Dr. John Love

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John Love, physician, city alderman.
Born, Savannah, circa 1760; surgeon’s mate, American Revolution.
Married Sarah Jones (?-1784); served as city alderman, 1790s;
Remarried to Louisa Love (?-?); failed to pay taxes, early 1800s;
died April 25, 1809.
Dr. John Love (ca.1760-1809) was a Savannah physician, Revolutionary War veteran, and public official. He is also something of an enigma, for virtually everything known about him comes from impersonal public documents and legal records. The student of John Love's life is hampered by a paucity of information about the private man and by the nature of the public records as well; the latter are scanty, intermittent and usually not very well detailed. In this paper we hope to examine the known facts about Dr. Love and to suggest further avenues of research.

Nothing is known about John Love's parentage, birth, or childhood. The Register of Deaths in Savannah, Georgia gives his age at the time of his death as "48 years 5 months?" The question mark indicates doubt as to his age, but as there is nothing to contradict that figure we will assume that it is more or less correct. Love died in April, 1809, giving us a probable birth date of December, 1760. The Register of Deaths lists Love's birthplace as Savannah, but this has not been confirmed by any other source.

While Love was growing up, events were taking place that would put the American colonies on a collision course with Great Britain. When that collision took place, in the form of the American Revolution, John Love would not be untouched by the conflict. From the Revolutionary War we find one of the earliest

\[^{1}\text{Genealogical Committee,} \text{ Register of Deaths in Savannah, Georgia 3 vols. (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society) 1983, 2:59.}\]
clues to John Love's life. After the war, he was issued a certificate from the State of Georgia attesting to his service as a surgeon's mate with the First Battalion of the Georgia Line. These certificates were issued by the state as proof of the grantee's honorable service in the war. They could be redeemed in land, which constituted a reward for military or naval service. The First Battalion was authorized in November, 1775. Whether Love joined the unit at that time or if he joined it at a later date is unknown. Perhaps Love's duties as a surgeon's mate constituted his medical training. In any case, the full extent of Love's education is unknown.

With the end of hostilities Love appears to have felt the urge to settle down. On May 22, 1783, the following story appeared in the Georgia Gazette:


The reader should note that Love is referred to as "Doctor," implying that he was practicing medicine at this time.

Love's marriage to this well-connected woman was brief. On Thursday, March 18, 1784, this notice appeared in the Georgia Gazette:

Died last Saturday Night in this town Mrs Sarah

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*Marion R. Hemperly, Military Certificates of Georgia, 1776-1800. (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Archives and History, 1983.) p.106.

*Georgia Gazette, May 22, 1783, page 4, column 3.
Love, wife of Doctor John Love, who lived beloved and died greatly regretted, and it may be truly said that a worthy woman went out of this world.  

Love eventually remarried. His second wife’s name was Louisa, but no information about her background has been discovered. Probate records and newspaper stories refer to her, but no record of the marriage has been found.  

Love fathered at least two children who survived until adulthood. Savannah newspapers of the early 1800s refer to a “Doctor Love, Junior.”  

It is believed that this second Dr. Love was Dr. Augustus C. W. Love, who died on November 13, 1813 at the age of 28.  

The only other offspring that has been linked to John Love is a daughter, Elizabeth Ann Love.  

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Warren’s *Marriages and Deaths* contains no mention of Louisa Love and no newspaper notice relating to the marriage has been found. It is possible that the marriage took place in another state, but there is no way to know for sure.  

*Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger*, November 3, 1807, page 2, column 1. “Dr. Love, Jun.” appears on a list of names of persons who had received mail through the post office. Probate records refer also refer to a second Dr. Love; See Chatham County Probate Court, Files L-39A and L-39B.  

*Genealogical Committee*, *Register of Deaths in Savannah*, 3: 02. This Dr. Love is listed as having been born in Chatham County. He died of an “intermittent fever after an illness of three weeks” at the house of a Mrs. Gilbert on York Street.  

Almost a year after John Love’s death, Elizabeth Ann Love married Major P. B. Oram in a ceremony performed by a Rev. Holcombe. See *Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger*, April 10, 1810, page 3, column 3. The article describes the bride as “daughter of the late Dr. John Love of this city.”
As best as can be determined, Dr. Love maintained a permanent residence in Savannah and became active in public affairs. His name appears on the 1790 tax digest for Chatham County. (The 1790 United States Census for Georgia has been lost.) On September 29, 1797, a local newspaper, The Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, carried a story about two American citizens who found aboard a British warship which had been intercepted on the high seas. The two Americans were brought to Savannah, arrested under a warrant sworn by the city’s mayor and brought before “Doctor John Love, one of the alderman of this city, for examination.” Love placed one of the men in the “Federal Jail” to await trial for allegedly having joined the Royal Navy voluntarily. The other man was released when Love found that he had been taken on to the British vessel against his will.*

We would like to know more about John Love’s career as a public official but unfortunately this newspaper entry was not discovered until late in the term, when this paper was being written. No other references to Love as a public official have been found, but there has not been time to conduct a search. It will remain one of the avenues for future research.

