





Life Saver

Medical alumnus William A. Newell practiced the healing arts throughout his life—when he wasn't founding the Life-Saving Service, representing New Jersey's Second District in Congress, and serving as governor of New Jersey and Washington Territory. Along the way he became the "particular friend" of Abraham and Mary Lincoln, and is credited with saving the life of their son Tad. **BY SAMUEL HUGHES**

The first time William Augustus Newell M1839 introduced a resolution in Congress to create a series of life-saving stations along the Jersey coast, it foundered on the sandbars of budgetary politics. But the young physician-legislator did get helpful encouragement from two notable colleagues.

One was Abraham Lincoln, who sat next to Newell in the House, shared a Washington boarding house with him, and became an important friend.

“Newell, that is a good measure,” Lincoln said after reading the resolution in January 1848. “I will help you. I am something of a life saver myself, for I invented a scow that righted itself on the Mississippi sandbars.”

The other was John Quincy Adams, then at the end of his post-presidential career in the House.

“It is good,” Adams said simply of the resolution. “I hope it will prevail.”

Six months later, after giving a lengthy speech filled with statistics about the lives and money lost to shipwrecks, Newell did prevail. His amendment to a lighthouse bill for a \$10,000 appropriation for “surfboats, carronades, and other necessary apparatus for the better preservation of life and property from shipwreck along the coast of New Jersey, between Sandy Hook and Little Egg Harbor” passed unanimously. The investment would almost immediately pay large dividends in human lives, and as the concept and investment increased, the payoff grew proportionately.

You might think that a man responsible for starting a national service that would save many thousands of lives and eventually morph into the US Coast Guard might be reasonably well remembered—especially if his accomplishments included serving as White House physician under Lincoln, getting elected to three terms in Congress and one term as governor of New Jersey, then moving to the Northwest and serving a stint as governor of Washington Territory. But our national memory can be oddly selective.

“Don’t know a thing about him,” said one distinguished Penn historian who specializes in 19th-century American history, in response to my query. “Sorry, never heard of him!” said another.

I’m indebted to Christian Johnson, a genial, sonorous-voiced historical re-enactor, for bringing Newell to my attention. And

he’s right—Newell may not have been a towering figure, but his contributions were substantial. He should not be forgotten.

August 13, 1839. Long Beach Island, New Jersey. Nighttime. A northeast gale had transformed the mid-Atlantic coast into a cauldron of heaving swells and churning sand. Through the wind and rain an Austrian brig, the *Terasto* (or, depending on your source, the *Count Terasto* or the *Count Perasto* or the *Perasto*) was tossing precariously southward toward Philadelphia.

The shore of that area, south of Barnegat Inlet, “bristled with the ribs of wrecks,” Newell recalled later. As a young doctor just out of medical school, he had been summoned to a “hovel” to attend to a sick person that stormy night. The next morning he went out to find that a

When John Quincy Adams suffered a fatal stroke on the House Floor, Newell “took the lead in repressing the throng, securing air for the sufferer, and rendering all the medical aid which was possible,” an eyewitness reported.

sandbar just a few hundred yards offshore had produced a grisly new collection of ribs. The *Terasto*’s entire crew of 13 sailors had drowned, their bodies washed up on the shore.

Given how close the ship had been to land, he couldn’t understand why they had not been able to reach the shore alive. It was at that moment, he said, “when the idea of throwing a line over a wreck thus situated, flashed quickly to my mind.” From a depressingly common tragedy, an idea was born.

It was not an entirely new idea; the British Navy had been employing variations on the theme for several decades, as had Massachusetts. But the fact that it took Newell less than a decade to bring it to federal fruition is somewhat remarkable. For one thing, he was just a young doctor at that time, and he had his own life as well as his patients to deal with. The following year he contracted tuberculosis while practicing medicine in Manahawkin with his uncle, Gustavus Hankinson, who prescribed massive and

extended doses of fresh air for his nephew. And so Newell “headed for the pine forest of inland Monmouth County,” wrote his only biographer, Lloyd Applegate, “and for many months lived outdoors, rode horseback and enjoyed only the shelter of an open-sided hut where he slept.” Given that he lived another 61 years, the no-frills treatment seems to have worked.

