WILLIAM BRENTON HALL
A Biography

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William Brenton Hall was born May 31, 1764, in what is now Meriden, Connecticut, near Wallingford. His father was Brenton Hall, Esquire. The Halls had been among the earliest settlers of Wallingford, John Hall and his son John moving there about 1670. In 1675 the two were chosen selectmen of Wallingford, which indicates that they were distinguished citizens. Another son, Samuel, also settled in the new community, and it is from him that William Brenton Hall descended.

The Halls appear to have been prominent citizens of Wallingford, intermarrying with other first families of Wallingford and sending several sons through the generations to Yale. William Brenton Hall's grandfather Samuel was the minister of the Congregational Church in Cheshire in 1724. Samuel married Anna Law, who was a daughter of John Law, a governor of Connecticut, and a granddaughter of Governor Brenton of Rhode Island. One of their sons was Brenton Hall, who settled in Meriden and was the father of William Brenton Hall, the subject of this paper.

Though the Halls were a prosperous and locally prominent family, their fortunes appear to have gradually waned following the Great Awakening and the rise of the New Lights. They were very probably conservative Old Lights whose wealth and power were based on land ownership. The only member of the family in Brenton Hall's generation who appears to have achieved real
power was his cousin Lyman Hall, who moved to the state of Georgia following his graduation from Yale, and who was a state representative, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and finally the governor of his state. In his case, vertical mobility followed social mobility, and the wealth and prestige of his wife's family undoubtedly contributed to his success.

However, the rest of the family does not appear to have followed his lead. When Brenton Hall married Lament Collins in 1762, his father gave him a house and 200 acres in what is now Meriden, and Brenton followed what appears to have been a family pattern by sending his oldest son to Yale and settling his other sons on the land near him. Brenton Hall remained important in Meriden history and was a leader in the movement to have Meriden set off from Wallingford.

William Brenton Hall graduated from Yale in 1786. This period was a time that Richard Puroell described as being one of growing religious toleration and one of a growing tendency to explain the Scripture on rational logical grounds. Along with religious liberalism was a growing interest in science and experimentation. One can see this in the diary of Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College during this time. Stiles was interested in many scientific things, from mammoth teeth and aboriginal artifacts brought back from the Ohio Territory to the construction of a model of the solar system. He was interested in the discovery of a new planet. History, odd medical facts, specifications of newly invented machines, all these are noted with interest in the diary. Clearly President Stiles was interested in many things
besides religion, and he must have fostered an air of scientific rational questioning. This is indicative of the spirit of toleration and rationalism during the formative years of young William Hall.

Another person who might have had an early influence upon Hall was Dr. Jared Potter of Wallingford. Potter graduated from Yale in 1760 and studied medicine with the Reverend Jared Eliot. Together they were the two most well-known and well-liked physicians in Connecticut in the 18th century. Potter eventually settled in Wallingford in 1772. In addition to his medical knowledge and skill, Potter was noted for his outspoken and unpopular view on politics and religion.

His interest in politics was intense. Beginning with distrust of the aristocratic bias of the early Federalists, he became in later life one of the most conspicuous leaders of the Jeffersonian democracy in this vicinity. While still in college he became in religious belief a Universalist, and so continued through life. The positiveness with which he held his unpopular views and his readiness in controversy gave him additional prominence, and he was freely stigmatized as an infidel.

Potter was an organizer of the Connecticut Medical Society and one of its officers for many years, and he was a local political leader, being a member of the General Assembly from 1780 until 1809. It does not appear that Hall studied medicine under Dr. Potter; nevertheless it is quite possible that his decision to study medicine and perhaps his religious and political views were influenced by Potter.

Hall himself says that he studied medicine at Philadelphia. When he set up practice in Middletown, he placed the following ad in the Middlesex Gazette:
The subscriber having been returned from Philadelphia about 16 months, where he completed his professional education, under a number of the most eminent and respectable Gentlemen; has at length determined to settle in Middletown, with a view to Practice the various Branches of the same; viz. MEDICINE, SURGERY, etc. Whoever shall think proper to call on him for Medical Attention, may rest assured of having the closest attention paid to them and he flatters himself that he shall be honored in their receiving Ample Satisfaction.