*Dr. Love’s name appears in “Chatham County Tax Digest for 1790,” Substitutes for Georgia’s Lost 1790 Census (Albany, Georgia: Belwyn Associates, 1975) p.48. Love’s role in the case of the two American sailors found on board the British ship is documented in Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, Friday, September 29, 1797, page 3, column 2.

**Columbian Museum, Friday, September 29, 1797, p.3, c.2
An interesting aspect of this article is that Love is referred to as "one of the aldermen of this city." But his actions in the case were similar to what we would today call a magistrate or Recorders Court judge. Perhaps Love held two offices at once, or perhaps the duties of city aldermen were different back then. It is possible that the newspaper reporter who wrote the story got Love's title wrong.

While the nature and extent of Love's service as public official remain shadowy, even less is known about his career as a physician. In newspapers and public documents he almost always referred to as "doctor," which may indicate that he was primarily known for his medical practice. Lists of his personal belongings filed in probate court do mention a large number of medical books, surgical instruments, and medicines. While we know nothing of his practice, we can make a few general statements about the state of American medicine in the early years of the Republic. It was abysmal, at least by our standards. Common medical practices included bleeding and purgation for a variety of diseases, including the dreaded and deadly yellow fever. Doctors generally knew how to set a broken arm or leg, but amputation of the limb was the only option if the fracture was severe. Leeches were used to "treat" diseases that affected internal organs. Even if John Love had been one of the most capable and intelligent physicians of his day he would not have understood the causes of infection, the dangers of harmful bacteria and viruses, or the necessity of sterilizing instruments.
and dressings. And when a surgeon of that day was forced to perform a serious operation, such as an amputation, he was apt to ply the patient with rum beforehand—no other anesthetic was available. The best medical opinion in 1800 held that most diseases were caused by "morbid acrimonies" in the blood. By the standards of the 1980s what passed for medical science in 1800 was not worthy of the name. But at the time no one knew better, and doctors enjoyed high social status. Love resided in what newspapers and court records referred to as a "House on the Bay." For a time he was apparently well-to-do; he stocked his home with mahogany furniture, china, and a personal library of some 150 volumes. He also owned slaves. Three were black women, named Chloe, Mira, and Henrietta. Four were mulattoes: two boys named Natt and George, and two girls named Lucy and Louisa. Louisa is described as a child of Chloe's, perhaps to prevent any confusion between her and the second Mrs. Love. No information about the parents of the other slaves is available. At the time of his death, these seven human

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12 Smith, Shaping of America, 430.

13 Chatham County Probate Court, Files L-39A and L-39B. See also Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, January 16, 1808, page 3, column 1.
beings were John Love's most valuable personal assets. Chloe and Henrietta were valued at $350 apiece, Mira at $300. Natt and George were believed to be worth $200 each, while Lucy's value was estimated to be $150. Louisa, perhaps because she was a child, was valued at a mere $50.¹⁴

For all his valuable personal possessions, Love experienced financial difficulty in the last years of his life. The main reason for his troubles was that he failed to pay his taxes. Why he did so is unknown. But on November 17, 1808, Love appeared on a list of tax defaulters printed in one of the local newspapers.¹⁵ On February 10, 1809, Peter Deveraux, a local tax official, ordered the sheriff of Chatham County to seize and sell such "goods and chattels, lands and tenements of Dr. John Love" as necessary to make good the amount Love had failed to pay. The delinquent taxes amounted to $12,871/2 for the year 1808.¹⁶ Love failed to pay his Federal Direct Taxes as well.¹⁷ Delinquent taxes would continue to trouble Love for the rest of

¹⁴Chatham County Probate Court, "Inventory of the Personal Estate of the Late Dr. John Love, Deceased," Document #666, File L-39A. This paper states that Love's personal property was worth $2,125.04 at the time of his death.

¹⁵Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, November 17, 1808, page 2, column 3.

