ON AUGUST 3, 1856, Senator Charles Sumner arrived at the top of Cresson Mountain, in the wilds of the Pennsylvania Alleghenies. It was the most recent stop on an odyssey which had begun for the Massachusetts senator with his brutal caning by Preston Books of South Carolina on May 22 in the senate chamber.¹

As Sumner stepped from the Pennsylvania Railroad car in the company of his friend, the Reverend William Henry Furness of Philadelphia,² he was greeted by the physician who was to be responsible for his care during the month of August. During that time Sumner, the powerful abolitionist from Massachusetts, and his country doctor, a loyal Democratic postmaster from Cresson,

¹The author is Historical Collections Archivist at the University Library, Pennsylvania State University.
²During the two months that had already passed since the assault by Brooks, Sumner had been unable to resume his Senate duties. He had first been attended by Dr. Cornelius Boyle who tended to minimize Sumner's injuries. On May 25, Boston physician Marshall S. Perry was called into the case. He found Sumner to be improving. Shortly thereafter, however, the patient suffered a relapse. Septicemia had apparently set in. At that point, George Sumner, Charles' brother, dismissed Dr. Boyle, with whom he was dissatisfied, leaving the case to Dr. Perry and Dr. Harvey Lindsey, a Washington physician who was taken on as a consultant. Under their care the crisis passed but left the patient weak and feverish.

Continued pain in the areas of the head and spinal cord led him to leave Washington—first to go to the nearby home of Francis P. Blair at Silver Spring; then upon relapse, to Cape May, New Jersey, on the advice of still another physician, Dr. Caspar Wister of Philadelphia. It was Dr. Wister who recommended that Sumner go to Cresson. For the best account of this period see, David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War (New York, 1960), 312-347.
³Furness, a Unitarian clergyman, was pastor of the Unitarian Church in Philadelphia which had been founded by Joseph Priestley in 1796. He championed the cause of abolitionism as early as 1824. He was a pioneer in the study of the historical Jesus rather than the theological, and believed the gospels were historic documents and that the new testament miracles were natural events. Furness was also one of the first American scholars to study and translate German literature. He was a lifelong friend of Emerson. There is an abundance of information about him in Elizabeth M. Geffen, Philadelphia Unitarianism, 1796-1861 (Philadelphia, 1961).
Pennsylvania, developed a relationship which provides us with a delightful account of a friendship between two extraordinary men and also sheds further light on the controversial convalescence of Charles Sumner.

Dr. Robert Montgomery Smith Jackson was born in Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania, on April 20, 1815, the son of a Presbyterian minister from Ireland. Before the child reached three years of age, both his parents had died. Details of his boyhood are scarce, but in 1836 young Jackson graduated from Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. He immediately enrolled as a medical student at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, from which he graduated in 1838.

At that point Jackson decided to indulge another great passion of his life, geology. As a boy in western Pennsylvania he developed a love for nature which bordered on the transcendental mysticism of the Concord group. When an opportunity presented itself to acquire a political appointment as assistant state geologist, he readily accepted. He held the position for four years, much of which he spent in the field. During those winters he returned to Philadelphia, where he performed a kind of medical internship in the public institutions of the city. In his spare time he pursued avid interests in science and literature.

By 1843, Jackson had apparently decided to devote his primary energies to the practice of medicine, and he set out to find a home somewhere in western Pennsylvania. Armed with numerous letters of introduction from physicians in Philadelphia and elsewhere, he finally settled in the small community of Blairsville in Indiana County. No doubt of considerable importance in his decision to settle down to medicine was the fact that he had recently married. His bride, Mary Herron of Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the niece of Andrew "tariff Andy" Stewart and great-granddaughter of the early Pennsylvania ironmaster, Andrew Oliphant, undoubtedly preferred the settled life of a country doctor's wife to that of companion to a roving geologist.