Newell’s own training took place during the murky dawn of modern medicine. The dean of Penn’s medical school—then at Ninth and Market streets—was William Edmonds Horner, who had recently written the first pathology textbook in America, and in 1842, Newell’s classmate Crawford Long M1839 became the first surgeon in the nation to use ether as an anesthetic.

By then Newell had passed his licensing examination and become a member of the Medical Society of New Jersey, and

would soon show unusual resourcefulness in his practice. (He was academically well rounded, too, having earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Rutgers.) In 1843, he performed a pioneering skin-grafting operation, fashioning a new eyelid for a patient who lacked one, using skin from the patient’s cheek. The delicate operation was almost certainly carried out without anesthesia—a testimony to the patient’s desperation, and, given its success, to Newell’s skill and steady hands.

“The material from which the lid was formed was cut from the cheek of the patient who had suffered much pain and inconvenience for 14 years, caused by the continual exposure of the eye to light and atmosphere,” noted *The Monmouth Inquirer* shortly afterwards. “The operation was so successful as to leave scarcely a vestige of the unsightly deformity.”

It’s impossible to know how Newell’s medical career might have progressed had he exclusively practiced medicine. But he soon got distracted by politics.

Mr. N. is ... amongst the most interesting we have seen in the present Congress. He wants little of six feet height, with a handsome agile figure neatly proportioned and somewhat muscular strength, which is always a fine set-off to manly beauty. His face is oval, fair and full, with a slight carnation shade and a smooth deep intellectual forehead denoting a quiet mind—placid as the sleeping lake ... His mild eye of an azure shade is full, and beams with the meek innocence of the dove, shedding a mild halo of flowing gentleness over his erudite countenance, in harmony with the purity of expression of all his features, besides a peculiar frankness, the evidence of a warm heart. In his manners Mr. Newell is of the old school, unaffected, and artless as nature's self.

—From a report on the freshman members of the House of Representatives in *The Huntress*, March 11, 1848.

The hints of artlessness—and the warm-heartedness—are worth keeping in mind while considering Newell's political career. When he first ran for Congress in 1846, representing New Jersey's Second District, his sole political experience had been as a regional tax collector while he was living and practicing medicine in Imlaystown, some 17 miles east of Trenton in Monmouth County. As a small-town doctor who was known to treat patients regardless of their ability to pay, Newell had undoubtedly earned some good will among local voters. He would later move a few miles away to Allentown, a quiet, bucolic village whose Presbyterian cemetery overlooks a millpond; his clapboard house still stands at the northeast corner of High and Main streets.

The years leading up to the Civil War were a dynamic, volatile, not-entirely-savory era in the young republic. The Mexican-American War, which began in 1846 and ended two years later with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, led to a massive expansion of territory in the Southwest. It also added plenty of tinder to the slavery debate, since Northern politicians saw the annexation of Texas as, in part, a land grab designed to add another slave state to the Union. And the American political system itself was undergoing one of its periodic convulsions.

Newell, who was often described as “eccentric,” ran for Congress as a Whig,

a faction-riven party despite the fact that its candidate, Zachary Taylor, would win the presidency in 1848. He voted for California's admission to the Union as a free state, and against an act that would have organized New Mexico Territory in a way that would have allowed slavery there. In a speech made during his first term that was later reported by the *Trenton State Gazette*, Newell said:

“I will not be found at this the meridian of the nineteenth century, advocating or by my vote sustaining the propagation of human slavery. It is a curse to the South or any other country where it exists. It interferes by the competition of slave labor, with the interests and prosperity of the North. It prevents the immigration of free labor into territories where it exists, thus virtually excluding by far the greater portion of our population. But there is to my mind a high moral obligation to oppose it which overrides all considerations of this policy—all sectional interest—all political contingencies.”

