in 1906 in New York City, where it held classes and ran a summer camp in the Poconos for fifty years. Todd remained a strong supporter of the school for the rest of his life. And in 1903, he put some of his social idealism on display. An advertising supplement Todd had printed in London’s *Chemist and Druggist* for January 31 1903 included quotes from an article on Campania, titled “The Largest Mint Farm.”

⁷⁰⁹ "Socialists to Start a College. Leader, It Is Said, Will Organize a School of Appiled Christianity," *New Haven Register*, 1900.

⁷¹⁰ Edward T. James et al., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950; a Biographical Dictionary*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). 112-3, 482.

This large mint farm and its equipment is evidently operated on the principle of avoiding every unnecessary waste. And this principle is extended to the management and welfare of the employees. They are paid something higher than usual wages, and a higher standard of efficiency is accordingly expected and realized from them. Their employers evidently believe it is good economy to greet their men cordially whenever they meet them at their work or elsewhere. They are treated as *men*, not merely as ‘hands,’ and consequently have every inducement to improve their efficiency in the work.⁷¹¹

Albert Todd’s peppermint farms were not the sole examples of the power of a profitable cash crop like peppermint to enable progressive social change. Among the farmers whose personal stories included peppermint was Mary Clark of Galien Michigan. Mary was first noticed by the *Detroit Free Press* in a 1905 article titled “Woman Farmer’s Success—Miss Mary Clark of Michigan Does All the Work on 80 Acres.” The article began with the news that Mary Clark “was paying girls a dollar a day and their dinners” to work on her farm.⁷¹² As word of the high wages Mary Clark offered spread:

The story stirred up the sluggish imagination of half the wage earners of Berrien county, where flesh and blood are cheap—where women pick berries in the broiling sun for twenty-five cents a crate; where they toil week days and Sundays for the same pitiful sum and work in the kitchen for a dollar and a half a week. But the fortunate few who found employment in Miss Clark’s peppermint field had an opportunity to earn their money, for they literally worked shoulder to shoulder with the most indefatigable woman in the country—a woman noted for her tremendous capacity for work, and whose endurance is the marvel of men where brawn is the common heritage.

⁷¹¹ A.M. Todd papers. 1903Chem&Drug.

⁷¹² "Woman Farmer's Success. Miss Mary Clark of Michigan Does All the Work on 80 Acres," *Kansas City Star*, 1905.

The article described how Mary took over her widowed mother's farm at age 16 and bought an additional 40 acres next door. "She cuts and rakes twenty tons of hay; milks ten cows night and morning, and once

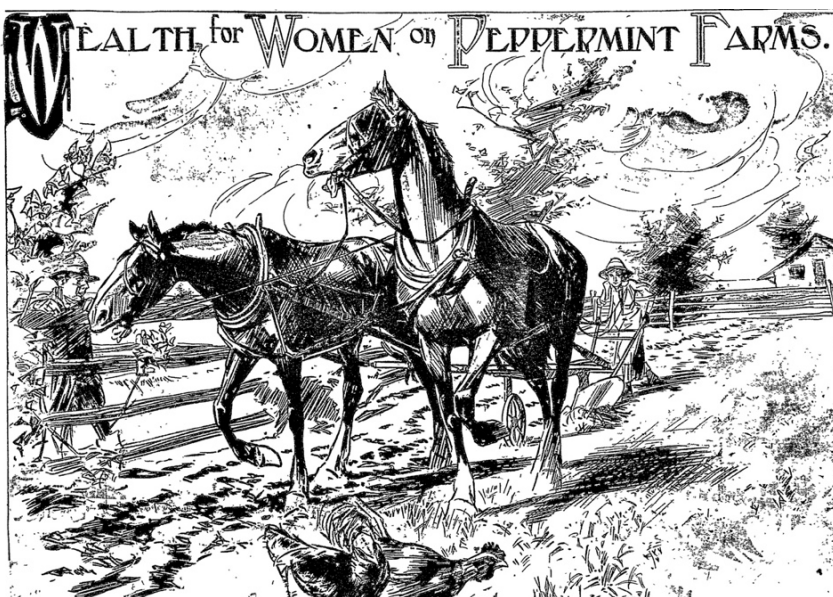


Figure 28: Illustration from 1912 newspaper article showing Mary Clark plowing her peppermint field.

a week sends half a ton of milk eight miles to the creamery, where her checks average \$50 a month." Returning to the women earning a dollar a day and their meals on Clark's farm, the article explained, "this is the basis on which these unusual wages were paid—the workers must keep abreast of their leader, like a regiment of soldiers, to get their dollar and their dinner. To their credit be it recorded, not one went hungry and every girl had her shining piece of silver when the day was done." The following year, the *Kansas City Star* ran another story titled "Girl Runs Peppermint Farm" about Mary Clark, remarking "She made a study of the chemistry of the soil and of the rotation in crops. With this knowledge she made the ordinary crop growing a secondary consideration, and went into the raising of peppermint and the distilling of peppermint oil."⁷¹³ The article noted that "Miss Clark has adopted a system of autumn planting, which is contrary to

⁷¹³ "Girl Runs Peppermint Farm," *Kansas City Star*, 1906.

established rules, and the mint growers watched the experiment with great interest and prophesied failure...But the innovation was a success, and is now heartily endorsed by farmers, as the cost of planting is doubled in the spring, it being hard to get hands at any price to work in muck soil in the wet season.” The article concluded, “Miss Clark employed fifteen women in the weeding season, paying those who worked shoulder to shoulder with her \$1 a day and their dinners. However, she says women cannot stand the hard work in the peppermint field, and she has decided to employ men for this work hereafter.” This last comment was apparently a bit of fiction, because several years later year in 1912 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a half-page feature titled “Wealth for Women on Peppermint Farms.” The article described Mary Clark’s success as a peppermint farmer, naming her “the ‘Peppermint Queen,’ as her achievements in the cultivation of peppermint may well prove an inspiration to other women farmers to specialize on some one crop and make its cultivation a rousing success.”⁷¹⁴ Peppermint farming, the article claimed, was becoming increasingly popular with women farmers in Michigan because it “is an ideal occupation for feminine bread winners and one in which the profits are practically assured.” The article included a long passage in which Mary Clark told her own story:

