

Gout, an American Revolutionary War Statesman, and the Tower of London

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Henry Laurens (1724–1792) was a successful American merchant and plantation owner who became a revolutionary war statesman, serving as vice president of his home state of South Carolina, president of the Continental Congress during the war with England, and envoy to Holland representing the newly-formed nation of the United States. While traveling to Europe on this latter assignment, he was captured at sea by the British and found to have incriminating documents in his possession. Charged with high treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London, he remained there for fifteen months before being released on bail and exchanged for Lord Cornwallis, the English general defeated by George Washington at Yorktown in 1781.^{1ppxxiv–xxv,2,3}

Laurens corresponded frequently with business associates, friends, family members, and many of the important political figures of the day. In addition, while held prisoner in the Tower, he kept a journal he later expanded

A caricature of a person with gout as typically viewed by an artist of this period. Engraving, drawn by E. Y. and engraved by G. Hunt, published in London by Thomas McLean in 1827.

Image courtesy of the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts.



Drawn by R. Y. Esq.

London, Published by Tho. Agnew, 26, Haymarket, 1827.

Eng^d by G. Hunt.

AN EXQUISITE TASTE, WITH AN ENLARGED UNDERSTANDING.

into a narrative about his confinement.^{4pp330–404} Mentioned repeatedly throughout those letters and documents are the episodes of gout that severely troubled him over the years. Written in the formal manner of the period, his comments not only provide a contemporary account of this disease but also reveal the significant impact this disorder had upon his daily personal and political life and activities, and perhaps even upon his career.

Laurens was not the only well-known person during these years to have suffered from gout. In his book *A Short History of the Gout*, William S. C. Copeman wrote that

The eighteenth century, known as the Age of Reason, might also be termed the Golden Age of Gout. Its ravages are well documented in both medical and lay literature and art throughout Europe, and its influence on world history at several important periods can be clearly seen.^{5p80}

The names and stories of those afflicted with gout in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, individuals who have been called “Martyrs to the Gout,”⁶ reads like a who’s who of the political, literary, and scientific worlds of that period— Thomas Sydenham, William Harvey, Horace Walpole, Henry Fielding, Thomas Gray, Samuel Johnson, Benjamin Franklin, William Pitt, and Edward Gibbon, to name just a few. Without doubt, Henry Laurens belongs on this list.

In 1768 Laurens, then in his mid-forties and a successful business man in Charleston, South Carolina, described his first episode of gout:

I have been sitting these four Days with my left Leg on a Chair and Pillows, my ankle and Foot in exquisite Torture at Times, never quiet and much swell’d. Doctor Garden says it is the Gout but I am satisfied in my own Mind that it is only the Effects of a Cold fallen into a part that has been the Weakest in my bodily Frame for twenty Years past.^{1p182}

This description calls to mind drawings and cartoons by English artists and caricaturists of that era—men seated in special gout chairs, in various degrees of distress, with their feet wrapped in layers of cloth and supported on gout stools.^{7pp248–83} Laurens initially attributed his symptoms to “the Effects of a Cold,”^{1p182} to “a sprain,”^{1p229} and to “no more than the effect of my Cherokee Marches,”^{1p232} the latter referring to the long distances marched in military campaigns against the Cherokee Indians several years earlier. At the same time, anticipating the possibility that he might indeed have gout, he noted, “I shall not eat or drink any thing in future that may encourage him [the gout] to become an inmate.”^{1p229} Rich foods, gluttony, and excessive alcohol had long been associated with gout, and by moderating and being selective about his intake of food and drink, Laurens was following a time-honored approach to treatment.^{5,7}

A year after the death of his wife, Laurens left for Europe to arrange for the education of his sons, though not before experiencing further “growling of the Gout in both Feet.”^{8p564} Later, when writing from abroad that his trip was “impeded by the Gout”^{9p386} and that it was “extremely uncertain when the Tyrant Gout might allow me to look about that City,”^{9p387} he seemed to be aware that the disorder was beginning to restrict his activities. At the same time, however, the following thought appeared to provide some consolation: “I have admitted that Plague [the Gout] to be friendly from this consideration that it allows no other bad company to stay in the House at the same time.”^{9p386} This remark by Laurens, strange as it may now seem, expresses what was then a popularly held belief, that “so long as gout was in possession of the body, no deadlier enemy could invade. Gout thus provided resistance.”^{10pp12–13}

During a visit to England in the summer of 1774, Laurens experienced yet another painful attack of gout:

I overfatigued my Self the 25th June by my favorite exercise of walking. I was near nine hours on foot without one hours rest. This brought on the most Severe fit of Gout that ever I had. . . . Temperance will not Secure me against Such attacks if I provoke them, but here-after, to Temperance in Meats & Drinks I shall add Temperance in Exercise.^{11p485}

