

HISTORICAL SKETCH

OF THE

GENEVA MEDICAL COLLEGE AND COLLEGE OF MEDICINE OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY*

(From the Record of 1887.)

The historian may be expected to direct our thoughts to local rather than to subjects of general interest. It is eminently proper that he recount the virtues, the honorable and noble deeds of the sons and sires of his Alma Mater, that the passing and coming generations may emulate their example. We thus propose not only to go back to our Alma Mater, but to the history of the ancestry of the half brother adopted into the family of our Alma Mater, to Fairfield, an obscure, out of the way village of two hundred or three hundred inhabitants, situated eight or ten miles north of Little Falls, in Herkimer county, just on the border line of civilization and the wilderness of the Adirondacks, once famous as a seat of medical learning, a strange place to think of locating a medical college. As early as 1803 a literary academy was established at Fairfield. This may have formed a nucleus for the future medical college. The first medical instruction given at Fairfield in 1809 would seem to have had some connection with this institution, as the medical school was first known as the Academy of Medicine of Fairfield. In 1812 the legislature of the State of New York granted a charter to this embryo medical school under the name and title of the "College of Physicians and Surgeons of the Western district of the State of New York," known as Fairfield Medical College. It was placed under the direction of a board of trustees who organized the school the following year with five professorships; which, if not in the beginning, were soon after filled by Joseph White, Westel Willoughby, James Hadley, T. Romeyn Beck—author of Beck's Medical Jurisprudence—and James McNaughton. This was the sixth medical school organized in the United States, and upon whose benches many of the older physicians of this and other States obtained their medical education. Our worthy Dean is an illustrious example of the kind of doctors they turned out of Fairfield, and my own beloved and honored preceptor, the late Dr. John F. Whitbeck, of Rochester, graduating in the same class (1835), from whose lips I learned much of Fairfield and its

* Extracted from an Alumni Address delivered before the College of Medicine of Syracuse University by Alfred Mercer, M. D., 14 June 1883.

able faculty. Then a medical education was largely obtained by office reading under the direction of a preceptor, in some country village—there were not many cities then. The more popular, the better the reputation of the village doctor, the more students sought instruction in his office and at the bedside of his patients. He often gave most valuable practical clinical instruction in the village home, and at the farm-house bedside, where every opportunity was afforded of seeing, handling and patiently and critically examining for one's self most of the common forms of disease, the treatment of which constitutes the major part of the physician's labors.

These bedside talks of intelligent preceptors I believe are still invaluable to the medical student, familiarizing him with the details of the daily routine of medical practice, teaching the art of prescribing in many particulars which can be taught nowhere else so well,—certainly not in the large and crowded amphitheatres of our metropolitan schools, where distance from the patient, often lends enchantment to the view,—although under the guidance of our most gifted and learned clinical teachers. Both have their place in a medical education, but are we not disposed to overrate the one to the neglect of the other? Special, private, hospital instruction, in classes limited to six or eight, may, however, well supply the preceptor's clinic.

I have said Fairfield was a strange place to locate a medical college. Then there were no great highways of travel through the State, no canals, no railroads, not even a well-established through line of stages, and one place for convenience was about as good as another, there being no inland cities. New York itself scarcely equaled the present population of the city of Rochester.

Fairfield medical college held sway as a popular and flourishing institution for about thirty years, and well served its purpose for its day and generation. But thirty years brought a new generation, with altogether different surroundings; lines of stage coaches had appeared and disappeared, canals and railroads had changed and were changing the whole thought and business of the country, and Fairfield had to yield to the change of surrounding circumstances. The session of 1839 was its last session. In this last session of Fairfield Prof. Frank H. Hamilton delivered his first course of surgical lectures in a medical school.

Fairfield did a great and good work in the twenty-six years it was a chartered medical college, from 1813 to 1839. During these years 3018 students matriculated, and 555 of them received the degree of M. D. The first graduating class of the college, 1816, consisted of two members, Sylvester Miller and Horatio Orvis. The 2463 students, who did not graduate, no doubt mostly obtained license to practice by passing an examination before the Censors of the various county medical societies of the State, which was quite the fashion and style of the times.

Geneva Medical College was chartered in 1834, and the first course of lectures given in 1835, the following gentlemen constituting the faculty of the college: Edward Cutbush, Willard Parker (still living in New York),

Thomas Spencer, John G. Morgan, Charles B. Coventry, of Utica, and Amos Colman.*

The Albany Medical College obtained its charter in 1838, four years later, both proving rivals to Fairfield. At the breaking up of the Fairfield school at the close of the session of 1839 and 1840, the faculty found new fields of labor at Albany and Geneva. Profs. Beck and McNaughton were elected to chairs in the Albany Medical College, while Profs. Hadley, De Lamater and Hamilton were added to the faculty of the Geneva Medical College, greatly to its advantage, increasing its popularity and classes, rivaling in numbers the classes of some of the older colleges of the sea-board cities. But this prosperity was not to be lasting. The University of Buffalo instituted a medical department in 1846, proving a powerful rival to Geneva. * * * * * Geneva Medical College as such had an existence of thirty-seven years, from 1835 to 1872. The period of its greatest prosperity being from 1840 to 1850. The largest class being that of 1844, with 196 matriculating students and 47 graduates. The smallest graduating class being four, in 1856. During these thirty-seven years the degree of M.D. was conferred on 701 students.

Great changes were taking place during these thirty-seven years in the moving centers of our population, in our social and industrial thoughts and habits, in the growth and development of our great inland as well as our sea-board cities by vast, widely extending, I may say continental, ocean to ocean rail-way connections.

