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# The Yellow Springs Water Cure

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# The Yellow Springs Water Cure

Ohio Academy of Medical History

7 May 2011

Jeff Wehmeyer

## The Yellow Springs Water Cure

A presentation for the Annual Meeting of the Ohio Academy of Medical History

7 May 2011

Glen Helen Building, Yellow Springs, Ohio

by Jeffrey M. Wehmeyer

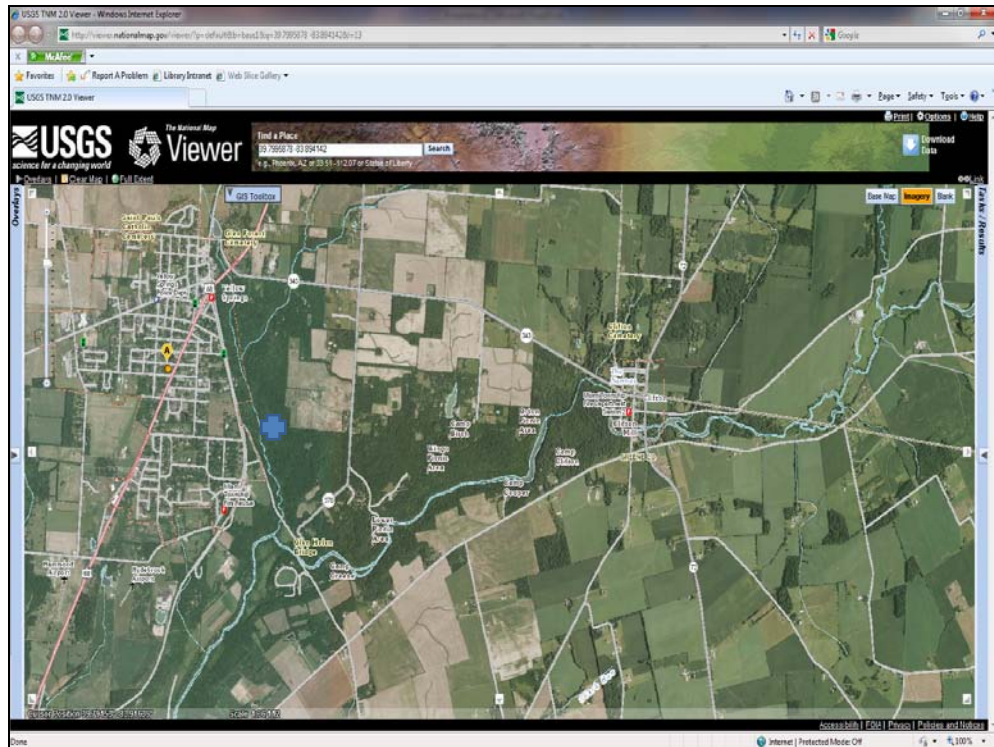
In the 1850s passengers traveling north from Xenia on the Little Miami Railroad would know that they were approaching the village of Yellow Springs when a three-story building came into view on the eastern side of the tracks. This was the Yellow Springs Water Cure, also sometimes known as the Glen Forest Water Cure Institution. The *Xenia Torch-Light* newspaper from April 7, 1852 offered the following description,

“The house is built on elevated ground, in the midst of a beautiful grove, and presents a tasteful front to the Little Miami Railroad. The location, of itself, is almost sufficient to inspire the invalid with health.”<sup>1</sup>

Yellow Springs Water Cure Establishment, *Reilly's Ohio State Business Directory*, 1853



An 1857 account describes the central building as three or four stories, large and attractive, painted white, and “located on an open plateau surrounded by fine forest trees and an extensive lawn.”<sup>2</sup> It could house about 100 people. There were also two bowling alleys, for patient exercise, a short distance from the central house.<sup>3</sup>



The location was known as Shelden Glen, downstream from the fork where the two branches of Yellow Springs Creek come together. From a small railroad station, built for the use of the Cure on the west side of the Glen, one descended to the creek, crossed a bridge, and then

“followed an uphill path toward the main house, passing wide circular fountains sparkling with goldfish and lilies. A cement conduit fed these fountains at good pressure, drawing water from an elevated spring. An even higher spring on the opposite bank of the creek supplied water to the buildings via a lengthy connection of wood pipes, each about twenty feet long and three inches in diameter.”<sup>4</sup>

All types of baths were available for treatment.

**YELLOW SPRINGS**  
**WATER CURE ESTABLISHMENT, GREEN CO., O.**



The above establishment being considerably enlarged and improved, is now open for the reception of patients and visitors. It is capable of accommodating over 100 persons. Being situated in a region of country well-known for the purity of its atmosphere, healthiness, and for its beautiful and romantic scenery, it offers advantages to the health seeking which few establishments possess. The Springs are numerous and inexhaustible, and of the purest water. Having 100 acres of land attached, principally woodland, there is ample scope for exercise without leaving the premises, independent of the walks and rides in its immediate vicinity, which are the most beautiful in the State of Ohio, and good fishing in the Miami about half a mile distant.

