THE FATHER OF AMERICAN SURGERY: PHILIP SYNG PHYSICK

John Zen Jackson[1*]

Abstract

Born in Philadelphia a few years before the American War of Independence, Philip Syng Physick received his medical education in England and Scotland. He was the favorite American student of John Hunter who was known as the Father of Modern Surgery. Physick would become known as the Father of American Surgery. Returning to Philadelphia in 1792, his medical practice was slow to develop until the 1793 outbreak of Yellow Fever. He volunteered to care for the sick and met Dr. Benjamin Rush, who was impressed by him and began to make referrals. Physick's practice then quickly grew, and he became increasingly well-known, both as a skilled surgeon and innovator of surgical technique and instruments. He was also a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. His patients included not only members of prominent families but also government officials such as Chief Justice John Marshall and President Andrew Jackson. Although his own medical training had heavily utilized dissection of cadavers, Physick was vehemently opposed to any post-mortem examination of his body and gave explicit instructions to prevent exhumation of his body.

Given the origin of the fields of medicine and surgery, with the traditional branching between physician and surgeon in their practices, there is something whimsical about someone named Physick receiving the appellation of Father of American Surgery. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the obsolete meanings of the term "Physick" is "Physicians collectively; the medical profession personified."

Philip Syng Physick lived between 1768 and 1837. His surgical skill brought him great renown along with techniques and inventions he developed. While he only published a few articles during his career, the details of his approaches to operations were written up by others, primarily his nephew, Dr. John Syng Dorsey. [2] Dr. William Gibson later published additional

[1*] Attorney at Law, Of Counsel to Healthcare Department, Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith & Davis, LLP, Woodbridge, New Jersey.

[2] John Syng Dorsey, *Elements of Surgery.* (Philadelphia: Edward Parker: Kimber & Conrad 1813).

details.[3] Gibson had attended lectures given by Dr. Physick and later succeeded him as Professor and Chair of Surgery at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. Following Dr. Physick's death in 1837, several contemporaries published extended commentaries on his achievements and innovations and his encounters with many notable persons.[4] A more recent detailed review of Physick's life was published in 2012.[5]

Early Family Life, Education, and Medical Training

Philip Syng Physick was born to a well-connected family in Philadelphia on 7 July 1768. He was the fourth child of Edmund Physick and Abigail Physick (née Syng). His father became a representative of the Penn family after coming from England in 1742. Young Philip took his name from his maternal grandfather, Philip Syng, a highly sought-after silversmith in Philadelphia and a lifelong friend of Benjamin Franklin. Philip Syng made a desktop inkstand in 1752, which was used to sign both the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the Constitution in 1787.

Abigail Physick became a member of the Society of Friends and in 1891 she was buried in the Quaker burial grounds at the Arch Street Meeting House. Young Physick received his

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[3] William Gibson, *The Institutes and Practice of Surgery.* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard 1827).

[4] William E. Horner, "A necrological notice of Dr. Philip Syng Physick," *American Philosophical Society.* Philadelphia: Haswell, Barrington & Haswell. 2-32 (1838). Jacob Randolph, *A Memoir on the Life and Character of Philip Syng Physick, M.D.* (Philadelphia: T.K & P.G. Collins 1839). See also William S. Middleton, "Philip Syng Physick: Father of American Surgery," *Ann Med Hist* 1(5)(1929):562-582; George McClellan. 1901. "An Analysis of the Character of Dr. Physick," *Transactions of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: College of Physicians of Philadelphia. lxvii-lxxii; The Dr. George McClellan who delivered the address to the College of Physicians was the grandson of Dr. George McClellan, the founder of Jefferson Medical College.

[5] George F. Sheldon, "To the Shade of John Hunter: Philip Syng Physick of Philadelphia, 'The Father of American Surgery' - Hunter's Favorite American Trainee," *J Am Coll of Surg* 215(5)(2012):731-766.

early education at Friends' Public School and regularly attended Quaker meetings for worship. However, like his English-born father, he remained an Episcopalian.