The farm came to my mother and me about fourteen years ago, with a mortgage of about two-thirds its value. The advice of my friends was for us to sell and move to town. My mother could keep boarders and I must get a position in a shop or office. Contrary to this, I wanted to stay on the farm, and as mother was willing, we decided to stick it out. While there were no peppermint farms in our neighborhood, I had heard and seen enough about growing mint to be pretty sure that my land was suited to the crop. I began by planting two acres, and every year

⁷¹⁴ “Wealth for Women on Peppermint Farms,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1912.

since I have planted two acres. Peppermint is a rotation crop and takes so much from the land that it must be changed at least every five years. I never let my land stay in mint longer than four years, for the simple reason that I learned by experiments that after that time the crop became less remunerative and my profits faded.

Clark continued, “I employ as many half-grown boys and girls on my farm as I can get. Mint setting is not heavy work, and besides, the stooping makes it especially adapted to people with young, supple backs...weeding must be done by hand, and for that purpose again I prefer women and children. They are lighter on their feet and more nimble with their fingers, and, if painstaking, do as clean work, covering more ground than men.” She concluded, “We make a good income and we now have a high-priced farm, free from debt, but both of us, my mother and I, have had to work for it. Every year that passes we are thankful that we stuck to our land and didn’t try boarders and the shop.” In a period when Progressive reformers were beginning to address the “Country Life Problem” and women were beginning to chafe at the limitations imposed by patriarchal society, Mary Clark’s peppermint farm offered a valuable example for women and farmers eager to take charge of their own rural destinies.⁷¹⁵

Albert Todd entered local politics again in 1907, when he proposed at a hearing convened to consider amending Kalamazoo’s charter, that the city should bar officials of local corporations from holding office. The proposal was not adopted, but Todd remained interested in both local and national political issues. He sent money to the Debs brothers and supported Eugene V. Debs in his political campaigns. In the fall of 1913, after Albert and Augusta Todd’s fourteen-month visit to Europe, the Wilkes-Barre *Times* ran an

⁷¹⁵ Horace Curzon Plunkett, *The Rural Life Problem of the United States; Notes of an Irish Observer*. (New York: Macmillan, 1910).

article titled “Todd’s Little Ticket.” It described the National Popular Government League’s convention in Washington, and said:

A.M. Todd of Kalamazoo bought it in Switzerland for \$27. Todd was over studying the initiative and referendum. Todd wanted to travel throughout the cantons; to go by rail and also by boat. He wanted to be spared the bother of buying a new ticket every time he started for the next place.

So Todd went to the government-owned railroad; to the costliest-per-mile roadbed in the world—costliest because of two great tunnels driven through the granite heart of the Alps—and said:

“I want a wholesale price.”

And they made him one—\$27 for 42 days, the ticket good on any Swiss conveyance and good as many times within that period as Todd wanted to use it—he might have traveled 42 days and 42 nights!

The Swiss railroads are good roads. They give a good service. They also give a cheap service. And they serve the public first—no banker management, no underwriting graft; no inside ring buying up scrap-iron feeders and selling it at big profit to themselves as officers and directors; and, naturally, no doubtful securities or trouble to get funds when the road needs fixing up.⁷¹⁶

Using information he had accumulated in his travels to advance his long-held interest public ownership, Todd brought together four like-minded Kalamazoo residents to form the Municipal Ownership League in August 1914. The League’s first order of business was to advocate that the city of Kalamazoo should take over its gas supply. In March 1915 the League hired a British expert to write a detailed assessment of the current gas company and draw up an alternative plan for a public gasworks. He concluded that the public project could provide gas to consumers for 75¢ per 1,000 cubic feet at a profit that would pay for the project in less than twenty years, versus the current private rate of \$1.25. The expert concluded that even if it decided against undertaking a municipal

⁷¹⁶ “Todd’s Little Ticket,” *Wilkes-Barre Times*, 1913.

project, the city ought to renew the private franchise at a rate of 75¢, which he calculated would still be profitable for the contractor. At the lower rate, he predicted, gas consumption in Kalamazoo would rise significantly. A referendum vote on September 7 1915 failed to get the 3/5 majority needed to create a municipal gasworks. Todd attributed the loss to “lavish expenditure of money on the part of the [private] gas company [that] so influenced public opinion through the press and widespread misrepresentation of facts by means of cunningly-worded literature.”⁷¹⁷ A few months later, Todd became founding president of the Public Ownership League of America. Other officers of the new national organization included Jane Addams, vice president, and New Jersey manufacturer Charles H. Ingersoll, treasurer.

