Sylvester Graham and his Influence on Daily Life in Oberlin

Sylvester Graham was a minister and health reformer whose ideas had a major influence on daily life in Oberlin for the first several years of its existence. He lived from July 5, 1794 to September 11, 1851. Graham’s followers were called Grahamites, and his philosophy was known as Grahamism. His rules about health became one of the first diet fads in the United States, and his advocacy of vegetarianism had an influence on later activists, right up to the present day. Graham became an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1826. One of his most famous works is a series of lectures that he gave called *Lectures on the Science of Human Life* (the book version, published in 1839, is available online: https://archive.org/details/lecturesonscien00grahgoog).

In these lectures, he talked about human anatomy and physiology, compared the effects of plant-based foods and animal products on various aspects of human health, and discussed what he considered to be the proper ways to eat, drink and sleep (among other things). He believed that a strong knowledge of physiology was essential for making healthy choices.

Graham also wrote *A Treatise on Bread, and Bread-Making* (which can be found online here: https://archive.org/details/treatiseonbreadb00grah), where he discussed the history of bread and how it should be made. He considered plain, whole wheat bread to be essential for a healthy diet. At the time, many commercial bakers mixed various chemicals into bread in order to make it whiter and to disguise low quality flour. Many people thought that white, “refined,” bread was purer; it was also a status symbol if you were able to buy white bread from a bakery (rather than having to make it yourself). Graham said that bread from bakeries of this type typically had little nutritional value and that the additives that bakers put into it were harmful. He also claimed that coarsely ground flour was better for digestive health than finely ground flour. The type of flour that he used was called Graham flour, and it is still available today. It is similar to regular whole wheat flour, except it is more coarsely ground. Graham’s recipe for Graham bread, which was first published in 1829, is a precursor of the Graham crackers which are...
available today. However, the two have little in common; modern Graham crackers are much sweeter than the original Graham bread and crackers, and they generally contain more refined flour.

A general summary of Graham’s other teachings is as follows:

- Clothing should not be too warm or tight, and bedding should not be too comfortable. Feather beds, for example, were frowned upon.
- Bathing regularly was important.
- Alcohol, tobacco, and caffeinated drinks (like tea and coffee) were prohibited. Meat, fish, fats (like gravy or butter), and most desserts were also prohibited. Condiments (even salt and pepper) were forbidden.
- Taking medicine when sick was discouraged; people were instead told to eat less food.
- Frequent outdoor exercise was highly encouraged.
- The main staples of the Graham diet were fruits, vegetables, and Graham bread. People were supposed to drink only water at meals.
- In general, it was considered very important to not only eat the right foods, but also to not eat too much of anything.

One of the main reasons that Graham advocated for these lifestyle choices was that he believed that consuming stimulants, meat, and dairy could lead to lustful behavior and impure thoughts. He felt that these desires were not only inherently immoral, but could lead to major physical and mental health problems if left unchecked. He claimed that following his diet plan would help prevent improper sexual desires from forming, and that it could also potentially treat the health problems of people who had already experienced issues with lust. He gave lectures on this subject that were both popular and controversial. The lectures were primarily addressed to young men and their parents, but they were also popular with women. A version of the lectures called *A Lecture to Young Men, On Chastity* was published in book form (they can be found here: [https://archive.org/details/lecturetoyoungme00grah](https://archive.org/details/lecturetoyoungme00grah)).

Graham never actually visited Oberlin (although he was invited to lecture here by the trustees in 1836), but for several years his ideas about health and diet were highly influential among students and townspeople. In the covenant signed by Oberlin settlers in 1832 and 1833, they agreed to eat plain food and renounce stimulants. In 1834, seasoned meats and desserts and “all unwholesome and expensive food” were officially prohibited. In 1840, David Campbell (or Cambell; sources vary as to the spelling of his name), who was the editor of the *Graham Journal* in Boston, came to Oberlin to help further the cause of Grahamism there. Under his regime as steward at the boarding house for students, no meat was served, and students were sometimes encouraged to eat as little as possible (in order to save money as well as to preserve their health). One student wrote to his father that he was “absolutely hungry a good part of the time.” At one point, a professor even got in trouble for bringing his own pepper shaker into the dining hall with him.

Campbell only lasted a year, though – pressure from hungry and protesting students forced him to resign in 1841. A call for a community meeting about the problems of Grahamism in March 1841 states that “the health of many who board [in the boarding house] is seriously injured and suffering not only in
consequence of a sudden change of diet but also by the use of a diet which is inadequate to the demands of the human system.” Tea and coffee were allowed in the boarding house after 1842, and meat was no longer restricted. After this, strict Grahamism became less prevalent in Oberlin, although some of its teachings stayed influential. Many inhabitants of Oberlin were still interested in new methods for staying healthy, and the spirit of restraint and moderation introduced by Graham’s teachings remained popular for many years.

Further Reading:


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