In his youth, Physick was skilled in the use of his hands. He developed an interest in becoming a silversmith and received practical training from his grandfather. But his father had a career in medicine in mind for him. After graduating in 1785 from the University of the State of Pennsylvania (now known as the University of Pennsylvania), Physick served an apprenticeship with Dr. Adam Kuhn at the University of Pennsylvania's medical school. Kuhn was one of the first professors of medicine at an American university and taught in the field of materia medica, now referred to as pharmacology. Physick read the works that Kuhn considered infallible, even memorizing one of the texts. He later had to unlearn and forget much of this teaching, as experience showed the information to be erroneous and impracticable. This early life circumstance is thought to have influenced his reluctance to publish writings of his own.[6]

In 1788, Physick traveled with his father to England to start his formal education in medicine. Edmund Physick procured an introduction to John Hunter, a prominent Scottish-born surgeon credited with advancing medicine using the scientific method with observation and experimentation. Mr. Hunter had acquired an extraordinary knowledge of and skill in anatomy through his apprenticeship as a dissection assistant to his older brother, William. During their first meeting, Edmund Physick asked Hunter for a list of books his son would be using in his study of medicine so that he could purchase them. Hunter led him to the dissecting room in which cadavers lay. "These are the books your son will learn under my direction," the surgeon said. "The others are fit for very little."[7] Before coming to London, Physick had had an aversive experience with cadavers. During his apprenticeship with Dr. Kuhn in Philadelphia, Physick had

[6] George McClellan, "An Analysis of the Character of Dr. Physick," 68.

[7] Sheldon, "To the Shade of John Hunter."

to boil a cadaver's skeleton to prepare it for use in anatomy class. He reacted badly to the experience and implored his father to let him withdraw from medical education. His father, however, insisted.[8] Cadavers and dissection would feature prominently in his life.

Physick enrolled in the Royal College of Surgeons and lived with Hunter as a "house pupil." During his time with Hunter, Physick learned from "a course of unceasing and untiring dissections." Physick's experience with Hunter preceded several memorable incidents.[9] Hunter's home, with guests entering through the front door and cadavers coming in through the back, has been suggested as an inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* published in 1886.[10] But his 1884 short story, *The Body Snatcher,* is a better fit.[11] The notorious Burke and Hare did not commit murders in the Edinburgh area to obtain corpses for dissection in anatomy lectures until 1828.[12] Similarly, the directions in the will of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham were not carried out until 1832, even though he had decided to donate his body for dissection in 1769.[13]

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[8] William E. Horner, "A necrological notice," 8.

[9] Randolph, *A Memoir.*

[10] Wendy Moore. 2005. *The Knife Man: The Extraordinary Life and Times of John Hunter, Father of Modern Surgery.* New York: Broadway Books. 218, 322 n. 3; Christopher H. Evans. 2007. "John Hunter and the Origins of Modern Orthopedic Research," *J Orthop Res* 25(4):556-569.

[11] Ruth Richardson, "Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Body Snatcher"" *The Lancet* 385(9966)(2015):412-413.

[12] Lisa Rosner, *The Anatomy Murders: Being the True and Spectacular History of Edinburgh's Notorious Burke and Hare and of the Man of Science Who Abetted Them in the Commission of their Most Heinous Crimes.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010).

[13] Ruth Richardson and Brian Hurwitz. 1987. "Jeremy Bentham's self-image: an exemplary bequest for dissection," *BMJ* 295(6591):195-198.

At the end of 1789, with Hunter's recommendation, Physick was appointed House Surgeon for St. George's Hospital. He came to admire Hunter in a way that "amounted to a species of veneration."[14] The work at St. George's presented the opportunity to enhance his surgical skill and dexterity. Physick performed his operations without benefit of anesthesia. Ether was first used as an anesthetic for a surgical operation in 1846.

He completed his studies at the Royal College of Surgeons in London in 1791, graduating with highest honors, and then went to Edinburgh the following year, where he took an examination and received the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1792. The University of Edinburgh and the Anatomical Schools in London created the first generation of university-educated American physicians and surgeons. The developing medical schools in America followed this model. The Edinburgh-London dominance in American medical education would persist until the Civil War.[15]

Return to Philadelphia – the Yellow Fever Epidemic – Dr. Rush

Returning to Philadelphia in September 1792, Dr. Physick opened his practice. Despite his excellent training, Physick was slow in establishing and growing his private practice. Like many surgeons of his era, Physick practiced as a physician and a surgeon. He observed: "I walked the streets of Philadelphia after my return from Europe for nearly three years without making much by my practice as would put soles on my shoes."[16] However, he kept busy by providing care to the poor in the city. Physick became even more engaged in 1793 when a yellow fever epidemic struck Philadelphia. In contrast to wealthier residents fleeing to their country

[14] Wendy Moore, *The Knife Man,* 223.

[15] Sheldon, "To the Shade of John Hunter."

[16] George McClellan, "An Analysis of the Character of Dr. Physick," 69; George Edwards, "Philip Syng Physick: 1786-1837." *Proc R Soc Med* 33(3)(1950):145-148.

homes, the city's poor had nowhere to go to escape the epidemic. Thus, they represented a significant proportion of yellow fever victims.