By the 1910s, the A.M. Todd Company dominated the essential oil markets and Todd’s children were largely responsible for the daily running of it. Todd received regular profit-sharing dividends on his company shares, in addition to a modest \$416 per month salary. He had abundant money and time to devote to his political passions. Todd opened an office for the Public Ownership League in Washington, D.C. and he increased his support of the Rand School, which had its own page in Todd’s ledger book. In August 1917 Todd recorded a \$5,000 contribution to the Society of the Commonwealth Center. In parentheses he added, “I have written to the Society that if they are able to reduce their indebted to \$50,000 by Sept. 1, 1918, the \$5,000 is to be made a gift to them, & the bonds returned to them marked ‘Canceled and paid.’ I offered as per letter enclosing

⁷¹⁷ Albert May Todd, *Municipal Ownership, with a Special Survey of Municipal Gas Plants in America and Europe; Comprising a View of the General Principles of Public Ownership; Its Relation to the Public Welfare: With a Special Study of Gas Works in American and European Cities under Both Public and Private Ownership; a Comparison of Efficiency, Costs, and Rates of Charge; and the Influence of Public Ownership on General Prosperity, Good Government and Democracy*. (Chicago: Public ownership League of America, 1918). 64-6, 73.

checks, to return the stock canceled if total debt is reduced to \$50,000 in one year.”⁷¹⁸ The Society of the Commonwealth Center was the leaseholder of the “People’s House,” a six-story building purchased from the YWCA that became the Rand School’s new headquarters in the fall of 1917. And Todd subsidized the Public Ownership League’s printing office, which published a series of booklets, several written by Todd. One of these was a 122-page pamphlet on *Municipal Ownership with a Special Survey of Municipal Gas Plants in America and Europe*.⁷¹⁹

Todd introduced the subject of public ownership by saying “Because of intimate relations early in life with the railroads, telegraph and other public utilities, the conviction came to me that the corporations operating them were not only usurping functions that rightly belonged to the government, but were rapidly becoming so rich and powerful as to

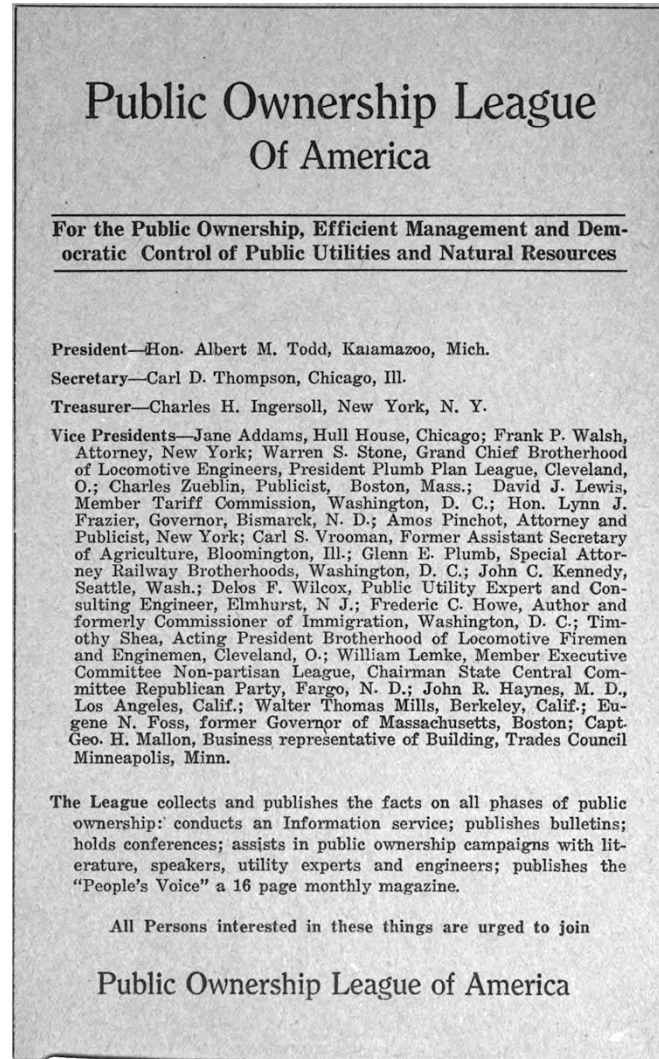


Figure 29: Pamphlet published by Todd's Public Ownership League, listing the league's officers.

⁷¹⁸ A.M. Todd papers. 1914InvestmentA/C.

⁷¹⁹ Todd.

be a serious menace to liberty, justice and democracy, in defiance of which, private monopoly ever sought to control the making and administration of law.” Todd explained how coal gas was made and gave an overview of the history of the gas industry and its present scope. He then devoted individual chapters to the municipal gas works of Virginia, Minnesota, Indianapolis, Germany, and Great Britain, and to “The Fight for Municipal Gas in Kalamazoo with an Investigation of Costs and Profits.” In his discussion of the Kalamazoo situation, Todd noted that “All of the public utilities of Kalamazoo, Michigan, with the exception of the electric lighting of the streets and the operation of the public water plant are under the control of a single monopoly directed from 14 Wall Street, New York City, which corporation also controls the public utilities of many of the other cities of Michigan as well as those of other states.” 14 Wall Street was the address of the newly-built Bankers Trust skyscraper. The tower’s entire 31st floor was occupied by an apartment belonging to banking mogul J.P. Morgan.

In late 1918 the *Washington Times* carried an article about “The Public Ownership League of America,” written by the League’s secretary Carl D. Thompson. Thompson wrote “The people want the Government to *keep* the railroads and the wire systems now that it has ‘taken them over.’ And especially since hundreds of millions of dollars of the people’s money is being put into the roads to repair them and bring them up to standard.” The takeover Thompson referred to was Woodrow Wilson’s wartime nationalization of the American rail system in December 1918. The article listed the League’s officers, including in addition to himself and Albert M. Todd, Jane Addams, Edward F. Dunne, former governor of Illinois, Frank P. Walsh, chairman of the War

Labor Board, and Frank Hawes, president of the United Mineworkers Union.⁷²⁰ On February 21, 1919 Todd gave testimony as president of the League, advocating for public ownership of the railroads at hearings held by the Interstate Commerce Commission. The League, he said, “does not advocate Government ownership of private industries, but is largely devoted to studying and applying the practical problems of democratic government in a broad and impartial manner, and sending its findings to all parts of the country.” Demonstrating his thorough understanding of the economic principles involved, Todd continued, “It is especially interested in promoting Government ownership of those resources and agencies which are natural monopolies and which the Government can own and manage better for the general public welfare than they can be owned and managed by private interests.”⁷²¹ Woodrow Wilson had nationalized the American rail system on December 26, 1918, and Todd wanted government ownership to continue after the war under the provisions of a bill (H.R. 10550) introduced in March 1918 by Wisconsin Congressman William J. Cary. “The railroads,” Todd said, “are a natural monopoly, and a private monopoly is abhorrent to democracy.”⁷²²

Todd observed that ineffective government regulation of privately-owned railroads “has made ‘looting’ of the roads and public possible. Why not remove the loot and secure public ownership of the railways at the same time, since they inevitably and naturally go together?” Todd concluded by suggesting that:

It may, of course, be five or ten years after Government ownership comes before

⁷²⁰ Carl D. Thompson, "The Public Ownership League of America," *Washington Times*, 10/8/1918.

