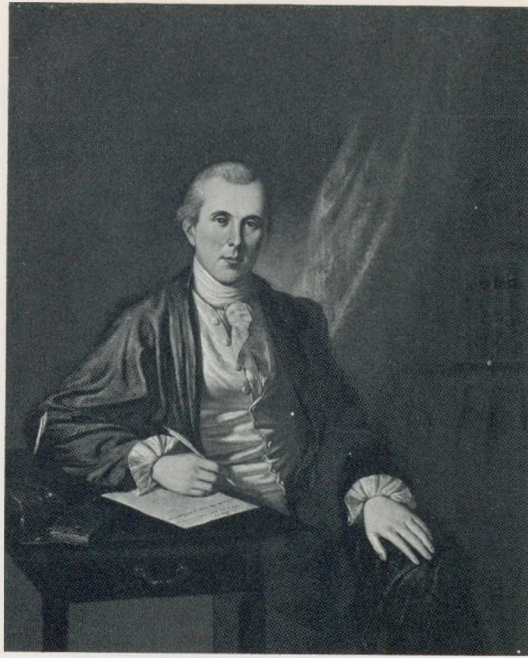




December 24, 1745—April 19, 1813

Benjamin Rush

Yankee Doodle Doctor

The anniversary of his death reminds us he changed not only our history but our medical traditions as well

By Thomas Fleming

“Prudence,” Benjamin Rush was fond of saying, “is a rascally virtue.” In which case, no one could call Dr. Rush a rascal. But that was about the only thing he was not called in his long, tumultuous life. Of the four doctors who signed the Declaration of Independence, Rush was by far the most famous and the most controversial. Which makes him a most logical and illogical choice to be honored as one of its forefathers, by the conservative AMA at its bicentennial clinical meeting in Rush’s native Philadelphia.

For Rush was a born rebel, ready to attack

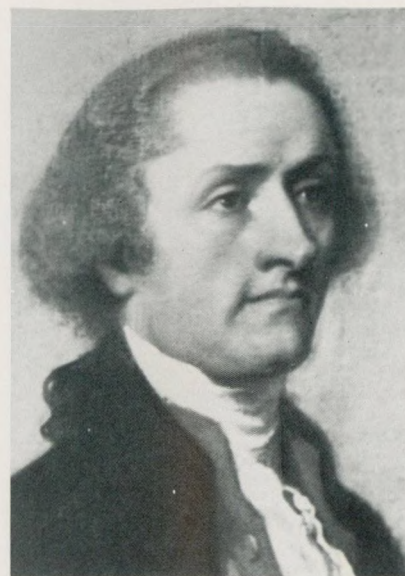
almost anyone and anything. In the course of his life, his targets included not only King George III, the British Parliament and George Washington, but the prevailing medical theories of his day, slavery, tea and liquor, the city of Philadelphia—and most of its physicians.

If there was an argument around, Rush got into it. A descendant of a Cromwellian soldier who had emigrated to America in the 1660s

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The Inner Circle

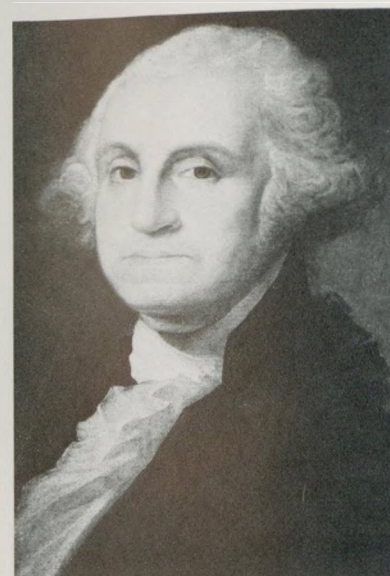
Dr. Rush was no mere on-looker at the Revolutionary parade. He was on intimate terms with men like Jefferson, Franklin and Adams; he gave Tom Paine the theme and title for the historic pamphlet "Common Sense," and he was a member of the "cabal" that tried to unseat his sometime friend George Washington from his post of command.



