



Epilepsy

The medical condition of epilepsy was only beginning to be understood in Frances Peter's time. From the ancient Romans until the 1600s, epilepsy, or "falling sickness", as it was often called, was thought to be caused by demons. The condition was considered to be contagious and epileptics were often forced to live alone. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that a specially-blessed ring could control epileptic seizures. St. Valentine and the Three Wise Men were often invoked to help.

By the 1600s, the "demon" theory faded away, but not so the idea that sufferers were contagious. Physicians now theorized epilepsy was caused by fright, self-gratification, drunkenness, or other mental frailties. Epileptics were often placed in mental hospitals and kept separate from the other inhabitants so as not to infect them.

As the Civil War approached, researchers in Europe developed theories that epilepsy resulted from problems in the central nervous system and brain. By 1861, physicians had begun trephining (drilling the skull) in an attempt to find a cure. Dr. Benjamin Dudley, a colleague and close friend of Dr. Peter, had performed this operation with some success in the 1820s. Dr. Dudley left Transylvania in 1850 when Frances was a young girl.

With little hope of finding a cure, most epileptics lived with families or extended families and were unable to integrate with their communities. Because she was a member of an educated and relatively enlightened family, Frances was not subjected to the degree of seclusion that many epileptics experienced. Still, she recorded only one incident where she left her home.

Epileptics continued to be shunned into the 20th century; often denied access to schools, employment, and hospitals. Several states forbade epileptics to marry or have children.