America's First Medical Graduate

John Archer, M.D.*

Physician, Soldier, Patriot, Statesman

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JOHN ARCHER's name comes down to us across 2 centuries as the first graduate of the first medical school in the New World. He is the ancestor of the medical profession in the United States, honored for receiving a truly unique degree in 1768 from what is now the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine.

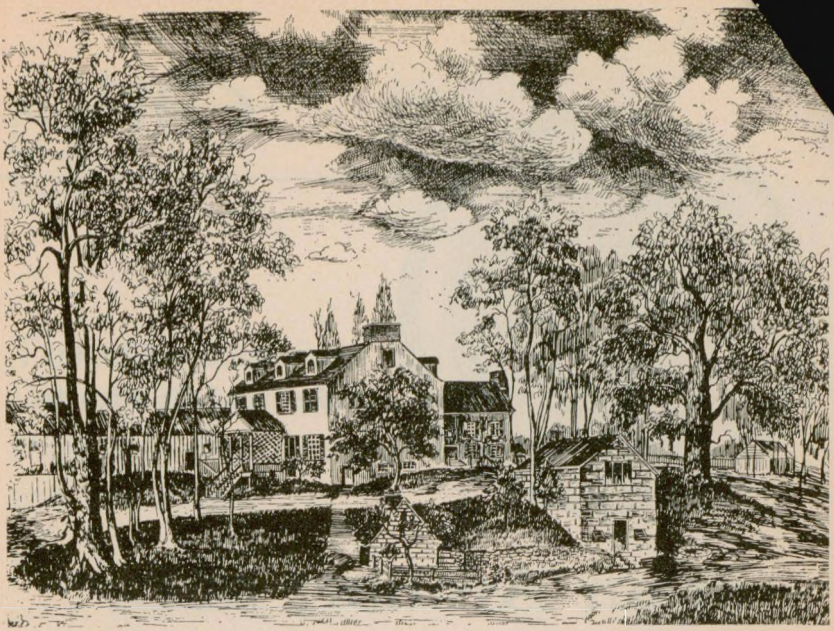
More than that, John Archer, the man and the physician, could stand for Every Doctor.

He was truly a citizen of his times. They were turbulent times. A revolution was fought and won—and John Archer had something to do with that. An infant government was formed and it prospered—and John Archer had something to do with that, too.

He was practicing physician, teacher of medical students, patriot, soldier-doctor, statesman, and—finally—retired and honored country gentleman, father of doctors, living the good life in his tranquil tree-shaded manor, known as "Medical Hall," in Harford County, Maryland.

The very fact that John Archer was the first graduate of the New World's first medical school came about through a controversy which unmistakably marked the times in which he lived.

It was in June, 7 years before the outbreak of the American Revo-



"Medical Hall," Bel Air, Maryland home of Dr. John Archer, 1768

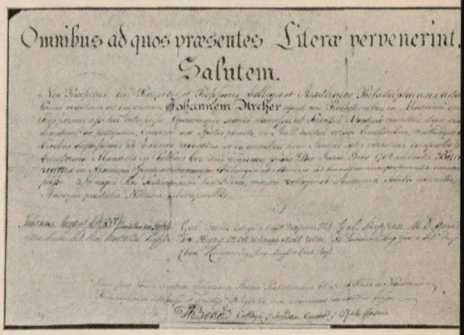
lution, and 10 young men had completed their studies, passed their examinations, and were qualified to receive the "Baccalaureate in Medicine" to be bestowed for the first time by the institution then known as the "College and Academy of Philadelphia." John Archer was one of the 10. And, since he possessed the further distinction of a name beginning with "A," he was the logical candidate to receive the first degree.

Controversy arose because young Archer—though first on the list alphabetically—was born a Colonist and not an Englishman. The medical faculty, all of whom had received their medical education in England and Scotland, proposed to bestow the first honor on the single Englishman of the graduating group, a young man by the name of Potts. It took strong feeling—and strong action—on the part of the students to reverse the faculty stand. The rebel Colonial candidates eventually won the day by threatening to take their credentials, en masse, over the river to Princeton.