Newell wasn't a radical by the standards of the day, but his moral indignation shouldn't be dismissed as good local politics. New Jersey was considered sympathetic to the South—Lincoln lost the popular vote there in both the 1860 and 1864 presidential elections—and even when its legislature abolished slavery in 1846, it left a loophole for slave-owners by redefining slaves as indentured servants who were “apprenticed for life.”

The most eloquent and passionate abolitionist in the House was John Quincy Adams, and in February 1848, just seven weeks after encouraging Newell to press for passage of his life-saving resolution, Adams suffered a fatal stroke on the House Floor. An eye-witness wrote that Newell, one of four physician-Congressmen to attend to the fallen former president, “took the lead in repressing the throng, securing air for the sufferer, and rendering all the medical aid which was possible.” Two days later, having been moved to the Speaker's Room, Adams died. Newell served as an honorary pallbearer at his funeral, and a few months later the *Christian Register* reported that Adams' widow, Louisa, had given Newell a “splendid” gold ring with a compartment containing a “small band” of the late president's hair, with the inscription *J.Q. Adams, Feb. 23, 1848*.

“I am about to lay down a proposition which, if not self-evident, is at least reasonable and, therefore—shall I dare say it—constitutional,” Newell said in his August 3, 1848 speech to the House. “This is my proposition: It is the bounden duty of the Government, especially, to protect the lives of such of its citizens as are engaged in those perilous pursuits from which are immediately derived the revenues of the country.”

Then as now, there were many self-appointed interpreters of the Constitution and defenders of the national purse strings. But having seen the loss of life and treasure firsthand, he made his case forcefully, listing the number and variety of shipwrecks along the Jersey coast over the previous decade, and citing the many lives and dollars lost. Because of its hidden sandbars, he said, the Jersey coast “is more famous for shipwrecks, attended with loss of life, than any other portion of our country, not excepting the Florida reefs.”

Two months after Newell's amendment passed in the House, Captain Douglas Ottinger of the US Revenue Marine Service reported to Newell that he and his men had erected eight stations along the coast that would be “furnished with galvanized surfboats with ten separate air chambers, 106 fathoms of hawser, 360 fathoms of hauling rope, 600 yards of rocket lines, rockets, stores, etc.,” as well as “stoves and fuel” for those rescued. (The rockets were able to fire lines 250 yards out to sea.) Ottinger also proposed to have a newly designed self-bailing, unsinkable “lifecar” in each station, made of corrugated metal and designed to “carry a line to the stranded vessel, where the wind and sea are too heavy for the best constructed boat to live.”

They didn't have to wait long to test the new stations. In January 1850, the *Ayrshire*, a Scottish brig carrying 166 passengers and 36 crewmen that had lost its rigging and rudder to an earlier storm, ran aground some 160 yards off Squan Beach, now known as Manasquan. During a lull in the bitter storm, a fisherman saw the ship and rounded up a band of volunteers. This time, thanks to Newell's bill, there was a life-saving station near the beach. Soon a small cannon with a foot-long barrel fired a six-inch ball and line toward the brig. The first one overshot the mark, but the second

“carried a light line squarely aboard the doomed ship, landing in the mate’s stateroom and slightly injuring a female passenger,” notes Applegate.

By then “the children were in water up to their knees,” wrote one of the passengers, and throughout the ordeal the waves “beat against the weather side of the ship with fearful force, keeping a continual shower of water flying over everybody who was on deck.”