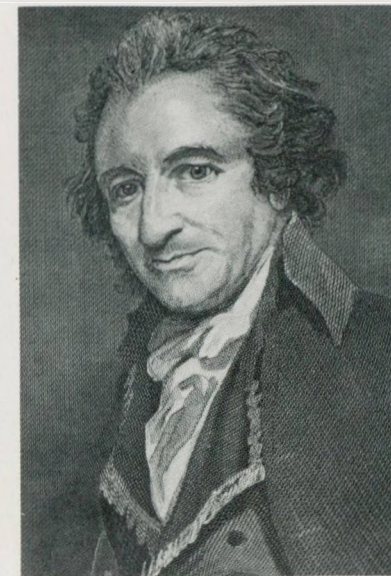
Thomas Jefferson



Benjamin Franklin



George Washington



Thomas Paine



John Adams

and failed to prosper, Rush was also fiercely ambitious. His father had been a gunsmith; his mother ran a grocery store. He was a Presbyterian in a city dominated by Quakers and Anglicans. For five years before the Revolution he battled in vain for admission to England's prestigious Royal Society.

While maintaining a huge practice and supervising a half-dozen apprentices, he managed (by living on three or four hours sleep a night) to produce a stream of scientific articles and essays that made him the leading medical theorist in America. He was a pioneer in preventive medicine, military hygiene, medical education, and the founding father of American psychiatry. He was also the perpetrator of some of the worst and most deadly medical theories of his era, most notably that bleeding was a cure-all.

Rush defended all his ideas, the good ones and the bad ones, with a violence that made him legions of enemies. He could not merely disagree with a colleague on a medical doctrine. The clash became a struggle between the forces of light and darkness, with the opposing doctor wearing horns. He brought the same approach to politics with disastrous political results.

Rush was as warmhearted as he

was quick-tempered. Even before he had established a practice he signed up as physician to the Philadelphia almshouse. He made house calls in the shacks and cellars and lofts where the poor lived in such filth that when he returned home he had to spend a half hour picking the lice from his clothes and hair. But it was not his sympathy for the downtrodden that got him into the Revolution. For Rush was living proof that American screams about British oppression and ruinous taxation were misleading.

In 1774, when the Revolution started, America was one of the richest countries in the world, and the lowest taxed. Rush's income from his practice, his apothecary shop (which he ran with the help of his apprentices like most doctors of the period), and his lectures on chemistry at the College of Pennsylvania was nearly 1,300 pounds a year. When he completed his studies at Edinburgh in 1768, he had considered settling in London until friends warned him off with word that there were only a half-dozen doctors in London earning more than 1,000 pounds a year, and 20 times that number who were starving. (The income of the average farm laborer or city workman in 1774 was 40-50 pounds a year.)

Instead, it was through his Crom-

wellian ancestry that Rush personified the real cause of the Revolution. Most Americans were descended from people who had left England because they did not like its aristocratically dominated society. Since 1765 these aristocrats and their chief blue blood, George III, had been trying to exert more and more control over the colonies. A minority of pugnacious types like Rush resented this intensely and saw America's free society in deadly danger. They also inveighed against British luxury and corruption, which they considered as dangerous to American liberty as the increased control.

Rush leaped into the political uproar, literally. In late 1774, when the Bostonians who had dumped the tea into Boston harbor arrived in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, Rush was among a welcoming committee who met them on the outskirts of the city. He sprang into John Adams' carriage and began warning him against certain Philadelphians who were trying to sabotage the Congress. It was the beginning of Rush's long political love affair with John and his cousin Samuel.

John Adams' estimate of Rush was rather good. He was, he wrote in his diary "an elegant, ingenious . . . fellow, but too much of a talker to be a deep thinker." (Adams, it should be

noted, was no mean talker himself.) Another loquacious rebel who arrived in Philadelphia around this time and became a close Rush friend was Charles Lee, a British colonel on half pay, who swiftly convinced Rush that he was the most brilliant soldier alive.

Among Rush's weaknesses was a tendency to accept the opinions of his friends as gospel. Charles Lee became his military idol and John Adams his political lodestar. He also clung to them because they kept him in touch with the political events that were shaking Philadelphia and the rest of America. Rush's practice was almost completely among the poor and lower middle class, with a sprinkling of wealthy Presbyterians. Although he had written essays in Philadelphia newspapers defending American resistance to Britain's imperial policies, he had no standing among the city's elite, who chose the delegates to the Continental Congress.

Because Rush was the only member of the College of Pennsylvania's medical faculty who had not been appointed to the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital, he was convinced that there was a conspiracy among the Quaker and Anglican doctors of the city to keep him in his place. If there was, he'd triggered it himself by his tendency to use his college podium as a platform to attack the theories and

practices of almost all the older, established physicians in Philadelphia.

Rush consoled himself by meeting with other outsiders—James Cannon, a professor of mathematics at the college, Timothy Matlack, a bankrupt brewer, and Christopher Marshall, a retired druggist—all of whom loved to denounce rich Philadelphians for their corruption and their reluctance to support a violent solution to America's difficulties with England.