Between August 1 and November 9, 1793, with the characteristic yellow tinge to the eyes and skin and the terrible "black vomit," caused by bleeding in the stomach, the yellow fever epidemic claimed the lives of approximately 5,000 people, or 10 percent of the city's population of 50,000. Philadelphia was not only the largest city in the United States, but also the national capital. In addition to thousands of wealthy Philadelphians, many of the new nation's government leaders fled the city. President George Washington and his wife were in Philadelphia until September 10, when they departed, along with his cabinet, except for Thomas Jefferson.[17] Some of the city's best-known physicians also removed themselves from the city.

Physick showed his professional dedication while disregarding any concern for personal safety during the yellow fever outbreak. In August 1793, the Board of Health established a yellow fever hospital at Bush Hill, an unoccupied estate about two miles from the center of Philadelphia. Dr. Physick offered his services and was elected the resident physician for the facility.[18] When yellow fever recurred, in 1797, Physick came down with the disease. But when another epidemic occurred in 1798, he returned to render medical services at Bush Hill.[19]

Physick drew on his extensive experience with Hunter, doing cadaver dissections to perform post-mortem examinations of individuals who had contracted the disease, to identify the cause. His investigations into the cause and treatment of yellow fever brought him to the

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[17] Karen Warren, *Jefferson's Response to the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* available at https://www.poplarforest.org/jeffersons-response-to-the-yellow-fever-epidemic-of-1793/

[18] Randolph, *A Memoir*, 34. For a contrary view of Physick's role at Bush Hill Hospital, see Dennis B. Cornfeld, "The Hospital at Bush Hill: Philadelphia's Response to the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic," *MDAdvisor* 13(3)(2020):25-28.

[19] Horner, "A necrological notice," 11.

attention of Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the physicians who had remained in Philadelphia. Rush was a revered doctor, statesman, and reformer. He, too, had studied at the University of Edinburgh. Rush trained thousands of students at what became the University of Pennsylvania. He persuaded Thomas Paine to write *Common Sense* and to discard the title *Plain Truth* that he had been using for the pamphlet.[20] He was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a delegate at the Constitutional Convention. He was the surgeon general of the Continental Army. He was also an advocate for free public education, a proponent of educational opportunities for women, a pioneer in prison reform, and a founder of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society.

Benjamin Rush was actively engaged in the treatment of individuals with yellow fever. His primary therapeutic approach involved rapid depletion, with bloodletting and purgation. Bloodletting and purging were controversial practices.[21] Dr. Kuhn, one of the physicians who had left the city, was among Rush's critics.[22]

During the epidemic, Physick became ill with yellow fever. He underwent bloodletting under Dr. Rush's supervision. He publicly supported Dr. Rush and his treatments in 1797 with an announcement that he was treated with the removal of 176 ounces of blood by 22 bleedings in ten days and survived.[23]

Physick's work during the yellow fever epidemic, in conjunction with Rush, changed the circumstances of his practice dramatically. Rush did not ordinarily undertake any surgical

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[20] Steven Fried, *Rush: Revolution, Madness, and Benjamin Rush, the Visionary Doctor Who Became a Founding Father* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018) 4-5, 139.

[21] Paul E. Kopperman, "'Venerate the Lancet': Benjamin Rush's Yellow Fever Therapy in Context." *Bull Hist Med* 78(2004):539-574.

[22] Marion E. Brown, "Adam Kuhn, Eighteenth Century Physician and Teacher." *J Hist Med Allied Sci* 5(2)(1950):163-177.

[23] Edwards, "Philip Syng Physick," 146.

operations and relied on another surgeon to tend to those patients. However, he now began to refer patients to Dr. Physick for their mutual advantage and benefit. Physick rapidly developed a successful and lucrative practice, leading to an enhanced stature in the medical community.[24]

The relationship between Physick and Rush endured. In addition to Physick's published public statement about his personal experience with Rush's bloodletting treatment for yellow fever, when Rush came down with yellow fever, Physick treated him with bloodletting. In 1810, Rush called upon Physick to remove a tumor from the neck of his son, John.[25] In April 1813, when Rush was nearing death, Physick was called upon to provide a second opinion about further treatment, including bloodletting. He advised against that.[26] Rush died on 19 April 1813, and was buried in the graveyard of Christ Church in Philadelphia, near his friend Benjamin Franklin. Following Rush's funeral, on 22 April, Physick was seated in an upstairs room in a solemn, contemplative state. A man who had been waiting to speak to him unexpectedly asked the surgeon:

> "Do you want Dr. Rush?"
>
> "What do you mean?" Physick responded. "Dr. Rush is dead!"
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> "I will have him at the College for you at nine o'clock tomorrow morning for twenty dollars."[27]

Having assumed that Physick would want to use Rush's body for a dissection demonstration, the man was about to go to Christ Church to dig up his remains. Physick told the

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[24] McClellan, "Analysis of the Character of Dr. Physick," 70.

