

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

WRIGHT POST

WRIGHT POST was born February 18, 1766, at North Hempstead on Long Island and died at Throggs Neck, the Bronx, June 14, 1828. His father was Jotham Post and his mother was a daughter of Benjamin Wright. For nearly thirty years he was the leading practitioner in New York City.

At the early age of fifteen he began the study of medicine under Richard Bayley, a skillful and celebrated surgeon of New York. After four years of diligent and persevering work at home he went to London to become pupil to John Sheldon, renowned teacher of anatomy and surgery. In two and one half years, living most of this time with his preceptor, he undoubtedly absorbed much of the spirit and zeal of this great enthusiast.

On his return he began active practice and was soon delivering lectures in anatomy at the New York Hospital. These were interrupted, however, by the occurrence of what was called by the chroniclers of the day, the "Doctors' Mob." The reason for this demonstration was about as follows: During the preceding winter some local cemeteries had been invaded, graves opened, and bodies removed therefrom. The people were greatly outraged. They suspected doctors of using this means of acquiring dissecting material. On Sunday, April 13, 1788, children playing in the hospital yard saw a limb hanging out of a window. They told others and a crowd collected, entered the hospital, removed a couple of bodies which were later interred, destroyed some valuable specimens, and even sought the young doctors, several of whom the mayor and sheriff rescued by lodging in jail. The next morning a number of people gathered, searched the homes of the suspected physicians, but as they were not satisfied, in the afternoon they threatened the jail. The militia had to be called out. As these responded in small groups one, being surrounded and stoned, fired in self-defense, killing two or three and wounding others. The mob disbanded shortly after.

In 1790 Post married Dr. Bayley's daughter and the following year became associated in practice with his father-in-law. He was appointed professor of surgery in Columbia College in 1792, while Dr. Bayley was given the chair of anatomy. He then went to London again for further study and to procure a medical cabinet. Returning in 1793 he brought back the material for the first museum, according to John Augustine Smith, in the United States.

This statement as to the priority of founding a medical museum in this country, however, may be qualified by the understanding of what constitutes a museum, for in Francis R. Packard's *History of Medicine in the United States*, the following notations are made: "Dr. Fothergill (England) sent on July 27, 1762, to Dr. Shippen at the Pennsylvania Hospital seven cases of anatomic drawings and casts toward the founding of a museum. Dr. Chovet brought from England a collection of wax models and dried and injected anatomical preparations, and in the winter of 1774-1775 he delivered a series of lectures illustrated by them. It would seem, therefore, that both Drs. Shippen and Chovet antedated Post with specimens for medical teaching."

During Post's visit in London he studied with Cruickshank, who, at this time, was working on the lymphatic system.

Post now exchanged chairs with Dr. Bayley, teaching anatomy while the latter taught surgery. He made his own dissections and preserved the specimens for his cabinet. Until 1813 when the medical department of Columbia College united with the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Post had remained professor of anatomy but under the new régime shared that chair with John Augustine Smith.

The Regents of the University of the State of New York in April, 1814, conferred upon him the honorary degree of doctor of medicine. Because of failing health he went abroad in 1815, for the third time, traveling especially in France where he visited the hospitals of Paris and Montpellier. His sojourn greatly benefited him.

He was chosen a trustee of Columbia College in 1816, which honor he held until his death. He was appointed president of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1821, succeeding Samuel Bard, and holding this office until 1826, when he resigned. He was a charter member of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York, a member of the New York Historical Society, a member and active officer of the Medical Society of the County of New York and for 35 years one of the surgeons and a consulting surgeon to the New York Hospital.

His accomplishments in the medical world gained him practice and fame both at home and abroad. In 1796 he tied successfully the femoral artery for false aneurism of the popliteal caused by a bayonet wound. In 1813 he tied the external iliac for inguinal aneurism, being second only to Dr. Dorsey of Philadelphia in this feat in the United States. Post's was considered the more difficult operation because the peritoneum had to be opened. His master stroke in surgery, however, was tying the subclavian, in 1817, for brachial aneurism. In this operation he used for the first time the American needle employed in the ligature of deep vessels belonging to Valentine Mott, who assisted him. The success of this operation after the failure of such men as Ramsden, Aber-

nethy, and Cooper was thought to be a complete answer to the taunting question: "What have your American physicians and surgeons ever accomplished?"

A relative has said of Post as a boy that he was "remarkably quiet, amiable and accommodating but resolute and firm in his purposes and active both mentally and bodily. He was never known to engage in mischievous sports or dangerous intrigues and his mother was heard to say his conduct never afforded her uneasiness." As a man he was tall, handsome, dressed stylishly and wore his hair powdered and in a queue. He had not the time and maybe not the inclination for great attainments in the arts, literature, or science. He read little, was averse to writing, and was not brilliant in speaking. His lectures, however, were delivered calmly and with crisp clearness, such as is often lacking in those who are perhaps confused by the complexities of greater learning or more imagination.

Many thought him inwardly cold, but on occasions he showed deep concern and the greatest tenderness. John Augustine Smith in speaking of his position at the head of his profession says: "To acquire and maintain that station two things are necessary—the confidence of the public and the good opinion of the faculty. To obtain the former mere ability will in a great degree suffice but to secure the latter something more is required, virtue must be superadded, a flaw in the heart being here as fatal as a defect in the head. But so unlimited was the confidence of every practitioner in the city in the honesty of Post that no patient could be more anxious to receive the benefit of his advice than the attending physician was ready to meet him in consultation. The public appreciated his talents and the profession relied on his virtues. And what renders Dr. Post's character in this respect the more praiseworthy is that while perfectly correct himself he well knew how to rebuke and to punish any medical man who should infringe with regard to him those rules of good conduct and gentility which should regulate medical intercourse." He thinks we may deduce two useful lessons from Post's life: "First, that Fortune is not so capricious in her favors as many imagine; and second, to secure those favors, in other words, to attain the success of Dr. Post we must first acquire his skill and tact and what is perhaps more difficult, certainly more rare, we must practice these qualities with his steadiness and virtue."

ALFRED STILLMAN.