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RECONSIDERATION OF THE DEATH OF JOSIAH GREGG

By HOWARD T. DIMICK

Acknowledgments

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I

Josiah Gregg was born in Overton County, Tennessee, on July 19, 1806. His father Harmon [Harman] Gregg, a Western pioneer, married a woman of Pennsylvania, Susannah Schmel[t]zer.¹ Harmon Gregg was a son of Jacob Gregg and Polly Hatcher, and Jacob Gregg was descended from William Gregg I of Delaware who emigrated from Londonderry, Ireland, in the period 1680-1682 and landed at

¹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 3 Ser., 18 century (29 vols. and index, Harrisburg, 1894-1899), XV, XVI, XVII, XXI XXIII, XXIV, XXVI, *passim*. Members of the Schmelztzer family may be found mentioned in the records *supra*.

New Castle with his sons John, George, and Richard and a daughter Ann.²

William Gregg I, although he had lived long in Ireland before his settlement in the American colonies, was not of Scots-Irish lineage but was of clannish and pure Scottish blood, having descended from Clan Gregor (Mac Gregor) of the Scottish Highlands.³ There is reason to infer that he was born William Mac Gregor and that his family name was changed to Gregg after Clan Mac Gregor was abolished by parliament under Charles I in 1633.⁴ The edict against the Clan licensed anyone to kill a Mac Gregor on sight and to receive a reward for the deed.⁵ Members of the clan who had preserved their highland integrity despite the persecution of James I and VI, took such names as Gregg (Greig), Gregor, Gregory, Grigor, Gregorson, Grier, Grierson, and others, and some of the Mac Gregors emigrated to Ireland.⁶

William Gregg I was the genarch in America of a line of dynamic and gifted Greggs, several of whom gained distinction.⁷ Two of them were exceptional: William Gregg of South Carolina who introduced cotton mills in the Graniteville district, and General John Gregg of Alabama and Texas

2. *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols. and index, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1928-1937), VII, 598, 599; *The Encyclopedia Americana* (29 vols. and index, Americana Corp., New York & Chicago, 1944), XIII, 442.

3. I have traced Gregg family mottoes preserved by descendants of William Gregg I of Delaware directly to Clan Gregor (Mac Gregor) of Scotland. This discovery, made with the aid of The Library of Congress, takes these Greggs back to Gregor Alpin, third son of Alpin, who founded Clan Gregor. See Eyre-Todd's *Highland Clans of Scotland*.

The eldest son of Alpin, king of Scots, became Mac Alpin, and Mac Alpin is an alternate patronymic of Mac Gregor.

Some biographers have inferred that because William Gregg I lived in Ireland he belonged to the Scots-Irish families of Ulster; but this assumption is without foundation, and although some of these Greggs married Irish nationals they were highlanders by blood and custom.

4. Frank Adam, *The Clans, Septs, and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (W. & A. K. Johnston, Edinburgh & London, 1924), 78-79; A. W. Dellquest, *These Names of Ours: A Book of Surnames* (Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1938), 209-210; George Eyre-Todd, *The Highland Clans of Scotland* (2 vols., D. Appleton & Co., New York, 1923), I, 166-172.

5. George Eyre-Todd, *op. cit.*, I, 166-172.

6. *Ibid.*, I, 172.

7. Howard T. Dimick, "Visits of Josiah Gregg to Louisiana, 1841-1847" in *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXIX, No. 1 (January, 1946), 3.

The writer's family is descended from four Gregg brothers of Virginia: Nathan, James, William, and Samuel Gregg, descendants of William Gregg I. General John Gregg was also descended from this Virginia family.

whose death near Richmond, Virginia, on October 7, 1864, was regarded as a calamity by the officers and men of the Confederate arms, many of whom wept while escorting the body to the cemetery.⁸ Josiah Gregg's fame, in his own field, is no less soundly established.⁹

II

Josiah Gregg lived in the vicinity of Fort Cooper, Missouri, until he was nineteen years old when his parents moved to Jackson County near the present site of Independence.¹⁰ As a lad Josiah Gregg wanted to study medicine but could not arrange such a study in his backwoods environment. When his health became affected at the age of twenty-four, he joined a Santa Fe caravan on the advice of his physician, and in the years from 1830 to 1840 he made a number of trips to and from Santa Fe, residing for much of the time in Santa Fe where he was engaged in the mercantile business.¹¹ His last journey to Santa Fe was made in the spring of 1839,¹² and early in 1840 he set out for Van Buren, Arkansas, where his favorite older brother John Gregg was a partner in the firm of Pickett & Gregg.¹³ He made business connections in the United States, quit the Santa Fe trade, and in 1844 went to New York where he found a pub-

8. Charles W. Field, "Campaign of 1864 and 1865" in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XIV, 558; E. L. Sykes, "Burial of General John Gregg in Mississippi" in *Confederate Veteran*, XXII, No. 10 (October, 1914), 463-464.