The crew attached the line to the remains of the mast and drew a heavier line on board. “Finally, a stout cable runway was established on which, by means of rings, the lifecar was suspended,” and could be drawn in either direction by using fore and aft lines. “After reading the instruction card on the craft, the crew lifted the lifecar’s hatch and stuffed four terrified but hopeful passengers into its dark interior,” and once the hatch was bolted into place, the crew signaled for the volunteers onshore to start pulling. “Dipping under some waves and riding over others, the lifecar was hauled to the beach where eager hands helped the relieved first occupants out.” Bringing in passengers at a rate of four to five trips an hour, they managed to save all but one (who had panicked and “grabbed a bolt ring but was swept away to his death”) as well as the entire crew.

The following year, with another assist from Newell and Congress, the life-saving system began to expand along the rest of nation’s coastline, though it would be years before the equipment and proficiency of the crews could be considered “lifesaving” on a regular basis. In 1871 the federal government formally created the United States Life-Saving Service—which would finally merge in 1915 with the US Revenue Cutter Service into the US Coast Guard. It wasn’t until the last years of his life that Newell would receive full credit from the New Jersey and Washington state legislatures for his role.

Newell declined his party’s nomination for a third term in Congress in 1850. But he wasn’t finished with politics.

On June 5, 1856, the *New York Daily Times* ran a short, three-sentence item headlined: “Great Meeting at Trenton—Nomination of William A. Newell for Governor of New Jersey.”

The “immense meeting” at Temperance Hall, the paper reported, was “composed of Whigs, Know-Nothings, Republicans, and Free-Soilers, fused for the purpose of denouncing and opposing the present [Democratic] Administration, and for the nomination of a candidate for Governor.” Though Newell had been elected to Congress as a Whig, he was now techni-

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cally the candidate of the short-lived American Party, otherwise known as the Know Nothings. While much of that party’s worldview involved a hostility toward immigrants, especially Catholics, it’s hard to know just how closely that worldview lined up with Newell’s. True, in his inaugural address, he did call for a one-year waiting period before new citizens could vote. But in that era of urban American politics—William Tweed was then well on his way to becoming Boss of New York’s lucrative political machine, for example—there was reason to be concerned about unscrupulous politicians buying the votes of new immigrants.

Whatever the reality of his views, the proceedings of the 1856 convention “were of the most enthusiastic nature,” the paper added. “Speeches were made denunciatory of the Kansas and Sumner outrages, and deprecatory of a war with England, and strong resolutions were adopted; after which Dr. WILLIAM A. NEWELL, of Monmouth, was nominated as candidate for governor by acclamation.”

Though local Republicans were not happy with Newell’s nomination, their disdain seems to have been on a more practical level. His brother John was dispatched to assure them that, if elected, Newell would “give the Republicans the control of the local appointments in those counties where the Republicans exceeded the American vote at the election,” reports Applegate, “and to the Americans where their vote was highest.”

Newell would later claim that he “sawed wood and let his friends fight for him” during the campaign. He won by less than 3,500 votes, upsetting Democrat William C. Alexander—even though the Democrats took both houses of the legislature and the Democratic candidate for president, James Buchanan, carried the state by more than 20,000 votes.

A wild blizzard hit New Jersey on January 2, 1857, forcing the governor-elect to walk a dozen miles through drifting snow from Allentown to Trenton for his swearing-in ceremony. Only three state senators were there to hear Newell’s inaugural address, which one newspaper described as “short, modest, and sensible.” Having served in Congress, he believed that the governor should “interpose no obstacle to the will of the Legislature ... except in cases of the most urgent necessity.”

Yet his outlook was somewhat idealistic as well. He proposed a “uniform system of free schools throughout the state,” noting that “without proper culture of the citizen, there is no safety for a Republic.” And on the powder-keg issue of slavery, he excoriated the Kansas-Nebraska Act—which allowed settlers to vote on whether the territories would be slave or free—as a “gross violation of the plighted faith,” one whose passage was “well calculated to arouse the just indignation of the whole country.” New Jersey, he concluded, “will insist upon preserving forever intact from slavery that portion of our soil dedicated to perpetual freedom by this solemn and time-honored act.”

