

Farewell General Jackson

By Dr. Ashley Bouknight, Curator

In the days before Andrew Jackson's death, he experienced constant pain and was not able to get out of bed without assistance. He never fully recovered from the gunshot wound he received during his duel with Charles Dickinson in 1806, and a persistent cough plagued him throughout his presidency. Family and friends recall the General lying on the couch with a blanket reading letters and newspapers to continue working despite his failing health. To relieve some of the pain, doctors performed "blood-letting," an ancient medical technique believed to release the toxins in the blood. Physicians used small lancets, pewter bowls (and often porringers) or heated cupping glass bowls to drain the "bad blood." In addition to "blood-letting," Jackson also consumed a variety of medications over his lifetime. While considered incredibly dangerous today, these were widely accepted medical practices during Jackson's era.



(Left to right) Pewter porringer from the Jackson family, c1840 cupping glass, reproduction Victorian medicine bottles

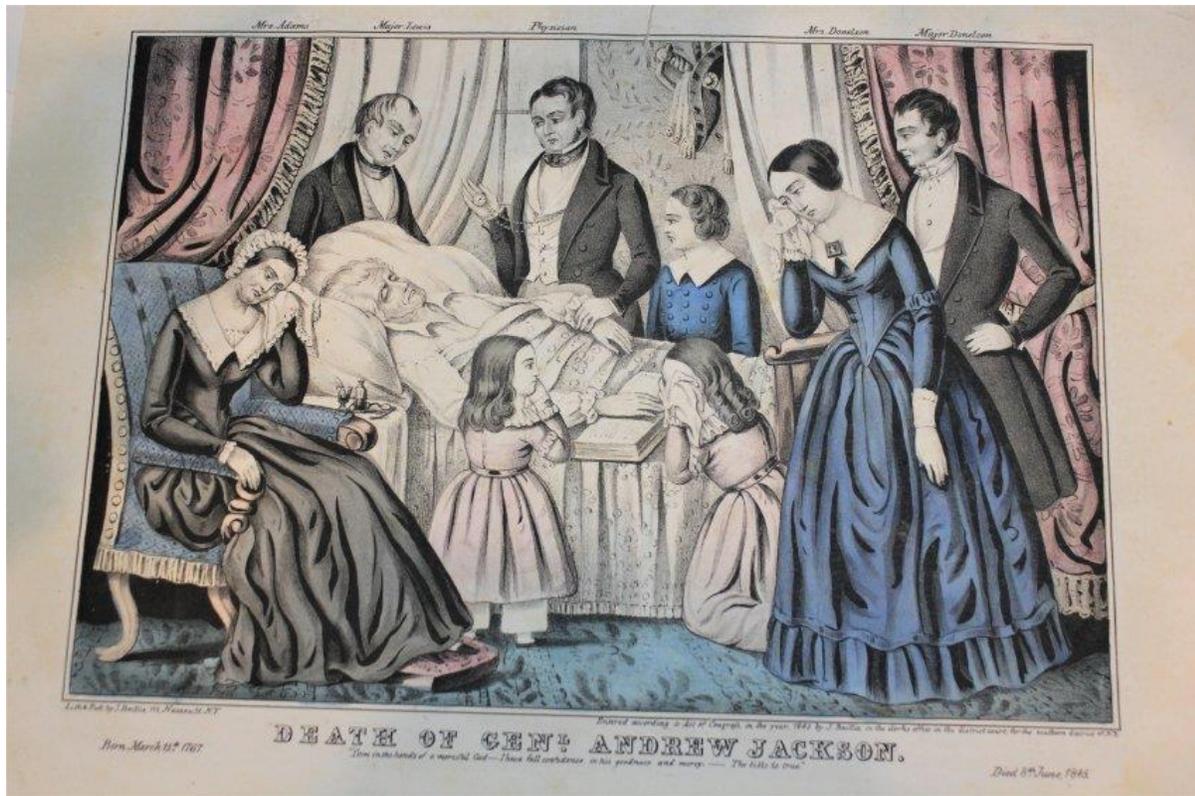
We've learned more about Jackson's medical practices from a 1998 hair study conducted by Northeastern Ohio University. Laboratory tests on strands of the General's hair from earlier in his life show high levels of mercury, following his use of mercury calomel tablets for pain. Strands tested from hair taken during Jackson's presidency show a decrease in levels of mercury but an increase in lead. This increase aligns with Jackson's use of sugar of lead (lead acetate) in baths to ease the pain from a lead bullet lodged in his shoulder. The hair samples taken from Jackson in his retirement years show the presence of both mercury and lead but in drastically lower quantities. The lower levels are probably due to Jackson swearing off mercury early in his presidency and the removal of the lead bullet in his arm in the early 1830s. The study concluded that "Jackson had mercury and lead exposure...However, Jackson's death was probably not due to heavy metal poisoning" but due to renal failure. After swearing off mercury and lead, Jackson replaced much of his medication with a syrup called Matchless Sanative. Although the sanative was mostly cheap whiskey prescribed by unlicensed medical practitioners, Jackson was convinced the concoction was a "cure-all" remedy.

Looking at the portrait of his late wife, Rachel, General Andrew Jackson closed his eyes and passed away at 6 p.m. on June 6th, 1845.



Locks of General Jackson's hair, c.1818. Strands from this group of locks were used in the 1998 hair study

Victorian superstition dictated that mirrors were to be covered with black fabric or turned to the wall. Covering the mirrors in the house was based on the belief that the spirit was attracted to the mirrors. Some people thought the soul could forever be trapped in the reflection. Others believed that the next person to look into the mirror would die. It was also customary to add cloth to the door to signify the death of one of the home's occupants and so guests would know to enter quietly. In several accounts about Jackson's death, witnesses describe Jackson's body lying in the parlor for viewing several days before the funeral. It was not uncommon for a family member to sit with the body throughout the night. Therefore, keeping watch over the General was important to ensure he had passed and was not in a coma or sleeping.



"Death of General Andrew Jackson," Lithograph, J. Baittie, 1845

The decorative motifs of the Victorian era (mid-1830s-1901) were often very elaborate, and funerals were no exception. Family and friends of the General were notified of his passing through small, ornate black bordered invitations. His family held a large funeral on the front lawn of the Hermitage Mansion. More than 3,000 people attended the service. Citizens around the country celebrated the life of Jackson in news articles, parades and memorial tributes. While visiting the grieving family, visitors signed guestbooks and gathered to celebrate the life of the 7th President over light refreshments. Funeral biscuits, like today's shortbread cookies, were probably given to funeral attendees per the traditions of the period.



Reproduction Funeral biscuits and red wine