William B Hall
Middletown Oct 1 1791

It is possible that Hall "completed his professional education" at the medical department of the College of Philadelphia. The medical department was begun in 1765 by doctors from wealthy families who had studied medicine in Scotland. One of those doctor instructors was William Shippen Jr., who taught anatomy and obstetrics. Medical students learned by attending lectures, and they had access to the hospital at Philadelphia, where they obtained practical experience. The importance of anatomy was emphasized at the college by the use of skeletons, anatomical drawings, and dissections.7

Hall made another reference to his medical training in a letter he wrote to Jedidiah Morse, dated January 26, 1799; "Since I left it (Yale) I taught school two years in this town, then went to Philadelphia where I attended the Medical Lectures & Hospital; since which time I have been in Practice of Physic and Surgery in this city (Middletown) for 8 years."8 In view of the fact that Hall made rather a speciality of obstetrics and surgery, one hopes he listened well to Dr. Shippen’s lectures.
Hall graduated from Yale in 1786, spent two years in Middletown teaching, went to Philadelphia for apparently two years, and returned to Middletown and sixteen months later advertised he was open for business. Where he lived during the years before and after his studying in Philadelphia is not known; probably he was a boarder in someone else’s house. However, he had sufficient personal property and was of sufficiently good character to be admitted as a Freeman in September 1790.9

A short while after Hall began the practice of medicine and surgery in Middletown there appeared another advertisement in the Middlesex Gazette, and Inoculation Notice, which stated John Dickinson and Wm. B. Hall would be inoculating for the Small pox at two locations, the pest house on Fort-Hill or at Mr. Eben Ward’s, and interested persons should inquire of either Dickinson or Hall.10

Dr. John Dickinson was related to Hall; he was married to Bunice Hall, a cousin of Brenton Hall, Esquire. Dickinson had been practicing medicine in Middletown for many years, and he had served as the Representative to the Legislature from Middletown during the Revolution.11 Apparently Dickinson was about ready to retire and it had been arranged that Hall would take over his practice and thus be assured of patients. Such arrangements with relatives were probably not unusual, and may have been necessary for the younger man to succeed.

The inoculation notice also offers an example of one of the activities of doctors of the time. Inoculations for small pox had been carried on in the state for some number of years. However, it was a risky undertaking. As we know from
Ezra Stiles' Diary, people did die of smallpox by inoculation as well as of smallpox "by the natural method", and much of the health legislation during the mid-eighteenth century was an attempt to regulate the inoculation activity. Doctors had to petition town selectmen for permission to practice inoculation. They had to have a suitable building, isolated, and they had to offer a bond as assurance that the disease would not be spread by their activities.

In December of 1792 the town of Wallingford granted the petition of Dr. Hall to erect a hospital "on his Fathers farm quite remote from the publick road or dwelling house for the purpose of inoculation for the small pox." This seems to have been the first such petition granted since the town decided to prohibit smallpox inoculation activities in 1777. It is possible that his father's political influence had some bearing on this petition being granted; Brenton Hall was elected to the General Assembly in 1788.

In 1801, after the new method of vaccination using cowpox virus was introduced to this country, Dr. Hall and his friend Dr. Ensign Hough of Heriden were granted permission to establish a pock house in eastern Heriden, probably on Brenton Hall's farm. Ensign Hough and Hall were probably close friends; Hough's son Isaac studied medicine as an apprentice to Hall.

Taking apprentices was another way Hall supplemented his income. Many doctors of the time studied medicine as apprentices to other physicians. During a two or three year period, an apprentice would live with a physician, sweeping and doing other chores, nursing the sick and being instructed in the medical arts of bleeding and cupping, preparing and administering drugs. Hall's
students would probably have gained some knowledge of surgery and obstetrics from him as well. Hall probably had at least one apprentice living in his house most of the time. On one occasion that the Reverend Enoch Huntington called at Hall's, "he was not at home. Saw a Mr. Hitchcock from here & a Mr. Day from Westchester and a Mr. Foot (?) from Branford. Young gentlemen staying with Dr. Hall." 