Extremes of poverty and wealth meet in our large cities, without a known applied preventive remedy for either. For the economical administration of public or private charity to the sick poor, hospitals are a necessity. They have sprung up with the growth of our larger cities, and have been utilized by the many medical schools of the country for clinical instruction. Thus the tendency of medical thought has been less office reading and more college and hospital work—not enough of either yet—so that the location of a medical college in a village like Geneva has become altogether an obsolete idea; yet through the gates of Geneva many eminent men have entered the profession, men whose subsequent career would honor any college in the land. There is more in the man than in the college.

* Geneva Medical College was chartered in 1834 and gave its first course of instruction in 1835. Its first faculty were Edward Cutbush, Willard Parker, Thomas Spencer, John George Morgan, Charles B. Coventry and Anson Colman. Its faculty at a later period, including several years, were James Hadley, John Delamater, Thomas Spencer, James Webster, Charles B. Coventry, Frank H. Hamilton and Charles A. Lee. After the Buffalo Medical School was opened the Geneva faculty was re-organized, consisting at different times of the following members: John Towler, A. P. Bowen, Frederick Hyde, William Sweetzer, Joel Hardy, Caleb Green, George Burr, James H. Jerome, Alfred Butler, Nelson Nivison, Hiram N. Eastman, Ezra T. Allen, and Charles E. Ryder, some of whom continued in their places, laboring in the school until it closed in 1872. When the Geneva Medical school was merged into the medical department of Syracuse University, the following members of its faculty, Towler, Hyde, Nivison, Eastman and Ryder accepted professorships in the latter new institution.—*Medical Register of New York New Jersey and Connecticut, 1881, p. 205.*

The faculty of the Geneva Medical College, appreciating the situation, took steps in 1871 looking toward the removal of the college to Syracuse, in connection with the newly established Syracuse University, where two well appointed hospitals had been in successful operation for several years. Through the kindness of the hospital trustees the college obtained permission to use both these institutions for clinical instruction.

This movement of the faculty was successful. In 1872 the Geneva Medical College, with its valuable library and museum, was transferred from the village of Geneva to the city of Syracuse, and became the College of Medicine of the Syracuse University. The first steps in relation to this removal were taken late in the year 1871. A special meeting of the Onondaga County Medical Society was held in the court house of this city 18 Nov. 1871, to learn the views and feelings of the profession of the county in regard to such removal. At this meeting the late Bishop J. T. Peck, D.D., and Dr. W. W. Porter, of Geddes, took their seats as representatives of the Syracuse University. Profs. Frederick Hyde, of Cortland, and John Towler, of Geneva, were present as representatives of the Geneva Medical College. The subject was discussed by the above named gentlemen and by several members of the Onondaga County Medical Society.

The spirit and animus of this discussion was, if the college were removed it ought to elevate the standard of culture above the then prevailing standard common in nearly all the colleges of the country; that we had inferior colleges enough as to time of study and the requirements for graduation; that if a medical department were added to the Syracuse University it ought to inaugurate a plan for a higher medical education.

Dr. M. D. Benedict offered the following resolutions which were adopted by the society :

Resolved, That the Onondaga County Medical Society look with favor upon the establishment of a school of medicine in connection with the Syracuse University, to be located in this city, and that in case of the organization of such school we pledge the approbation and support of this society.

Resolved, That it is the opinion of this society that a transfer of the Medical School of Hobart College to this city would advance the interests of medical education in Central New York, and would greatly enhance the usefulness of this school.

Resolved, That a standing committee of five be elected by ballot to communicate the action of this meeting to the trustees of the Syracuse University, and to cooperate with the said trustees in the furtherance of the establishment of a Medical College in Syracuse

The following gentlemen having received the highest number of votes were elected on this committee : Drs. Alfred Mercer, G. T. Campbell, J. V. Kendall, J. P. Dunlap and R. W. Pease.

These preliminary steps were followed by the removal of the Geneva Medical College to this city, and the college was formally opened in temporary apartments procured in the Clinton block on the first Thursday of October, 1872, which rooms were occupied for college purposes for three

years, when the college was removed to its present location on Orange street.

The following gentlemen of the faculty of the Geneva College still filled chairs after its removal to Syracuse : Profs. Hyde, Towler, Nivison, Eastman and Rider. Under the re-organization the institution was known as the College of Physicians and Surgeons of the Syracuse University.

The following gentlemen constituted the faculty, giving the first course of lectures in Syracuse :

John Towler, M.D., Professor of General, Special and Surgical Anatomy ; Frederick Hyde, M.D., Professor of Principles and Practice of Surgery ; Hiram N. Eastman, M.D., Professor of Principles and Practice of Medicine ; Nelson Nivison, M.D., Professor of Physiology, Pathology and Hygiene ; Edward B. Stevens, M.D., Professor of Materia Medica, Therapeutics and Botany ; Charles E. Rider, M.D., Professor of Ophthalmology and Diseases of the Ear ; Harvey B. Wilbur, M.D., Professor of the Diseases of the Mind and Nervous System ; Rev. John J. Brown, A.M., Professor of Chemistry ; Wilfred W. Porter, M.D., Professor of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children ; John Van Duyn, M.D., Professor of Histology, Microscopy, and Assistant to the chair of Anatomy ; Joseph P. Dunlap, M.D., Professor of Clinical Medicine ; Henry Darwin Didama, M.D., Professor of Clinical Medicine ; Roger W. Pease, M.D., Professor of Clinical Surgery ; Alfred Mercer, M.D., Professor of Clinical Surgery ; J. Otis Burt, M.D., Professor of Materia Medica ; Wm. T. Plant, Professor of Medical Jurisprudence ; John W. Lawton, M.D., Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology and Diseases of the Ear ; Miles G. Hyde, M.D., Demonstrator of Anatomy.