⁷²¹ Alfred M. Todd, *Public Ownership of Railroads*, 65th Congress, 3rd Session ed., Interstate Commerce Committee (Washington: GPO, 1919). 4.

⁷²² *Ibid.* 6.

the merits of the plan are outstanding above private ownership. But the period in which the Government has been in control and facing a world war and the most adverse obstacles of all kinds here at home, has been quite sufficient to demonstrate both to unbiased experts and to millions of our people, railroad employees almost universally, and many others, that Government control must be continued.⁷²³

The Interstate Commerce Commission ignored the League's proposal and the railroads were returned to private control in March 1920, under the Esch-Cummins Act. Although rail-workers had won an eight-hour work-day during the war years, in 1922 they faced a 12% wage-cut. 400,000 workers walked off the job, beginning the largest rail strike since Eugene V. Debs's Pullman Strike of 1894.

The Red Scare and wartime attacks on American civil rights had also affected the Rand School, which was raided and prosecuted under the Espionage Act of 1917. The school published a booklet in its own defense, declaring:

The Rand School of Social Science last year had 5,000 students. Rand students, when they finish their training, go out to be lecturers, street speakers, teachers and organizers in the labor movement. They become leading spirits among their fellows, for they have supplemented their toil-won knowledge of present social and industrial evils with an intelligent, constructive idealism that builds in a new and better way where the present system fails and collapses...Through its students, the Rand School has created a high and unique function for itself in the rapidly changing scheme of American life. It is a great educational power plant whose energies are dedicated to the cause of political freedom and economic justice.⁷²⁴

Albert Todd's ledger page for the school lists a number of contributions he made to the

⁷²³ Todd. 43.

⁷²⁴ Science Rand School of Social, *The Case of the Rand School*. (New York City: The School, 1919). 1.

school's defense fund and to the personal defense fund of the school's publication editor, Algernon Lee.

In July 1918, Todd presented an essay to the Academy of Political Science at their National Conference on the War Economy. Todd's "Relation of Public Ownership to Democracy and Social Justice" summarizes his thinking on the subject and was reprinted by a variety of public affairs periodicals and by the Public Ownership League. Todd framed his argument with an affirmation that "Democracy is the greatest thing in the world," and by pointing out the extreme sacrifices people had just made in in the World War to "make the world safe" for it. He then quoted Lincoln, suggesting that securing democracy was the "unfinished work which they who have fought here have thus far so nobly advanced...that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."⁷²⁵ The challenge to democracy, Todd continued, was "special privilege." He quoted Lincoln again, that "as a result of the war, corporations have been enthroned, and an era of corruption in high places will follow." Todd continued, "His prophecy already has been in part fulfilled, because special privilege has been permitted to secure the control of our great public functions. To restore Democracy, by nationalizing our great public utilities in the interest of the public good, is the great work now before us."⁷²⁶

Todd claimed that in order to avoid what Jefferson had called the "aristocracy of

⁷²⁵ Albert M. Todd, "Relation of Public Ownership to Democracy and Social Justice," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 8, no. 4 (1920). 731.

⁷²⁶ Ibid. 732-3.

our moneyed corporations,” the public should own and the government should operate all “utilities and services which are of universal need...and especially those which either by nature or by law are monopolies.”

Specifically, Todd proposed to nationalize railroads, telegraph and telephone services, and municipal services such as street railways, gas and electric.⁷²⁷ Based on his travels in Europe and his study of other nations such as Russia, Japan, Australia, Mexico, and China, Todd observed “*The United States of America*



Figure 30: Undated photo of Albert M. Todd, A.M. Todd Company archive, photo by author.

is the only nation in the world which does not publicly own and operate its telephone and telegraph systems as government functions.”⁷²⁸ He claimed that contrary to a public opinion beguiled by the corporate-controlled press, European public utilities were operated economically. Todd said, “all these public utilities were efficiently administered and gave a profit to the government.” And “Strikes and labor trouble of any kind are so extremely rare as to be almost unknown under public ownership, for the public has no interest nor desire to treat its ‘citizen employees’ otherwise than with generosity and

⁷²⁷ Albert Todd never expressed his opinion regarding the Federal Reserve System, established in 1914. It is possible he viewed it as an attempt to restrict the influence of the “money power” as it was expressed in financial organizations such as J.P. Morgan’s Wall Street bank, which had presided over the creation of the trusts and monopolies Todd had consistently opposed. To the extent that Morgan seemed to oppose the government intervention in banking undertaken with the Federal Reserve, Todd may have considered the central bank a positive change.

