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Ezra Stiles Ely—Benefactor  
of Jefferson Medical  
College

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**Des Moines, Iowa**

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EZRA STILES ELY—BENEFACTOR OF  
JEFFERSON MEDICAL COLLEGE

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The guns of Fort Sumter had been silenced by a defiant Southland. Everywhere the atmosphere was impregnated with that intangible something which shortly was to arraign brother against brother, father against son, neighbor against neighbor and the South against the North. The inevitable at last had occurred. All over the nation, men were hastening to join the colors. The stirring strains of martial airs were heard on every hand. Practically every community had its group of self-appointed guardians of the law which took upon itself the duty of weeding out the northern sympathizers who resided in the South, and the copperheads who lived in the North. The Civil War was a reality. It was in the midst of these disturbing times that the spirit of Ezra Stiles Ely winged its flight to that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. He died June 18, 1861, and with his passing the final chapter of his life's work was closed. His life had been a busy one, a full one, overflowing with the joys which affluence and position had provided and with the satisfaction of tasks well done; but it also was filled with the bitterness which comes to one who is obliged to drink from the cup whose contents are tintured with sorrow, disappointment and disillusionment. Well may it be said of him, however, that he had fought a good fight, he had finished his course, he had kept the faith, and that

\* Jefferson Medical College, Class of 1909.

† Member of Historical Committee of the Iowa State Medical Society.

he had gone to receive his well earned crown of righteousness. However, with his going he did not cease to be existent, for he left behind him many acts of kindness, many deeds of generosity, many evidences of charity, and, above all, a monument which has existed for 114 years, and which should continue to live throughout the coming ages. The enduring monument he helped to erect is the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia. The Rev. Mr. Ely played the savior's part at a crucial moment in the early life of this institution. Without his wise counsel and financial support the college, in all probability, would have gone out of existence while it was yet wearing the swaddling clothes of infancy. In order then that a better understanding may be had of the manner in which he became a benefactor of the medical school, I feel it would not be amiss to turn back the pages of time and glance at some of the early events which are there recorded and which later cast the shadows which foretold so clearly what was to follow.

The aftermath of the Revolutionary War was still being felt by a victorious people. The New England states were doing their best to help in the constructive efforts which had followed the struggle for independence. It was in these exciting times that a babe was born, June 13, 1786, in the home of the Rev. Zebulon Ely, a Presbyterian minister, residing in Lebanon, Connecticut. Rejoicing that the child was a boy, the father named it after one whom he greatly admired, his preceptor, Ezra Stiles, a famous president of Yale University. Seventeen years later, Zebulon saw his son graduated from his alma mater and

become one of the sons of old Eli. In fact the young man represented the third generation of the family to be graduated from that institution and was the seventeenth individual of blood-ties who had received instruction within its halls. Ezra continued his studies in theology and within a year, thanks to the guiding hand of his father, he became an ordained Presbyterian minister. His first charge was at Colchester, Connecticut. Here he ministered to his flock for two years. He then became interested in mission work and went to New York City where he became Chaplain of the New York City Hospital and Almshouse. A record of some of the work he did during these years of service is found in a book he published under the name "Visits of Mercy." The manuscript was written while he was a stated preacher to the hospital and almshouse in the city of New York. The book, which went through several editions, reminds one of a compilation of case histories, except that it deals with spiritual, rather than with physical, problems.

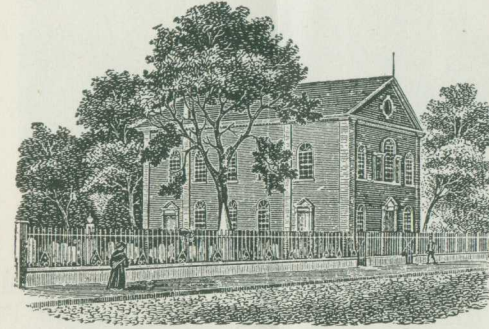
It was while he was carrying on his missionary work in New York City that he made the acquaintance of Captain Benjamin Wickes, an elder of Old Pine Street Church in Philadelphia. Evidently the elder was favorably impressed by the young minister, so much so that through his good graces the Reverend Ely was invited to fill the pulpit one Sunday while he was sojourning in the city. Thus came about his introduction to Philadelphia and to Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church, an institution formed in 1768. Some years later, when Archibald Alexander, D.D., vacated the pulpit of Pine Street, it was only