There is also a Bowling Saloon, Gymnasium, and a Swimming Pool with other descriptions of amusements where patients and visitors can engage in such healthful and diverting exercise, as will be best calculated to restore their muscular strength.

The Medical department is under the care of A. CHENEY, M. D., and G. W. BIGLER, M. D.

Patients are requested to bring with them two coarse cotton sheets, 1 linen sheet, three comforts, one blanket, and four towels. Patients not bringing the above will be charged 50 cents per week extra.

The establishment can be reached by the Little Miami Railroad from almost every direction. Persons will please notify the conductor on the cars, who will leave them at the "Water Cure Station" opposite the House.

**TERMS.**

For Board and Treatment, \$6.00 to \$10.00, according to the season of the year, length of time the patient may remain and attention required.

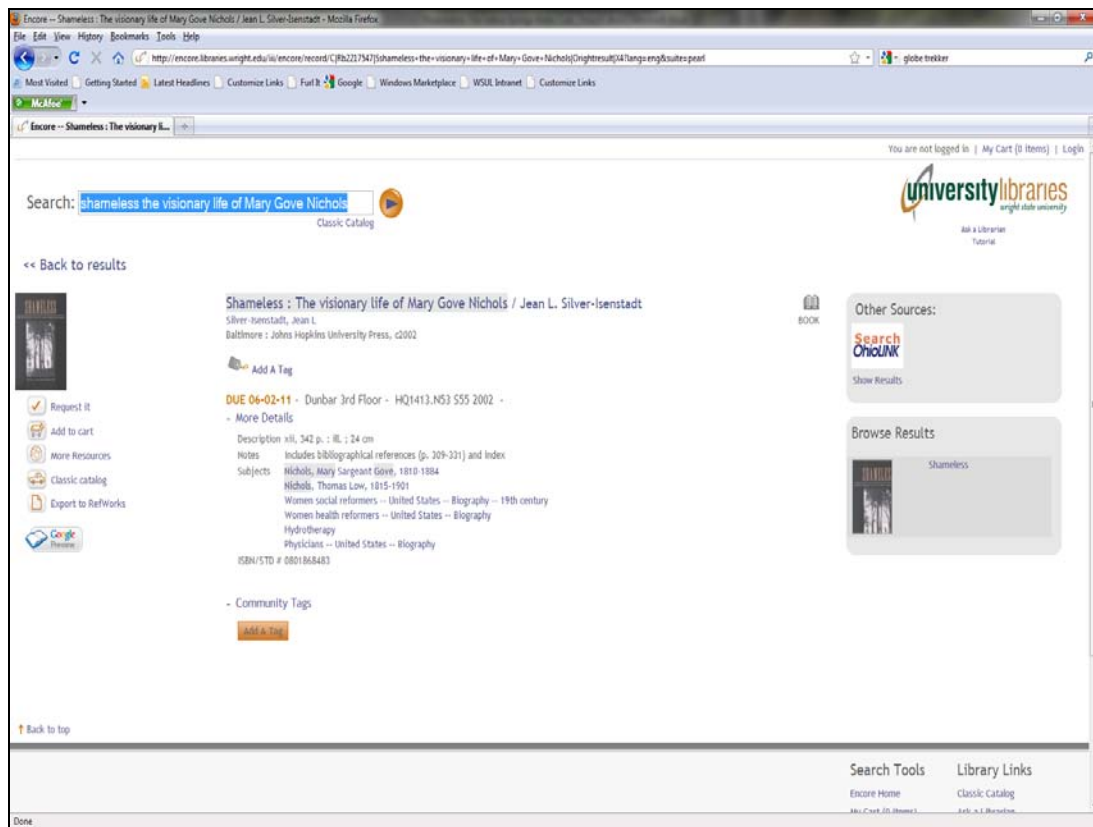
The Yellow Springs Water Cure appears to have been active for a dozen years or more, beginning around 1850, or possibly a few years earlier. There were several managers and/or owners, but their exact sequence is difficult to determine. The *Xenia Torch-Light* piece from 1852, which was mentioned earlier, refers to the Cure as the establishment of Dr. Cheney & Co. This was Dr. Abner Cheney, who was in charge for several years. According to his wife, there were times on week-ends and in the summers when every room of the Cure was occupied and they put cots in the halls for "many who came from Cincinnati and Dayton."<sup>5</sup>

The Antioch College Archives contain a copy of a letter from one of Dr. Cheney's patients that gives a picture of some of the treatments provided. It is dated December 15, 1853. The patient is Clara True and the letter is addressed to her brother-in-law. Ms. True complains of headaches, although it's not clear if these are the primary reason for her taking the cure. She says she received pack sheets every day in the afternoon for 40 minutes.

"I have never got warm in one yet. Dr. says they will finally be beneficial to me even if they make me worse now. If it were not for this hope, I would not submit to the packs, they are so unpleasant."