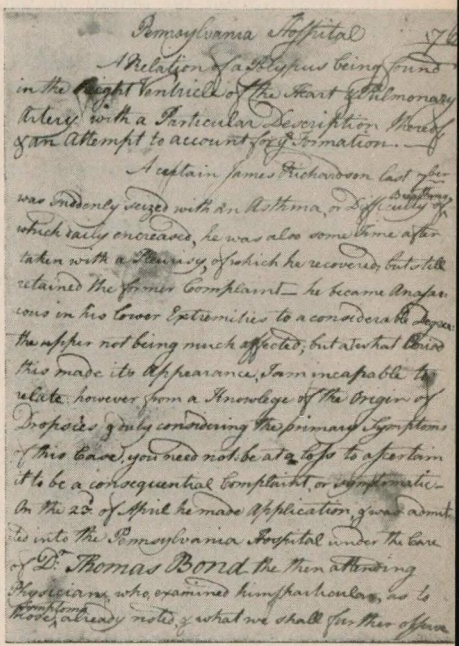
It was perhaps this early taste of conflict with the mother country that led to Dr. Archer's later vigorous participation in the War for Independence. Soon after his academic triumph over the Englishman, Potts, he returned to the family homestead near Bel Air, Maryland, where he developed an extensive practice which was to continue—with interruptions—for the next 40 years. He must have become politically active in his

community at a fairly early date. Records show that by 1774 he was on the revolutionary Committee of Safety for Harford County, and in January, 1775, voted for the resolution to collect contributions "for the Relief of the Poor of the Town of Boston or for the purchase of Arms and Ammunition for the defense of our Lives, Liberties and Properties." He served during the War as captain of a company he himself enlisted—almost entirely from the ranks of his former patients. Politics still called him in the early years of the new Republic. He was Congressman from his district for 2 sessions, from 1800 to 1804. He died in 1810 at the age of 69.

A study of John Archer, the physician, throws much light on medical men and on medicine as it was taught and practiced in those earlier times. America's first medical graduate was a lifelong friend of Dr. Benjamin Rush, a classmate at Nottingham Academy, Maryland, and later at Princeton. He met another distinguished medical man with whom he maintained friendship in after years in the person of Dr. John Morgan, under whom he studied when he came to Philadelphia. At that time Dr. Morgan, professor of medicine at the College of Philadelphia, had just begun his professional career here with a dazzling reputation from Europe, where he had been made a Fellow of the Royal Society and of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. Morgan's sig-


Omnibus ad quos præsentes Literæ pervenerint
Salutem.
Johannem Archer

John Archer's Medical Diploma


Pensylvania Hospital
A Relation of a Polypus being found
in the Right Ventricle of the Heart & Pulmonary
Artery with a Particular Description thereof
& an Attempt to account for its Formation.
Captain James Richardson last year
was suddenly seized with an Asthma, or Difficulty of
Breathing
which daily encreased, he was also some time after
taken with a Pleurisy, of which he recovered, but still
retained the former Complaint — he became Anasarcous
in his Lower Extremities to a considerable degree
the upper not being much affected, but after that Disease
was made its Appearance, I am incapable to
relate however from a Knowledge of the Origin of
Polypus's only considering the primary Symptoms
of this Case, you need not be at a loss to ascertain
it to be a consequential Complaint, or Symptomatic
On the 23d of April he made Application, & was admitted
into the Pensylvania Hospital under the Care
of Dr. Thomas Bond the then attending
Physician, who examined him particularly, as to
Symptoms
those already noted, & what we shall further observe

From Archer's student notebook

nature, incidentally, is 1 of 7 appearing on the history-making John Archer medical diploma.

Much of Dr. Morgan's theories and teachings are revealed in a book of medical notes made by the young student from Maryland. Several years ago these were presented in manuscript to the University of Pennsylvania Library at special ceremonies during a dinner meeting of Organized Classes, January 13, 1956. Another Dr. John Archer, of Greenville, Miss.—the great-great-grandson of the author of the manuscript—made the presentation on behalf of his class, Medical School 1916.