The persistence of his symptoms necessitated a change in travel plans, his mobility being restricted to moving “from the Bed to an Easy chair & from this to that again as Night succeeds day without being able to put either foot to the Carpet.”^{11p494} He turned for relief to what some considered to be an extreme form of therapy:

This Morning my patience being exhausted I called in my old remedy, Cold Water. Friends & Connoisseurs pronouced [sic] it desperate, but experience teaches best. At the Sight of the apparatus my Heart Shrunk but I was determined & did the Deed three times over, & thank God I feel no Ill effects, on the contrary have hopes to Crutch it to morrow.^{11p505}

Laurens was aware of the controversy surrounding this remedy (immersion of a painful extremity in cold water^{5p93,7p137,7p140}), having been “told that what proves a cure to me has hastned [sic] the Death of Some Men. Perhaps they did not practice the Cold Water in the Same way.”^{11p504}

On returning to Charleston, Laurens became more politically active, and in March of 1776 was elected vice president of South Carolina. The following year he was sent as a delegate from his state to the Continental Congress, and on November 1, 1777, succeeded John Hancock as president of this body.^{3pp205–06} A few weeks later his gout recurred, a severe attack that he portrayed in a letter to his friend the Marquis de Lafayette:



Henry Laurens by Lemuel Francis Abbott of London (ca. 1760–1802). The inscription in the upper left hand corner reads: “Hon: Henry Laurens, Pres: of the American Congress. (Painted 1781. while in the Tower.)” From the U.S. Senate Collection.

From the Morning of the 9th Inst. to this minute I have been close prisoner to the Gout. . . . in very great pain & at this Instant unable to put a foot to the floor.^{12p163}

The intensity of this episode apparently caused Laurens to wonder whether he should continue as president of the Continental Congress. He explained to a friend:

I foresaw a continuance of pain & Crippism [sic] for many Weeks. I then dictated a Letter to be written to Congress expressing my apprehensions & earnestly intreating [sic] an acceptance of my resignation. an answer was returned by a Member, that Congress were not disposed to grant my request . . . this Seemed & indeed was very kind & a little flattering. a Compliment which laid claim to my gratitude.^{12p221}

Laurens persevered through this difficult period. “Sitting both feet & Legs bound up in a Basket in the room where Congress meets,”^{12p220} and only able “to hobble on my Crutches over Ice & frozen Snow or to be carried to such a homely home as I have,”^{12p220} he wrote that “under very great bodily pains [I] proceeded to do business every day.”^{12p183} Strangely enough, the difficulties he faced were similar to those of a contemporary, William Pitt (1708–1778), England’s great eighteenth-century prime minister, who experienced such excruciating pain from gout that at times he had to be carried to Parliament

to deliver his speeches and conduct the affairs of office.^{6pp214–16} It was the seventeenth-century English statesman Sir William Temple who earlier, when writing about gout, had pointed out what might be the political consequences of illnesses like these: “I have seen the Councils of a great cuntry grow bold or timorous, and the pulse of Government beat high or low, according to the fits of gout or ill health of the Governors.”^{5pvii}

Laurens presided over the Continental Congress during a critical period in American history—the hardships of Washington’s army at Valley Forge, the Conway Cabal, the Saratoga Convention, and the French alliance.^{3pp218–19} However, personal and factional differences with others led to his resignation from the presidency on December 9, 1778, after thirteen months in office. He continued, nevertheless, to represent his state in Congress, and the following year was appointed envoy to Holland, charged with securing alliances, preparing for future peace negotiations, and obtaining financial loans.^{4pp198–201} The ongoing war with England had made it difficult and dangerous to travel across the Atlantic, and while waiting to make the trip, his gout returned: “I have been for several days past, & am now, lame & confined by the Gout.”^{4p299}

Finally able to secure passage aboard a brigantine, the *Mercury*, Laurens embarked from Philadelphia on August 13, 1780. Unfortunately, three weeks later, he and the crew were captured by the British on the high seas. His attempt to destroy his private papers by throwing them overboard failed. His captors were able to recover the documents, the contents

of which revealed the purpose of his mission and provided the British government with a pretext for later declaring war against Holland.^{2,3}

Taken to England, Laurens arrived in London on October 5. Appearing the next day before members of the Privy Council, he was charged with high treason and imprisoned immediately in the Tower of London.^{4pp617–18} There he was lodged in the quarters of a warder, James Futterell, in two small rooms measuring about twenty square feet, with iron bars in the windows and an armed guard outside the door.^{4p343} He had to pay for his own provisions, was allowed to walk only in a limited area of the Tower grounds, and was subjected to a number of other restrictions spelled out in orders to his jailers.^{4pp623–24} In his correspondence and journal, he frequently complained about the harsh and cruel behavior of John Gore, the residing governor of the Tower, who at times acted “arbitrarily & tyrannically”^{4p349} towards him and under whose care he was “closely confined & inhumanly treated.”^{4p458} Laurens also told of being subjected to repeated pressures from his British captors to renounce the American cause and to renew his allegiance to the Crown, in return for which he would be released from the Tower. He refused these offers, saying dramatically, “Sir I will never subscribe to my own infamy & to the dishonor of my Children. . . . I am afraid of no consequences but such as would flow from dishonorable Acts.”^{4p358}