On an issue that still resonates today, he warned corporations not to interfere in “legislation or official appointments of the state,” adding: “No power should be allowed to assail the integrity of our elections.”

The fact that he only served one term as governor suggests that his political skills were not as adroit as they might have been.

He refused to appoint certain Democrats to key positions, which sparked hard feelings in the legislature, and he apparently didn't manage the patronage system too well among Republicans, either. The *Trenton State Gazette* suggested that he had been defeated "not through anything he did, but because of secret intrigue." Newell himself attributed his loss in part to the "base and ungenerous appeal to the passions and prejudices of a large class of voters, by misrepresenting my motives and action in the discharge of solemn and painful executive duty."

Those passions and prejudices were largely owing to his refusal in 1857 to pardon a young Irish-Catholic medical student named James Donnelly, who had been convicted of murdering a man over a gambling debt, which led to accusations of anti-immigrant bigotry. The region's Irish Catholics believed that a Protestant jury had convicted Donnelly on flimsy evidence. But the Court of Pardons voted not to pardon him, and Newell (who, for what it's worth, was a Presbyterian) voted with the majority. Shortly before he was hanged, Donnelly gave a long, dramatic speech claiming that the Court of Pardons had been split and that a deeply prejudiced Newell had cast the deciding vote against him—though the blame seems somewhat misplaced given that the vote was six to two. One sympathetic newspaper opined that while Newell's refusal to grant the pardon "added laurels to his character," it also aroused the "bitterness of Donnelly's friends and caused them upon several occasions to threaten Newell's life."

One threat came several months later when Newell—who continued practicing medicine—responded to a request for a doctor in western Monmouth County. After his visit a rough-looking woman asked if she could hitch a ride on his horse. He agreed, but after she climbed on, he noticed that she was wearing men's boots under a skirt. Newell gave his horse a sudden crack of his whip, then, when the horse took off at a gallop, dropped it, reports Applegate. When he finally managed to stop the horse, he asked his passenger to dismount and pick up the whip—then "signaled his horse to take off, fast!" The passenger fired a pistol at the galloping governor, but missed.

Five years ago, when Allentown was deciding what to name its public elementary school, one member of the local board of education voted against naming it for Newell on account of his brief Know Nothing affiliation. But given Newell's close relationship with Lincoln, and Lincoln's disdain for the Know Nothings, the *Examiner* newspaper reported, Board President Joseph Stampe concluded that "Newell's association with the 'Know Nothing Party' was only to get on the ticket to prevent the Democrats, who favored the expansion of slavery in New Jersey, from gaining the governorship." And so the William A. Newell Elementary School sits just down the road from the Presbyterian cemetery where Newell himself is buried.

Though Newell left the governor's office in January 1861, he did have an important friend in the White House. President Lincoln quickly appointed him superintendent of the New Jersey Life Saving Service, responsible for quarterly inspections. That August, Mary Lincoln (who described Newell as "our particular friend" and invited him to dinners and riverboat excursions), visited Long Branch on the northern Jersey shore and "expressed a desire to be made acquainted with the methods adopted for rescuing the crews of shipwrecked vessels," *The New York Times* reported. Newell "got up an exhibition which was witnessed with great apparent interest by Mrs. Lincoln and was attended by nearly all those in the town." That night Newell escorted the First Lady to a ball in her honor at the Mansion House.

Tragedy struck the Lincolns the following year, when their 11-year-old son Willie died of typhoid. Newell was reportedly among the attending physicians, and that December Mrs. Lincoln wrote to Newell saying that she hoped that he would "bring Mrs. Newell to the city" sometime that winter, adding: "My precious Willie is as much mourned over & far more missed (now that we realize he has gone) than when so fearful a stroke as to be called upon to resign Him came. Your kindness can never be effaced." A month later the *Medical and Surgical Reporter* noted that the president and Mrs. Lincoln had "sent an elegant gold-

headed cane" to Newell, "in testimony of their appreciation of valuable professional services rendered by Dr. N. [for] the family at the White House."

