



The McDowell Memorial

Humanity Owes a Debt of Gratitude to the Father of Abdominal Surgery

AN INTENSE interprofessional spirit permeated the atmosphere in Danville, Kentucky, on the hot, sultry afternoon of August 14, 1959, as members of the medical and pharmaceutical professions assembled at the home of Dr. Ephraim McDowell to honor him. They had come from all over the United States to dedicate the restored apothecary shop where he had dispensed herbs and galenicals 150 years ago.¹

Like all physicians in frontier Kentucky, McDowell was forced to gather herbs in order to compound his own drugs. As a pioneer physician, he administered to any and all of the health needs of his patients, who were scattered over wide areas. In addition to the hurdles of a wild, undeveloped country with its primitive means of travel, he had to match his clinical experience and common sense against the superstition and ignorance of the time, while facing new and challenging surgical situations.

A Physician's Growth

Ephraim McDowell was born of Scotch parents November 11, 1771 in Rockbridge County, Virginia, under the

British flag, the ninth of eleven children. His family moved to Harrodsburg, Kentucky in 1783 and soon after to Danville, which had been founded only two years earlier.

McDowell first studied medicine at the age of 19 under the preceptorship of Alexander Humphreys, a prominent and able physician who had started practicing in Staunton, Virginia after graduating from the University of Edinburgh. In 1792, after spending three years with Humphreys, McDowell also traveled to Scotland to study at the University of Edinburgh, considered at that time to be the finest medical school in the world. Because he was especially interested in surgery, McDowell became a private student of the great surgeon and teacher, John Bell, and was lastingly impressed by his spirited lectures. But after two years, he impatiently returned to his native Kentucky before he had accumulated sufficient formal credits to earn the University's medical degree. Of his competence to practice, however, there was no question. In fact, in recognition of his ability, the University of Maryland in 1825 conferred upon him an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine.

Because a man on the frontier with his medical training was so exceptional, he rapidly became recognized as the finest surgeon west of Philadelphia. He also became widely admired for his great professional zeal and integrity. He performed all his surgery under the most varied and difficult conditions—without anesthesia, antiseptic techniques, or trained assistance. This rigorous training

¹During the dedication, presided over by E. M. Josey, President of the Kentucky State Pharmaceutical Association, John C. Burch, Professor of Gynecology, Vanderbilt University, spoke on "The Effect of the McDowell Operation on the Growth of Surgery," and Glenn Sonnedecker, Director, American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, Wisconsin University, spoke on "The Place of Drugs in the Practice of Medicine in 1809 and 1959." Crawford Meyer, President of the Kentucky Pharmaceutical Association, presented the key to the McDowell Apothecary Shop to Robert W. Robertson, President of the Kentucky Medical Association. A 4¢ commemorative postage stamp was issued on December 3, 1959.



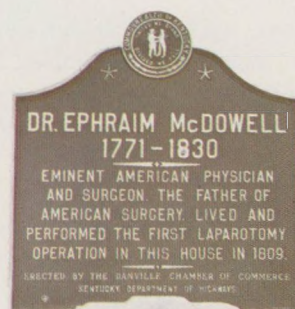
The apothecary shop in the McDowell Memorial, Danville, Kentucky.

prepared McDowell for his unique contribution when, on December 25, 1809, at the age of 38, despite community-wide hostility stirred up even from the pulpit, he performed the first successful removal of an ovarian cyst and thereby founded modern abdominal surgery.

Posthumous Recognition

McDowell modestly refrained from issuing any report of his achievement for nine years, during which period his friends constantly urged him to publish it. By the time his report finally appeared in the scientific journal, *Eclectic Repertory*, he had successfully performed two more ovariectomies. His paper so directly opposed the accepted teaching of the era, i.e., that exposure of the peritoneum and intestines would inevitably prove fatal, that it was met initially by sarcasm and disbelief. Only after many years during which other courageous, but usually little known, surgeons had repeated his operation successfully, did the mistrust turn to jealousy and finally to grudging recognition of his work.

The implications of the first ovariectomy were truly enormous. A modest and comparatively unknown physician of the American frontier had proved that successful abdominal surgery was possible. This operation launched the modern era of surgery.



The McDowell Memorial.





A leech jar (ca. 1830), bleeding basin, 1834 U.S. Dispensatory, and lancet.



Prescription compounding equipment like that used by Dr. McDowell (ca. 1700 to late 18th century).



Drug jars of the McDowell period (about 1840) now located in the Memorial.