The notes have fascinated historians and medical writers who have perused them.

"Occasionally," noted a writer in *Spectrum* (August 1957), "the mere excitement of exploration unsteadies Archer's tidy 18th century script. The 20th century reader stands nervously expectant with Archer's fellow students for that rarest of opportunities: an autopsy on a patient they had seen, examined and failed to heal. This was a James Richardson of whom we do not know a great deal other than that he drank too much. ('*Women & Wine* the 2 outlets to Man's Ruin,' Archer notes grimly.) . . . The modern reader waits a description of cirrhosis of the liver, splenogmegaly and portal vein obstruction. Instead, the pupils were halted and impressed by a huge 'Polypus,' an obstruction which 'nearly filled' the right ventricle and continued 'in the Arteria pulmonaria into the Lungs'. . . . What comes down clearly in the manuscript is the eagerness to learn, to understand."

It was probably about the time he completed his medical studies that Archer was offered—and declined—a partnership with Dr. Morgan. Some time earlier he had married a Catherine Harris, of the family which gave Harrisburg, Pa., its name. Now the young couple moved to Maryland, which was to be their lifelong home.

Here, in the midst of his growing family, busy with a wide practice in his own and surrounding counties, distracted on occasion by war and politics, Dr. Archer pursued his calling and took steps to pass on his knowledge to a younger generation. Five of his 6 sons studied medicine under his guidance (2 later received medical degrees at the University of Pennsylvania). With 45 additional boys he started a sort of medical preparatory or embryo medical school. It was at this time that he changed the name of his farm to 'Medical Hall"—a colonial and medical shrine still known by this name today.

Dr. Archer wrote for the medical press of his time, and a number of his cases can be found in ancient numbers of the New York Medical Respository. He advocated the administration of Peruvian bark in intermittent fever with the idea of averting its tendency to return at weekly intervals. Whooping cough, he believed, could be modified by

vaccination to such an extent that it might be treated as a trivial complaint. He developed a splint for fractured femur which was very similar to what was afterwards known as "Physick's modification of Dessault's apparatus for fractured femur."

One powerful difference—among many—stands out in comparing medical education then and now.

"I am daily at Dr. Morgan's shop," Archer wrote his fiancée in 1765–66, "and on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays attend his Lectures (on theory and practice)—the Course is 4 Pistoles & a Dollar (for the library). Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays Dr. Shippen's (on anatomy)—the course 6 Pistoles."

Value of the Pistole, a Spanish coin, was about $4, making the cost of Archer's two principal courses something less than $50 for the year.

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MANKIND has discovered in the 20th century a truth known to nature since the dawn of time, the truth that in co-operation there is survival. Rivers change their courses; mountains rise and fall; and species of fish, fowl, and mammals develop, run their course, and vanish from the face of the earth. Tribes of mankind multiply, flourish, and then vanish, leaving scarcely a trace; but, in the Pacific Northwest, the majestic redwood trees tower toward heaven, the oldest living things on the earth. They were there when Jesus trod the earth. They were there at the beginning of time. These magnificent trees have survived because, unlike most other trees, they have no tap root. Their roots entwine with all the surrounding trees, not only entwine but actually blend with their neighbors' roots, so that a storm cannot uproot one without uprooting the entire forest. If a tree is struck by lightning it receives sustenance not only through its neighbor's roots but through a neighbor's limb that grows into its trunk and helps to sustain its life. These trees have developed a resistance through a long lifetime to disease and insects. Only mankind can vanquish them by cutting them down and hauling them away. Even then, they will grow again from the stump and roots.

There is a forceful lesson here. No nation can any longer live in isolation, nor, narrowing it down, can any man or woman exist without his or her fellows. We organize and maintain organizations for mutual benefit, survival, and development.

—Quoted from Editorial, "Survival" by Mary Mitchell Henry, M.D., AMWA Regional Director of Civil Defense, *Journal American Medical Women's Association*, 14: 987, 1959.