

Cyrenius Chapin: Buffalo's First Physician and War of 1812 Hero

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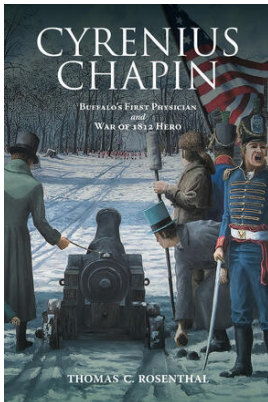
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Book Title: Cyrenius Chapin: Buffalo's First Physician and War of 1812 Hero

Author: Thomas C. Rosenthal

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Cyrenius Chapin was a frontier physician who moved to Buffalo, New York, in 1803. He was influential in founding the city and in promoting medical education. He participated in politics and military exploits, and he “had tremendous influence on his neighbors’ lives, with a frustrating knack for being intense regardless of whether he was right or wrong” (p. 2). He was hotheaded, generous, and dedicated to his patients’ well-being. He maintained public feuds with some colleagues while inspiring loyalty in others. The thesis statement for the book is found on the second page: “This is the story of Dr. Chapin’s Buffalo and the Western New York frontier he helped forge in the early nineteenth century.”

Thomas C. Rosenthal is the biographer of the charismatic Dr Chapin. Rosenthal is an emeritus professor of family medicine at the University of Buffalo, with interests in geriatric care, rural medicine, and the history of medicine.

Chapin was born in Massachusetts and apprenticed with his brother. Aspiring physicians were not required to attend medical school at the time.¹ Chapin practiced medicine, organized medical associations, and trained apprentices. He built long-standing relationships with his patients; Rosenthal recounts how Chapin would read a story to the family’s children prior to leaving a house.

Chapin forged connections with local Seneca leaders, and some of them sought treatment from him. Rosenthal offers an amusing anecdote about one of the Seneca leaders, Chief Red Jacket. Missionaries attempted to convert Chief Red Jacket to Christianity. He responded: “Go, preach to the people of Buffalo. If you can make them decent and sober, and learn them not to cheat the Indians and each other, we will believe in your religion.” (p. 73).

Rosenthal describes Chapin’s life and his endeavors (farming, politics, and civic life) against the backdrop of the War of 1812. Chapin had experience in the Massachusetts State militia and was eager to join in the war. He became Lieutenant Colonel Chapin, in charge of a militia, Chapin’s Forty Thieves, renowned more for its daring than its willingness to respect military authority.

In one rather alarming section, Rosenthal describes how Chapin’s quarrels with Brigadier General George McClure escalated to the point where McClure had Chapin arrested twice. Antipathies led to McClure withdrawing his men, leaving Buffalo undefended, and may have contributed to the burning of Buffalo by British troops in 1813. Chapin engaged in cross-border skirmishes designed to liberate Canada from British rule until he died in 1838, after leading an unauthorized invasion party across the frozen Lake Erie toward Canada.

Strengths of this book include its extensive use of primary sources and rigorous research into medical history and the region. Frequent maps, portraits, and timelines are helpful. Rosenthal provides extensive details about the founding of Buffalo, including disagreements over land purchases and how Chapin’s office skeleton was stolen from a graveyard by Chapin’s apprentice. Weaknesses, which affect readability, include a fraying of the narrative thread created by toggling between the history of Buffalo and Chapin’s contributions.

Writing about the frontier while avoiding pitfalls is difficult. One challenge is how to address the treatment of native peoples after white settlers arrived. Rosenthal describes General John Sullivan's mandate to clear the area of perceived British-allied tribes, killing 50% of the native population. "Despite Sullivan's extirpation, the native American population exceeded the white European population" by the time Chapin arrived (p. 12). While Rosenthal acknowledges the massacres, the tone can sometimes be unsettling.

Another challenge is how to discuss westward expansion without falling into narratives evoking Manifest Destiny. This requires considerable sensitivity and is hard to get right. For example, Rosenthal cites a source that states, "Western New York was a wild frontier where he [Chapin] could carve out his own prospects. The lingering spirit that inspired the American revolution continued to empower many self-directed men, confident that their own potential was unlimited"² (p. 9). A discussion of the perils of such depictions can be found in Markham.³

One strategy that would have mitigated this concern would be for Rosenthal to provide a richer depiction of the Seneca people, their medical practices, and their culture. Elaborating on this key facet of the region's history would have been interesting and helpful.

This book would be most appreciated by Buffalo history buffs, military history readers, and medical history enthusiasts. It is richly researched and tells the story of an intriguing man, full of contradictions, who became a central figure in the founding of the city of Buffalo.

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