It infuriated Rush that Pennsylvanians were the chief opponents to the arguments of the New England men that the best solution to the quarrel with the mother country was an immediate separation. Rush was probably acting as Adams' go-between when he sought out a tall, reserved Virginian at the London Coffeehouse and assured him that "the people of Pennsylvania" would be delighted if he became commander-in-chief of the American army. George Washington thanked Dr. Rush for the endorsement, which was a crucial part of the Adams cousins' strategy to outflank Pennsylvania by building an alliance between New England and Virginia.

After Washington's appointment was voted by Congress, he invited Rush to join a dinner party honoring him. There Rush met another Virginia

delegate he liked much more than the modest, inarticulate Washington—a rangy redhead named Thomas Jefferson who shared Rush's inclination to defy George III and his fleets and armies.

Early in 1775, Rush performed an even more important service. He became acquainted with a newly-arrived Englishman, Thomas Paine, who shared Rush's detestation of slavery. Paine was inclined to be skeptical about American claims in the quarrel with England. But the Battle of Lexington and a few conversations with Rush changed his mind. Rush had thought about writing a pamphlet on America's behalf, but he dreaded the effect it might have on his practice—an earlier attack on slavery, published in 1773, had cut his income in half for six months. Paine, unmarried, with no connections in America, had nothing to lose. Rush urged him to tackle it.

The result was *Common Sense*, the pamphlet which did more to push the colonies toward independence than anything else except the British government's stupidity. Rush gave Paine the title, and found a printer for him. But he never became very friendly with Paine. Rush was a strict moralist and Paine's "intemperate and otherwise debauched . . . private life" put him off.

Rush worked closely with Paine as

YANKEE DOODLE DOCTOR

a political colleague, however. In mid-1776, he and the English pamphleteer joined radicals Matlack, Cannon and Marshall in a well-organized plot that overthrew the government of Pennsylvania. Using mass meetings and threats of violence from the militia, they intimidated so many members of the legally elected Pennsylvania Assembly, it ceased to function.

Rush and his friends then called a Constitutional Convention to replace it. Their real goal was the replacement of the Pennsylvania delegates to the Continental Congress, whom they considered a major roadblock to independence. These "establishment" gentlemen were so intimidated by the upheaval that a majority of them abstained or switched their votes, bringing the state onto the independence side before Rush's convention met.

Nevertheless, the radical-dominated meeting voted to send eight new delegates to Congress. Among the replacements was Dr. Benjamin Rush. He arrived too late to vote for independence, but he signed the Declaration on August 1. We are indebted to Rush for one of the few descriptions of this almost forgotten day. Rush always remembered "the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress to subscribe what was believed by many at the time to be our own death warrants."

Rush now became a Revolutionary

Two of the four physician-signers of the Declaration of Independence, Rush (1) and New Hampshire's Josiah Bartlett (2), are shown in Trumbull's famous 1797 commemoration of the Declaration. Since he lacked likenesses of all 56 signers, including Drs. Matthew Thornton (N.H.) and Lyman Hall (Ga.), only 48 are seen.

insider and a full-time politician. The result was massive disillusionment and the near destruction of his career as a doctor. As an outsider and an instinctive idealist, as well as a scientist who had given very little thought to politics, he saw the Revolution as the beginning of a golden age, and its leaders as a collection of geniuses who inspired one another all day long.



Cause for Rebellion

When Rush served with the Colonial Army during the crisis of 1776-77, he was appalled by the overcrowding, filth and neglect of wounded troops. Graft was rampant; corrupt surgeons sold medical supplies (including wine and liquor) for personal profit. Rush openly criticized George Washington, filed charges against William Shippen, head of army hospitals, and urged reforms of the Medical Department.



On his first day in Congress he was stunned to hear Samuel Chase of Maryland rise to deliver a ferocious attack on the cowardice of New England soldiers. John Adams roared back a reply which among other things told Chase he should spend the rest of his life in sackcloth and ashes "deploping the mischief he has done his country." Immense amounts of time were lost listening to windy speeches and dealing with people whose chief talent was obstruction. Within a few months, the Continental Congress taught Rush what John Adams meant when he remarked that "political integrity is the rarest virtue in the whole world."

For a while Rush tried to maintain his practice and his career as a politician. The effort almost killed him. He would arise at dawn, see patients until 9, then spend the next seven hours on the floors of Congress. After dinner, which he had around 3, like most Americans of the era, he saw more patients, then spent the rest of the day and most of the evening toiling on one or two of the five committees to which he had been appointed.