Jackson's ambition had always been to combine his medical

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3 Pittsburgh Press, December 26, 1954.
4 Letter of Recommendation from John Henderson, M.D., March 15, 1843. Robert Montgomery Smith Jackson Collection, Historical Collections, Pennsylvania State University Library. Hereafter referred to as the Jackson Papers.
5 Pittsburgh Press, December 26, 1954.
practice with enjoyment of the bounties of nature. The wilds of the Alleghenies surrounding Blairsville provided the perfect setting. He envisioned a health spa located adjacent to some of western Pennsylvania's most famous health springs. Out of this dream emerged the Allegheny Mountain Health Institute. Incorporated in 1854, it was located at the "Allegheny Springs," Cresson Station, 243 miles from Philadelphia and 101 miles from Pittsburgh at the summit of the mountain, 2300 feet above sea level. In a more poetic vein, a promotion probably written by Dr. Jackson placed it "on the eastern rim of the great interior continental basis . . . in the line of temperate latitude, and above the plane of perpetual malaria." The seeker of pleasure and luxury was promised "all he could desire," including "unobjectionable cuisine, a cool, delightful climate, and every amusement desireable." For the sufferer from ennui, heat, disease, or for invalids, the institute offered "absolute comfort and relief for the time being and certain prolongation of life in the future."

It was as an invalid rather than a seeker of pleasure that Charles Sumner arrived at "the Mountain," Jackson's name for the institute. He came in a hopeful mood, cautiously sensing that he was recovering, but wary because previous spells of optimism had been followed by setbacks. The sight which greeted him as he stepped from the train in the peaceful Alleghenies must have pleased the weary Sumner. A broad expanse of lawn led up to two large hotel buildings surrounded by shade trees.

Unfortunately the senator's enjoyment of the restful vista was probably impeded by his condition upon arrival. The long train ride must have tired him considerably. Jackson noted that his new patient appeared "extremely unwell."

Jackson examined Sumner almost immediately. He had not been given a medical report by any of the previous physicians on the case. His examination revealed a "watery condition" of the blood accompanied by a "general pallor of countenance and

9 Broadside for the Allegheny Mountain Health Institute, Jackson Papers.
8 Broadside for the Allegheny Mountain Health Institute, Jackson Papers.
9 Charles Sumner to Mrs. Charles Francis Adams, August 3, 1856, Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts. Hereafter referred to as Adams Papers.
10 North American, July 26, 1856.
CHARLES SUMNER

flabbiness of solids.” On the surface of the head he found a “slight redness around the cicatrices of the recently healed cuts” as well as some “morbid sensitivity on pressure.”

When he walked the senator tottered as if partially paralyzed. The slightest exertion exhausted him and often produced severe headaches. Jackson felt that the symptoms pointed to the “head and spine as the area of a highly morbid condition.” The brain and spinal cord appeared to have been afflicted with a formidable lesion. He believed that Sumner had suffered from a “great general disarrangement, local disease, or threatening organic attavation of some important tissue or organ.” Jackson’s florid diagnosis revealed that he was very much a medical man of his time. One thing was certain, however, Sumner was a very sick man and in Jackson’s opinion, the outcome remained in doubt.

The senator was not without aids with which to wage the struggle. His happily married physician somewhat humorously noted that while the fact that Sumner was a bachelor was critical, it was of no consequence to the case. He found his patient a six foot two inch muscular man of nervous temperament in the “full zenith of manhood.”

The doctor’s prescription combined the influences of his medical training with a geologist’s belief in the healing powers of nature. Sumner was to be subjected to a “judicious diet, mild tonic agents, constant exercise in the air, on horseback, or in a carriage,” accompanied by a cessation of “all active efforts of diseased parts.” This was to result in a gradual “stringing up and intonation of the whole body under the influence of mountain air, mountain water and change of climate.”

Apparently wishing to avoid the publicity of a public hotel at the resort, Sumner took lodgings with the Jackson family. The arrangement evidently proved to be highly satisfactory. Sumner

Robert Montgomery Smith Jackson to Henry Wilson, September [?], 1856, Jackson Papers. Along with others, Henry Wilson was directing the effort to discredit the “possum hypothesis” of Sumner’s condition. At the time he was the junior senator from Massachusetts and a strong abolitionist. He characterized Brooks’ assault on his colleague as “brutal, murderous, and cowardly” (Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 2 session, p. 1306). He later became an active campaigner for Lincoln, and in 1872, Grant’s vice-president.