[25] Fried, *Rush*, 454.

[26] *Ibid.,* 480.

[27] McClellan, "Analysis of the Character of Dr. Physick," 139.

man he was not interested and that he should leave Rush's body alone. This encounter influenced actions that Physick took 24 years later, as he, himself, lay dying.

Pennsylvania Hospital and Mounting Advancement and Accomplishments

In 1794, Physick was admitted to the surgical staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital. Having been founded in 1751 by Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Thomas Bond, this was the nation's first hospital. Dr. Jacob Randolph, Physick's biographer and son-in-law, described the appointment to Pennsylvania Hospital as "the dawn of his greatest surgical fame and usefulness."[28] His position in the Philadelphia medical community quickly expanded. In 1794 he was appointed one of the physicians of the Philadelphia Dispensary and became a consulting surgeon, a position that he continued to occupy until his death in 1837.[29] The Philadelphia Dispensary was founded in 1786 for "the medical relief of the poor" and was the first of its kind in the country.[30] Physick also served as a surgeon at the Philadelphia Almshouse between 1801 and 1816 and as a consulting surgeon to the Pennsylvania Institution for the Blind in 1821.

Physick's prominence included leadership positions in professional and medical societies. Physick became the first president of the Academy of Medicine of Philadelphia, founded in 1797. He was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society in 1802 and was president of the Philadelphia Medical Society from 1824 until he died in 1837. He was elected to the Royal Academy of Medicine of France in 1825 and was the first American to become a member. In 1836, he became an honorary fellow of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society of

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[28] Randolph, *A Memoir* 38.

[29] *Ibid.,* 44.

[30] Wiliam Pencak, "Free Health Care for the Poor: The Philadelphia Dispensary," *Penn Mag Hist Bio,* 136(2012):25-52.

London, now known as the Royal Society of Medicine. Given his English heritage, this honor "pleased him most."[31]

Physick began keeping a journal in 1795 regarding noteworthy cases in his practice.[32] The first case listed was of a woman suffering blindness from a cataract, treated with the extraction of the intraocular lens. In this period, Physick treated ulcers of the extremities, fractures, dislocations, and bladder stones. His operations on the eyes, and for stones in the bladder, were major contributors to his reputation as a surgeon. He performed the first human blood transfusion in 1795.[33] Physick was particularly skillful in urological surgery. He performed his first lithotomy for bladder stones in 1797.[34] He also developed or improved several surgical instruments and devices, including a splint for thigh fractures, a seton to treat ununited fractures, a stomach pump, special forceps for use in lithotomy, instruments for the removal of tonsils, and absorbable sutures from catgut, to replace the silk or flaxen sutures in use at the time.

Evidence of Physick's scientific integrity is found in connection with a procedure involving use of a stomach pump for washing toxic substances out of the stomach. For years, Physick believed he was, and presented himself as, the inventor of this pump; however, he later learned that Dr. Alexander Munro II of Edinburgh had written up this procedure in 1797 as part of his thesis at medical school. Physick published a letter in 1812 giving credit to Dr. Munro. Nonetheless, Physick's use of the stomach pump became a standard part of medical practice.[35]

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[31] Edwards, "Philip Syng Physick."

[32] Randolph, *A Memoir*, 44.

[33] P J Schmidt & A G Leacock, "Forgotten transfusion history," *BMJ* 325(2002):1485-1487.

[34] Randolph, *A Memoir,* 40-45. Physick was assisted in his first lithotomy procedure by his nephew Dr. John Syng Dorsey, who was then a boy about the age of 14. Alexander Randall, "Philip Syng Physick's Last Major Operation," *Ann Med Hist* 9(2)(1937)133-141.

[35] Randolph, *A Memoir*.

Although an intense work ethic helped Physick develop a lucrative practice, a story of a man whose wife was cared for by Physick illustrates his reputation for modest fees. The man gave Physick several bills in payment for his services. When the man left the office, Physick saw that he had given him two 100-dollar bills. He sent a messenger after the man to bring him back. While the man expressed his gratitude, Physick asked him if he had two 10-dollar bills in his pocket. When the man indicated that he did, Physick said: "Very well, here are your two hundred dollars; the two tens are quite enough."[36]

In 1800, students at the Pennsylvania Hospital asked Physick to deliver a series of lectures about surgery. These guest lectures were well received and Physick continued these presentations to 1805.

