

Meet Dr. John Sappington



Real People! Real Stories!

Santa Fe Trail Hall of Fame

Dr. John Sappington
(1776 – 1856)

- Physician, Farmer & Medical Pioneer
- Established the Pearson and Sappington stores
- Developed “Dr. Sappington’s Anti-Fever Pills” to cure scarlet fever, yellow fever and influenza
- Researched use of Quinine for the treatment of Malaria
- Published the first medical book written west of the Mississippi River
- Philanthropist

Real People! Real Stories!

Dr. John Sappington was born on May 15, 1778, to Dr. Mark and Rebecca Sappington. In 1786 His family moved to Nashville, TN. John studied medicine as an apprentice to his father for five years. About 1800, John moved to Franklin, TN to practice medicine. In 1804 he married Jane Breathitt of Russellville, Kentucky and they had 7 daughters and 2 sons.

In 1814-1815, John went to Philadelphia and attended lectures at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He returned to medical practice in TN, but, at the suggestion of Thomas Hart Benton, moved his family to Missouri in 1817 and settled near Arrow Rock on the Santa Fe Trail.

Dr. John Sappington was the first physician in Saline County, MO, arriving in 1819. He amassed a fortune by developing and mass-marketing quinine in pill form to treat malaria. The Sappingtons and their extended families owned large numbers of African American slaves whose labor and skills contributed directly to their success and prosperity. Sappington was the patriarch of a family political dynasty that included three Missouri governors (2 sons-in-laws, Meredith Miles Marmaduke & Claiborne Fox Jackson, became Governor of Missouri, as did Sappington’s grandson, John Sappington Marmaduke). Sappington started an education fund for indigent children of Saline County that today still provides college scholarships. He is the great-great grandfather of singer, dancer, and actress Ginger Rogers.

In the practice of medicine, Dr. Sappington avoided the standard medical practice of bleed, blister and purge and only relied on quinine to treat the fevers, most of which were due to malaria. Shunned by the medical establishment, he manufactured “Dr. Sappington Anti-Fever Pills” which contained quinine. His pills were very successful when used by travelers on the Santa Fe Trail.

Susan Magoffin’s diary documented the successful use of his pills in relieving her, and a friend’s, fever on the Trail. In 1844, Dr. Sappington published *The Theory and Treatment of Fevers*, the first medical book published west of the Mississippi. In it he made public the recipe for the pills.

Although Dr. Sappington was a successful farmer and business, his promotion and use of quinine for Malaria Fever on the Santa Fe Trail is his lasting legacy.