

---

## From the Editor

### THEY WERE OPTOMETRISTS!

If you happen to read an article of potential interest to optometric historians, I encourage you to write a review of it and submit your review to *Hindsight*. Alternatively, you could send the article of interest to me, and we will bring it to the attention of OHS members through the pages of *Hindsight*. OHS Advisory Committee member Chuck Haine recently sent me an article entitled “Spectacles, Cheaters, and Shades,” which appeared in the March/April, 2016 issue of *Your Genealogy Today* (volume 2, number 1, pages 33-36), written by a regular contributor to that magazine, David A. Norris. Dr. Haine wrote that he found the article to be “interesting but not exactly scholarly research.”

The author of the article wrote about the history of spectacles in the last few centuries because “hints about spectacles and eyeglasses during...genealogy research...might be a good way of finding new and personal information about our ancestors.” (p. 36) One of the various interesting tidbits was that two Mayflower passengers had pairs of spectacles mentioned in the inventories of their estates after their deaths in 1659 and 1672. The author also noted that the 1781 probate file of one of his ancestors mentioned one pair of spectacles. Spectacles were imported in Colonial America, and the American spectacle making industry did not arise until after the American Revolution.

Norris noted that early newspaper advertisements can provide clues concerning where our ancestors may have obtained their eyeglasses. Watchmakers, jewelers, booksellers, druggists, and other merchants advertised the sale of spectacles. Norris gave these examples:

Torry and Company of Charleston, South Carolina advertised themselves as ‘Opticians and Print Sellers’ in the early Federal era. A Philadelphia city directory of 1819 included the firm of ‘Fisher M. and Son’, who were listed as a ‘thermometer and spectacle maker.’ In early newspaper ads, ‘opticians’ also offered telescopes, microscopes, magnifying glasses, barometers, and other optical instruments besides spectacles. (p. 36)

What I found most interesting in the article was the reproduction of two advertisements for “opticians” from the 1880 Worcester, Massachusetts city directory. This was an era before the term optometry was in common usage, and persons who were practicing optometry referred to themselves as opticians or other monikers.

Henry Hofstetter often talked about optometry’s “centuries-long existence,”<sup>1</sup> emphasizing that the popularization of the term optometrist, the passage of licensure laws, etc., in the early twentieth century were stages, albeit highly significant stages, in the development of optometry, rather than indications of the *de novo* birth of a new occupation. The factor that we may view as distinguishing the refracting optician or optometrist from the dispensing optician is the conduct of some form of examination, however rudimentary it may seem by today’s standards.

---

One of the 1880 advertisements was for “I.H. Stockwell, Optician.” Further inspection of the ad suggests that he was practicing optometry because it says: “Spectacles adapted after an examination of the Eye.” The multiple roles often filled by the nineteenth century optometrist are illustrated where the ad says: “Mathematical and Philosophical Instruments in great variety.”

The other advertisement was for “W.A. England, Watchmaker and Optician.” In fine print the ad states: “Personal attention given to Fitting the Eye for Spectacles or Eye Glasses. Improved Instruments used.” It is not as obvious whether W.A. England was also practicing optometry, but if we assume that the “improved instruments” were used in some type of examination, then we can assume he or she was also practicing optometry.

Although we can rightfully be proud of the advances in optometric knowledge and technology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it would be arrogant on our part to think that optometrists of centuries past were less important to the persons they served.

### **Reference**

1. Hofstetter HW. The OHS mission. *Hindsight* 1996;27:17-18.

David A. Goss

Editor, *Hindsight: Journal of Optometry History*