In 1805, Physick became Professor of Surgery at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, a newly established position. Before 1805, surgery and anatomy were combined in a single professorship resulting in limitations on surgical teaching. After Physick became Professor of Surgery, the numbers of students coming to study at the University of Pennsylvania increased substantially. "[A]t the period when Dr. Physick enjoyed the very zenith of his fame and usefulness, the University of Pennsylvania had attained the acme of its reputation."[37] Dr. Randolph described Physick's approach to his lectures as

> grave, dignified, and impressive to an extraordinary degree. His style was clear and comprehensive, simple yet chaste. He was uniformly careful never to say too much. His choice of language was remarkably good, and he possessed the happy faculty of communicating knowledge agreeably and well in as great perfection as any other man I have ever heard lecture. Perhaps one great reason

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[36] Horner, "A necrological notice," 21-22.

[37] *Ibid.,* 69.

> for this was, that he never undertook to instruct others upon subjects which he did not clearly comprehend himself.[38]

This assessment of Physick as a lecturer by his son-in-law was shared by others.[39] Physick's lectures formed the basis of the first American textbook of surgery, John Syng Dorsey's *Elements of Surgery*.[40] His lectures built upon the training he had received from John Hunter to "observe, deduce and record" as an integral component of a scientific approach to surgery.[41] In 1818, Physick gave up the post of Chair of Surgery and became Chair of Anatomy. He replaced his nephew, Dr. John Syng Dorsey, who died that year. Physick remained in that position until 1831. At that point, Physick was giving lectures with Dr. William E. Horner, to transition him into the post, as Physick retired to become Emeritus Professor of Surgery and Anatomy.

Notable Physician-Patient Relationships

Given his prominent status as the leading surgeon in the country, it is no surprise that among the individuals who sought treatment by Dr. Physick were prominent members of the public and government. The three-year period spanning 1831 to 1833 demonstrates that Dr. Physick's skill was a shared refuge even for leaders of the nation who felt significant animosity toward each other.

Chief Justice John Marshall viewed the election of Andrew Jackson to the Presidency in 1828 as a threat to the notions of a central national government that the Chief Justice had helped

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38 *Ibid.,* 71.

39 McClellan, "An Analysis of the Character of Dr. Physick," 17; Edwards, "Philip Syng Physick."

40 W. Roy Smythe. "First American Surgery Textbook," *Ann Surg* 237(4)(2003):580-589.

41 Moore, *The Knife Man,* 223.

develop.[42] President Jackson tangled with the Supreme Court over several issues. Prominent among those controversies was Jackson's reaction to the decision in *Worcester v. Georgia*.[43] The Chief Justice wrote the opinion for the Court declaring a Georgia law concerning Cherokees unconstitutional.[44] In the aftermath of the decision, President Jackson reportedly stated: "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it." Jackson's antipathy toward the Cherokee was later reflected in his putting in place the policy that led to the forced removal of the Cherokee people, known as the Trail of Tears.[45]

In October 1831, Physick operated on Chief Justice Marshall to provide relief from bladder stones. Physick hesitated to undertake the procedure. Involving a perineal incision to cut into the bladder wall, this lithotomy technique had a significant mortality risk. Marshall was 76 years old. Although Physick was experiencing health problems himself, nonetheless, he operated with his usual skill and dexterity.[46] Physick removed approximately 1,000 stones from the Chief

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[42] Leonard Baker. *John Marshall: A Life in Law.* (New York: Macmillan Publishing 1974) 649-650.

[43] 31 *U.S.* 500 (1832).

[44] A Cherokee tribe had established its government within the bounds of the State of Georgia following treaties with the Federal Government. Georgia subsequently passed laws invalidating the Cherokee enactments and authorizing the division of Cherokee lands. This conflicted with the treaties. And under Article VI of the United States Constitution, treaties made by the federal government were included in what "shall be the supreme Law of the Land." Samuel Worcester, a missionary to the Cherokees, was indicted for having lived in an area that was within the Cherokee Nation without having first obtained a license to do so from the State of Georgia. The Supreme Court held that the Georgia law was unconstitutional. It ruled that the Cherokee nation was an independent community, established by federal treaty. Only the federal government could deal with the Cherokee nation. The state of Georgia could not pass laws affecting the Cherokee. Accordingly, the Supreme Court ordered that the missionary be released.

[45] Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House.* (New York: Random House 2008).

[46] Randolph, *A Memoir,* 97.