Ezra Stiles Ely, A.B., D.D., as he appeared when he came to Philadelphia in 1814.

natural for the leaders in the church to turn to the promising young chaplain of New York City as a prospective candidate to fill the vacancy. After some trials and tribulations, both to the invited minister and to the Pine Street congregation as well, Ezra Stiles Ely came to Philadelphia and was installed, September 7, 1814, as minister of the Old Pine Street or Third Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. He was the fifth man to serve in this capacity. He became moderator of the General Assembly in 1828. Just as

his birth had occurred during the Revolutionary War period, so did his work in Philadelphia begin during the second struggle with England, the War of 1812. It has been said of him that he



Old Pine Street Church prior to 1837.

came to his new charge splendidly equipped for the work before him. Born of the best New England stock, blessed with a commanding presence, both intellectual and spiritual, finely educated, experienced far beyond his years, and in manners thoroughly a gentleman, he was fully prepared at the age of twenty-eight years to take his place in any society or in any assembly of his brethren. Thus began the pastorate of Ezra Stiles Ely in Philadelphia. Thus was laid the groundwork upon which later was founded the permanency of the Jefferson Medical College.

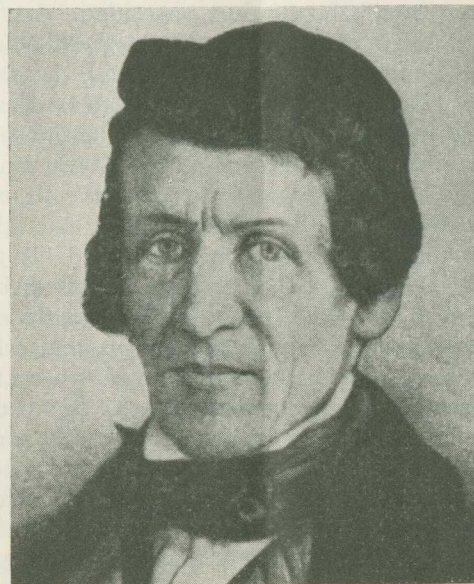
Dismissing for a moment the life of Ezra Stiles Ely and Old Pine Street Church, let us now turn our attention from spiritual affairs to medical affairs in the old Quaker City. Just as Cambridge, Massachusetts, has the honor of being the



Old Pine Street Church as it stands today. Note the old burial ground.

home of the first university to be established in this country—Harvard University—so to Philadelphia goes the honor of establishing the first medical school in the new world. The individual honors go to Dr. John Morgan, a native of Philadelphia, for it was he who founded, in 1765, the Medical School of the College of Philadelphia. He became the first medical professor in America. The school eventually became the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania. The first commencement of this, our first medical school in America, was held June 21, 1768. This is the same year in which the Pine Street Presbyterian Church was formed. Little did the faculty and trustees of the medical school or the trustees, elders and members of the congregation of the Pine Street Church dream of the rôle which each institution was to play as causative agents in the founding of a new medical school in the city of Philadelphia in the years to come.

For more than half a century the Medical



George McClellan, M.D., founder of Jefferson Medical College.

School of the College of Philadelphia—or its successor, the University of Pennsylvania—had no competitor in the field of medicine. It is true that several attempts to establish a new medical school had been made, but each time the opposition was too strong and all such efforts came to naught. However, it remained for Dr. George McClellan to break the political ice which had so definitely defied all previous attempts of men in their endeavors to establish a new medical school. As his name would indicate, he was of Scotch-Irish descent. This at once stamps the ambitious young doctor as coming from that stock which