Rush's strongest interest was naturally the Medical Committee. When he entered Congress, the American army's medical system was a mess. The doctor in charge, John Morgan,

was a brilliant man, the first great medical educator in America. But Congress, loath to share its authority, refused to support Morgan when he asked for power to appoint and control all the doctors in the army. Instead, the politicians did not even give Morgan authority to control the regimental surgeons, who refused to send their sick to Morgan's general hospitals. To do so would have deprived them of patients—and graft. Wine and liquor were considered part of a therapeutic diet and a steady supply from the commissary guaranteed more than one dishonest surgeon a nice second income.

Morgan was blamed by many, including Rush at first, for the disease in Washington's army. Throughout 1776, a quarter to a third of his soldiers were too sick to fight. The dirty, inept regimental hospitals killed 10 times as many as they cured. Morgan was finally dismissed without even the thanks of Congress. His successor—a behind-the-scenes backstabber—was Dr. William Shippen, Jr.—like Morgan, a generation older than Rush and a handsome self-assured Philadelphia aristocrat.

At first Rush treated Shippen with something close to awe. "Every person who comes from camp," he told

him, "speaks in the most respectful terms of your conduct towards the sick and wounded..." But Rush changed his mind about Shippen after serving with the American army in the crisis of late 1776. He worked in hospitals while Washington's ragged remnant escaped disaster with victories at Trenton and Princeton, and was appalled by the way the American sick and wounded were neglected while lack of warm clothing, tents and blankets among the well practically guaranteed more illness. He bombarded his friends in Congress with suggestions for reform and severely censured "our commanders" for their lack of interest in quartermaster, commissary and medical departments. He also urged Congress to give George Washington dictatorial powers for a few months.

Back in Congress, which had fled to Baltimore, Rush was dismayed to discover that that body was as lethargic and divided as ever. Having revolted under the slogan "No taxation without representation" they were afraid to impose any taxes on their newly independent constituents. This meant Continental money began to depreciate dangerously. Rush recommended taxation and got into an interesting medical exchange with a Congressman from Virginia who told

him that he had "mistook the disorder of the continent." America was suffering a spasm, the Virginian claimed, which only required "palliative medicines." Rush retorted, "It is not a spasm, but a dropsy. I beg leave to prescribe two remedies for it. First, raising the interest of the money we borrow to six percent; this like a cold bath will give an immediate spring to our affairs. And second, taxation; this like tapping will diminish the quantity of our money, and give a proper value of what remains."

Congress ignored Rush's prescription. Only a few weeks later, on February 27, 1777, he received stunning news—his friends in the Pennsylvania Assembly had dismissed him as a delegate. The reason was an old one: Rush's inability to restrain either the style or the content of his criticism of the constitution which these gentlemen had put together for Pennsylvania. (Yet, when John Adams read that same document and said to Rush, "Good God! The people of Pennsylvania in two years will be glad to petition the Crown of Britain for reconciliation in order to be delivered from the tyranny of their constitution," nobody censured him.)

The government concocted by the radicals was a one-party Assembly with practically no executive. In-

stead of a governor, there was a council of 13 who took turns playing chief executive. Rush had attacked this government in the press as weak and ineffective—which it turned out to be—but he never seemed to realize that other men took his criticisms personally. He felt his motives were pure and this was all that mattered.

More than anything else, this explains how Rush emerged as a severe critic of George Washington. In Congress he had heard his friend John Adams warn against hero worship of Washington. Rush's disillusion with the Commander in Chief became more acute when he accepted the appointment of surgeon-general to the armies of the Middle Department in April of 1777. He watched Washington get beaten at Brandywine and Germantown and lose America's capital and Rush's home city, Philadelphia.

Rush was again appalled by the filth and neglect in army hospitals and now thought he had proof that the director, William Shippen, was not only responsible for the maladministration but was profiteering by selling hospital supplies (notably wine) and putting the money in his own pocket. Rush made formal charges against Shippen. Washington referred the case to Congress, which

had retreated to York, Pennsylvania. Rush went there to testify against Shippen. He also talked freely about his disillusionment with Washington and the whole American military establishment.