Justice's bladder. Physick refused a fee for this surgery.[47] This was identified as Physick's "last major operation" in a 1937 article.[48] The specifics of the procedure are set out in exquisite detail by his son-in-law, Dr. Randolph, who assisted in the operation. He also reported that soon after Marshall's surgery, Physick became aware of the development of lithotripsy. He saw the advantages over the need for a perineal incision, in that lithotripsy would represent minimally invasive surgery, involving entering the bladder with a hollow sound inserted into the urethra. Physick became very supportive of this procedure.[49]

The Marshall surgery was followed in 1833 by President Jackson's consultation with Physick about lung hemorrhages he was experiencing. Physick told the president to stop smoking. Jackson responded: "Now, Doctor, I can do anything you think proper to order, and can bear as much as most men. There are only two things I can't bear to give up – one is coffee, and the other is tobacco."[50] While not successful in getting Jackson to stop smoking, Physick was able to convince him to stop taking medicine that contained mercury and arsenic. Jackson lived until 1845, when he died from congestive heart failure.

Although the removal of Chief Justice Marshall's bladder stones was described as Physick's "last major operation," his actual last surgery was a cataract extraction performed on 13 August 1837.[51] And with that, the events of his life completed a full circle, and he returned to

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[47] James Gregory Mumford, *A Narrative History of Medicine in America.* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co. 1903), 212.

[48] Randall, "Philip Syng Physick's Last Major Operation."

[49] Randolph, *A Memoir*, 102.

[50] Reda C. Goff. "A Physical Profile of Andrew Jackson," *Tennessee Hist Quarterly* 28(3)(1969):297-309.

[51] Randolph, *A Memoir,* 106.

the point and place of his beginning: the cataract extraction that had been his very first operation recorded in his journal in 1795. During the malpractice trial in 1828 against Dr. George McClellan, the founder of Jefferson Medical College, Physick, appearing as an expert witness, displayed his particular expertise in ophthalmological surgery. The judge asked Physick about his experience with eye surgery, and specifically, operations for cataracts. After hearing Physick's response, the judge said: "Sit down, great man, sit down: that will do, great man."[52]

Family Life

In contrast to the professional success that Physick achieved, his home life was an abysmal picture of strife and scandal.

In 1800, Physick married Elizabeth Emlen. She was the daughter of the wealthy Quaker minister Samuel Powel Emlen, known in Philadelphia as "the Quaker Seer." Physick met her at the time he attended to her father at the family home when their regular physician was not available. Her father died in 1799, leaving her a generous inheritance which became a considerable dowry when she married. There were seven children born to Physick and Elizabeth, with four surviving to adulthood. The first child, Sarah, was born in 1801 and married Dr. Jacob Randolph, who worked closely with Physick. The last child was a boy named Emlen, who was born in 1812, and became the father of Dr. Emlen Physick of Cape May.

Dr. Emlen Physick attended medical school at the University of Pennsylvania and graduated in 1878. However, he did not practice medicine, choosing instead to lead the life of a gentleman farmer.[53] The Emlen Physick Estate is one of the more distinctive attractions and landmarks in the New Jersey seaside resort city of Cape May (Fig. 1).

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[52] Middleton, "Father of American Surgery," 572.
[53] Russell Roberts, *Cape May: The Informed Traveler* (Mechanicsburg, PA: 2008), 37-39.

Figure 1: Photo - J.Z. Jackson

The marriage to Elizabeth Emlen was not a happy one. Physick and his wife had constant arguments and the relationship became the subject of gossip and scandal. In 1815, they entered a formal legal separation. Elizabeth received the return of several properties from her original dowry and other assets she had inherited, enabling her to live independently.[54] The reasons for the separation are unclear, but the published writings of Elizabeth's sister Susan reflect the ongoing animosity between the couple.[55] The last argument concerned the planting of a tree in the backyard.[56] There is some evidence of mutual infidelity, with Elizabeth's mental condition contributing to irreconcilable differences between the couple.

[54] George B. Roberts. "Dr. Physick and His House," *Pennsylvania Magazine Hist Bio* 92(1)(1996):67-82.

[55] Susan Garfinkel. "'This Trial Was Sent in Love and Mercy for my Refinement': A Quaker Woman's Experience of Breast Cancer Surgery in 1814" in *Women and Health in America: Historical Readings*, Judith Walzer Leavitt (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press 2nd Ed. 1999), 68-90, 86.

