There is a vast trove of medical related collections in the Manuscripts and Archives of Yale University Library. I recently had a chance to go through some of these materials for an instruction session I co-taught for a class on the history of mental illness in America. One collection I examined was the Clements Collard Fry Papers [1]. From 1930-1955, Fry was the head of the Department of Mental Hygiene at Yale, the office responsible for the treatment mental health problems among members of the Yale community in the early 20th century. In addition to his work with mental illness, Fry was an avid collector of historical medical documents, and the letter transcribed below is from that collection.

Timothy Pickering (1745-1829)

The 1827 letter is from the cantankerous Federalist Timothy Pickering [2], a former Secretary of State and Senator, and addressed to Loammi Baldwin, Jr. [3], a well-known civil engineer who designed canals and dry docks in early America. In this epistle, Pickering offers Baldwin advice on the cause of the “derangement” of one of his brothers (it is not clear if it is Benjamin or George Baldwin), pointing to the “self-pollution” of masturbation. This was a typical view for the early 19th century and Pickering cites the highest authority for this belief, the 1760 pamphlet L’Onanisme by Samuel Auguste André David Tissot (an 1832 English translation can be viewed here [4]. Onanism takes it name from Onan, son of Judah, who refused to impregnate the widow of his brother and practiced coitus interruptus with her. This later became associated with masturbation. See Genesis chapter 38 for the story of Onan). In that work, Tissot argued that semen was important bodily fluid that provided strength for the body and that its reduction through masturbation led to various disorders like epilepsy, poor memory, and insanity.

Loammi Baldwin, Jr. (1780-1838)

This letter is particularly fascinating for Pickering’s relation of Benjamin Rush [5]’s opinion on masturbation. Rush thought that those who were most virtuous, especially young clergymen, were most susceptible to it, and he had warned his sons to avoid the vice. Pickering agreed with that assessment, reporting that his own sons died early because of their predisposition to onanism. He reported that the only cure for the “derangement” would be regular
sex inside marriage or hard work. These types of views mirror the Federalist notion of control — it starts with the individual body and translates its way up to the body politic. This might be one reason why Pickering expressed curiosity about vegetarianism at the beginning of the letter. If people show restraint in their lives, either through eliminating meat or sexual urges from their lives, a republic based on virtue emerges.
Sons William & George, arose from that fatal indulgence.


Perhaps Tissot's pamphlet may be found at some bookstore — or if not, with some physician of your acquaintance. A short account you may find the Encyclopedia [3] Britannica.

I do not know your brother; but tis enough to have known you, to determine me to give to you the hints herein noticed; being with respect and affection yours.

T. Pickering.

I always ascribed Mr. Bushminter's epilepsy, and premature death to the cause above suggested. My only brother lived to a considerable age: but his epileptic fits, for 20 or 30 years, I never doubted, originated in the same cause. A young man in New Hampshire, grandson of my brother Wingate, was a physician. He was subject to epilepsy. By accident, he met with a woman whom he married. During her life, for 2, 3 or 4 years, he was well. After her death, the fits returned: and he has now quitted the practice of medicine, and gone to work on his father's farm; which has proved salutary.

Loammi Baldwin Esq'

Timothy Pickering Oct. 20, 1827

External link: http://campuspress.yale.edu/mssa/onanism-or-self-pollution-timothy-pickering-on-...