JOHN WAKEFIELD FRANCIS, 1789-1861
THE ACADEMY'S SECOND PRESIDENT

"WHO does not know the venerable Doctor?, the Mentor of the profession, the kindly assistant of the young aspirant. . . . The Doctor is the centre of New York, and his presence is necessary to every public meeting. The antiquarians, the printers, the politicians, the literati, the artists, the 'Knickerbocker', gentlewomen, the men in rule, his own profession, all look to him as an essential to their counsels, their circles, their well-being." These seemingly over-enthusiastic, but really little exaggerated sentiments were written in 1850 by the New York correspondent of a New Orleans journal. The venerable doctor was John

Wakefield Francis, genial, witty, compassionate, whose high place in the medical profession did not deter his ready participation in other activities and friendly fellowship with leading figures of his day.

In 1789 he was born in New York, the city he came to love so well. The death of his father, a German immigrant, forced him to become briefly a printer's apprentice to help in the support of his family. He was fortunately able to return to his studies, receiving his A.B. degree from Columbia in 1809 and his M.D. in 1811. A student of David Hosack, he soon became his partner. He served as professor of medicine and materia medica when the College of Physicians and Surgeons merged with the Medical Department of Columbia in 1814, but interrupted his career for a prolonged visit to Europe in 1816-17. Here he studied under or met such distinguished physicians as Sir Astley Cooper, Abernethy, Cuvier, Gall, and Bell. Again in New York, he resumed his teaching, now adding the subject of forensic medicine and obstetrics. In 1826 he shared the difficulties of the ill-fated Rutgers Medical College, and by 1830 had retired from teaching to devote himself to the extensive practice and busy professional life which led Marshall Hall to call him the "most representative physician of his generation."

On November 10, 1847, at the Broadway Tabernacle, Dr. Francis delivered the Academy's first Anniversary Discourse. The oration fills 112 printed pages and gives an interesting picture of the history of medicine in New York. It lasted two hours, but was enlivened by appropriate selections performed by Dodsworth's cornet band. In his recapitulation Dr. Francis remarked that in 1691 the population of the city "was 4202, (a little over the number of this audience)." Four thousand is a large figure for an Academy audience, but even so, according to an account of the meeting, "hundreds must have gone away disappointed, being unable to obtain places." A few months later, Dr. Francis spoke again, when on February 2, 1848, he gave his inaugural address as second president of the Academy. This briefer message reminds his listeners that the "Academy seems to be already extensively known: its brief history is widely circulated in many periodicals; favorable views of its objects have been promulgated; the people awaked to its action; our City Council have, on several occasions, appealed to its decisions." These sentiments did not deter his refusal in 1855 when for a second time he was elected president. He declined because of the recent death of his son, but was prevailed upon to accept,

and he did preside at several meetings. In 1857 he took part in the puerperal fever controversy which was heatedly carried on at more than one meeting. He believed that the disease was contagious, citing cases where it was apparently transmitted by the hands and clothing of physicians. This must have been of particular interest to him, as he had a large obstetric practice.

Dr. Francis died on February 8, 1861. At a special meeting held on the following day it was resolved that the Fellows of the Academy should "attend his remains to their last resting-place, wearing the usual badge of mourning." His career had been long and successful, but histories of medicine will not record his achievements. He is remembered today for his excellent history of New York, *Old New York*, 1858. He served as one of the editors of the *American Medical and Philosophical Register*, 1810-1814, and as editor of Thomas Denman, *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, New York, 1821. He wrote a few papers and addresses. Garrison mentions him only briefly in his history; Castiglioni, Major, Mettler, not at all. But in the first volume of the new series of the Academy *Bulletin*, 1925, pp. 35-40, Garrison, at the suggestion of Osler, wrote a sketch of this man whose "position in the more general history of medicine could be stated in three lines." As a personality, however, he "was very remarkable, and filled the public eye for half a century." His familiar figure was known well to the literary and artistic luminaries of the city. Equally well known was he to the poor in the slums. In looks he bore a marked resemblance to Benjamin Franklin. In the Malloch Rare Book Room of the Academy Library stands a small figure of a pleasant looking man with hat in hand. The casual observer would surely identify it as Franklin, but it is James Trudeau's statuette of Francis, the leading physician of New York in his day whose funeral was attended by "rich and poor, savant and mechanic, physician and author, merchant and printer, the actor and the preacher, the statesman and the apprentice."

GERTRUDE L. ANNAN
Librarian
The New York Academy of Medicine