In the fall of 1864, Lincoln himself wrote to a New York Republican leader describing Newell as "a true friend of the Union, and every way a reliable gentleman," adding: "Please hear him whenever he calls."

For a brief moment in 1864, a much bigger role on the Washington stage seemed possible.

At the Republican convention in Baltimore that summer, the New Jersey delegation, sensing an impending deadlock for the vice-presidential nomination, "contemplated urging a favorite son," notes historian James F. Glonek. According to Applegate, they unanimously settled on Newell. But he declined, recommending that the candidate come from the West or a border state. And so Andrew Johnson of Tennessee became Lincoln's vice president.

That fall Newell won a third term to the House of Representatives. He told a celebratory crowd in Allentown that "we must not contemplate an abandonment of the advantage gained at so terrible cost in the cause of freedom and humanity. Slavery has taken the sword and will perish thereby; and we cannot consent to aid in reviving and re-establishing this evil institution."

Shortly after Newell took office in January 1865, Lincoln appointed him White House physician. When another Lincoln son, Tad, came down with typhoid for a second time, they sent for Newell. It's unclear exactly what he did, but Tad recovered—earning Newell the profound gratitude of the president and his wife.

Newell declined to bill the family, according to a newspaper report from many years later, "telling the President that to have attended his son was reward enough." Lincoln replied that if there was ever a chance for him to repay the favor, Newell should ask. Shortly thereafter, a young New Jersey man was court-martialed and sentenced to the firing squad for going over to the Confederacy. When the boy's father begged Newell to intercede, Newell approached Lincoln. At first, the president refused. "But when reminded of his personal pledge, the president relented and pardoned the youth."

On April 14, 1865, actor John Wilkes Booth slipped into Lincoln's box at Ford Theatre and shot the president in the back of the head. All four of the doctors who performed the autopsy were Penn alumni ["Penn Fights the Civil War," Mar|Apr 2011]. Accompanying the late president's body on the long funeral tour back to Illinois, and presumably comforting the inconsolable Mary Lincoln, was Newell.

He was soon torn over the fate of Reconstruction and President Andrew Johnson. On January 15, 1866, he held out something of an olive branch to the president, saying: "Let us not [reproach] and distrust him without cause ... let us endeavor to re-establish this Government upon the enduring principle of equal and exact justice to all men." (While he called for "comfortable maintenance" of wounded Union veterans, however, he said nothing about the Confederate wounded.)

A year later, Newell's position had hardened, possibly in response to criticism over his early attempts at reconciliation, possibly because of the degree to which Reconstruction was foundering and a deep resentment of Southern attempts to regain influence. In a speech given on January 4, 1867, he blasted Johnson for his "bullying," adding that "many honest and patriotic government employees felt the 'political ax' for refusal to [compromise] their principles." He excoriated the president for "paving the way for the return of the lately defeated rebels to political power," and for opposing the right of the newly freed slaves to vote as citizens.

"A State has no right to deprive a citizen of the United States of any rights he enjoys as such," said Newell. "On the contrary, it is expressly provided in the Constitution that the citizens of every State are entitled to the rights, privileges, and immunities of the citizens of all the States." Suffrage, he added, "is the most important of these" because it "guards and protects all the rest." By depriving any citizens "of the only means by which they can render their servants accountable for their actions," a government "reduces the citizen to the necessity of taking up arms in order to reassert his manhood." And while there may be "great evils in extending the suffrage to

the lately enslaved race," he added, "there may be still greater in excluding them altogether and for all time from it."

He scorned those who would only accept universal suffrage if it were coupled with a general amnesty for Southern leaders. "By this they propose to set off justice to a wronged and oppressed race against an act of unmerited mercy to their oppressors, who have been at the same time rebels against national authority," he said. "I look upon such a bargain as jeopardizing the safety of the nation, which has already cost such fearful sacrifices of life and treasure."