He found more than a few Congressmen, mostly New Englanders grouped around Sam Adams, who agreed with him. While Washington was losing Philadelphia, General Horatio Gates had forced British General John Burgoyne and his entire army to capitulate at Saratoga. A number of people in Congress and in the army, notably an Irish-born general from the French army, Thomas Conway, thought the solution of America's problems lay in the replacement of Washington with Gates. Washington and the men around him, naturally, thought this was a rotten idea and detested anyone who advanced it. Rush leaped into the "cabal," as it was called at the time, by trying to undermine Washington with the most powerful politician in his home state.

In 1776, Rush had inoculated Patrick Henry for smallpox and the two men had become fairly good friends. Now Rush dashed off a letter to Henry in which he summed up all the current criticisms against Washington. Gates, he wrote, "has shown



Founding Father

Rush, more than any other man, made Philadelphia the center of American medicine in the first half of the 19th century. He was on the staff of Pennsylvania Hospital (left) and on the medical faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, was known as the Father of American Psychiatry—and established the first free dispensary in the colonies.

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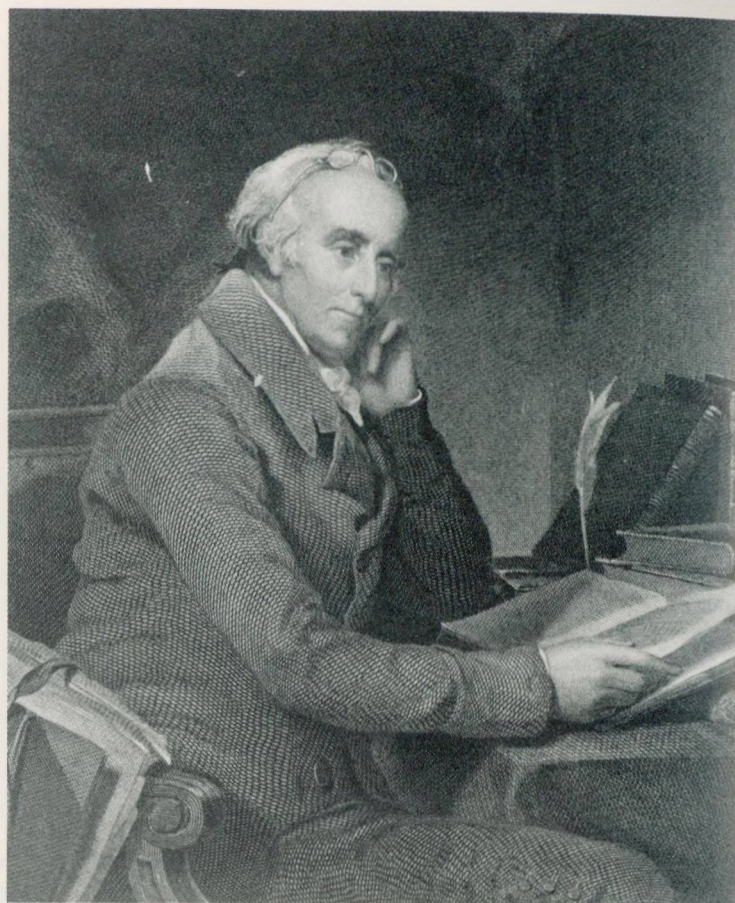
us what Americans are capable of doing with a GENERAL at their head." Rush did not sign the letter. He hoped this would make it easy for Henry to circulate the letter among Virginians and even to publish it in the local papers. Instead, Henry's blood boiled at this attack on his fellow Virginian and he sent the letter to Washington, who had no difficulty recognizing Rush's handwriting.

To Rush's surprise (but to no one else's) Washington saw it as personal disloyalty and Rush was *persona non grata* at army headquarters for a long time. Increasing his distress was the discovery that many Congressmen who were free with their criticisms of Washington over dinner were loath to vote against him in Congress. They recognized the indubitable fact that the Revolution and Washington had become identified in the popular mind and anyone who tried to separate them was committing political suicide.

Rush's influence in Congress plummeted toward zero under the frosty glare of Washington's disapproval. A committee heard his charges against Dr. Shippen. It was headed by John Witherspoon, president of Princeton (Rush's alma mater), whom Rush had personally persuaded to emigrate from Scotland to take the job, two New Englanders whom Rush considered friends, and a Pennsylvanian who had been a fellow radical in the heady days of 1776. Rush thought he had an unbeatable case and expected to knock Shippen flat in a day or two. He had been assured by "some very worthy members of Congress" that he could depend on their complete support if he pressed the case. Instead, after listening to the testimony, Witherspoon came to Rush and told him to resign.

