

Caring for a Newborn in the 1830s by Meggan McGuire

Rubbing a newborn in fresh lard, creating formula recipes made with raw cow's milk and sugar loaf, applying a raisin to a baby's belly button, and only nursing a baby if a mother has been free of "violent passions and emotions" for at least two hours are some of the common pieces of advice given to new parents in the 1830s. As we approach Grover Cleveland's birthday, we will take you back in time to imagine what the early days of Grover's life may have looked like.



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Stephen Grover Cleveland was born March 18, 1837 and was brought into the world by two midwives, Naomi Baldwin and Mary DeCamp Shippen. In addition, Grover's mother, Ann Neal Cleveland, was assisted by Elizabeth Gould Courter Cook, a local baby nurse, in caring for the tiny infant. What information did midwives, baby nurses and mothers have to help keep infants safe and healthy during the 1830s? One possible and probable source is Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) and her successful series of domestic manuals: *The American Frugal Housewife* (1829), *The Mother's Book* (1831), and *The Family Nurse* (1837). Child's work was wildly popular in her time, with *The American Frugal Housewife* going through thirty-three printings in twenty-five years. It is likely that Grover's mother, midwives and baby nurse were familiar with Child's teachings and put them into practice as they cared for the future president. Today we will focus on *The Family Nurse*, but we invite you to read Child's other works to gain an even fuller picture of household management and childrearing in the 1800s.

Immediately after birth, Child recommends that the baby be “rubbed with fresh lard, and then carefully washed with luke-warm water, and fine old soap” (34). It may sound strange to a modern audience, but this practice could have helped to stimulate the baby’s circulation and give some protection to their sensitive skin during the first wash. The new mother is advised to “avoid seeing too much company, or too soon. It is better not to see even intimate friends under a week or ten days” (33). The mother would need time to rest, recuperate and bond with her baby, so this advice on confinement doesn’t seem too outlandish, even for today.

When it comes to feeding the baby, Child believes that strong exercise or emotions could negatively impact the quality of the mother’s milk, going so far as to advise: “Avoid all over-heating, from running, dancing, excessive fatigue, &c.; likewise the indulgence of violent passions or emotions. If anything of this kind takes place, do not nurse the child for at least two hours after the occurrence, lest convulsion fits should be the consequence” (35). She also warns against using feedings as a way to pacify a crying infant, as “it forms the habit of requiring more nourishment than its stomach can well bear” (36). For mothers who struggle to produce enough milk, Child provides an early recipe for formula: “If a mother have not enough milk to nourish her child, the best substitute consists of two-thirds new [raw] milk, one third water, and a little sugar loaf; made fresh often and given luke-warm” (36). While we cannot endorse this particular substitution for today’s mothers, it is fascinating seeing a recipe that may have helped mothers with such a life-or-death challenge.

Keeping the baby clean, comfortable, and safe are recurring themes in Child’s manual. Clothing, including cloth diapers, should be “washed often enough to be kept perfectly soft and sweet. As far as possible, use strings instead of pins. The use of needles is extremely dangerous.” (40). Essentially, a clean baby is a happy baby and sharp objects should not be used on children’s diapers, advice that still rings true today. She also makes a special note of caring for a newborn’s umbilical stump: “The belly-band of an infant should be worn at least four months [...] it should be made of a soft flannel, cut cross-wise, so as to be elastic. A little piece sewed upon it to fasten it to the diaper is convenient. A scorched linen rag, with fresh mutton tallow on it, or a raisin split open, are suitable to apply when the cord drops off” (40). For a modern audience, it is funny to imagine sticking a raisin into your baby’s belly button, but Child infers that this practice helped the area heal faster. Two pieces of advice that aged particularly well are the following: “Cradles should never be rocked violently, lest it produce dropsy in the brain” (40) and “Infants should always be carried in such a manner as to support the back and neck. Many diseases of the spine originate in a want of this precaution” (40). Child’s focus on protecting a child’s developing brain, nerves and spine shows that she had an understanding of human anatomy and physiology and knew that it was vitally important for new mothers and their attending nurses to be familiar with it as well.

While *The Family Nurse* is almost 200 years old, it still holds immense value because it gives us a clear image of the standard of care for infants in the 1800s. When we think of Stephen Grover Cleveland, most of us do not picture him as an infant, but it is important to recognize that the proper care during his most vulnerable infant years allowed him to grow into the man he became. Although some of Child’s advice has now proved to be medically antiquated, it still gave much-needed guidance to mothers, midwives and baby nurses. This text, along with Child’s other manuals, are available for purchase at our site’s gift shop.