Charging that Johnson and the Democratic Party had "inaugurated a plan of restoration designed to bring back the rebels to power, and ... to rule the country in the interests of the South and its institutions," Newell concluded: "Such a catalogue of high crimes and misdemeanors was never before presented against any executive officer in the whole range of history as can be presented by the present Congress" against Johnson. Thirteen months later, Johnson was impeached. By then, Newell was out of office.

He ran once more for governor, this time on the Republican ticket in 1878. *The Independent*, citing his previous term as governor and his three terms in Congress, said: "He is a strong man, well known in the state, has an unstained public record, and stands a fair chance of beating [Democrat] Gen. McClellan, who has the chronic habit of failure." But for a variety of reasons, he lost. He would never win another election.

*F*or a man who had served as White House physician and was credited for saving the life of a president's son, the charges filed by the Medical Society of New Jersey for "unprofessional conduct" in 1880 must have come as a shock. The specific charge was "consultation with A.C. Haines, an irregular eclectic, a Thomsonian practitioner" in the village of Columbus. The reference was to Samuel Thomson (1789-1843), an herbalist with a large following in the Northeast.

The charges smack of turf-guarding. According to *The Healing Art: A History of the Medical Society of New Jersey*, any "regular practitioner of medicine and surgery" could be expelled from that organiza-

tion for consulting with "any but colleagues of the same practice." Though Newell had issued a "general denial of the charges and an expression of regret for the misunderstanding," the report noted, both were considered "insufficient" by the Burlington County Medical Society, and the charges were referred to the Monmouth District Medical Society. Newell made a "full unequivocal denial of all charges" and demanded an investigation—which prompted the committee in question to conclude that Newell was "guilty of indiscretion, to say the least," and to recommend that he be censured—a motion that was adopted.

Since as far as we know, no patients died or suffered abnormally from his treatment, the censure seems parochial and vindictive. For a physician then in his sixties, it must have been a profoundly discouraging event.

Then, at the end of March 1880, he got a letter.

My Dear Governor:
If you will accept the place of Governor of Washington Territory, it will give me great pleasure to nominate you to the Senate for that office.
You know the promising conditions and prospects of that Territory. The present delegate in Congress will make no opposition to your appointment. The people will generally hear your appointment with satisfaction. Please notify me at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely, R. B. Hayes

President Hayes's letter must have seemed a godsend to Newell, who had not only just received a smack in the face from his medical peers but was probably viewed as washed up in politics as well. True, it must have been a daunting prospect to relocate himself and his family—his wife Joanna, their son William A. Newell Jr. M1877, and daughters Eleanor and Eliza—to the semi-wild Northwest. But he had a strong constitution, and the appointment offered a chance for redemption. Congress had created Washington Territory in 1853, and six years later it was expanded to include all of the former Oregon Territory not included in that newly created state.

The Olympia Transcript praised Newell's "statesmanlike character" and his commitment to the "wise and liberal plans

Before Newell became governor of Washington Territory, a large group of “colonists” from the “streets and factories of Brooklyn” heard him speak about the “wonders of Washington.” They came to Olympia calling themselves the Newell Colony.

by which the resources of the territory may be developed and the interest of the people promoted.”

Newell’s promotional efforts had begun even before he left the East. A few weeks after he arrived in Olympia, so did a group of some 1,000 “colonists” from “the streets and factories of Brooklyn,” according to one Shanna Stevenson in an undated paper. Having heard Newell “speak about the wonders of Washington,” they not only decided to migrate there but to call themselves the Newell Colony in his honor. Those “hardy-looking people” (as *The Washington Standard* called them) selected a site for the colony on prime land in Sherman Valley, with each person getting 160 acres, along with an obligation to build a dwelling and live there. But the harsh winter “broke the resolve of the colonists,” Stevenson reported, and most of the Newell Colony returned to New York—or settled, in less rigorous circumstances, in Olympia.

