

A History Lesson – Part 2

It's not who's on first, but who was first!

By Janice E. Huff, MD, President



When someone tells me there is nothing new under the sun, or at least since the Greeks described civilization, I beg to differ. Instead of the four television stations I had growing up, there are now hundreds of channels for us to peruse, each one seemingly more entertaining. In college, I remember typing programs on cards in COBOL for computer class. Today, my pocket phone contains the entirety of current medical knowledge, and also can inform me about the speed of my last ski run.

Things evolve. Vaccines have eradicated targeted diseases by more than 95 percent. News is 24/7 — ok, that may not be the best example of Darwinian progress when one considers the incessant news shows and their “experts”. You can even travel in space, if you have enough money.

So it is with medicine and the Mecklenburg County Medical Society. A few months back, I wrote of the origins and growth of our medical society. This article will continue in that vein, but I will touch more on where we have come in terms of medical care in our community.

The first physician reported to have practiced in Mecklenburg County, after its formation in 1762, was Dr. John Newman Oglethorpe of Rowan County, who practiced in the northern part of our county in 1764. At that time, Mecklenburg included what are now Lincoln, Cabarrus and Gaston counties. The first record of treatment for pay was in 1766 by Dr. Crozen, who received a shilling from Mr. Dellinger for treating a slave. Curiously, the surviving documentation concerns only the financial aspect and not the patient's

name, disease or treatment. This couldn't survive a Medicare audit!

Dr. Joseph Kennedy, who practiced from 1766 to 1778, was the first medically educated physician. He made rounds on horseback, just as ministers and judges did. Dr. Ephraim Brevard was the first physician to live in Charlotte. One of the co-authors of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, he served in the Revolutionary War, was captured by the British at Charleston and died soon after he made his way home. Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander (son of Jack McKnitt Alexander, secretary of the convention that promulgated the May 20, 1775 Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence) was a Princeton graduate and one of the county's most-educated physicians. A smallpox epidemic raged in 1780 (brought by the armies), and Dr. James Alexander vaccinated 10 people, charging one pound per inoculation. Around 1815, Drs. McKenzie and Caldwell formed a partnership (probably the first group practice in Charlotte). To eliminate competition, they split Charlotte down Trade Street — one taking the north side and one taking the south.

Proving you can ride a horse to medical school but you can't ride him back, Dr. John Strong bought a horse, rode to Philadelphia, sold the horse and attended medical school. Four years later, he bought another horse and rode back to Charlotte.

Every doctor was a physician and surgeon, admitting you could not operate caused loss of standing among the laity. Operations then consisted of circumcisions, hemorrhoidectomies, strangulated hernia repair, D&Cs and tonsillectomies. Everyone carried

a tonsillotome and could remove tonsils while the patient was sitting in a rocking chair.

The usual anesthetic was chloroform, dripped on cotton in a cone. A few doctors in Asheville used ether, but were considered disloyal. Out of loyalty to the Confederacy, Southern surgeons only used chloroform, since chloroform was used by the British who helped the South during the Civil War.

Once the first hospital opened (stay tuned for more hospital history), the “specialists” arrived. First were the obstetricians, then general surgeons and then urologists and GI doctors. Once the surgeons and internists were here, nurses and radiologists followed. The first X-rays made in Mecklenburg County were at Davidson College, where some physics students, after hearing a lecture on Roentgen's invention, made their own X-ray machine in 1896. They kept their experiments secret for several years, fearing they would be punished. Their professor, who did experiments also, got the credit. They took X-rays of a cadaver finger (taken from the North Carolina Medical College) and six Strychnine pills (commonly used by students to stay awake during finals — so maybe Adderall isn't so bad!). The professor used his machine to detect a broken needle in a man's knee, allowing for surgical removal. This was the first documented use of X-rays in a medical procedure in the country. In 1897, his X-ray machine was used to find a thimble in a starving girl's throat, and again during surgery to save her life.

After being in the first graduating class from Leonard Medical College, Dr. J. T. Williams, in 1886, was the first African-American doctor to

open a practice in Charlotte. He also served as alderman for the city of Charlotte and was appointed consul to Sierra Leone by President McKinley. The Charlotte Medical Pharmaceutical and Dental Society was founded in 1900 by Dr. Allen Atkins Wyche and became affiliated with the Old North State (founded in 1887) and the National Medical Association (founded in 1895). In 1954, Dr. Emery L. Rann was the first African-American physician accepted into the Mecklenburg County Medical Society (provoking consideration for expulsion from the North Carolina State Society). African-Americans were admitted to the North Carolina State Society as "scientific members" in 1954. In 1965, the North Carolina Medical Society changed its Constitution to allow any qualified physician full membership.

Send any stories of interest from our more recent medical history to your county Society. We will publish your stories in the Mecklenburg Medicine magazine and keep them in our archives. The Mint Hill Country Doctor's Museum was the first restoration project of the Mint Hill Historical Society. You can visit the museum by appointment in the Carl J. McEwen Historic Village in Mint Hill. This museum has artifacts from the practices of Dr. John McCamie DeArmon (past MCMS president in 1929) and Dr. Ayer Whitley.

The next installment of the history of medicine in Mecklenburg County will focus on our hospitals and medical education. Think Johnny Red to Johnny on the Spot.



References include:

"The Black Physician in Charlotte, North Carolina (A Historical Review)" by Emery L. Rann, MD

"History of Medicine in Mecklenburg County" by Lawrence K. Boggs, MD, 1978

"A History of Medicine and the Medical Society in Mecklenburg County in the Early 20th Century" by Wilson K. Wallace, May 1966

"A History of Medicine in Charlotte-Mecklenburg" from the Bulletin, January 1993

"History of Mecklenburg County Medicine" by Charles M. Strong, MD, February 1929

We would like to thank the following practices for their recent business:

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