⁷²⁸ original italics, Todd. 735.

justice.”⁷²⁹

Todd continued with a detailed description of the Swiss railway system, which had begun under private ownership but had been purchased by the government and nationalized after a public referendum in 1898. Todd observed that although the mountainous terrain of Switzerland made railway construction about five times as expensive as it was in the U.S., Swiss fares were substantially lower than those in America. Todd then reviewed the history of Pacific Railroad construction and the Credit Mobilier’s bribery of politicians before moving to more recent history. Between 1912 and 1915, he said, the Interstate Commerce Commission had investigated five railway systems that accounted for one third of the nation’s rail miles. “The evidence secured by the commission shows that *every railroad company investigated knowingly falsified its accounts*, partly in order to hide expenditures of large sums for controlling politics and elections and influencing legislation and the administration of laws.”⁷³⁰ In the case of one railroad, the report had found “more than 300 subsidiary corporations in a web of entangling alliances with each other, many of which are seemingly planned, created, and manipulated by lawyers expressly retained for the purpose of concealment or deception.” This railroad, the report continued, was plagued by “the most glaring instances of maladministration...The difficulties under which this railroad system has labored in the past are internal and wholly due to its own mismanagement. Its troubles have not arisen because of regulation by government authority,” Todd said. “Its greatest losses and most costly blunders were made in attempting to circumvent governmental regulation and to

⁷²⁹ Ibid. 738.

⁷³⁰ original italics, Ibid. 750.

extend its domination beyond the limits fixed by law.”⁷³¹ Todd closed by reiterating, “Government ownership of railroads is desirable; it is practicable; it is the only democratic and just solution of the railway problem, the great emergency of American reconstruction.”⁷³²

In 1922, Albert Todd retired as president of the League and was replaced by Willis J. Spaulding, the public utilities commissioner of Springfield Illinois. Spaulding was twenty years younger than the 72-year old Todd, and was later instrumental in establishing public water and electrical services in Springfield and building Lake Springfield. Todd retained the title of Honorary President, but began spending more time at home with his books and artworks. In the eight trips he had made to Europe between 1907 and 1923, Todd had acquired and shipped home over 30,000 pounds of art objects. At the end of his life, he accelerated the process of giving his art away. Other wealthy art collectors such as J.P. Morgan failed to “make some suitable disposition” of their collections “which would render them permanently available for the instruction and pleasure of the American people.”⁷³³ Todd began giving his art collection away during his lifetime. He provided paintings for the walls of the social hall in Mentha and the public schools of Kalamazoo. He loaned a large part of his collection to Kalamazoo College and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, which later became permanent gifts. His only stipulation in these gifts was that the recipients had to display the art where the public would be able to see it.

⁷³¹ Ibid. 751-2.

⁷³² Ibid. 759.

⁷³³ Morgan admitted in his will that he had neglected to make these arrangements. Quoted in Rachel Cohen, “J.P. Morgan: The Man Who Bought the World,” *Apollo, The International Art Magazine*, September 5, 2015.

Todd told a reporter from the *Detroit News*, “I am buying pictures that will make man more human to his brother but also that will strike at the roots of all exploitation by developing the general appreciation of beauty...If the world saw beauty, it would abolish the wrongs of economic injustice; it would open the door of equal opportunity for all.”⁷³⁴ Although he apparently considered himself a religious man, Todd never explained any of his actions in terms of his faith. His personal beliefs seem to have provided him with a moral compass rather than with a specific guide for action.⁷³⁵ All told, Todd gave away over 400 paintings during his lifetime. He told another reporter, “It is as important to lift the hearts of men by beauty as it is to challenge their thought by pointing out social misery and wrong...I am having a good time buying what I don’t need and never can use. But people can use them, get joy and inspiration from them.” Todd replied to the reporter’s final question: “no, I’ve never figured the money I’ve spent for paintings. If I did, I might get scared and quit.”⁷³⁶

When Albert Todd died at age 81 on October 6, 1931, his family continued Todd’s policy of sharing his collection. In November, paintings worth \$60,000 were given to the city’s public schools, again with the single stipulation that they would be kept on display in classrooms and public spaces. A month later, 29 more art objects from the Todd collection were given to Kalamazoo College.

Albert May Todd grew up in rural Michigan and lived in the small city of Kalamazoo. He traveled extensively for business and pleasure, and was an avid student of European culture, politics, and economics. Although he was a successful capitalist,

⁷³⁴ A.M. Todd papers. Norris1.

⁷³⁵ Ibid. 1877-1-18AMTtoOllie.

⁷³⁶ Ibid. IanBlair4.

Todd's rural background and Midwestern experience drew him to populism and a kind of democratic socialism. But he was far from the stereotypical populist or socialist. In *The Populist Vision*, Charles Postel examined the ways "Americans responded to the traumas of technological innovation, expansion of corporate power, and commercial and cultural globalization" at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷³⁷ Postel tells a story of how "Populists were influenced by modernity," but not all Populists were victims of modernity. Albert Todd was a technological innovator and the leader of a corporation with an international clientele that was occasionally suspected of seeking to monopolize essential oils. His populism was not characterized by rural anxiety over the baffling complexity of new urban commercial and financial centers. Todd was one of the populists Postel described who "sought to reshape government as an agency of the majority rather than of the corporate and wealthy minority;" not from a generalized dread of plutocracy enflamed by muckraking media, but because he had precise personal knowledge of the excesses and corruption of an economy run for the benefit of the Money Power.⁷³⁸ Similarly, Todd supported socialists and their organizations throughout his life, but he never advocated collective ownership of all of the means of production. It may be significant this was the single plank of the Socialist Labor Party's platform that the populists had rejected when formulating their 1892 party platform.⁷³⁹ Todd's example of a successful businessman supporting Populist ideals suggests the standard portrayal of the People's Party may be incomplete. Like many populists, Todd had no interest in nationalizing everything: he sought public ownership of natural monopolies and

⁷³⁷ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*. (Oxford: New York, 2007). viv.

⁷³⁸ Ibid. 288.

⁷³⁹ Sanders. 56.

government action to break trusts and combinations that prevented competition.

Ultimately, Albert Todd believed in people. He advocated for democratic reforms because he trusted regular people like himself to make better decisions than plutocrats. And he gave his art to public institutions to “lift the hearts” of his neighbors and help them believe in a brighter future.

