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THE ORIGINS OF
JEFFERSON MEDICAL COLLEGE

IN 1790 when the first census was taken, the United States had a population of nearly four million vs. over 230 million in 1980. It was a new nation, born in the crucible of the Revolutionary War, and seeking its manifest destiny. Philadelphia was then the temporary capital of the country. Thomas Jefferson was serving as the first Secretary of State in the cabinet of President George Washington.

Four years later, in 1794, a small private school was chartered under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. Its small log cabin home, nestled in rural Washington County, was the first academy located west of the Allegheny Mountains. The embryonic one-room school sprouted to become Jefferson College in 1802 (now Washington and Jefferson College). Named in honor of the third president who had taken office a year earlier, the college offered a basic liberal arts curriculum.

Then, in 1824, as a result of events in faraway Philadelphia, Jefferson College assumed a new and significant role. At the start of the 19th Century, enthusiasm for medical education was running high in the Quaker City. But the University of Pennsylvania, where the first medical school was founded, could not accommodate more than half the number of students who applied there.

A small group of physicians headed by Dr. George McClellan, sought to obtain a charter from the State Legislature to open a new
This humble log cabin, built in 1780, first housed a small private school chartered in 1794. It was the forerunner of Jefferson College, founded in 1802 (now Washington and Jefferson College).

The new Jefferson Medical College Building at 10th and Sansom Streets in Philadelphia was officially occupied in mid-1828. The towering Doric columns lent grace and charm to the front entrance.

In 1877, Jefferson Medical College Hospital settled into a home of its own in this building at 1020 Sansom Street. Its 125 beds were occupied by nearly 2,000 patients during its first three years of operation.
medical school in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, the lawmakers bent to the bitter objections raised by the trustees of the University of Pennsylvania and rejected the application. But the undaunted and determined McClellan refused to admit defeat and conceived a clever plan to outflank the opposition.

The regents of Jefferson College were surprised to say the least when McClellan and his colleagues arrived on horseback at their doorstep with a most unusual proposal—that a medical school in Philadelphia be organized under Jefferson’s charter. After due deliberation, the proposition was accepted. A year later (1825), the charter of Jefferson College was extended to include the granting of medical degrees. The new medical school thus created was known as the Medical Department of Jefferson College.

Philadelphia Roots

The first location of the new Jefferson Medical School in the old Trivoli Theatre at 518 Prune (now Locust) Street was somewhat bizarre. Directly across the street was the Prison for Criminals and Debtors. To the east was the burial ground of the Free Quakers. To the west lay Washington Square, then used as a Potter’s Field. Directly behind the building was a popular ale-house surrounded by churches. It was a mixed neighborhood of crime, misery, death, and solace (both liquid and spiritual).

An inaugural series of medical lectures was delivered in these makeshift quarters in late 1825. The following spring, Dr. McClellan performed the first operation, and the first commencement exercises were held on April 14, 1826. In mid-1828, the college moved to a new location at 10th Street below Sansom. It was here that McClellan introduced the technique of operating and lecturing to students simultaneously. This “watch and learn” approach was extended to the bedside when the college set up a “Teaching Infirmary,” and much later when the School of Nursing was established. It consisted of a clinical room for operations and lectures, one for general dispensary work, and a small ward for patients too sick to be released. Most patients, other than critical cases, were sent home in carriages after their operations, where they were attended by the hospital’s clinical assistants (now identified as staff physicians).
In 1838, the Pennsylvania Legislature chartered the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia as an independent corporation “with the same powers and restrictions as the University of Pennsylvania.” By mid-century, Jefferson was graduating more physicians than its older rival. Quick to recognize the danger of releasing surgical patients too soon after serious operations, Jefferson expanded its original small clinic to include provisions for 20 patients by 1849. This move led eventually to the opening in September, 1877 of Jefferson Medical College Hospital in a new building at 1020 Sansom Street. Its 125 beds were occupied by 1,952 patients during the first three years of operation.

From then on, the Jefferson story was one of rapid expansion, increased national recognition, and outstanding leadership. A few of the faculty members whose names are inscribed on the honor roll of medical history are: Dr. Samuel D. Gross, “Dean of American Surgery;” Dr. Chevalier Jackson, inventor of the bronchoscope; Dr. J. Marion Sims, “Father of Modern Gynecology;” Dr. Carlos Finlay, who discovered that yellow fever was spread by mosquitoes; Dr. Silas W. Mitchell, a pioneer neurologist; Dr. John H. Gibbon, Jr., who pioneered in open-heart surgery; and Dr. Thomas A. Shallow, who advanced the art of gastrointestinal surgery. Sixteen United States presidents, including Ronald Reagan, have been treated by Jefferson physicians before, during, or after their terms of office. Dorothea Hamilton ’65, was one of the military (Navy) nurses assigned to the White House during the Carter administration.

In the early days, however, bacteriology was still an esoteric science, the importance of surgical cleanliness was overlooked, and there was no clinical training for men or women nurses. But remember, medicine itself was in an elementary state of development and a source of mystery to the general public. Hawkers of such patent nostrums as “Stomach Bitters” for indigestion, “Barker’s Linament” for aching muscles, “Egyptian Regulator Tea” for flat-chested girls, and Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound for “female weakness” did a thriving business at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

No wonder untrained and unskilled hospital nurses of that era hadn’t the slightest knowledge of drugs, or of the symptoms and signs of any physical changes in their patients, such as hemorrhage
or shock. When a surgical patient emerged from ether, a clinical assistant had to be stationed at his bedside to make sure he was turned properly during attacks of nausea. Patients were often burned with hot water bags through carelessness, and dressing bedsores was haphazard at best. Even though a nurse in those days was expected to mop floors, haul coal, fill kerosene lamps, and wash windows, in addition to caring for patients, he or she was not permitted to prepare or handle instruments for or during an operation. All of these elements combined to force a near-desperate cry for professional training of nurses.

"The Gross Clinic" (1875) by Thomas Eakins is considered to be one of the most important pieces of American art. Featured demonstrating a surgical procedure to students is Dr. Samuel D. Gross, who was a professor in the Department of Surgery at Jefferson Medical College from 1856 to 1882. The canvas was painted by Eakins when he was a part-time anatomy student at the college. The masterpiece is now located in a new Eakins Gallery in Jefferson Alumni Hall.