does not bow before unjust opposition. In fact, one well might say of him that he must have taken for his motto, "Where there is a will, there is a way." His actions, at least, so indicated. Realizing that it would be impossible to secure a charter for an independent medical school, McClellan set about to see how he could overcome the obstacles before which all other similar efforts had fallen. The manner in which he accomplished his purpose brings out the real strategy and generalship which were innate to his being. His fertile brain conceived the idea of launching a program which in the end would secure for himself and others a charter for a new medical school. His church affiliation, or at least his acquaintanceship among the Scotch-Irish folk of the town, was with people who professed the Presbyterian faith. This contact gave him entrée to the trustees of the Jefferson College, located at Canonsburg, Washington county, Pennsylvania. This institution, originally founded as a private school under Scotch-Presbyterian influence, was the first chartered literary institution west of the Alleghany mountains. McClellan reasoned that if he could get the sanction of the Board of Trustees of the Jefferson College to establish a medical department of the school in Philadelphia, he might be successful in obtaining from the state legislature a charter for the new project. With this thought in mind he laid his plans before the trustees of the Jefferson College in Canonsburg, in June, 1824. The outcome was that the parent college adopted the articles of union authorizing the establishment in the city of Philadelphia of a Medical Faculty, as a constituent part of Jefferson College, to be styled the *Jefferson*

*Medical College*. Among other things the trustees expressly stipulated that the medical school should have no claims whatsoever on the funds of Jefferson College. Thus was the fledgling institution created, but its financial resources were purely problematical.

With the die cast and the Rubicon crossed, McClellan and his associates immediately began to make preparations for the opening of the spring term of the Medical Department of Jefferson College. Thus it came about that the hall of the Jefferson Medical School was opened March 8, 1825. The fall term began the following October. By this time 109 students had matriculated. This was only the beginning. What was the end to be? With the fall and winter months passed and with spring rapidly approaching the all consuming question among both faculty and students was whether the school could legally graduate the senior class. Here again the strategy of McClellan was unfolded when the time to strike was propitious. In the spring of 1826, while the state legislature was in session at Harrisburg, he left Philadelphia early one morning, traveling by means of horse and sulky. Reaching Lancaster during the night, a distance of some sixty miles from Philadelphia, he secured a fresh steed and continued his journey, arriving in Harrisburg the following morning. The entire distance traversed by the intrepid Scotsman was almost one hundred miles. He and his staunch Presbyterian friends presented their claim to the legislators. Evidently their prayer fell on attentive and friendly ears for, *mirabile dictu*, their efforts were rewarded with success. On April 7, 1826, the

bill which gave life to the institution in Philadelphia was enacted by the legislature and approved by Governor Andrew Schultze. It may be of interest to learn that George McClellan, once the battle was won, lost no time loitering in Harrisburg. On the contrary, he started the return trip to the place from whence he had come, driving over the dark and lonely roads with a light and courageous heart. He too had fought a good fight; he too had kept the faith, and now he was on his way back to finish his course. Thus it came about that the first class, twenty in number, was granted diplomas by the Jefferson Medical College just a week after Governor Schultze had signed the enabling act.

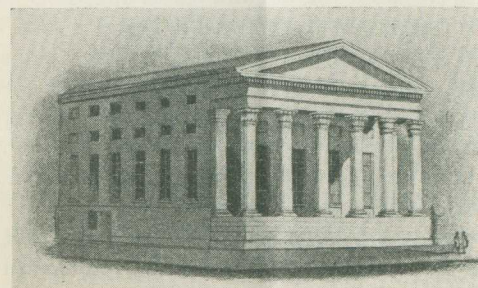
Just as the parents of a new born babe, overjoyed because of the new arrival, later are faced with the stern reality that something more tangible than love is needed to sustain its life, so did the first blush of joy disappear as the faculty of the newly created medical school began to realize that something more than good will was needed to keep the institution alive. To express the thought in present day phraseology the school had been built on a shoestring. Its faculty was young and ambitious. McClellan, its prime mover, was only twenty-four years of age; but youth and ambition cannot succeed without financial backing. Hence in 1827 the momentous question of how to acquire financial aid, like Banquo's ghost, arose to haunt and plague the faculty. The college had no definite home. Lectures were being given in a makeshift place on Prune Street, now Fifth and Locust streets. Personal notes of the professors were pledged to help tide over the