CONCLUSION

Introducing this study, I promised to build a narrative based on primary sources that would challenge traditional interpretations of rural America's engagement with the capitalist marketplace in the nineteenth century. My claim was that the ways rurality has been understood by historians has been influenced by their particular focus on economic, cultural, social, or political historical perspectives: that rural people's self-perceptions did not conform to many historians' conceptions of their interests and concerns. I proposed treating rurality as a category that cuts across conventional economic, political, racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and ideological lines that historians conventionally use; arguing that the construction of rurality shown in the writings and actions of my subjects suggests they had a much different perspective on society and their place in it than most histories portray. I believe that I have provided sufficient primary evidence and interpretation to support my claim.

The story of the Peppermint Kings focused on three families that were prominent during three very distinct moments in the economic history of the United States. The Ranney family dominated the peppermint oil business during the age of peddlers that corresponded with the period commonly described as the market transition. The Hotchkiss brothers operated in a changing marketplace where they were pioneers of wholesale distribution and branding, and explored the changing world of business finance. Albert May Todd became Peppermint King at a time when historians have described American agriculture as reaching a critical juncture at which their

undifferentiated products lacked market power, especially relative to highly capitalized food processors. The experiences of each of these families adds valuable texture and nuance to commonly-held historical interpretations of these times.

Reviewing the narrative presented in this study, we begin with the earliest commerce in peppermint oil in Colonial America and peppermint's culture and distilling in the Early Republic. From its earliest introduction, peppermint was an inherently commercial crop. There was no gradual evolution from a subsistence-surplus phase of production to a peppermint oil business, because peppermint had no food or fodder value in a subsistence economy. From its earliest days, peppermint oil has always been an item of commerce. Thus, the farmers who grew and distilled peppermint deliberately involved themselves in distant markets. Rural people, at least those involved with peppermint, did not live in a pre-commercial state of grace until affected by a market transition imposed from without. The first peppermint growers like the Ranneys, Burnets, and Vandermarks were deeply embedded in widespread commercial networks. Some of their activities, such as supplying peddlers and transporting peppermint oil from producing areas to centers of distribution or consumption, were more widespread and happened much earlier than many historians have realized.

Although advertising is often depicted as a phenomenon of the late 19th and early 20th century, peppermint oil and essence were advertised heavily in newspapers throughout the British North American colonies and the early United States. The earliest advertisements were for imported peppermint preparations, but very quickly, domestic peppermint producers began to compete with their British counterparts. Because peppermint oil was an important component of the *materia medica*, used in many medical

preparations, it was ubiquitous, indeed required, at any well-stocked apothecary shop. In regions such as the American South where peppermint could not be grown effectively, peppermint oil was imported first from England and later from domestic sources of supply such as western Massachusetts and later western New York. Rural consumers of peppermint oil in non-producing regions were drawn into networks of commerce and medical information, especially when peppermint oil became widely prescribed in popular home health manuals and among alternative medicine practitioners like the followers of herbalist Samuel Thomson.

The social and religious struggles of rural people in remote Ashfield, Massachusetts became regionally and nationally important when controversy between the town's established church and its Baptist minority escalated all the way to the Privy Council of King George III. The use of church membership and taxation as a weapon of class-based battles between poor local Baptists and their prosperous (and often out-of-town) opponents suggests that religious histories of the period might consider both class and urban-rural differences in their interpretations. The resumption of Ashfield's social-religious strife in the 1830s illustrates that the distribution of secular ideology during the Second Great Awakening was more complicated than is generally acknowledged. Although historians have depicted the evangelical movements of the 1830s as being largely attempts at social control, the "infidel" or secularist challenge is usually considered an urban intellectual phenomenon. Ashfield's physician, Charles Knowlton, was a rural intellectual. Samuel Ranney, who had introduced peppermint to Ashfield and helped end its culture there, was a remarkably insightful farmer. Neither of Ashfield's notorious infidels were urban intellectuals. And yet Knowlton wrote America's first birth

control manual and Ranney changed the fortunes of the entire region when he helped shift peppermint production to western New York.

But rural Ashfield remained relevant on a much wider scale. Essence peddlers from Ashfield brought news, ideas, and consumer culture to the remotest farms and villages, connecting rural Americans to both commerce and to American culture and politics in ways that have not been fully appreciated. Hundreds of local men carried trunks of goods and baskets of essences not only to remote farmsteads in their region, but south and west into the slaveholding states and onto the frontier. Social and economic historians have often gauged the transition to capitalism in rural areas by the extent of their production for the urban market. Peddlers made rural populations consumers as well as producers, and even in the most remote areas with the least cash-based economies, even a small amount of trade with itinerant peddlers was of great cultural significance. And in addition to goods, peddlers connected their customers with networks of news and ideas in an interactive, face-to-face way that could not be achieved by newspapers, pamphlets, and books. Ashfield peddler William Sanderson carried *Slavery As It Is* with his wares, but he also discussed its contents with his customers. The peddlers' supplier, Jasper Bement, took time out to attend rallies and speak on behalf of the Liberty Party while on a business trip to Detroit. Ashfield's Yankee peddlers carried both commerce and their politics with them wherever they went.