THE FIRST OVARIOTOMY

Two weeks before Christmas in 1809, McDowell was called to attend the "pregnant" wife of a farmer named Thomas Crawford. This is the doctor's own dramatic account of the first successful removal, on Christmas Day, 1809, of an ovarian tumor:

"In December, 1809, I was called to see a Mrs. Crawford, who had for several months thought herself pregnant. She was affected with pains similar to labor pains, from which she could find no relief. So strong was the presumption of her being in the last stage of pregnancy, that two physicians, who were consulted on her case, requested my aid in delivering her. The abdomen was considerably enlarged and had the appearance of pregnancy, although the inclination of the tumor was to one side, admitting of an easy removal to the other. Upon examination, per vaginam, I found nothing in the uterus, which induced the conclusion that it must be an enlarged ovary. Having never seen so large a substance extracted nor heard of an attempt or success attending any operation such as this required, I gave to the unhappy woman information of her dangerous situation. She appeared willing to undergo an experiment, which I promised to perform if she would come to Danville (the town where

I live), a distance of sixty miles from her place of residence. This appeared almost impracticable by any, even the most favorable conveyance, though she performed the journey in a few days on horseback. With the assistance of my nephew and colleague, James McDowell, M.D., I commenced the operation, which was concluded as follows: Having placed her on a table of the ordinary height, on her back, and removed all her dressing which might in any way impede the operation, I made an incision about three inches from the musculus rectus abdominis, on the left side, continuing the same nine inches in length, parallel with the fibres of the above-named muscle, extending into the cavity of the abdomen, the parietes of which were a good deal contused, which we ascribed to the resting of the tumor on the horn of the saddle during her journey. The tumor then appeared full in view, but was so large that we could not take it way entire. We put a strong ligature around the fallopian tube near the uterus, and then cut open the tumor, which was the ovary and fimbrious part of the fallopian tube very much enlarged. We took out fifteen pounds of a dirty, gelatinous-looking substance, after which we cut through the fallopian tube and extracted the sack, which weighed seven pounds and one-half. As soon as the external opening was made, the intestines rushed out upon the table; and so completely was the abdomen filled by the tumor, that they could not be replaced during the operation, which was terminated in about twenty-five minutes. We then turned her upon her left side, so as to permit the blood to escape, after which we closed the external opening with the interrupted suture, leaving out, at the lower end of the incision, the ligature which surrounded the fallopian tube. Between every two stitches we put a strip of adhesive plaster, which, by keeping the parts in contact, hastened the healing of the incision. We then applied the usual dressings, put her to bed, and prescribed a strict observance of the antiphlogistic regimen. In five days I visited her, and much to my astonishment found her engaged in making up her bed. I gave her particular caution for the future, and in twenty-five days she returned home as she came, in good health, which she continues to enjoy."

McDowell died in 1830, apparently without realizing that he would achieve lasting fame. He remained practically forgotten until 1879, when the Kentucky State Medical Association voted to dedicate a handsome monument in Danville to his memory. On that monument is inscribed the tribute, "A grateful profession reveres his memory and treasures his example."

The McDowell Memorial

After many years of sporadic interest and effort, the Kentucky State Medical Association succeeded in purchasing the McDowell home in 1939. It was restored and dedicated as a public shrine the same year. The old building has a dual significance. Not only is it the site of the world's first successful ovariectomy, but it also contains what may be the earliest apothecary shop west of the Allegheny Mountains. The pharmacy was opened in 1795 by McDowell, when he began to practice in Danville.

The beautiful restoration of the McDowell Apothecary Shop was completed during 1959 through the combined efforts of the Kentucky State Medical and Pharmaceutical Associations. The work was also supported by interested members of the pharmaceutical industry. Two pharmacists acted as advisory experts: George B. Griffenhagen, medical curator of the Smithsonian Institution, and Sydney Blumberg, a noted private collector of early apothecary pieces from whom the glassware and other items were purchased by Pfizer for permanent display.

With its mortars and pestles, its rows of neatly labeled bright green drawers and richly decorated apothecary jars, and its shining array of colorful glassware, the shop is authentically fitted out in the manner of the early 1800's. It is perhaps the outstanding display of its kind in existence. At the dedication of the Apothecary Shop, Dr. John C. Burch, Professor of Gynecology at the Vanderbilt University Medical School and one of the two guest speakers, said:

"To me the apothecary shop represents the inseparable bond between Medicine, Surgery and the Pharmaceutical Profession. Dr. McDowell was physician, surgeon and apothecary....

"Gentlemen of the Pharmaceutical Profession, we are fully aware of the great role you have played in the alleviation of human suffering. We are grateful for the contributions you are making and for your unselfish dedication to research in the basic sciences as well as your brilliant contributions in pharmacology. You have provided humanity with new knowledge and opened new horizons for longer, healthier and more useful lives. We thank you, too, for making possible the restoration of this apothecary shop....

"McDowell, by his operation on Mrs. Crawford, inaugurated the new era in surgery. This was the beginning of abdominal surgery. Because of this, he deserves to be ranked in the forefront of the benefactors of mankind and

is therefore entitled to great and lasting fame...."

The other guest speaker during the ceremony, Dr. Glenn Sonnedecker, Director of the American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, noted:

"His claim to greatness lies not only in a single, brilliant operation, or in pioneering the broader field of abdominal surgery. It lies also in his independence of thought, in his ability to face challenging circumstances, and in his courage coupled with compassion."

The members of the health professions in America have gained courage from such remarkable men as McDowell who served under difficult conditions as combination physician, surgeon, and pharmacist.

END



Part of the collection of drug jars in the McDowell Memorial—upper shelf, English Delft (middle 18th century); lower shelf, pink, finely glazed English Queensware (early 19th century), and blue Dutch Delft (middle 18th century).

American drug stock bottles (19th century) containing spices and chemicals.

