Frontier Surgeon Had Courage As Well As Skill

EPHRIAM McDOWELL
1771-1830
(McDowell is a public surgical ward on third floor.)

Ephriam McDowell was characteristic of the frontier days and town in which he lived. He was used to acting with freedom, he had much initiative and was a courageous—if not daring—man.

Although he was born in Virginia, McDowell's family moved when he was two to Danville, Kentucky. And it was in Danville that McDowell maintained his private practice for over thirty years.

To understand more fully why McDowell's surgery was so outstanding at the time it was performed, it is important that the period and geographic setting be understood.

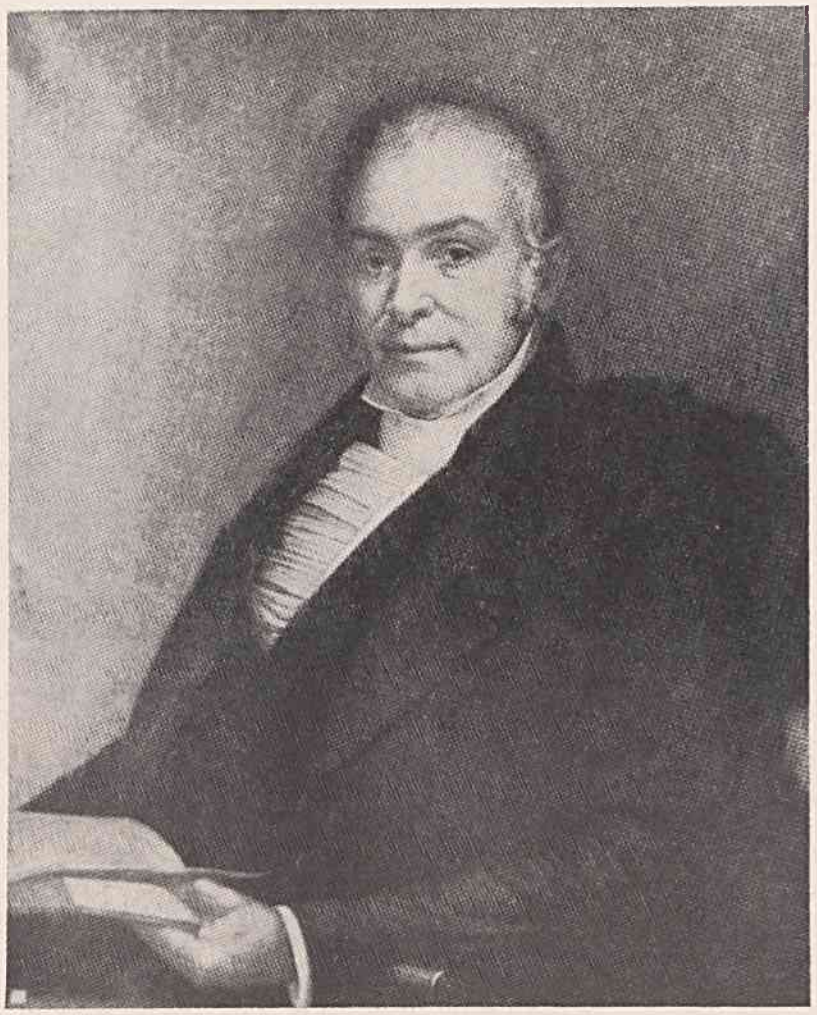
It is estimated that Danville had less than 1,000 inhabitants at the time McDowell began practicing medicine there, but was, as a former capital of the state, extremely active in the political affairs of Kentucky and was still considered one of the state's most important towns.

McDowell's practice extended over a hundred miles beyond the town, and this meant many trips that had to be made on horseback through wild and undeveloped country that offered not only no roads but also the danger of wolves and Indians. (As late as 1810 a "scalp law" was passed that allowed pay for the scalps of wolves to encourage their extermination.)

In a letter received by McDowell in 1793 from his brother (McDowell was at the time out of the country), the following note of Indians was made:

"Dear Ephriam:

"... I have had letters from Kentucky lately . . . Indians are still very troublesome on the frontiers from North to South. A treaty has been proposed by the government, I suppose more with a view to quieting the minds of members who are averse to the war, than an expectation of *peace*. By every act the Indians refuse treating on any other terms than making the Ohio River the line, which never will be complied with by the Government. The President [General Washington] has called on the State of Kentucky for fifteen hundred volunteers. It is said they (with a considerable addition) will march about the first of next month. Reports say that the commissioners who were sent to treat with the Indians are made prisioners and not permitted to return . . ."



Ephriam McDowell, a frontiersman and famed surgeon, was described as a heavyset man over six feet tall with a ruddy complexion and shining black eyes. He was noted for his strength and agility, both of which no doubt came in quite handily when he found himself riding on horseback through the wilderness to see his patients, some of whom lived more than a hundred miles away.

As far as the few, and at best incomplete, records show, McDowell never received an M.D. degree; but three years before his death the University of Maryland gave him an honorary M.D.

His first introduction to medical education was at the age of 19 in the office of an eminent Staunton, Virginia, physician, Dr. Alexander Humphries.

At age 22, he went abroad and entered the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, considered at the time to be the "very capstone of the pyramid of medical education." He left Edinburgh after a year, but remained in Scotland to study under John Bell, known as the "most able and eloquent Scottish surgeon of his day."

While studying with the famed Scottish surgeon, Bell, McDowell was first introduced to the study of the diseases of the ovaries—in particular ovarian tumors, the fact that these usually resulted in death, and the *possibility* in the future of "relief through surgery." The study of the entire "ovarian question" must have made quite an impression on the young doctor; for sixteen years later when McDowell performed the first ovariotomy, he said it was Bell's principles and suggestions that impelled him to attempt the operation, considered by most surgeons of his day to be an impossibility.

McDowell returned to the States in 1795, after a year of study with Bell, and settled near his family in Danville. It did not take his fame long to spread, nor his practice to grow; for there was little "competition" professionally (some sources say that for a time he was the first and only "qualified" surgeon practicing medicine west of the Alleghanies), he had already established extensive connections in the area, and his "foreign" training seemed to have a somewhat dazzling effect upon the townspeople and inhabitants of the surrounding area.

Within a relatively short period of time, as his successes became known, McDowell's practice grew until it covered almost the entire Southwest.

In the first years, he performed a variety of operations—all well known to the surgery of his day, such as those for lithotomies (incision of duct or organ, especially the bladder, for removal of stone), amputations, tracheotomies, and hernias.

He was an especially skilled lithotomist, and he performed about thirty-two of the operations without loss of life. One of these was performed in 1812 on James K. Polk (later president of the United States), and it is said that he "ever afterwards held in grateful remembrance the surgeon who made his career a possibility."

McDowell had been in practice almost fourteen years when his most famous surgical case became history. The patient, today known by name about as well as her surgeon, was Mrs. Jane Todd Crawford. McDowell had been called to her home, located sixty miles from Danville, to investigate Mrs. Crawford's abdominal swelling, first thought to be caused by pregnancy.

Upon further examination, the doctor realized that Mrs. Crawford's condition indicated the need for an immediate ovariotomy (removal by surgery of an ovary or of an ovarian tumor). He knew well the dangers of such an operation, but he also knew that without the surgery Mrs. Crawford would not have long to live.

He presented the case to her, explaining both sides of the issue, and stating his willingness to try the operation if she would come to Danville for it. She agreed, and a date was set.

The result is history: Two courageous people helped create an entirely new frontier in surgery.

Seven years later, in his first published account of the histori-