Although historians of western migration have largely put aside the idea that the frontier experience reshaped society by erasing people's ties with home and family, the degree to which families such as the Ranneys maintained their connection has not been adequately appreciated. The Ranney brothers kept up a vigorous correspondence from

Massachusetts to western New York and Michigan spanning six decades. They visited each other and their aged mother traveled regularly to divide her time between the homes of her children. And they supported each other financially as well as emotionally, loaning money and doing business across the miles. Historians often characterize this period as one when (especially urban) business transitioned to impersonal association and anonymous, one-off exchange, but the Ranneys built their rural business on kinship networks featuring obligation, morality, and long-term commitment. The Ranney migration into the Yankee West suggests not only the cultural continuity asserted by recent historians, but a degree of connectedness even these historians have not depicted. But the Ranneys were not a uniquely close family. The story of the settlement of Phelps, New York shows that migrants from Conway, Massachusetts migrated serially and often visited their old homes. One migrant walked back to Massachusetts to get married and when his wife died went back again for another. And when peddler Archibald Burnett decided to live in Phelps and marry a local girl, his brother called him back to Ashfield to share the secret of peppermint.

While some rural businessmen such as Ira Cary moved to New York City in order to become successful, even Dows & Cary's success was based on transporting rural products to city consumers. This is consistent with the standard historical depiction of relatively undifferentiated agricultural goods and raw materials flowing into processing and consuming centers, frequently enriching the centers at the expense of the peripheries. The story of Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss's rise to Peppermint Kings challenges the standard trajectory. Peppermint oil was highly differentiated based on quality, and the Hotchkiss brothers managed to identify themselves as reliable judges of quality and

prevent the concentration of market power in the center. After their initial success showing their oil at international expositions, the Hotchkisses shifted from growing and distilling their own peppermint oil to promoting their brand. Although histories of branding tend to focus on modernity and even post-modernity, the Hotchkiss brothers' campaign to brand their products was one of the earliest in America. Rather than raising their product above a generic mass market which barely yet existed, Hiram Hotchkiss aimed at making his peppermint oil the rival of English oil from Mitcham. A merchant's son from a rural village in western New York, Hotchkiss considered himself a formidable competitor in an international market.

In spite of his rural origins, in the commercial and financial periphery, Hiram Hotchkiss conducted business by his own rules. He expected his commission agents in New York City to advance money on his peppermint oil shipments, even though the oil market was quite different from the flour market to which they were accustomed. Hotchkiss expected foreign buyers to consider his peppermint oil equivalent to Mitcham oil because he said so. He expected his creditors to renew his notes indefinitely. Hiram expected people to use his elaborately-engraved banknotes as money. And in an ironic perversion of the kinship networks the Ranney family business had been based on, he expected his relatives to prostrate themselves on his behalf.

Hiram Hotchkiss's relationship with finance and banking offers a rural perspective that is lacking in histories of banking and business finance. Early in his career, Hotchkiss took advantage of his local bank's failure by speculating in mortgages and promissory notes he purchased from the bankruptcy receiver for pennies on the dollar. Contrary to the conclusions of historians who describe a growing moralism in

public attitudes toward debt and credit after the Panic of 1837, Hotchkiss learned that value was subjective and open to negotiation. And contrary to prevailing contemporary belief that New York City was the center of finance, Hotchkiss believed he was the center. Once his flour or peppermint oil was loaded onto canal flatboats, Hiram considered the transaction complete. He had created value—it was someone else’s job to make sure the flour or oil was sold when it arrived in the city.

The history of American banking is largely told from an urban perspective, partly because after the Civil War control of the United States banking system shifted to New York City. But the Hotchkiss brothers’ experiences as bankers under New York’s antebellum state banking laws suggest that the dominance of central banks was not inevitable and that rural bankers had interests and objectives that were not identical to those of the urban bankers who would dominate national banking. Hiram Hotchkiss used his Peppermint Bank irresponsibly, primarily as a source of funds for his peppermint oil business. Hiram’s brother Leman ran his bank on much sounder financial principles and focused on exchange and other business services that survived the elimination of state banknotes in 1866. Thaddeus Hotchkiss succeeded his father at the bank in 1869 and William B. Hotchkiss ran it until the late 1870s. We can only speculate how our present financial system would be different had rural regional bankers retained the ability to issue notes and write mortgages on real estate, but it is clear that the interests of those rural bankers were not considered when the banking legislation of the 1860s was passed. Historians might find that rural bankers’ reactions to the changes enacted during the Civil War shed light on subsequent rural movements for free silver and sub-treasuries, and resistance to the “money power” later in the nineteenth century.

Although historians have stressed the importance of social networks in regulating business behavior, especially in the mid-nineteenth century in western New York's burned-over district, Hiram Hotchkiss was a strong counterexample to the portrayal of an orderly, self-regulating community of entrepreneurs. Hotchkiss was a monomaniacal autocrat who put his own desires before the interests of business partners, friends, and family. Hotchkiss regularly defaulted on debts, often leaving close relatives to suffer the consequences. He fled to New York City to avoid his creditors, spending entire seasons living in posh hotels and speculating on the stock market rather than paying his business and family bills. Although he (and his descendants) tried to portray himself as a jovial country gentleman, Hiram Hotchkiss illustrated the capacity of rural people to operate in business with an amorality considered shocking even by city standards.

Like the Hotchkiss brothers, Albert May Todd built a brand for his peppermint oil and festooned his labels with images of the awards his products won in national and international expositions. Unlike the Hotchkisses, however, Todd approached peppermint growing and distilling with the rigor of a scientist. After reading classics at a rural union school, Todd attended Northwestern University to study chemistry. When he began his peppermint oil business, Todd identified himself as a manufacturing chemist. Todd corresponded with other scientists about the chemical properties of peppermint oil and published technical letters to his customers describing the tests they could use to determine the purity and quality of essential oils. Todd was also keenly interested in agricultural improvement. He built extensive company farms complete with their own experiment stations and concerning himself with the welfare of his rural employees decades before urban Progressives developed an interest in country life. And although

Progressive reformers ultimately failed to resist the dehumanizing tendency of corporate agriculture, Todd remained firmly focused on the social and cultural quality of life he provided for workers at his large farms.