9. Josiah Gregg, self-educated except for his medical studies, impressed the leading scientists of his day. Ferdinand Roemer in his *Texas*, 32 (footnote), refers to him as "the eminent Gregg, author of 'The Commerce of the Prairies'."

Gregg's book, which sold several editions, was translated into German, and was one of the leading works on commerce of its day, and is now one of the important items of Americana.

10. *Diary & Letters of Josiah Gregg, 1840-1847*, ed., M. G. Fulton (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1941), 10. Cited hereinafter as *Diary & Letters*, I.

11. *Ibid.*, I, 43; Howard T. Dimick, "Visits of Josiah Gregg to Louisiana, 1841-1847," *loc. cit.*, XXIX, 4.

12. John and Josiah Gregg to Commanding Officer of Dragoons Escorting the Santa Fe Caravan, May 12, 1839. By courtesy of the *Division of Manuscripts*, The Library of Congress. On May 12, 1839, Josiah Gregg, who was en route to Santa Fe in company of his brother John Gregg, had reached Camp Holmes near Coop Timbers on the Santa Fe trace. The food was running low and the Greggs were looking for buffaloes.

See *Notes and Documents* this issue of the Review for this letter in full as copied from a photostat by Howard T. Dimick and submitted for publication. Editor.

13. Josiah Gregg, *Diary & Letters*, I, 43-69.

lisher for his celebrated work *Commerce of the Prairies; or, The Journal of a Santa Fé Trader* Having launched his venture as an author, he went to Louisville, Kentucky, and there attended the Medical Institute of Louisville from which he was graduated in March, 1846, with the degree of M.D.¹⁴

Doctor Gregg had intended to return to the Santa Fe trade after graduation, but was persuaded in June to act as guide and interpreter for a mounted regiment from Arkansas under command of Colonel Archibald Yell. The regiment marched for the Mexican border, and at San Antonio was attached to the division of Brigadier-General John E. Wool which was known as the "Army of Chihuahua."¹⁵ Gregg served with the American forces in the Mexican War until June, 1847, when he paid a visit to the United States.¹⁶

Having completed his business at New York and Philadelphia, he made a leisurely return to Louisiana where he remained at the plantation home of his brother John near Shreveport until November.¹⁷ At New Orleans he embarked on the government steamer *Ashland*, reaching Brazo de Santiago, Mexico, in December.¹⁸

Making his way to Saltillo, which he had visited while in the military service, he settled down to the practise of medicine which he continued as a physician of growing repute until the following December.¹⁹ Ever since returning to Mexico he had planned to visit California, and news of gold mining north of San Francisco hastened his decision to begin the journey. Leaving Mexico City in April, 1849, he

14. *Ibid.*, I, 123-156, 159-192.

15. *Ibid.*, I, 251-299; *Dictionary of American Biography*, VII, 598.

16. *Diary & Letters of Josiah Gregg, 1847-1850* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1944), 33-182. Cited hereinafter as *Diary & Letters, II*. Gregg's sojourn in the United States was brief and would have been terminated sooner had it not been for a virulent epidemic of yellow fever in New Orleans which caused him to turn back up Red River for a visit to his brother's plantation home in Caddo Parish, Louisiana.

17. *Ibid.*, II, 168-182; *public records* of Caddo Parish, Louisiana. John Gregg in 1847 owned a small plantation and 14 negro slaves. He appears to have been engaged in raising stock as well as cotton.

18. Josiah Gregg, *Diary & Letters, II*, 181-193.

19. *Ibid.*, II, 202-237.

traveled to Mazatlan where in July he took a steamer bound for San Francisco, landing there about September 1.²⁰

Soon after arrival in California, he went to the Trinity River mining settlements in the vicinity of Big Bar.²¹ From the settlements in November he led a party of explorers toward the mouth of the Trinity River to ascertain the reality of a bay described by Indians as receiving the waters of the Trinity. The party consisted of Gregg (captain), Thomas Seabring, David A. Buck, J. B. Truesdell, — Van Duzen, Charles C. Southard, Isaac Wilson, and Lewis K. Wood.²²

The adventurers discovered the bay [Humboldt Bay] on December 20, but could not agree among themselves on the best route to be followed on the return trip to civilization.²³ Since neither faction would yield, the party divided into two groups each of which selected a different route for the return trip. Gregg with Van Duzen, Southard, and Truesdell followed the Pacific coast for a short distance southwardly and then turned inland to reach the Sacramento Valley. Wood, Seabring, Buck, and Wilson proceeded up Van Duzen's Fork and near its head turned southwardly toward Sonoma Valley and San Francisco.²⁴ So far as known the two factions did not meet on the return trip.

