

This Week in Saratoga County History

Walter Haslam Lewthwaite – Bacteriologist and Patent

Submitted by Rachel Clothier March 13, 2024

Rachel Clothier is historian for the Town of Corinth, operates the Corinth Museum, and is retired from Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls



Walter Haslam Lewthwaite

I would like you to meet a fascinating fellow– Walter Haslam Lewthwaite. I came to know him through a single letter he wrote in March 1918 to his brothers, their wives and his nieces and nephews. He mailed this eight-page letter from the post office in Middle Grove to family in Brooklyn. Walter was a patient at the Homestead Sanitarium in the town of Providence – a hospital for tuberculosis patients. The letter was found at a barn sale in the summer of 2023. Because of the thickness of the envelope, it stood out from other greeting cards. This letter introduced me to a very interesting fellow.

Walter begins the correspondence by condensing his response to many letters into a single joint letter. He goes on to explain he has been too busy to reply. He had been “appointed to a very important position at the san (his nickname for the sanitarium) – namely that of bacteriologist and I do the work in the evenings.” William Holmes assists him. They make microscopic specimens of the sputum taken from each of the patients every three or four weeks. They also do a urinalysis for albumen and sugar. He says that he finds the work interesting and a way to pay back the facility for all the care he has received. Walter receives no compensation for his work. At the time that the letter is written there are 34 patients at the hospital, and it takes two men 8 to 12 evenings to process the specimens. A detailed description of the chemicals used as

the specimens are prepared on the glass slides along with small drawings of the slides are included in the letter. Each sample is identified with a number so no names are used. Walter and his assistant had tested themselves and found they had minor infections.

Walter experiences “blue” periods at the sanitarium. The winter weather had been bad and he notes there had been eleven deaths since the first of January just in his pavilion. Almost all of the women who were at the hospital when he came the previous summer had died. Only one was still alive. He refers to her as “Mother Jones of Mechanicville.” One night the head physician, Doctor Hirst, stated there was a show being performed in East Galway, a few miles away, and two sleighs were provided to take all who wanted to attend. Walter decided not to go because of the physical stress in the cold air. Another patient, Bunny Hunt, called him a “slacker” for refusing to go. But the next day Bunny Hunt was late to rise and soon fell ill, died before day’s end. He had a severe case of TB and had been deemed as incurable by the doctors.

Walter refused to work on Sundays. He would play hymns on the player pump organ and read aloud from the Bible. The organ was hard to play because the bellows had a leak and was stressful to him. A player piano was soon to be purchased for the facility using funds from a donation left by woman patient who had died.

Apparently, Walter had been a patient at Saranac before coming to the Homestead Sanitarium. Comparing the two he feels the care he is currently getting is not “proper” and the doctor is more concerned with the looks of the facility rather than the patients’ care. Some of the improvements mentioned are a pool room, smoking room, landscaping, and a recreation area. There had been no improved cases and of the 34 patients eleven deaths had been reported in two months.

Alas, Walter died that fall at the age of 27 at the Homestead Sanitorium. Four years earlier he had been a student at Cornell University in Ithaca and his photograph was included in their yearbook, which captured his short life:

Unquestionably the most popular person in Prep school, “Ted” came to Cornell to continue his conquest of winning friends. When you know him well, you understand how he does it. He is the kind of student who makes an enviable average without any perceptible effort, always having time for college activities and every chance of a good time.

The 1900 federal census indicates that Walter’s father, George Lewthwaite, born on the Isle of Man in England, was employed at a paper mill in Ballston Spa and the family lived on Prospect Street. His mother’s maiden name was Adelaide Dake of Greenfield. Walter was the youngest of five children. By 1910 the family lived in Greenwich where Walter went to High School before enrolling at Cornell.

Walter’s letter provides an insightful view of life in the Homestead Sanitarium a century ago and gives us a glimpse of Walter’s shortened life. This letter ensures that Walter is not forgotten.

Sources: March 1918 letter from Walter H. Lewthwaite, Ancestry.com, Find A Grave, census records.