Probably at least one of these men was an apprentice, and maybe they all were. The census for 1800 indicates that eleven people lived in Hall's house. Besides Hall and his wife there are two Negro servants, a family of four, and three young men. Perhaps the family was that of the man who rented a shop at the back of the house; the three young men, though, must have been either boarders or apprentices.

Hall was probably well qualified to teach what medical knowledge there was at the time. As he said in advertising his qualifications to teach, he had a skeleton for students to work with and a working knowledge of Latin. And he was an educated man. Various students of Hall's "all seemed to entertain a high regard for the talents and medical attainments of their preceptor, as did also Dr. Jared Potter, Dr. Hall's particular friend and counsellor, whose opinion of that time was conclusive." 

Hall apparently engaged in other activities to augment his income. He rented the shop attached to the back of his house. We can infer from his ledger that he also compounded and sold medicines, buying his supplies from the firm of "Schiffelin" in New York and from his wife's relative Dr. Samuel H.P. Lee in New London. Selling drugs would not have been part of Hall's instruction at Philadelphia, where the leaders of the medical
school were promoting the separation of physician and apothecary.²⁰

Shortly after Hall began medical practice, at the May 1792 session, the General Assembly passed "an Act incorporating a Medical Society".²¹ The Connecticut Medical Society had been preceded by the New Haven Medical Society, of which Jared Potter was a member. For several years the New Haven Medical Society led a campaign to receive permission to incorporate a state society. The doctors engaged in lobbying techniques, letter writing, publishing a journal of noteworthy cases. They also worked to remove from their petitions all indications that incorporation would improve their financial position. Where earliest petitions contained the proviso that physicians not licensed by the medical society would be unable to sue to collect fees, the Act, when it was finally passed, permitted the medical society to establish examining committees for membership, to confer honorary degrees, and to hold property not exceeding $16,667.²² The Act further stated that members were to share useful information with each other and publish "such extraordinary cases and such observations on the state of the air(sic) and on epidemic and other disorders as they may think proper."²³

Although the incorporating act gave no indication that the Medical Society was a self-protective organization, there are signs that it was one. For example, the number of practicing physicians in Middlesex County dropped sharply in the years immediately following the Society's incorporation.²⁴ And finally, in 1800 the Society succeeded in having the Legislature pass an act prohibiting those practicing medicine without a license from the Medical Society from suing to collect fees.²⁵
In 1795 Dr. Hall was appointed to the Middlesex County Medical Society Examining Committee. This must have been an indication that he was becoming well established in his practice, for in the spring of the following year he married Mehitable Parsons, a daughter of Revolutionary War General Samuel Holden Parsons. Hall was 32 years of age, Mehitable was 24.

Samuel Holden Parsons' father had been Jonathan Parsons, a New Light Minister. Jonathan married Phoebe Griswold, a daughter of Judge John Griswold and a sister of Matthew Griswold who became a governor of Connecticut. His father having removed to Massachusetts after his conversion to New Light Congregationalism, Samuel attended Harvard. After his graduation he returned to Connecticut to study law with his uncle Matthew Griswold. According to C.P. Hall, the wedding of Parsons and Mehitable Mather was a great social event in the town of Lyme.

Samuel Holden Parsons was probably wealthy at the beginning of the Revolution, but depreciation of his government securities and loss of professional income had left him less well off. He was engaged in speculation of the Ohio lands when he was drowned in a boating accident in November 1789. Although his estates in Middletown and Ohio were declared insolvent due to lack of cash when he died, his land holdings undoubtedly provided his family with considerable income later. Occasional references in Dr. Hall's ledger indicate that he is paying taxes on land in Ohio, presumably land that Mehitable inherited from her father. Parsons' son Enoch, Mehitable's brother, was appointed high sheriff of Middlesex County a few years after his father's death. This was an extremely important political job, the appointment being made by the governor
and Council, and probably it was given to Enoch on the strength of his family connections and his personal wealth.