Gregg's party encountered severe exposure and hardship and made slow progress. The death of Gregg occurred on February 25, 1850, while he was riding with his companions near Clear Lake (now in Lake County, California). He suddenly fell from his horse and died in a few hours without speaking. He was buried in a grave dug with sticks and covered with stones to prevent the depredations of wild

20. Josiah Gregg to Dr. George Englemann, February 1, 1849; Gregg to Dr. George Bayless, June 30, 1849; *Diary & Letters, II*, 285-287, 335, 340, 346.

21. Maurice G. Fulton, who edited Gregg's *Diary & Letters*, gives Big Bar as the probable vicinity of the settlement on Trinity River to which Gregg went after leaving San Francisco. The writer has no additional data on this locality. See *Diary & Letters, II*, 361 (footnote).

22. Wood's account of the journey to Humboldt Bay gives the names of the eight persons of the party of explorers, but does not give the first name of Van Duzen.

23. Wood's account of the discovery of Humboldt Bay; Owen C. Coy, "The Last Expedition of Josiah Gregg" in *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XX, 41-49. The Spaniards called the bay *Trinidad*—the name given it by Bodega in 1775.

24. Wood's account. See *Diary & Letters, II*, 361-379.

animals. But the location of his grave was an unmarked one in the wilderness, and, so far as known, was never afterwards found.²⁵

III

The news of the death of Josiah Gregg reached his brother John in Louisiana in May, 1850, in a letter from Probst, Smith & Company of San Francisco, but the letter contained no details of the death. In fact, the historiographer is impressed by the scantness and inadequacy of the data on Gregg's death, as well as by the reticence of the members of the faction which accompanied Gregg on the return trip.²⁶

John Gregg promptly conveyed the news of his brother's death to Philip A. Hardwick, his brother-in-law, who was about to go to California on a business trip. For months thereafter John Gregg made an effort to ascertain details of the death and to locate Josiah's notebooks, papers, and personal effects. He wrote to several persons and firms in California, requesting information, but in January, 1851, he wrote to Mrs. Philip A. Hardwick (Margaret Gregg) that he had been unable to learn anything about the death or to locate his brother's notebooks and personal effects. Philip A. Hardwick had gone to California in May, 1850, but in September of that year he had heard nothing from Josiah Gregg and had no confirmation of his death.²⁷

The newspaper reports of 1850, announcing the discovery of Trinidad [Humboldt] Bay, contained occasional references to the death of Captain Gregg, but the accounts are of no value in attempting to ascertain the cause of Gregg's death or to learn the significant circumstances which preceded it. In a general way they attribute death to exposure and exhaustion, asserting that Gregg's "physical powers sunk" under the hardships of the expedition, and they mention his "debilitated" condition. As a matter of

25. Dimick, "Visits of Josiah Gregg to Louisiana," *loc. cit.*, XXIX, 5; *Diary & Letters*, II, 379.

26. John Gregg to Philip A. Hardwick, May 13, 1850, *Diary & Letters*, II, 354.

27. Gregg to Hardwick, May 13, 1850; John Gregg to Dr. George Englemann, December 24, 1850; John Gregg to Mrs. Philip A. Hardwick, January 6, 1851; Philip A. Hardwick to Mrs. Hardwick, September 21, 1850; *Ibid.*, II, 356-360.

fact, Josiah Gregg had suffered from delicate health as a young man, and there is no doubt that he was ill at the time of undertaking the expedition to the bay. It is probable that his associates were impressed by the fact of illness during the exploration; but of details there are none in the newspaper reports. Yet it must not be overlooked that Gregg was a hardened explorer and traveler used to living on scant food when that was necessary, and in no danger of "sinking" after a few days of hunger. The newspapers of California which first carried the story of the discovery of the bay and the death of Gregg were probably influenced in their accounts of the death by statements of Charles C. Southard, a member of Gregg's faction, who appears to have established the opinion that Gregg died of *starvation*.²⁸