trying and difficult days; but these methods could not continue indefinitely. Again the resourcefulness of the dominating spirit of the Jefferson Medical College asserted itself. Again the master mind of McClellan became evident. When the bill, for which McClellan and his friends had labored, was enacted into law it contained a clause authorizing the Board of Trustees of the Jefferson College at Canonsburg to elect ten additional trustees, "who may be residents of the city or county of Philadelphia." It was only natural that the "additional trustees", which the board authorized, would be friends of McClellan and his associates. It is not strange then that among the number appointed on the Board of Additional Trustees to serve the Jefferson Medical College was Ezra Stiles Ely, pastor of Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church, which was located between Fourth and Fifth streets, about two blocks distant from the college. In fact this learned gentleman served as secretary of the board for some years. Who other than the faculty would know more of the trials and tribulations of the medical school than its local trustees? Thus did Reverend Ely come face to face with the school and with its problems. It was he who listened with a sympathetic ear when the subject of a new college building first was mentioned in 1827. The medical school had no endowment. The act creating it stipulated expressly that it should have no claim on the funds of the parent institution. The Jefferson College at Canonsburg gladly gave it birth but the hardheaded Scots who served as trustees saw to it that neither they nor the school they represented were made liable for its after-care.



Neither the faculty nor the Board of Additional Trustees was in a position to assume the responsibility of purchasing a lot and erecting thereon a suitable building in which to house the activities of the medical school. When it seemed that all must fail, when the hour of greatest darkness and despair crept over the Jefferson Medical College and threatened to engulf it within the inky bosom of oblivion, a ray of hope, like a beam of light from the morning star, pierced the gloom and spread its beneficent influence upon the troubled faculty and trustees. Ezra Stiles Ely came forward and saved the day. Of all persons concerned about the future of the school, he was the one who was best equipped mentally and financially to come to its aid. He generously proposed to assume the responsibility of erecting a new building. Accordingly, in March, 1827, the Board of Additional Trustees of Jefferson College agreed to pay the Rev. Dr. Ely a sum of one thousand dollars a year for a term of five years, providing he would erect a Medical Hall for the use of the Medical School. Reverend Ely immediately set about to fulfill his agreement. By May he had purchased a lot on Tenth Street above Walnut—what is now Tenth and Sansom streets—and by the following August the new college building was ready for use. This was the home of Jefferson Medical College between the years of 1828 and 1846. On the same site stands today the Jefferson Medical College Hospital, which was erected about a third of a century ago. This is the only building remaining of the ones in use when I was a student in the college more than thirty years ago.

There is little more to be said about Ezra Stiles Ely and of his connection with the Jefferson Medical College by virtue of his membership on the Board of Additional Trustees of the Jefferson College at Canonsburg. There can be no question of the influence he exerted in helping to establish and maintain the medical school. His willingness to finance the college at a time when its affairs were in an unsatisfactory condition, his loyal friendship, honest encouragement and financial aid, just at the psychologic moment when the clouds of despair hung ominously over the institution, were the means which turned the tide of probable disaster into perfect success. True, someone else might have done as much for the school; but we have no proof that such a person existed. If he did, he failed to come forward and make himself known. Consequently more



Home of Jefferson Medical College from 1828 to 1846. Built from funds supplied by Rev. Ezra Stiles Ely.

than 16,000 alumni of Jefferson Medical College owe a debt of gratitude to the Rev. Dr. Ely for making it possible for them to be graduated from such a fine and honorable medical school. If he

had left nothing behind him but this one deed, that alone would insure a conspicuous place for his name among the records in the archives of the college and cause it to be remembered as long as the medical school, whose interests he cherished and whose life he saved, remains. However, his life's work also left an indelible impression on another old Philadelphia institution; namely, Old Pine Street Church. His connection with this institution, like that with the Jefferson Medical College, marks him for all time as an outstanding man, a good citizen, a devoted minister, an exemplary character and a benefactor of humanity. His life began during the stress and strain of the post-Revolutionary War period. His introduction to the ministerial work in Philadelphia, which he carried on for more than twenty years, was during the War of 1812. His closing days on earth were amid the beginnings of the Civil War. How fitting it is that such was to be for a man who carried on so militant a battle for the things he thought were right and just and for the church which to him was his very existence. Truly it may be said of him that whatever evil he may have done was interred with his bones while the good which he did still lives after him.