Samuel and Nehetable Parsons had seven children: William Walter, Enoch, Lucia, Nehetable, Phebe, Samuel and Margaret. In contrast with Dr. Hall's own family, who remained farmers in the country town of Meriden, his wife's family were prosperous and clearly a part of the Federalist "Standing Order" which controlled Connecticut for so long. That the family was "well connected" can be seen from some of their various marriages. Lucia married Stephen Titus Hosmer, the son of a Middletown merchant, a young lawyer who rose to become Chief Justice of the state. Lydia married Samuel Tiffin, a merchant, Samuel Holden married Esther Sage, the daughter of a merchant, and it appears that William Walter's wife Esther was the daughter of a merchant and related to Esther Sage's family. Enoch's second wife was a daughter of Nehemiah Hubbard, who was the president of the Middletown Bank from 1808 until 1822, and Enoch himself was to become the president of the Connecticut Branch of the Bank of the United States.

Doctor Hall and Nehetable were married in March 1796, and in August of that year there was an outbreak of yellow fever at Knowles' Landing in the village of Middle Haddan, some six miles south of Middletown. In the eighteenth century yellow fever epidemics struck fear in all, and people reacted by fleeing whenever possible. The three physicians of Haddan reacted in just this way, as did some 200 inhabitants of the village, leaving only five people to tend the sick and bury the dead. Dr. Hall
and Dr. John Richmond of Haddam attended the cases. There was no
doubt at the time that the disease was yellow fever, and the doctors
were both brave and humanitarian in their actions. 29

In October of 1796 Dr. Hall and Mehetabel bought a house
in Middletown, near Mrs. Parson's house, for $150. 30 Probably the
money for the house came from Dr. Hall's father Brenton Hall, since
Brenton Hall did provide houses and land for his other sons in
Meriden. In December a daughter was born, but she only lived five
days. 31

The Halls had two other children, both sons. It is
interesting to note that baptisms of the children were often
family affairs. For example, these entries are recorded in the
records of the First Congregational Church:

1799 Augt 30th Church Lecture. Elizabith Lord Daughter of
Stephen Titus Hosmer, William Brenton Son of William
Brenton Hall and Frederick Redfield Son of John
Fisk was baptised. William Brenton Hall and his (sic)
Mehetabel his wife previously owning their baptismal
Covenant.

1804 Augt 2nd Thursday - Lecture. The Widow Esther Esq & her
Daughter Esther, the Wife of Samuel Holden Parsons
were admitted to Full Communion. And Samuel Holden
Parsons, Son of William B. Hall, & Lucia Hosmer
Daughter of Samuel H. Parsons ... were baptised.

Here is another family baptism record:
1804 Sept 5th Wednesday. At the House of
Samuel Tiffin baptised Samuel Holden Parsons,
Son, & Mehetabel Parsons, Daughter of Samuel
Tiffin, the Son by his first Wife, in the eight year
of his Age, the Daughter an infant by his last Wife.

It is clear from the ledger of Dr. Hall that families
were interdependent. Hall treats his and his wife's relatives. His
brother-in-law apparently does legal business for family members.
Hall also borrows money from his brothers and his brothers-in-law.
Brenton Hall Esquire often seems to be subsidizing the family with produce, hay and barrels of cider. Much of Hall's payment is in kind; for example, tinsmith William Gilbert paid by mending a bucket and Capt. Daniel Hubbard sent 14 pounds of sugar.32