Jackson to Wilson, September [?], 1856, Jackson Papers.

Undated fragment of a medical report on Charles Sumner, Jackson Papers.

Ibid.

Jackson to Wilson, September [?], 1856, Jackson Papers.
enjoyed the atmosphere of the doctor's home, especially the attention of the Jackson women. He affectionately referred to Cary, the doctor's daughter, as "the lady with the bright eyes," and to Mrs. Jackson as "the lady with the soft voice." The soft voice may well have been employed to chide Sumner about his moderate drinking, since Mrs. Jackson was a teetotaler.

It is also interesting to speculate on the conversations which took place during the August evenings between two such articulate and interesting companions. One must, however, feel some sympathy for the ladies in the presence of two such verbose men. One thing is certain; at some point during the month, Jackson, hitherto a minor political functionary in the Buchanan organization, became an ardent Sumner partisan. The doctor came to feel that Sumner was nothing less than "one who seems by fate to have been consecrated to the progress and well-being of his race."

While the senator apparently found a measure of peace at the Mountain, his physical and mental condition remained in a state of flux. The most alarming sign of his infirmity continued to be the difficulty he had walking. Before the assault Sumner had been a strong walker. He considered ten or twelve mile hikes to be no more than "pleasant exercise." While at the Mountain, however, his gait appeared to be that of a much older man. One observer compared it to "the kind of steps one takes when creeping through a darkened chamber under the influence of a paroxysm of nervous headache. . . ."

Whatever his physical condition, he frequently told visitors that he would return to Washington in two weeks. He wrote Joshua Giddings that he longed to return to the senate to expose the "brutality of the slave oligarchy." These were brave words for a man who was driven to the sofa after reading or writing only ten or so letters a day.

While the Institute was remote, its location on the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad made it reasonably accessible. A

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16 Sumner to Jackson, October 11, 1856, Jackson Papers.
17 Sumner to Jackson, September 21, 1856, Jackson Papers.
18 Jackson to Wilson, September [?], 1856, Jackson Papers.
20 Ibid.
22 Swisshelm Letter.
number of the senator's friends, including the Reverend Furness, Anson Burlingame, and Mrs. Jane Swisshelm visited the Mountain to see the condition of their hero for themselves.\textsuperscript{23} Theodore Parker also planned to visit, but he was misinformed that Sumner had left Cresson. Parker thanked Dr. Jackson for helping "this noble man."\textsuperscript{24}

These visits were often occasions of considerable pleasure to the patient. On one, Burlingame, the Massachusetts Congressman who gained a measure of notoriety by challenging Brooks to a duel to avenge Sumner, arrived at the Mountain in the company of a gentleman and a lady. Along with Dr. Jackson, the party engaged in lengthy conversations and frequent rides into the lush mountains. Oddly enough, while walking proved difficult, Sumner had no difficulty sitting a horse. By mid-August riding had apparently become his most enjoyable daily exercise.\textsuperscript{25} In any event, the company of the Burlingame party proved so enjoyable that Dr. Jackson practically had to force Sumner to retire for the evening.\textsuperscript{26}