¹⁶Chatham County Probate Court, Document #784, File L-39B.

his life, and were to a burden to his family after his death."* On Tuesday, April 25, 1809, Dr. John Love died at his House on the Bay. In contrast to his birth, his death is well documented. The Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger for April 25, 1809 says that Love died that morning. The obituary goes on to describe him as "for many years a resident of this city" and concludes by saying that "the citizens are respectfully invited to his funeral from his late dwelling house at 10 o'clock tomorrow."** Another source, The Register of Deaths in Savannah, Georgia, says that Love died that day of a fever.*** Where Love was buried is unknown; a search of the records of the Colonial Park Old Burial Ground turned up no mention of Love. A document filed in Probate Court shows that on the day of Love's death Mrs. Love paid $26 to Mr. J. T. Lawrence for "sundries for a funeral," but aside from that nothing is known.

Louisa Love served as the administratrix of her late husband's estate.**** She appears to have been beset by debt. The probate

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*Chatham County Probate Court, Documents #786 and #788, File L-39B. These papers indicate that Love and his survivors failed to pay county and general taxes for 1809 and 1810.

**Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, Tuesday, April 25, 1809, page 3, column 2.

***Genealogical Committee, Register of Deaths in Savannah, Georgia, 2:59. Love's death on April 25, 1809 is also confirmed by Warren, Marriages and Deaths in Georgia, p.68, and by Hemperly, Military Certificates of Georgia, p.106.

****The record of Mrs Love's payment to Lawrence for "sundries for funeral" is found in Chatham County Probate Court, Document #676, File L-39A. Louisa Love is identified as administratrix of her husband's estate in Chatham County Probate Court, Document #679, File L-39A.
files contain numerous papers relating to debts owed and debts settled. Eventually she was forced to sell off much of her late husband's personal property to settle these obligations.**

We have examined the known facts about the life of Dr. John Love. From what we have seen it is difficult if not impossible to draw many conclusions about the man's attitudes, beliefs, and interests. The best clue we have to the latter is the inventory of his personal library which was liquidated after his death. Love owned, as we have seen, an extensive personal library, and its contents provide some insight into the interest of Love and his family. Love owned a great many books relating to the practice of medicine and surgery and to the study of anatomy and disease. But he also owned volumes on government, logic, law, history, the Italian language, and the works of Pope, Swift, and Shakespeare.*** Whoever stocked that library had wide ranging tastes. Be that as it may, our tentative conclusion about Dr. John Love is that he was a respectable physician who for some unknown reason fell into financial difficulty late in his life.

We are left with many unanswered questions. We would like to know something about Love's parents. Where were they from? What did they do? We would also like to know more about the nature of Love's service as an alderman in the 1790s. Perhaps

**Chatham County Probate Court, Documents #672-674 and Documents #668-669, Files L-39A and L-39B.

***Ibid, Documents #671-674, File L-39A.
the minutes of the city council meetings from that decade could provide some useful information. The microfilmed editions of the local newspapers are of limited help. The Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser carried many references to Love according to the newspaper index for the 1790s. Unfortunately, the Savannah Public Library’s microfilm edition was made from poorly preserved copies and is unreadable in many places.

Nothing is known about Mrs. Louisa Love. Her maiden name, date of birth and date of death are unknown, as is the date of her marriage to John Love.

An interesting point to raise here is that at the beginning of this course John Love was characterized as a "physician and owner of a house of questionable repute." No record of Love’s ever having owned a brothel has come to light. It does seem logical that such an enterprise would be conducted furtively—-one would not expect the owner of such a house to advertise his business in the local newspaper. But we have no reason to suspect that Love ever operated a brothel, and perhaps it is best to give him the benefit of a doubt. Nonetheless, this characterization of Love was made by the Georgia Historical Society, which provided the students of this class with their subjects. The Georgia Historical Society has been closed to researchers throughout the Fall of 1987 and therefore we have not had access to their materials. Perhaps the Historical Society does have some papers that convincingly identify Love as a brothel keeper, but it is just as possible that the story is a
myth. It is conceivable that Love may have been smeared with this charge by a political opponent. At this time we cannot say.

John Love was born a British subject and died an American citizen. In between he saw the most pivotal events in our nation's history. He was involved in the Revolution, was active in community affairs in the early years of the Republic, and was a witness to the extraordinary events of the late 1700s. It would be interesting if a collection of his papers could be found. They could provide us with some insight into how an active, apparently well-read American saw the events of his time. But unless such documents turn up we will have to be satisfied with a life in outline.
WORKS CITEd

Chatham County Probate Court, "Estate of John Love," Files L-39A and L-39B.


Columbian Museum and Savannah (Georgia) Advertiser, September 29, 1797.


Georgia Gazette, May 22, 1783.

Georgia Gazette, March 18, 1784.


Hemperly, Marion R., Military Certificates of Georgia, 1776-1800. Atlanta: Georgia Department of Archives and History, 1983.

Republican and Savannah (Georgia) Evening Ledger, 1807-1810.
