Dr. H. H. Green: An Early “Junk Mailer”
By Francis J. Crown, Jr.

This story begins in 1870 with Mr. Henry Haines Green (Figure 1) working as a dry goods merchant in Tilton, Georgia. In 1872, the town of Tilton was incorporated and Green became one of its first commissioners. Sometime between 1872 and 1877, he obtained a medical degree. By the end of the decade his profession was listed not only as a physician, but also as a notary and a justice.¹

About 1877, he either prepared a formula for the treatment of dropsy or acquired one, and began selling his dropsy cure. Dropsy was the term then used to describe the swelling of soft tissue due to the accumulation of excess water. Today the condition is called edema, but it is normally used as a descriptor with a specific cause. Thus, a person might have edema caused by congestive heart failure.

Dr. Green used the mails to advertise his dropsy cure, but not in the ordinary way of the period. Instead, he was what we would today call a “junk mailer.” Most mail order merchants were selling their wares by sending out circulars to specific prospective customers. This required the name and address of each prospective customer to be written on each circular. Dr. Green’s method was somewhat different.

Figure 1. Dr. Henry H. Green. (Courtesy of Ancestry.com)

While he did address his circulars to individuals by name, there was also a preprinted name such as “or any minister of the gospel.” This is somewhat like junk mail today addressed to a specific person “or current resident.” This was extra insurance the circular would find its way into the hands of someone, with the hope they would be interested, tell their friends, or post the circular in a public place.

It is said that Dr. Green sent out so many circulars from Tilton that he brought them to town two or three times a week in large cotton baskets. There were so many that the Tilton post office could not handle them and put them in the mail car of the passing trains where they would be canceled and sorted. It is hard to confirm this story as the only circular that I have seen from Tilton has a manuscript cancel that could have been applied either at the Tilton post office or in the mail car by a rail agent (Figure 2).²

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Although the advertising corner card says in bold letters “Dropsy Treated Free”, a careful examination of the full advertisement shows that only ten days treatment was furnished free. The symptoms were removed in eight to twenty days, but a full cure took 30 to 60 days. The free ten day treatment was certainly enticing to many. However, at a cost of from $10 to $15 each, the follow on treatments were not cheap.³

![Figure 2. Dr. Henry H. Green advertising cover used from Tilton, Georgia before 1884.](image)

By 1884, Dr. Green moved his business to Atlanta. The advertising corner card at Figure 3 is the same design as the one used from Tilton, but with the address changed to 55 Jones Avenue, Atlanta.

![Figure 3. The early design of the Dr. H. H. Green dropsy advertising cover with the Atlanta address.](image)

In mid to late 1880s, Dr. H. H. Green’s three sons - John, Alfred and Elijah - received medical degrees. Alfred and Elijah received their degrees from the Georgia College of Eclectic Medicine and Surgery. It is not known where John received his degree.⁴

Eclectic medicine made use of botanical and mineral remedies and physical therapy to treat ailments of the body.

This was in keeping with their dropsy cure, which from all accounts was nothing more than botanicals mixed with some chemicals.

By 1887, Dr. H. H. Green moved his business to the Fitten Building at 30½ Marietta Street.⁵ About the same time the corner card advertisement was changed to include the number of years Dr. H. H. Green had been in business. The name of the firm was also changed from “Dr. H. H. Green” to “Dr. H. H. Green & Sons,” an acknowledgement that his sons were members of the business (Figure 4). A review of the addresses on covers from this time forward suggests the names may have been fictitious as they are short and simple.
The same year, Dr. Green & Sons got a boost from an endorsement that appeared in the Southern Cultivator.

It read, “Six thousand cases of dropsy cured by Dr. H. H. Green & Sons, dropsy specialists, of Atlanta, Ga. Do not let physicians for friend’s opinions discourage you, send for circulars and trial medicine, free to all.”

Figure 4. The revised Dr. H. H. Green advertising corner card shows the firm had been in business for 14 years.

In 1892, Dr. H. H. Green’s youngest son, Elijah, died. This had no outward impact on the business as reflected in the advertising corner cards (Figure 5). However, by 1895 the design of corner card was changed from a plain line border to a saw tooth border. At the same time, the name of the firm was changed again. This time from “Dr. H. H. Green & Sons” to “Drs. H. H. Green & Sons” (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Dr. H. H. Green advertising corner card showing the firm had been in business for 16 years.

Figure 6. Dr. H. H. Green advertising corner card with saw tooth border and showing the firm had been in business for 18 years. The cover is postmarked Atlanta, 20 April 1895.
On 17 September 1896, Dr. H. H. Green died at the age of 62. He had done very well with his dropsy cure. By this time, he had treated 47,000 patients and made $200,000, a large fortune at that time. He was interred in a mausoleum in Oakland Cemetery (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The mausoleum of Dr. H. H. Green and his wife, Clarissa Elmina Green erected in 1894. (Courtesy of Ancestry.com.)

The firm continued in business but with a new advertising corner card and under the name of “Dr. H. H. Green’s Sons.” About the same time the method of addressing the circulars was changed from an individual’s name to a more generic “Tax Collector” or “Bailiff.” The preprinted “Minister of the Gospel” remained (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Dr. H. H. Green’s Sons advertising cover prepared by the two surviving sons with a 1903 Atlanta postmark.

The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 prompted the Greens to change the wording of their advertisement. The phrase “cures dropsy in its various forms” became “treats dropsy in its various forms.” The free ten days treatment was reduced to six days (Figure 9).

Figure 9. A revised Dr. H. H. Green’s Sons advertisement for the dropsy cure on a cover postmarked Atlanta, 18 May 1910.

Exactly how much longer the Green brothers continued to operate the business is unknown. However, by 1920 Thomas E. Green had bought the business and operated it from Chatsworth, Georgia.  

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What was the dropsy cure? One treatment consisted of six large black balls and six small black balls. Some included a “tonic” tablet. A test conducted by the American Medical Association in 1920 found the balls contained powdered squill as the chief medicinal ingredient. The tablets contained ferrous sulphate as the chief medicinal ingredient. Squill is from the plant Drimia maritima, and historically was used for medicinal purposes. One of those purposes was to purge excess water from the body. Iron sulphate was used to treat iron deficiency anemia. Some deaths were reported from taking the treatments, but none ever resulted in any action against the Greens.10

Notes
5. Ibid., 225.
9. Ibid., 689-690.
10. Ibid., 690.

Auxiliary Markings on Georgia Covers – NO RECORD ATLANTA ORDNANCE DEPOT

Courtesy of Richard Frajola at philamercury.com, the June 29, 1943 cover shown here carries various handstamped and blue pencil markings repeatedly redirecting the mailing back to the sender. The most significant of these is the NO RECORD marking indicating that Pvt. Charles A. Johnson was not currently and never was stationed at the Atlanta munitions depot. (The pointing finger with what appears to be a band aid is interesting!)

- Steve Swain