Culture and art were a significant priority from Albert Todd's earliest days. Introduced to the classics by his well-educated mother, Todd left college after a year to travel in England and Europe. During this trip he began an art collection and a library that he expanded throughout his life and shared with his employees and with his neighbors by loaning or donating artworks for public display. Todd believed that art uplifted rural people and gave them hope. And unlike famous urban industrialists and bankers who were art patrons and public benefactors, Todd did not keep his collection private for his own enjoyment but gave away hundreds of artworks during his lifetime.

Albert Todd entered politics at a time when many rural people were Populists. Todd organized a fusion of Democrats, Populists, Free Silverites, and Prohibitionists to win a Congressional seat in a Michigan district that had not elected a Democrat since before the Civil War, far from the South and West usually considered the stronghold of Populism. In Congress, Todd drew on his experience as a rural businessman when he opposed railroads, plutocracy, and the control of the economy by autocratic Wall Street bankers. He also drew on observations of European political economy made on several research trips. Todd advocated national ownership of natural monopolies such as railroads and telecommunications, and expanded his focus to municipal ownership of public utilities when he founded the Public Ownership League of America. Todd gave generously to support radical causes such as the Rand School of Social Science in New York City. And he built a network of allies that included local and regional activists as

well as national figures like Jane Addams, Caroline Rand, and Eugene V. Debs. Unlike rural Populists who are often remembered as being traumatized by modernity, Todd was a successful businessman who was comfortable with technical and financial complexity. And unlike urban Progressives, often depicted as technocrats who approached issues from the top down, Todd advocated democratic reforms that would put more power in the hands of regular people.

It is possible that Albert Todd was entirely unique in developing a perspective that did not fit easily into the mold of a Midwestern agricultural businessman. It is similarly possible that the Hotchkiss brothers' interests and concerns and the Ranneys' activities were so far from typical that they contribute little to our understanding of their times and regions. But perhaps the history of these Peppermint Kings shines a light on less-well-known countercurrents in the general flow of history; eddies in the stream that give the river its distinct character. The peppermint oil industry itself contrasted with most agricultural businesses described by historians, in the highly-differentiated nature of its product and the decentralization that resulted when control was maintained near the point of production. The personalities and stories of the industry's principal actors seem to suggest a richer and more complicated rural history than is currently appreciated. If historians look more closely at the stories of rural Americans, they may well be rewarded with a more nuanced and comprehensive view of American history. They may also discover a new treasury of interesting and compelling stories to tell.

Finally, the common element informing the attitudes and actions of the Peppermint Kings was their rurality. Although their individual responses to rural life and rural business differed, the Peppermint Kings are connected by their rurality in ways they

are not unified by traditional categories such as politics, culture, ideology, or religion. Although they sometimes battled urban powers, the Peppermint Kings did not consider themselves characters in a grand narrative organized around urban centers. The agency they displayed as agricultural businessmen pursuing their own goals for their own reasons confutes the widely-accepted depiction of peripheral agriculturalists increasingly dominated by centralized economic power.

American rural history has undergone somewhat of a renaissance since Robert Swierenga described the field in 1981 as an “orphan child” of the new social history.⁷⁴⁰ Rural histories such as David Danbom’s *Born in the Country* have taken issue with the dismissal of rural people and their concerns by consensus historians who had little interest in the countryside once America “moved to the city.”⁷⁴¹ As Danbom noted in a 2010 article, “Nowadays, rural people are not much different from the rest of us.”⁷⁴² While the accuracy of Danbom’s assessment is evident in the many similarities of contemporary rural and urban life caused by technology and social change, these very similarities hide wide differences in experience of Americans of earlier generations. The story of the Peppermint Kings contributes to a more detailed, nuanced understanding of the life experiences, interests, and attitudes of rural people and their communities. The Ranneys, the Hotchkiss brothers, and Albert May Todd exhibited a degree of agency that is not present in many histories of rural America. The view into their lives afforded by this study helps establish rural entrepreneurs as significant figures in business history,

⁷⁴⁰ Robert P. Swierenga, “The New Rural History: Defining the Parameters.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Fall, 1981), 211.

⁷⁴¹ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). xiii.

⁷⁴² David B. Danbom, “Reflections: Whither Agricultural History.” *Agricultural History* 84, no. 2 (Spring, 2010). 173.

and the Peppermint Kings' other interests and activities incorporate elements of economic, political, and cultural history for a more complete picture of these complex rural characters.

While their activities as Peppermint Kings illustrate the agency and initiative of rural people, the subjects of this study contribute most to our understanding of rural America in the ways they resisted mainstream American trends. The Ranneys were secularists in a very religious society. Samuel Ranney wrote eloquently about his rejection of organized religion and his relatives kept up a half-century long correspondence without once mentioning religious ideas. The Hotchkisses explored banking and regional credit during a period when finance was being nationalized. Their activities shed light on rarely-considered elements of rural Americans' response to the consolidation of the banking industry – a perspective that has generally escaped the view of historians for whom central banks and a national currency are often an unquestioned norm. And Albert May Todd showed how a rural entrepreneur could run a thriving business and still be a socialist. Populist and progressive opponents of monopoly are depicted in most histories as either poor farmers or academics. Albert May Todd enriches the story of resistance to economic concentration because he was a successful businessman himself. Todd did not object to the “money power” because he was anti-business, but because he believed the special privileges enjoyed by the financial elite had been attained unfairly and that large corporations behaved unjustly in society. Each of these elements of this study contribute to a more complete view of the issues, and each perspective has escaped the notice of most historians precisely because these characters lived their lives far from the cities that received the majority of attention by contemporary

commentators and by historians basing their studies on sources produced by those largely-urban contemporaries. In addition to exploring the differences between rural and urban life and its change over time, a new rural history could offer insights into how rural people responded to broader social changes that have often been viewed from a predominantly urban perspective. These insights might make the world we currently inhabit seem a bit less inevitable.

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