Letters from friends also acted as a stimulant. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that even though he "grieved" that Massachusetts would be crippled in the Senate, he believed that the senator's suffering had been a "stranger manifest benefit to the country." Apparently referring to the use to which Sumner's political friends were putting his martyrdom, Emerson noted that, "Bad times are bitter when passing; but, if well used, how glorious forever afterward."\textsuperscript{27} Emerson also sent his regards to Dr. Jackson.\textsuperscript{28} A letter from Charles Francis Adams assured the senator that his handwriting indicated he was gaining strength and would soon be himself again.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{23}Pierce, \textit{Memoir and Letters}, III, 507.
\textsuperscript{24}Theodore Parker to Jackson, August 27, 1856, Jackson Papers.
\textsuperscript{25}Sumner to Giddings, August 15, 1856, in Pierce, \textit{Memoir and Letters}, III, 507; Swisshelm Letter.
\textsuperscript{26}Swisshelm Letter.
\textsuperscript{27}Ralph Waldo Emerson to Sumner, August 26, 1856, Jackson Papers.\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{29}On March 20, 1851, Emerson arrived in Pittsburgh to deliver a series of six lectures on "conduct of life." The next day he apparently met Jackson, who was staying at the same hotel. He enjoyed the doctor's company well enough to write an introductory letter for Jackson to Henry James, Sr. He called Jackson a good man whose society had been a great comfort to him in Pittsburgh. (Emerson to Henry James, Sr., March 29, 1851, Jackson Papers.)
\textsuperscript{29}Charles Francis Adams to Sumner, September 3, 1856, Adams Papers.
Whatever the real state of Sumner's health and attitude—and it fluctuated from day to day—they were objects of lively national interest. Brooks' assault had become the focal point of the sectional struggle, and the question of Sumner's health was pursued with great interest by both sides. Sumner's opponents, the South, and the Buchanan Democrats saw the senator using his martyrdom to enhance the anti-slavery position. Sumner was not ill, but hiding in the Pennsylvania mountains, they claimed. Sumner's supporters, on the other hand, pointed to his broken health as proof of the inhumanity of the pro-slavery forces. The isolation of Cresson provided the distance necessary for rumor and speculation to flourish.

Sumner's friends sometimes seemed to want him to be ill in order to suit their need for him to remain a martyr, at least until the hotly contested presidential election took place. Theodore Parker gloomily wrote that the senator's condition was critical. "I have never thought he would recover," wrote Parker. William Seward was even more dramatic. He had "Sumner . . . contending with death in the mountains of Pennsylvania." One less emotional Sumner confidant wrote the senator of the difficulty of finding "authentic" accounts of his health.

The anti-slavery press contributed to the confusion by printing a plethora of "eye witness" accounts of Sumner's health, some of them contradictory. In the same issue of the *Anti-Slavery Standard* appeared, "Neither sea air nor mountain air has yet produced any effect . . . Mr. Sumner continues in a state of prostration"; and " . . . Sumner today . . . announces his health is improving . . . [and] . . . expresses the greatest anxiety to take his seat before the adjournment and may do so." A Philadelphia physician and clergyman reported that the "healing breath of the Alleghenies" was working to good effect on Sumner.

Sumner's own correspondence did nothing to clear up the matter. In letters published one week apart, he wrote first that

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32 Charles Francis Adams to Sumner, September 3, 1856, Adams Papers.
33 Letter to the Boston *Transcript*, August 8, 1856; telegraphic dispatch to the New York *Tribune*, both quoted in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 30, 1856.
34 Letter to the Boston *Transcript*, August 20, 1856, quoted in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 30, 1856.
he would soon be taking an active part in the presidential campaign and then reported that he was "so feeble still that I am constrained to turn away from all temptations and opportunities of labour."\textsuperscript{35}

Sumner's critics were not inactive during the Cresson period. One hostile writer noted that Sumner's letters seemed to indicate that the senator was playing an invalid on one side and a politician on the other.\textsuperscript{36} A southern editor complained that "he [Sumner] affects in the very teeth of medical and surgical testimony to the contrary to have sustained an injury to the brain. . . ."\textsuperscript{37}

Not all of Sumner's friends were bothered by the charge that they were using Sumner's health as a political ploy. One Pittsburgher wrote Jackson that "If Sumner be with you keep him, keep him by coaxing, keep him by hand, keep him by force—but KEEP HIM. His time to flash across the political firmament has not yet come."\textsuperscript{38}

One ardent Sumner supporter, Miss Jane Swisshelm, found the contradictory reports "beyond human endurance." She traveled to Cresson to see for herself. Her long friendship with Dr. Jackson assured her of entrée to Sumner, whose condition confirmed her worst apprehensions.\textsuperscript{39} Miss Swisshelm, who had training as a nurse, was not far wrong. As late as August 28, Sumner lamented that his strength had not returned in spite of Doctor Jackson's regimen of alternating rest and exercise.\textsuperscripts{40}