In 1856 Lewis K. Wood published his account of the discovery of Humboldt Bay, a circumstantial narrative of the expedition from the Trinity River mining settlements to the locality where the party divided into two factions and went separate ways. Wood's account attributes the death of Gregg to starvation. Wood's account, however, is admittedly based on what Wood was told about Gregg's death by Charles C. Southard, since Wood was not a member of Gregg's faction on the return trip and was not present when Gregg collapsed. It is probable, therefore, that Southard impressed on Wood his own opinion that Gregg died of starvation. According to Southard, Gregg's faction had been without "meat" for a few days, and had lived meanwhile on herbs, nuts, and acorns.²⁹

In 1915 Owen C. Coy, engaged in research work in California, came across records of the expedition to the bay, including Wood's account of the death of Gregg. Coy published an article on Josiah Gregg's last expedition, but quoted Wood's narrative on the point of Gregg's death and, unfortunately, made it appear that the person quoted was present when Gregg died.³⁰

28.— *Alta Californian*, March 7, 1850; *The Arkansas Gazette and Democrat*, May 17, 1850; *The Liberty (Mo.) Tribune*, May 31, 1850; *op. cit.*, 351-355. Coy gives the first article *supra* as appearing in *Alta California* (?).

29. Wood's account first appeared in *The Humboldt (Cal.) Times*, April 26, 1856; Owen C. Coy, "The Last Expedition of Josiah Gregg" in *loc. cit.*, XX, 41-49.

30. *Ibid.*, XX, 41-49.

In 1941 the first part of the *Diary & Letters of Josiah Gregg* was published in Oklahoma with the coöperation of Claude Hardwicke of Liberty, Missouri, who was custodian of Gregg's personal diaries and other records. The second part of these valuable records was published in 1944, and in the second volume there is an account of Gregg's death based on the newspaper reports and on Wood's narrative with Wood's familiar statement that Gregg died of starvation.³¹

IV

Because eyewitness narratives of the death of Gregg have not been available, some writers have accepted the account of Wood's, and others have attempted to make it appear that Wood was present when Gregg died. Wood's account has found its way into the publications of several historical societies.³² The most recent use of Wood's account to show that Gregg died of starvation is in an article by Percy Montgomery quoted in a popular California magazine. According to the editors, Montgomery died in San Francisco in July, 1946. In the article Montgomery worded Wood's account in such a way as to imply that Wood was present when Gregg fell from his horse and died in two hours from starvation.³³

So far as Wood's account of the death of Gregg attempts to assign the cause of death, it is merely hearsay and is based on the statements made to Wood by Charles C. Southard, an eyewitness of Gregg's death. But there is no record to show that Southard had any knowledge of medicine or of death beyond that of the average layman of his day; his opinion is on that account a lay opinion of death and, as such, carries no weight. Even Southard's observations of the incident and of the surrounding circumstances are scant and unsatisfactory; but on that point it is well to remember that the explorers of Gregg's faction were suffering from

31. The University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. The Press is the publishing division of the university.

32. Wood's account has been reproduced or quoted in the following publications: *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, VI, 19-32; *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (The Texas State Historical Association), XX, 41-49; Hillett's *History of California*, III, 817-832.

33. *Sunset, The Pacific Monthly*, 96, No. 6 (June, 1946), 5.

hunger, exposure, and fatigue, and probably also from disappointment that the route chosen by them had not brought them to the Sacramento Valley by February 25. Their ability to observe closely, in truth, their very inclination to observe details, was affected by their weariness and frustration.³⁴

Wood, so far as known, had no knowledge of medicine or of death other than that of a layman, and his opinion of the cause of Gregg's death is a lay opinion and has no more weight than Southard's. Besides, Wood's account was first published about six years after Gregg's death, and there is the probability that faulty memory may have modified his reference to Gregg's collapse and death.³⁵

V

The want of competent observation of Gregg's death raises many questions pertinent to any historical investigation of death, especially where the cause is in doubt. One may ask with point whether or not Gregg had complained of headaches or other pains before his collapse. With as much point one may inquire into his irritability and uncharacteristic abuse of his companions on the exploration trip to the bay as recorded by Wood. Did all the members of his faction agree that he died of "starvation," or were they instructed on that point by Southard? Why did none of the survivors of Gregg's faction make a statement for publication about the death? Did Gregg make any effort to speak to a member of his faction before death, and what did he try to say? The account of Wood's states that he died in a few hours *without speaking*. Was Wood's statement founded on Southard's personal opinion, or did the other two members of Gregg's faction support it? These are indeed but a few of the questions with which the investigator is faced.

