JOHN STEARNS, 1770-1848
THE ACADEMY'S FIRST PRESIDENT

JOHN STEARNS personifies the link between colonial and modern medicine. Born before the Revolution, of a physician father, he received a rather better than normal medical education for the period: Yale College, followed by apprenticeship to a country doctor, then lectures at the Philadelphia medical school under Shippen, Wistar, Rush and others. Settling in Saratoga County in 1793, he engaged in extensive and laborious rural practice, still in pioneering conditions for he had to tie his horse to a tree and cross the Mohawk on a log to reach his Dutch settler patients.

These severe early years laid the groundwork for his life's work Here he observed both the detail and the mass: he learned and promulgated the parturient properties of ergot, treated tuberculosis successfully, studied the prevalence of disease in Saratoga County and croup and influenza in Waterford, laying a firm foundation of experience on which to form later mature conclusions and to write thoughtful papers.

These years, too, showed him the usurpation of medical practice by charlatans and the gross controversies of consultants at a patient's bedside. To counteract these deplorable conditions, Stearns joined with two other physicians in attempting to establish a society for combating empiricism and quackery and encouraging regular practitioners. Once approved by the Legislature, these efforts resulted in the formation of 20 county societies in 1806 in less than three months and in that of the State Society in 1807, with Stearns as the latter's secretary for the first seven years, and president 1819-21. This show of public spirit was probably instrumental in sending him to the State Legislature for four years, 1810-13. As early as 1812, his services to general education and his distinguished attainments in medicine earned him an honorary M.D. from the New York State Board of Regents.

It may be considered fortunate for the Academy that following his Albany years he took up practice in New York City at the instigation of his former patients, DeWitt Clinton and Daniel D. Tompkins. Here

the same power of thoughtful observation (he studied and mapped the yellow fever epidemic of 1819-22), much of it among the poor, combined with a realization of the continuing unsatisfactory conditions of medical ethics, made him a moving spirit among the group of physicians who united to combat the situation and in 1847 formed The New York Academy of Medicine. This does not mean that the Academy would not have been formed without Stearns, but he typifies the hard-working regular physician of the time, exerting his influence to promote public health education and to counteract ignorance and empiricism. Fittingly enough, this faithful worker for the welfare of his fellows and the honor of his profession, then in his 76th year and dean of the medical community, was elected the Academy's first president. His qualities as a presiding officer were admirable: a thorough knowledge of procedure, ready tact, sound judgment, and ability for impartial action.

Deeply religious, Stearns was not only a dedicated physician but a devoted husband and father. His letters to his daughter exhibit much affectionate moralizing as well as educational ideas in advance of his time. "Let nothing interfere with the hours which you devote to reading.... Too many of your sex are always silent whenever any subject is started except what relates to fashion, character, or amusements." Stearns' care for his patients was assiduous throughout his long practice, and led, alas, directly to his death. One morning after paring an apple, he grazed the skin of his thumb when shutting his penknife. Attending a patient with erysipelas soon afterwards, he developed symptoms of the disease himself the next day and quickly succumbed.

Stearns' importance lies not so much in what he *did*, but in what he *was*. His achievements in his profession were neither bold nor brilliant. But through a long life he devoted himself to the care of the sick, to profiting from what he learned, and to advancing the interests and contributing to the science of his profession. He was one of those who, rooted in a previous era, grew with the times, nourished new ideas, and saw the happy advancement of the ideals for which he had spent his life.

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