The story of Ezra Stiles Ely and the rôle he played as benefactor of Jefferson Medical College might well end at this point. I doubt if there are very many physicians, if any, among the alumni now living who ever heard of him or know anything about his descendants. In order, then, to make the tale complete, and to bring it down to the present day and hour, I feel that an additional word need be written. To the Rev.

Dr. Ely and his good wife was born, February 4, 1828, a child whom they named Benjamin Ezra Stiles Ely. Unlike his grandsire and father, he did not take up the ministry at an early age. Instead, as a youth of eighteen he was seized with the wanderlust which caused him to ship as an able-bodied seaman on the Bark Emigrant. The ship was a sailing vessel and was bound on a whaling expedition to the Indian and South Atlantic oceans. After three years of hardship, danger, privation and adventure, Benjamin Ely returned to his father's home a wiser and a disillusioned young man. He desired no more of ocean life. However, shortly after regaining his land legs the fever of the California gold rush of 1849 seized him, and in due time he was numbered among the tenderfeet who sought the elusive ore on the Pacific coast. Unlike most of the men with whom he rubbed elbows, Ben Ezra Stiles Ely had a background of culture and a stability of character which, in spite of everything, crept to the surface in due time and asserted itself. Thus it came about that he was elected to a seat in the legislature from Yuba county, California, in 1858. It requires no stretch of imagination on my part to believe that the young legislator took an active and decided stand on the side of justice and right in legislative matters pertaining to lawlessness, vice and the vigilantes, all running rampant at that time on the western coast. Indeed there is much evidence to show that he did that very thing; but the virus of wanderlust, adventure and politics which was in his veins was not sufficient to overcome the blood tendencies which he inherited from his sturdy and somewhat puritanical

ancestors. Hence we find him in the course of time occupying a pulpit in a Presbyterian Church in Chicago. Later he held successful pastorates in Iowa, preaching both at Ottumwa and at Winterset. He died in Des Moines, Iowa, April 22, 1910, at the age of eighty-two years.

The final chapter in the story of Ezra Stiles Ely would be incomplete if I did not mention one of his grandsons who also has made his mark in the world. While living near Beloit, Wisconsin,



Francis Argyle Ely, M.D., grandson.

there was born on January 15, 1876, in the home of the Rev. B. E. S. Ely, a child who was christened Francis Argyle Ely. Fate decreed, however, that the lad should not follow in the footsteps of his progenitors. It caused the young man to choose the medical rather than the ministerial profession as his life's work. Consequently he entered the State University of Iowa and was graduated from its medical department in 1898. Dr. Ely then served as the first full term interne in the new University Hospital. With the termination of his internship he became assistant physician in the State Hospital for the Insane, at Clarinda, Iowa. Two years later he severed his connection with this institution and located in Des Moines. Here he began the practice of his chosen profession. He soon was elected to the Chair of Nervous Diseases in the Medical School of Drake University, a position he continued to hold until the institution was merged with the State University of Iowa in 1913. In the forty years since his graduation, Dr. Ely has worked diligently to perfect himself in the specialty of neuropsychiatry. His studies have been pursued in some of the leading universities both at home and abroad. Thus it would seem that the interest shown by Ezra Stiles Ely over a century ago, in matters pertaining to medicine in its relationship to suffering humanity, again has asserted itself, and is manifested by the successful medical career of his grandson. For more than a quarter of a century it has been my pleasure to know Frank Ely. On many occasions he has demonstrated the sterling qualities which are inherent in his nature by virtue of heredity, culture and education. Well

may it be said of him, as was said of his grandsire, that he is a man well born, finely educated, of a pleasing personality, well experienced in years, a thorough gentleman, and fully prepared to take his place in any society or in any assembly of his colleagues. As a personal friend and as an alumnus of Jefferson Medical College, I take pleasure in paying tribute to the memory of his illustrious grandfather, Ezra Stiles Ely, benefactor of Jefferson Medical College.

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