The questions are not without bearing in the light of medical opinion obtained by the writer. In unofficial med-

34. Dimick, *loc. cit.*, XXIX, 5 (footnote).

35. A lapse of six years between the time of Southard's statements to Wood and the publication of Wood's account might cause errors in Wood's recollection of Southard's statements.

ical discussion with physicians, the writer has elicited the opinion that Gregg's death, as based on the description given by Southard to Wood, is *not* consistent with a death from starvation.³⁶ Certain varieties of acorns, it was said, contain chemical compounds which tend to increase human blood pressure.³⁷ If the eater of acorns has hardening of the arteries, increased blood pressure is dangerous, and may lead to a cerebral hemorrhage (stroke).³⁸

The account of Gregg's collapse and death as recorded by Wood is suggestive of a stroke (cerebral hemorrhage), but the details are so scant that it is impossible to assign this as a tentative cause of death. It seems fairly certain, however, that a sudden organic attack, such as a stroke, a heart attack, or other organic seizure, caused Gregg to collapse. The attack may have been superinduced by exposure and exhaustion. Since there was no medical aid at hand and no means of reviving Gregg, he died in a few hours. But there is no foundation for the assertion that he died of starvation.³⁹

VI

The conclusion is unavoidable that the death of Josiah Gregg remains a historical problem, and will probably so remain.

Wood's account can not be accepted as having historical weight. Wood as a layman was not competent to give a medical opinion or to determine a cause of death; and Wood's data were based on hearsay.

Southard, who related the incident of Gregg's death to Wood, was also a layman, and had no competency to give a medical opinion or to determine a cause of death. His opinion has no more weight than Wood's.

36. This is the unofficial medical opinion of Dr. George B. Dickson, physician, surgeon, and associate of the North Louisiana Sanitarium, Shreveport, Louisiana. Gregg's abusive language to his companions is mentioned by Wood. See *Diary & Letters, II, 373*.

37. *Idem.* It is not known what varieties of acorns were eaten by Gregg.

38. The references to Gregg as the "old gentleman" and the "old man" in Wood's narrative indicate that he was prematurely old at forty-three years. In Josiah Gregg's branch of the Gregg family there have been cases of arterial disease and senility.

39. According to unofficial medical opinion, Gregg's death does not resemble a clinical picture of death from starvation.

The details and circumstances of the death as known are not consistent with modern medical knowledge of death from starvation.⁴⁰

The probability of death from a cerebral hemorrhage finds some support in the premature old age of Gregg at forty-three years as well as in the known susceptibility of these Greggs to arterial disease and senility.⁴¹

But a possibility remains which can not be ignored: the possibility that the death of Josiah Gregg was in fact homicidal.

Wood in his account relates an incident in which Gregg narrowly escaped injury or even death at the hands of angry members of the exploration party whom he had abused with "insulting" language.⁴² It is not beyond possibility that such an incident would rankle in the minds of some of those who were Gregg's targets—perhaps in the mind of one of the members of his own faction on the return trip. Fierce quarrels and prolonged enmities were fairly common among pioneers, and they were more likely to occur in situations where the tempers of men were tried by exposure, hunger, and fear. If Gregg's death were homicidal, it would explain the disappearance of his notebooks and personal effects, for they would probably have been buried with him as a precaution by the killer. So, too, would it explain that unlikely story of death by starvation. Since there were only three surviving members of Gregg's faction and since they remained reticent about the death, making no statements for publication except Southard's scant statements to Wood, the possibility of homicide must remain. The Gregg family

40. Report to the Editors of *The Saturday Evening Post*, "Don't Forget How They Starved Us," by Major Livingston P. Noell, Jr., Medical Corps, U. S. Army Air Forces; *Executive Document No. 23*, 2d Ses., 40 Congress, 1867-1868, Vol. 8, 376-377, 629-634.

Dr. Noell, Jr., calls attention again to the disabilities and diseases suffered by those who starve to death; in the Civil War these diseases were encountered at Camp Sumter, Andersonville, Georgia, and although they are differently described by the doctors of 1864, they are still recognizable today.

Doctor Noell, Jr., mentions these: beriberi, hypoproteinemia, scurvy, pellagra, ariboflavinosis, and blindness from Vitamin A deficiency.

41. Gregg's irritability and foul temper on the expedition to Humboldt Bay may have been indicative of high blood pressure from arterial deterioration.

42. *Diary & Letters*, II, 373. Wood's narrative may be consulted in any available publication mentioned in this paper.

could never ascertain details of the death nor recover Josiah Gregg's notebooks and other effects.

Certain it is that the account of Wood, so readily accepted in the past, can no longer be relied upon by historians to explain the cause of the death of Gregg.