[56] Prized Artifacts of the Garden State (December 2012) available at www.GardenStateLegacy.com

Physick moved into a townhouse located on South Fourth Street in the Society Hill section of Philadelphia (Fig. 2). He took the four children with him. Physick forbade his wife from ever setting foot in the house.[57]

Figure 2 – Photo – Matthew Aungst, Society of Architectural Historians

He had the building renovated to include medical facilities. He later purchased a summer home in Maryland; however, the South Fourth Street townhouse was his home until he died in 1837. Over the years, his household staff included a housekeeper, Anna Marie Shields, and another female servant. His will had generous bequests to both and a comment that he had "so long lived in the utmost kindness and harmony" with them.[58] Leaving the South Fourth Street house to one daughter and the Maryland summer home to the other, Physick directed his

[57] The Physick House is said to have its ghost and is included among several "haunted house" tours in Philadelphia. The haunting consists of the spirit of Elizabeth Physick coming to the front door and knocking. Physick had forbidden his wife from entering the house. The ghost story is that after knocking, she runs away with weeping sounds sometimes heard. The Emlen Physick Estate in Cape May was also known as a haunted house. Physick lived there with his mother and two aunts. After Physick's death in 1916, his last surviving aunt lived in the house until 1935. Since Physick, his mother, and his aunts all died there, it became known as a haunted house. The building and its grounds fell into disrepair and was a target of vandals until it was restored and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1976.

[58] Roberts, "Dr. Physick and His House."

executors to purchase a home for Anna Marie Shields. It is understood that she was his companion and probable mistress.

Recurring Health Problems and Physick's Death

It is an unfortunate too-common irony that healthcare providers, such as physicians themselves, are not excellent specimens of health. An event early in his medical education presaged that development for Physick. He attended an amputation at the Pennsylvania Hospital and became sick during the procedure. Kuhn had recommended that Physick's father accompany him. Kuhn's foresight allowed Edmund Physick to lead his son from the amphitheater.[59] During his time at St. George's in 1790, Physick had bouts of illness that caused Hunter to recommend that he consider returning home. The illnesses included catarrh. He would suffer from a form of post-nasal drip throughout his life.[60] In 1797, Physick came down with yellow fever and was severely ill.[61]

In the winter of 1813-1814, Physick experienced an intense attack of typhus fever. His biographer Dr. Randolph observed that "from this period he never enjoyed what might be called uninterrupted health."[62] His health problems included digestion difficulties and frequent episodes of dyspeptic symptoms. He also became subject to recurring episodes of catarrh. He became increasingly debilitated by the small amounts of food that he would eat. Additionally, he developed heart and renal problems.[63] About ten years before he died in 1837, he had an

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[59] Randolph, *A Memoir*, 15.

[60] Edwards, "Philip Syng Physick"; Middleton, "Father of American Surgery."

[61] Randolph, *A Memoir*, 51-52.

[62] *Ibid.*, 79-80.

[63] *Ibid.*, 80-81.

extended period of almost two hours, during which he had a barely perceptible pulse at the wrist. When he retired in 1831 from the University of Pennsylvania, he was quite ill.

Physick's ailments and bodily discomforts contributed to negative aspects of his personal and professional interactions. For much his life, he "lived alone and lonely."[64] Although he could be dignified and committed to helping the patients in his professional work, he did not tolerate resistance or non-compliance concerning his recommendations and he disliked extensive talking by the patient. He had a "rare slow smile" as seen by his colleagues.[65] He rarely dined out or received visitors. He was reserved and frequently impatient.[66] His son-in-law and biographer described him as "often inclined to melancholy."[67]

In comments delivered to the American Philosophical Society in 1838, his University of Pennsylvania colleague Dr. William Horner reported an encounter with Physick on 26 November 1837. He arrived at Physick's home as he was about to go out for a carriage ride. Physick greeted Horner saying, "'Ah, doctor, how do you do, you see I am almost gone.'" Horner commented, "his tottering, emaciated frame and altered visage, but too certainly confirmed that statement." He recorded his last exchange with Physick as the old surgeon saying, "'I shall not see you again, I must die soon, my fate is fixed, I can't help it, I am sorry for it.'" Horner described these words as "prophetic" as he did not see Physick again until two hours after his death on 15 December 1837.[68]

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[64] Edwards, "Philip Syng Physick," 148.

[65] Middleton, "Father of American Surgery," 579.

[66] Horner, "A necrological notice."

[67] Randolph, *A Memoir,* 32.

[68] Horner, "A necrological notice," 14-15.