Hall was a member of the Freemasons along with his brother-in-law, Stephen Titus Hosmer. During the 1790's, a time characterized by Purcell as one of growing infidelity,33 Masonry spread rapidly. Masonry was a secret fraternity and a form of recreation that added mystery and color to the lives of the men who belonged. However, in what Lipson terms a "latitudinarian spirit", Masonry "welcomed the unchurched as well as members of all denominations in an association that purported to derive ideas about morality from concepts about the essential nature and needs of man."34 Some people undoubtedly used Masonry as a surrogate religion.35 In a society like Connecticut where the religious and political life were so closely interrelated, Masonry could not help but be associated with political liberalism. There was a coincidence of leadership among the Jeffersonians and the Masons which tended to arouse the fears of the Federalist Standing Order.36

It seems likely that Dr. Hall was a Jeffersonian, and there are several reasons to suppose this. First is his membership in the Masons, although by itself this fact would not indicate his political affiliation. Second, there is the evidence of his ledger, the years 1807-1809. With the exception of members of his wife's family, almost none of his patients are of the "better sort." Artisans and farmers are the people he treats, not people with political and economic power. Many of his patients are
founders of the Baptist and Methodist churches, certificate men, clearly outside the Standing Order. The wealthy people in town appear to have been treated by the Federalist physicians, Elisha Tracy and John Osborn. In comparing Federalist and Jeffersonian physicians, P.D. Hall has said "the Federalists tended toward a more modern practice - functionally specific, their activities restricted solely to medicine.... Jeffersonians, on the other hand, tended to practice in the countryside or in smaller towns. For them a range of diffuse activity was essential for economic survival. Such a range often included teaching, shop-keeping, farming, compounding drugs, and training medical apprentices." Judging from his varied economic activities, Dr. Hall appears to have been a Jeffersonian physician.

Another indication of Dr. Hall's political affiliation is his involvement with the Connecticut Medical Society. There appears to have been a struggle within the society over educational requirements and standards for admission to candidacy, culminating in a political coup by the Jeffersonians and resulting in the deposition of the Federalist officers in 1801. Dr. Hall was clearly allied with the Jeffersonians and in 1801 was elected to the office of Treasurer of the Connecticut Medical Society, a position which he held for the next seven years. Following this Jeffersonian takeover, Mason F. Cogswell, one of the deposed Federalists, wrote a vitriolic poem attacking Hall, among others, as leaders of the Jeffersonian faction. Hall held the position of treasurer until 1808, when it appears that a reversal took place, and the Federalist physicians again gained power over the Society. This animosity between Federalist and Jeffersonian doctors is
also apparent in a rather sharp remark made by Dr. John Osborn, one of the Federalist doctors in Middletown. Osborn is supposed to have said in regard to Hall's medical teaching activities, that he turned off doctors as fast as a rake-maker could rakes.\textsuperscript{42}

William Hall died in July 1809, at the age of 45, leaving his wife and two young sons. His estate was declared insolvent,\textsuperscript{43} which means that there was insufficient cash to pay off his debts. This was a not uncommon condition at the time, and it is easy to understand in Hall's case from the financial transactions recorded in his ledger. He often borrowed money from one source, usually from a relative, to pay a bill somewhere else. However, his estate in 1810 was taxed at $22,50, which was a great deal higher than most of the estates taxed that year.\textsuperscript{44} He was not a poor man.

The cause of his death is not known. In a letter to her sister Lucia Hosmer shortly after his death, Mehitable Hall wrote that he had been unwell for some months preceding and that he suddenly took a turn for the worse. She sent for Dr. Potter, probably Hall's friend Jared Potter, but Hall died before he arrived. "He thinks his disorder was seated in his liver. He had the jaundice together with some other weakening complaints which put a period to his life."\textsuperscript{45} A different account is recorded by Matthewson. "On his last attempt to visit a patient he fell from his horse before leaving his yard; he was taken to his bed, which he was not after able to leave."\textsuperscript{45} One wonders whether the account in Matthewson was made up at some time or whether Hall did fall from his horse and his widow did not choose to mention it.