Astounded, then infuriated, Rush at first refused. Witherspoon told him he had no choice; Congress had no intention of supporting the numerous reforms in the Medical Department that Rush had urged in the midst of his attack on Shippen. How could he continue to work in a department whose system he had denounced?

Rush crumpled under this logic and wrote out his resignation. It was accepted without a word of commendation for his services from a single



Benjamin Rush in his later years. On facing page is Shippen Mansion in

Congressman. A few days later Congress did the precise opposite of what Witherspoon had told Rush it planned to do, and voted to approve a major reform of the Medical Department, incorporating many of Rush's suggestions.

Rush stumbled back to his family, who were living with in-laws in Princeton, a broken man. He thought about abandoning medicine for the law. But when the British evacuated Philadelphia in the spring of 1778, he returned to the city and resumed his practice. He remained thoroughly disillusioned with Washington. If anything, he became even more hostile after his friend Charles Lee, serving as Washington's second in command, was court-martialed and dismissed for insubordination and incompetence at the Battle of Monmouth. Rush continued to deplore the idolatry of Washington and was equally antagonistic toward Congress, whom he now inveighed against as men of "ambition, craft, avarice and dissolute manners."

By 1779, Rush was talking about 1775-6 as a golden age when liberty

and the nation's welfare were the only things that mattered to the patriots who filled the seats of Congress and the ranks of the army. He was wrong, of course. The men of 1779 were as devoted as their predecessors to liberty and the nation's welfare. But by now the war looked like it might last 20 years, and they had to reconcile this with their own personal needs and political realities. Rush, a doctor first and a politician second, never understood or accepted this fact.

But Rush did not let his political disappointments discourage him completely. He became reconciled to the reality of the Revolution, thanks in part to George Washington's ability to forgive and forget. Washington particularly appreciated a pamphlet Rush wrote on military hygiene and, by March of 1780, he was receiving Rush cordially at headquarters again. This in spite of the fact that Rush continued to pursue his vendetta against Dr. Shippen, until Washington reluctantly ordered Shippen tried by an army court-martial board. Shippen was acquitted, with only a mild censure for selling government wine.

Although Rush, when he heard his



Philadelphia, where Dr. Rush died 162 years ago this month. Ironically, Shippen was Rush's long-time political enemy.

long-time foe was acquitted, cried, "Virtue is a shadow and liberty only a name in the United States," he was a more resilient man than his colleague, Dr. John Morgan, who had pursued Shippen with equal vindictiveness and became so depressed at the verdict that he abandoned medicine and died a recluse. Rush restored his enthusiasm by hurling himself into projects more closely connected to his profession. He established the first free dispensary in the country, became active in (and finally president of) the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, called for a reform of our prison system, especially the abolition of public and capital punishment, and denounced the excessive use of tobacco and alcohol. He was the first American doctor to connect cancer with tobacco. He was also one of the more illustrious members of the prestigious American Philosophical Society—from which one of his younger disciples, Dr. Nathaniel Chapman, emerged as a founder and first President of the AMA in 1847.

Rush left politics strictly alone for the rest of his life, except for a brief

period in 1787 when he took to the newspapers to urge Pennsylvania to ratify the new Federal Constitution. He was elected to the Pennsylvania ratifying convention and was one of the leaders of the successful movement for adoption.

In 1797, his friend John Adams, now President, appointed him Treasurer of the U.S. Mint. But the job had little political significance and it was a largely personal gesture by the President. By this time Rush was a member of the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital and the dominant figure on the medical faculty of the University of Pennsylvania. More than any other man, he made Philadelphia the center of American medical training during the first half of the 19th century.

Although Rush Medical College in Chicago is named after him, most of Dr. Rush's medical theories—notably a disastrous attempt to treat a yellow fever epidemic with bloodletting—have gone into history's ashcan. His fame as a doctor rests chiefly upon his pioneering work with the mentally ill. His book, *Medical Inquiries and*

Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind, published in 1812, shows a remarkable appreciation of the causes of mental illness and even anticipates some aspects of psychoanalysis. And his son James, also an M.D., was one of America's first psychologists. (His other son, Richard, a lawyer, became an internationally-known diplomat, a Secretary of the Treasury and an unsuccessful Vice-Presidential candidate.)

To the end of his life on April 19, 1813, at the age of 67, Rush never completely abandoned the idealistic vision which had led him into the Revolution. In a letter to an English friend in 1786, he made a statement which is still pertinent—and widely quoted—today:

"The American War is over, but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of a great drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government, and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens for those forms of government if they are established and brought to perfection."

