

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

JOHN PETER METTAUER

ACCOMPANYING Lafayette's American expedition was a young French surgeon: Francis Joseph Mettauer. After the battle of Yorktown, the young surgeon, at the solicitation of General Lawson, the Randolphs, and the Henrys, was persuaded to remain in the new country and settled in Prince Edward County, Virginia, where, soon afterward, he married Elizabeth Gaulding. In 1787, a son, John Peter Mettauer, was born to the couple. Apparently, the youth early decided to follow his father's profession; in 1806, at the age of nineteen, he received the A.B. degree from the neighboring college of Hampden-Sidney; in 1809, he graduated from the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania. At Pennsylvania, young Mettauer was particularly fortunate in coming under the influence of such men as Shippen, Wistar, Physick, and Rush: that he profited by his opportunities and his early manifested ability is evidenced by the expressed opinion of his preceptors.

On receiving his medical degree, Mettauer returned to his native state, settling in Prince Edward County near Farmville, Virginia, with the resolution: "Though doomed to labor in the country as a practitioner . . . to continue my studious habits." His skill seems to have won immediate recognition; he found himself engaged in a busy practice without the necessity of passing through the probationary period which is the lot of the modern medical graduate. With the passage of years, his work became more restricted to surgery, though he always resented the insinuation that he was a "specialist." His surgical skill was so remarkable and the success that followed his efforts was so striking that patients came to him from far and wide; from the most remote regions of America and even from abroad. At the height of his career, it was no unusual thing for him to have as many as sixty patients under his care at one time, and every suitable house in his neighborhood is said to have sheltered at least one patient convalescing from an operation or one awaiting his turn at the master's hands. It is a matter of record that Mettauer operated 800 times for cataract; the number of such operations probably was in excess of this; he operated for stricture over 200 times; and Dudley's record of "cutting for stone" 225 times is eclipsed by Mettauer's 400 similar operations.

Mettauer's operations were characterized not only by skill but by daring and originality. He was undoubtedly the first western surgeon to operate for cleft

palate, using, for this purpose, an instrument devised by himself. He was certainly among the first to undertake such operations as amputation of the shoulder, ligation of the carotid, and resection of the superior maxilla. Though such ability to occupy the forefront of his profession through his early employment of the suggestions of his contemporaries stamps Mettauer as an unusual man, probably his greatest claim to fame rests upon his being the first surgeon successfully to operate for vesicovaginal fistula. Though Sims is generally credited with the honor of introducing the operation for the alleviation of this distressing condition Mettauer described the procedure in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, vol. xxii, page 154, twelve years before Sims first conceived the idea; and five years before Sims first discussed the operation for vesicovaginal fistula, Mettauer wrote in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, new series, vol. xiv, p. 117: "I am decidedly of the opinion that every case of vesicovaginal fistula can be cured, and my success justifies this statement."

In spite of the enormous volume of his operative work, Mettauer found time for other things. He was a prolific writer; literally hundreds of articles, not only on surgical topics but on such subjects as yellow fever, puerperal fever, and Asiatic cholera, are to be found under his name in the leading medical journals of his day. There is still in existence the manuscript of his treatise on surgery; never published, for some unknown reason. This treatise comprises some three thousand pages of closely written legal cap; and can well stand as a model, both for accuracy of analysis and excellence of phrasing. In 1837, he opened a medical "institute"; being impelled to this step by the paucity of medical schools in the United States at that time. His institute continued in successful operation, at first independently, later, as a part of Randolph-Macon College, until 1848.

Mettauer lived to the advanced age of eighty-eight years. Apparently, the infirmities of age had little affected him; in the last week of his life, his eye was sufficiently keen, his hand retained the requisite steadiness, and his judgment was reliable enough for the successful performance of an operation for cataract; a second for stone; and a third for amputation of the breast. Just after these, as a result of exposure incident to attending a patient suffering from opium poisoning, he contracted pneumonia, and this "friend of the aged" caused death in two days.

The clinic of this remarkable man of the 19th Century seems to have as its only parallel in this, the 20th Century (certainly in the western world), the Mayo Clinic of Rochester, Minnesota. The life and achievements of this pre-Listerian surgeon stamp him as among the leaders of his profession. Few surgeons surpassed him in daring and originality; he was among the foremost educators of his day; and his contributions to medical literature alone should have saved his name from oblivion. In spite of this, Mettauer is unmentioned by many medical biographers; while those who refer to his work do so in a very casual manner. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

A. MURAT WILLIS.