The cause of Physick's death was suspected to be hydrothorax; however, Physick specifically denied permission for any post-mortem examination – whether despite or because of his extensive experience with cadaver dissection – and no one was to touch his body except the two women who had been part of his household for twenty years.[69] Moreover, in anticipation of his death, Physick had told his son Philip, Jr., who was a lawyer, that his burial should be delayed and his body was to be kept in a warm room until putrefaction had set in.[70] His body was to be placed in a wooden coffin and that in turn was to be placed in a lead coffin and soldered shut.[71] The burial took place on December 21, 1837. Physick also had his son promise that after the body was placed in the grave, it would be guarded for a period of six weeks, a sufficiently long time that his remains would be valueless, and protected from any "resurrectionist." Undoubtedly, the request for this promise was prompted not only by Physick's experiences in his training but more acutely by the encounter with the would-be grave robber following Dr. Benjamin Rush's funeral.[72]

Dr. Physick's House

Historic tours of Philadelphia include the house that Dr. Physick moved to in 1815. On 7 January 1976, the house was designated a National Landmark. This was the same year the Emlen Physick Estate achieved this recognition as part of the Cape May Historic District.

The Philadelphia Physick House, also known as the Hill-Physick House and the Hill-Physick-Keith House, is a three-story brick building in the Federal style emphasizing

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69 *Ibid.,*16.

70 Middleton, "Father of American Surgery"; Roberts, "Dr. Physick and His House."

71 Horner, "A necrological notice," 16.

72 Middleton, "Father of American Surgery," 562. See also text at n. 28.

balance and symmetry. It is the only remaining free-standing Federal townhouse in Society Hill. The house was constructed in 1786 by Henry Hill, a Quaker merchant who became rich importing Madeira wine. Before the American Revolution, England restricted the importation of products from European countries. Hill was able to circumvent the regulatory limitation. Ownership of Madeira wine was Portuguese, but because the wine was actually made in Africa, it was not subject to the English taxes and tariffs.[73]

The opening paragraph of an article on the background of the house's original owner reads:

> Today we know it as the Physick House. The elegant brick structure located in Philadelphia on the east side of Fourth Street, between Spruce and Pine, bears that label in eponymous recognition of its most famous occupant, Philip Syng Physick, the father of American surgery, who lived there from 1815 to his death in 1837. As an added signal for identification purposes, Dr. Physick's patronymic has a felicitous ring, for where else would one have gone in the early nineteenth century to consult the city's most renowned physician if not to the Physick house.[74]

Henry Hill built the house on part of the site of the original Philadelphia Almshouse. Physick served as surgeon to the Almshouse between 1801 and 1816 after it had moved west to a new location in 1767. After Physick acquired the property in 1815, he made substantial changes, including erecting a stable to accommodate his four horses. He added a new dining room, drawing room, and entrance hall.[75] That he had four horses was a manifestation of Physick's wealth at this time.

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[73] David W. Maxey, "Maderia, Quakerism, and Rebellion: Reviving Henry Hill," *Quaker History* 93(2)(2004):47-75.

[74] *Ibid*.

[75] Roberts, "Dr. Physick and His House."

Consistent with its museum function, the Philadelphia Physick House displays surgical instruments designed and constructed by Physick.

Dr. Philip Syng Physick was a complicated and controversial character. Whatever reluctance he had at the start of his medical education, there is no question about his unwavering devotion to his professional abilities and responsibilities. The personal cost he experienced, however, is regrettable.

His eminence as a surgeon, however, has even entered popular literature. Physick's grandson, Dr. Emlen Physick, is a character in a Sherlock Holmes pastiche novella. The first chapter includes a letter from Emlen Physick to Dr. Watson inviting him to come with Holmes to Cape May to undertake an investigation of a local murder:

> "My name is Emlen Physick. You do not know me, but I believe you are aware of my grandfather Philip Syng Physick. I hope that this affiliation will attest to my character…"
>
> After reading the letter, Holmes and Watson had this exchange:
>
> "What say you, Watson?" he blurted, stirring from his trance.
>
> "He has provided us with very little…" I replied, unsure of the response my companion desired.
>
> "His grandfather was a distinguished doctor," Holmes said, though the tone of his voice made it difficult to determine if this were a statement or a question.
>
> "You have heard of him?" I asked, slightly astonished.
>
> "No, not at all. But he addressed the letter to you and obviously assumed that you *had*. It is therefore likely that he was a physician of some note."
>
> Though my friend displayed the most remarkable memory, it did not house facts that were not germane to his profession. If Philip Physick had been a pioneer in autopsy or forensic medicine, it is likely that Holmes would have known all about him.
>
> "Yes," I replied, "he is indeed noteworthy. He is considered the father of American surgery. I studied many of his methods in medical school."[76]

[76] Steve Leadley, *Sherlock Holmes in Cape May* (Cape May: Steve Leadly 2006), 7.