Though frontier life was rife with opportunity, the efforts to seize it weren’t always pretty; in his 1924 book *History of the State of Washington*, Edmond S. Meany noted that there were so many instances of labor agitation, anti-immigrant riots, and fires that the period should have been called “the turbulent decade.” On the whole, Newell—who set up office in the Territorial library in Olympia (where his daughter Eliza was the librarian)—seems to have been a pretty good governor for this raw territory. He oversaw the building of two lifesaving stations on the Washington coast, supported women’s suffrage and the abolition of the Indian reservation system as a prelude to putting Native people “upon the same footing with other people,” and “brought about the codification of the Territory’s laws, a very important step in stabilizing the affairs of government and society as a whole,” in the words of Applegate. In 1883, Newell declared that

Washington Territory had drafted a constitution and was ready to be admitted to the Union.

Newell served out his entire four-year term, which is more than most territorial governors could say. But President Chester A. Arthur declined to appoint him to a second.

The people “misjudged his motives, and never held him at his real worth,” wrote Meany, though they did come to appreciate the services of Newell the physician. “There are not a few cases of poor people whose needs he served without cost, and for them he bought medicines at times when he himself was in need of money.” As the years went by, Meany added, the people of Washington came to appreciate “that the one they thought was an eccentric governor was in reality a man of skill and of many talents, as well as a warm-hearted, sympathetic friend of those in need.”

Newell did get a lesser appointment from President Arthur: that of US Indian Inspector for the Northwest. During his 10-month stint he traveled throughout the region, visiting the various tribes. His attitude toward the roughly 10,000 Native Americans in the territory seems to have been one of benevolent paternalism—more enlightened than most of his contemporaries, but not without a certain cultural arrogance. Convinced that Indians needed to be “self-supporting and self-dependent,” he wrote that the only way to make that happen was to “abolish tribal names and relations and languages, abolish the reservation and agency system” when practicable, and “provide each head of the family with an inalienable possession” of land from his own reservation. Each member of the immediate family would receive 40 acres, with the rest of the land “to be sold and opened to American settlement.” The proceeds would be distributed to the

Indians “to secure the necessary means for their new departure in life.”

He ran for Congress three times from his adopted state. In 1886, as the People’s Party candidate, the *Seattle Daily News* praised him for “a busy life crowned with honors and honorable positions at the hands of his fellow citizens,” and noted that his “efficient service as Governor of Washington Territory remains fresh in the memory of our citizens.” Apparently the memory wasn’t fresh enough; he lost. He came up short again in 1892 and yet again in 1898, both times on the Prohibition Party ticket. During a 52-year political career that spanned five political parties, Newell won just four of his 12 campaigns—three of which were for governor, one for US senator, and eight for the House of Representatives.

By the time his last campaign ended, Newell was 81 and, for all intents and purposes, alone. Joanna had passed away that summer. Of their four children, three had died young: Gustavus in 1871, William in 1886, Eliza in 1891. His older daughter, Eleanor, had moved to Rhode Island. (Grandson William A. Newell III M1907, a physician specializing in X-rays, lived until 1921.) And so Newell moved back to New Jersey. But even with whatever modest fees he could command as a small-town physician in Allentown, notes Applegate, he “could barely afford to rent humble living quarters and office space on Church Street.”

In July 1901, despite the heat and his declining health, he agreed to serve as foreman on a grand jury that convened in Freehold. (He missed only one session, and that was to attend to a sick patient.) A few weeks later, a headline in *The North American* announced: “Famous New Jersey Statesman Is Dead.” The cause of death was listed as old age. State offices, as well as businesses in Allentown, were closed, and Governor Foster Vorhees declared a 30-day mourning period.

At the funeral service, the Rev. George Swain told the audience that Newell did not serve his fellow men “‘for what was in it,’ but for the good he could do,” and the encomiums he received were “because of his unselfish heart.”

“If he had any fault it was an amiable one,” the minister concluded. “He sometimes thought too little of himself.” ♦