It may be that Hall was an alcoholic, apparently a not
uncommon tendency among early doctors. Dr. Shippen in Philadelphia apparently warned his students against becoming alcoholics, as did others. It is also possible that Hall suffered from gall bladder disease and the fall, if it occurred, caused a stone to lodge in his bile duct and resulted in the jaundice and death. Certainly the gradual deterioration of his handwriting in the ledger seems to indicate that he had been unwell for some time.

Matthewson also recorded that "Dr. Hall was noted for hospitality; his house was a great center for the profession in the neighboring towns. His side-board was especially free." After Hall's death the house was still full of people, because his wife took in boarders to support herself and the boys. She never remarried, though after a time she and the boys may have lived with her brother Enoch. In the Hall Family Records it is recorded that she had a "dignity and proud bearing ... which caused over-sensitive at times to style her 'Lady Hall!'" Hall's older son, William Brenton, died in 1824 at the age of 26, and Mehitable died in 1828. They are buried with the doctor and the infant daughter in the Mortimer Cemetery in Middletown near her relatives, the Parsons and the Hosmers.
Notes


8. Jedidiah Morse, A.B., Yale, 1783. The letter from William B. Hall was found in the Morse Family Collection in the Yale Archives.

9. City of Middletown, Book of Freeman, September 21, 1790.

10. Middletown Gazette, January 7, 1792.


13. City of Middletown, Petitions to the Selectmen, December, 1791, and December 1792.


15. Davis, loc. cit.

16. The Diary of Enoch Huntington, entry for September 27, 1796.


19. William B. Hall ledger entry, October 24, 1807.
   Cr. James Porter by stopping shop rent which is on my premises.
   Df. Mr. Harry tuev to rent from this date of shop which
   is on my premises at $5 per year.
   Same as Sam'l Harris, Wm Boardman & James Porter before gave.
   Other time when James Porter but a shop on my premises
   of Wm Boardman was July 27, 1802.

20. Thoms, ed. Heritage of Connecticut Medicine, 36. Also R.H.


22. For a discussion of the incorporation of the Connecticut
    Medical Society see Creighton Barker, "The Origin of the

23. Middlesex Gazette, July 2, 1792.

24. Peter Dobkin Hall, Physicians in Middlesex County 1700-1820,
    an unpublished chart. Sources are Beers & Co., Middlesex
    County History; D.D.Field, Centennial Address; R.W.Mathewson,
    "Biographical Sketches" in CSMS Proceedings (1877); R.C.Hazen,
    Centennial History" in CSMS Proceedings (1892).

25. Thoms, ed. op. cit. 128.

26. C.S. Hall, Life and Letters of Samuel Holden Parsons, from
    the Archives of James Pugliese, (new York: 1968)

27. Barbour Collection of Connecticut Vital Records, Middletown,

28. C.S. Hall, op. cit. Also J.B.Beers & Co., History of Middlesex
    County, Connecticut, (New York: 1884)

29. William Tully and Thomas Minor, Essays on Favers, (Middletown: 1823)
    357-364.

30. Middletown Land Records, V.35; p.73.

31. Records of First Congregational Church, Deaths, 1796.

32. William B. Hall ledger, 23 October 1807.

33. Purcell, op. cit., 7.

34. Dorothy Ann Lipson, Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut, 1789-1835,

35. Ibid., 124.

36. Ibid., 81.
37. Beers, op. cit., 141.

38. Peter Dobkin Hall, "Medicine, Politics & Higher Education, 1777-1813: The Prehistory of Yale Medical School", Yale Higher Education Program Working Paper, (1975) 63. See also the Diary of Mary Russell,


40. Ibid., 40.

41. Connecticut State Medical Society, Proceedings (1800-1808)

42. Mathewson, op.cit., 146.

43. County of Middlesex, Probate Records, Middletown, Vol. 9, 226.

44. City of Middletown, School List for 1810. See estate inventory attached

45. Letter from Mehitable Parsons Hall to Lucia Parsons Hosmer, quoted in Hall, The Hall Ancestry, 382. A copy of the letter is attached

46. Mathewson, op.cit., 146.

47. Mathewson, loc. cit.


Additional Sources about the early medical profession include