She also took sitz baths at 10 am, 75 degrees; and foot baths at 7 pm; 90 degrees. In addition she refers to a dripping sheet, saying, "you know how well I like them." Ms. True mentions that the Doctor reduced her board by \$1 so that she paid \$4 per week and says, "Dr. Cheney would ensure me a cure if I could stay long enough." She also tells her brother-in-law that they have a very good library at the Cure.<sup>6</sup>





By 1856 Dr. Ehrmann, a homeopathic physician in Cincinnati, was the owner and he leased the property to Thomas and Mary Nichols. The Nicholsons were well known as hydrotherapy practitioners and teachers, and also as social reformers. Jean Silver-Isenstadt has written a fascinating biography of Mary Gove Nichols, which is the source for some of the information presented here. (A library catalog record for this book is reproduced above.) At the Yellow Springs Water Cure the Nicholsons planned to open “a School of Health; a School of Progress; A School of Life” called Memnonia.<sup>7</sup> Their reputations as social reformers and advocates of “free love” preceded them, however. Horace Mann, president of Antioch College, which had opened in 1853, and other local residents did not want Memnonia in their community. Faced with local opposition, and due to changes in the Nicholsons’ spiritual outlook – they converted to Roman Catholicism – Memnonia disbanded early in 1857, and Thomas and Mary Nichols left Yellow Springs.

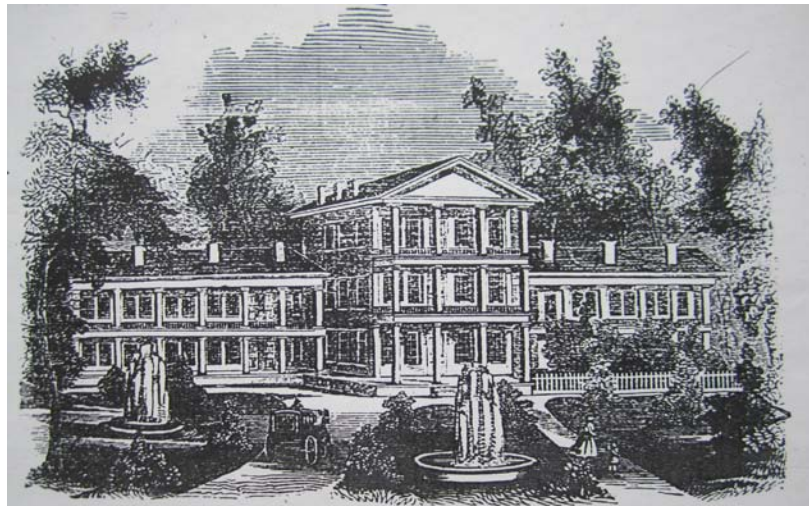
Engraving of Mary Gove Nichols; frontispiece of the *Nichols' Health Manual: Being Also a Memorial of the Life and Work of Mrs. Mary S. Gove Nichols*, 1886.



Mary S. G. Nichols,

Born at Goffstown, New Hampshire, 1810. Died in London, England, 1884.

Springfield Weekly News, June 8, 1860



The Glen Forest Water-Cure.

a Forest Water-Cure—a pictorial representation of which we give our readers today—is delightfully situated in Yellow Springs. It is accessible by carriages and by railway; a neat, little station house having been built on the road, below the village. Leaving the station the visitor crosses by a pleasant carriage drive a wild, romantic road, reaches the summit beyond, upon which stands the buildings. These are commodious and

Another group of physicians, possibly following the Nicholises, was in charge of the Water Cure for a time. An undated advertisement lists the resident physicians, James E. Gross MD, Charles M. Seeley MD, and Mrs. Maria M. Gross MD, and says, “The female department is under the direction of Mrs. Gross, who has a very large experience in the treatment of diseases peculiar to her own sex.” Rates for board and treatment are listed as \$7 to \$10 per week.<sup>8</sup>

The Yellow Springs Water Cure came to an end when the buildings were completely destroyed by fire. The sources that I’ve been able to check disagree on the date for this event. The one that fits best with the rest of the evidence, however, puts it in November 1862.<sup>9</sup> Although much remains to be learned about the Yellow Springs Water Cure, it seems clear that in its relatively short existence it was an important local institution.



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  - Engraving of Mary Gove Nichols, reproduced from frontispiece of the *Nichols’ Health Manual: Being Also a Memorial of the Life and Work of Mrs. Mary S. Gove Nichols*, 1886.

Thanks to Scott Sanders, Archivist, Antioch College

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- “Yellow Springs,” *Xenia Torch-Light*, April 7, 1852.
2. William Albert Galloway, *The History of Glen Helen* (Knightstown, Ind.: The Bookmark, 1977; Reprint of the 1932 ed. printed by F. J. Heer, 1932), 56.
- Ibid., 58.
4. Jean L. Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless: The Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 202-3.
- Galloway, 58.
6. Clara True to Ralph Collier, copy of a letter, December 15, 1853, Memnonia Folder, Antiochiana, Antioch College Library, Yellow Springs, OH.
- Silver-Isenstadt, 200.
  - Galloway, 57.
9. Cosmelia Hirst, typescript of *Yellow Springs News* column, undated, Memnonia Folder, Antiochiana, Antioch College Library, Yellow Springs, OH.