In spite of his condition and the congenial company at the Mountain, Sumner was apparently becoming impatient with his separation from the political action. Jackson could not persuade him that he was still an invalid and far from ready for a return to active political life.\textsuperscript{41} Against the doctor's urgent advice, Sumner left Cresson early in September and after spending a day with Jackson's friend, Enoch Lewis, in Altoona, he returned to

\textsuperscript{35} Letter to the Boston Transcript, quoted in the Boston Liberator, August 22, 1856; Sumner to the Fitchburg Convention, August 5, 1856, quoted in the Anti-Slavery Standard, August 30, 1856.
\textsuperscript{36} Editorial in the Boston Courier, as quoted in the Anti-Slavery Standard, August 30, 1856.
\textsuperscript{37} Editorial in the Charleston Courier, quoted in the Boston Liberator, September 19, 1856.
\textsuperscript{38} Anonymous correspondent to Jackson, August 28, 1856, Jackson Papers.
\textsuperscript{39} Swisshelm Letter.
\textsuperscript{40} Sumner to Samuel Howe, August 28, 1856, in Pierce, Memoir and Letters, III, 507.
\textsuperscript{41} Jackson to Wilson, September [?], 1856, Jackson Papers.
Philadelphia, where he once again became the guest of Reverend Furness and the patient of Dr. Caspar Wister.42

The move nearer to the political activity did not prove to be the tonic that Sumner had hoped. He remained exasperated by his inability to function properly in those "stirring times."48 Two weeks after he left the Mountain he wrote that he was still in medical embargo and experiencing the old difficulty sleeping.43 He plaintively asked Jackson why he couldn't get well. His voice continued to fail him.45 He realized that he had left the Mountain prematurely—before his system had hardened into health.46 Furness wrote that Sumner often spoke of the time at Cresson. On October 7, the two men attended a fair in Philadelphia, and even the sight of pigs reminded Sumner of the pastoral scene at the Mountain.47 He often thought of the Jackson ladies and asked to be remembered to Cary and Mrs. Jackson as well as to the Jackson hound.48 On one occasion he sent the Jacksons a case of "princely tokay" which he hoped Mrs. Jackson's "signs of temperance" would not reject.49

As for political activity, Sumner had apparently convinced himself that John Charles Fremont would win the presidential election.50 This confidence allowed him a humorous exercise which must have been specifically constructed to please Dr. Jackson. Furness informed Jackson with mock seriousness that Sumner had picked up a "geologic habit of mind" in the mountains. The senator,

42 Sumner to Howe, September 11, 1856, in Pierce, Memoir and Letters, III, 508. It was Dr. Wister who had originally advised Sumner to go to Cresson. He had married William Henry Furness' daughter, Annis Lee, in 1854. She was a noted translator of German literature and collaborated with her father in publishing several volumes of German translation.
43 William Henry Furness to Jackson, September 10, 1856, Jackson Papers.
44 Sumner to Jackson, September 13, 1856, Jackson Papers.
45 Ibid., September 21, 1856, Jackson Papers.
46 Furness to Jackson, October 8, 1856; Sumner to Jackson, October 11, 1856, Jackson Papers.
47 Sumner to Jackson, October 8, 1856, Jackson Papers.
48 Sumner to Jackson, October 11, 1856, Jackson Papers.
49 Sumner to Jackson, September 21, 1856, Jackson Papers.
50 Sumner to Jackson, September 21, and October 11, 1856, Jackson Papers. In mid-September Sumner informed Jackson that Fremont would "surely be elected." (Sumner to Jackson, September 21, 1856, Jackson Papers.) His friends, probably because of a desire to keep him inactive in order to speed his recovery, told him that they felt the presidential race was settled. (Furness to Jackson, October 8, 1856, Jackson Papers.) Less than one month before the election, Sumner still wrote that the Fremont cause would go on to a sure triumph. (Sumner to Jackson, October 11, 1856, Jackson Papers.)
applying it to the political scene, claimed to have found a “free Plymouth Rock stratum underlying Maine and Vermont and cropping out in Iowa.” The conclusion, according to Sumner, “is scientific and decisive that it underlies all the intervening states, although it is hidden deeply in some portions of them under heaps of worthless broken slate.” He felt that by “running shafts in all directions and blasting the superincumbent refuse with republican powder here and there, the primitive rock will be disclosed and a sufficient quantity quarried to underpin the foundations of the state, so that the nation will become what it was meant to be, a grand ‘sanatorium’ for the woes of humanity.”