From time to time Laurens expressed his belief that the American government was not doing enough on his behalf. In a letter to the president of Congress, he wrote,

From the 6th of October 1780 to November 1781. I remained a close Prisoner in the Tower of London, without hearing of any Steps taken for my Release, or for my support or Consolation in that distressful State, either by Congress or by any of their Servants.^{4p518}

To add further to his difficulties, his gout was a continual problem despite occasional visits from doctors:

The Governor [of the Tower] grew uneasy & asked the Warders why I had not walked? they answered I was lame with the Gout.^{4p348}

Battalion Surgeon bled me, having been very ill preceeding [sic] night.^{4p351}

Seized by an extremely violent fit in both feet & Ankles, confined to my Bed.^{4p383}

The last Blister has done great Execution I feel my head and heart light and chearful [sic] this Morning, but a confounded gnawing all night in my right foot, thro’ that Channel the disorder probably will pass.^{4p416}

The Bearer [of this message] will relate how very roughly I have been treated by the Gout . . .

At present I am sitting in great pomp, the Leg and the foot on a Sort of a prison Cushion.^{4p416}

With the help of the famous English political writer and statesman Edmund Burke, Laurens petitioned the House of Commons on December 1, 1781, for his release from the Tower, explaining that “his bodily health is greatly impaired & that he is now in a . . . languishing state.”^{4p457} He later wrote,

On the 31st of December [1781], being as I had long been, in an extreme ill state of Health unable to rise from my Bed, I was carried out of the Tower to the presence of the Lord Chief Justice of England & admitted to Bail.^{4p519}

Immediately on being set free, Laurens went to Bath,^{4pp398,461} a popular spa that traced its origin back to Roman times and was known for its waters, taken internally and externally, for the treatment of gout. He returned there periodically over the following months but nonetheless continued to experience gouty symptoms and poor health during the remainder of his stay in Europe. To John Adams he wrote,

I arrived in a shattered state & continued very Ill & drooping to the 11th Inst. when for the first time in nine Months I buckled up my Shoes, I have physicked bled & starved out the cause of my disorders, but am left in a feeble condition.^{4p595}

In 1782 and 1783 Laurens served with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay as a peace commissioner in Europe. However, failing health and family concerns restricted his participation in the commission’s activities and his contributions were limited. Arriving back home in South Carolina in early 1785, Laurens retired to “Mepkin,” his estate. Except for voting on ratification of the new United States constitution at the state convention of 1788 and being selected to cast an electoral vote for his state in the nation’s first presidential election,^{3p278} he no longer was active in public life. On December 8, 1792 at the age of sixty-eight, he died.

The treatments mentioned by Laurens—bleeding,^{4p599} blistering,^{4p416} evacuatives,^{13p1} moderation in meats and drinks,^{11p485} a regimen of vegetables and milk,^{4p599} bark (cinchona),^{4p384} spa therapy,^{4p398} and cold water treatments^{11p505}—were only a few of the countless “cures” patients were exposed to in earlier years when treating gout.¹⁴ Most were of limited, if any, value. Indeed, not until the reintroduction of colchicum (*Colchicum autumnale* or meadow saffron) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from which colchicine was later derived, did the first truly effective medication for acute gout become available.^{7pp131–36} Unfortunately, this did not happen in time to be of help to Laurens and his generation. Today, with a number of beneficial



“The Tower,” an aquatint by T. Malton, 1799. A view of the Tower of London during the time when Henry Laurens was a prisoner within its walls.

Courtesy of Guildhall Library, City of London.

medications and treatment options to choose from for managing and preventing attacks of gout, far fewer physicians will ever see the full-blown episodes and long-term consequences of this disease, including joint destruction and renal failure.

In its thousand-year history, the Tower of London has served as a fortress, royal residence, prison, and place of torture and execution, and has housed public records, a zoo, a mint, and an observatory. At present it contains the famous Crown Jewels and the collections of the Royal Armories. Henry Laurens, the most distinguished American captured during the Revolutionary War,^{4pxvii} became part of the history of the Tower when—like Sir Walter Raleigh, two of the wives of Henry VIII, Guy Fawkes, the two ill-fated princes Edward V and his brother, Lady Jane Grey, Sir Thomas Moore, and countless others—he was imprisoned within its walls. However, unlike many who were held prisoner there, Laurens was able to leave with his head held high and still firmly attached to his shoulders and with his reputation intact.

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