By and large Sumner kept Dr. Jackson out of his serious political affairs. Nevertheless, what Furness called the “possum hypothesis” was being used effectively against Republican candidates. One way to counter this was to gather medical reports from the various physicians who had treated Sumner during his convalescence and publish them. Near the end of September, Sumner requested such a report from Jackson for use in the Indiana campaign. Because he happened to be in Pittsburgh at the time, the request reached the doctor too late for him to meet the deadline for publishing. When he learned that his report had not been included, he wrote Furness indicating his displeasure that they had not waited. Pained that Jackson should have been hurt in any way, Sumner hastened to assure his friend that the omission was not intentional. He flattered Jackson that “... nothing could be said better than you have said it to render my case intelligible.”

As far as the record shows, the relationship between Sumner and Jackson ended in December of 1856. There is a postscript, however. Under the heading “Penalty for Hospitality,” the Blair County (Pennsylvania) Whig reported that one John Troxell had been appointed postmaster at Cresson in place of Dr. R. M. S. Jackson. Frederick William Thayer forwarded the clipping to Jackson with the comment that it was “rich.” Once again Sumner wrote apologizing to Jackson for his having been hurt due to
their friendship. In what was probably their last communication, Sumner somewhat wistfully noted that it must be cold in the mountains and asked what the temperature was.

The relationship of the two after Sumner left the Mountain seems to indicate that the senator’s stay at Cresson helped him only insofar as it allowed him to escape from the national events which pressed upon him. There seems to be little question any more that Sumner was indeed a very sick man. The cures which Dr. Jackson believed in so strongly, mountain air, water, and exercise, proved largely ineffective. The many letters and visits from friends served only to remind Sumner that he was a leader of the anti-slavery crusade. The Mountain was beautiful, but too far removed from the stirring events of the times. Sumner’s premature return to the struggle resulted in a worsening of his condition which sent him seeking a permanent cure for over three years after the Cresson experience. As for Jackson, after his flirtation with fame he devoted his time to the Institute and to the writing of a long and florid book called The Mountain, published in 1860, which one critic described as “varied, pyrotechnic, enthusiastic, and scattered a work as one might read.” It was a geologist’s observations of the bounties of nature as appreciated by a physician. That other lover of nature, Henry David Thoreau, called the beginning of the book “the best specimen after Carlyle’s style, which I have met without of Carlyle’s own books.” In fact, the whole Concord group apparently liked the work. Bronson Alcott read Emerson’s copy and was impressed, and his neighbor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, read it “admiringly.”

After seeing his book through two printings, Jackson became Medical Inspector of the 23rd Army Corps and acting Medical Director of the Department of the Ohio during the Civil War. He died, at age fifty, of pneumonia on April 28, 1865, while directing a hospital on Lookout Mountain in Tennessee.

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Sumner to Jackson, December 20, 1856, Jackson Papers.

Ibid.

David Donald, in his authoritative book, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War, has generally laid to rest any controversy over the true state of Sumner’s health after the beating by Brooks. The assault resulted in severe psychological injuries which were unrelated, neurologically, to his physical ailments. The charge that he was malingering for political profit seems completely without evidence.


Henry David Thoreau to Jackson, September 24, 1860, Jackson Papers.

Bronson Alcott to Jackson, August 25, 1860, Jackson Papers.