

Walter Reed — the End of Yellow Fever

(Reed is a private, adult, surgical ward on the third floor.)

"He gave to man control over that dreadful scourge, yellow fever."

That statement about Walter Reed, made by the president of Harvard University in 1902, summarizes the life of a man who took a giant stride in the race against communicable disease. His story is one of dedication to the medical profession and a desire to serve humanity.

Walter Reed was born September 13, 1851 in Gloucester County, Virginia, the youngest of five children. His father, Lemuel Sutton Reed, was a North Carolina Methodist minister, and his mother, Pharaba White Reed, was the daughter of a Carolina planter. Both were descended from proper English families.

Reed's biographer, Dr. Howard A. Kelly of Johns Hopkins University, notes that the primary traits of Reed's ancestors were a sense of individuality and a quest for knowledge.

He grew up in the community of Farmville in Prince Edward County, Virginia, and attended a small private school across the street from his home. During the Civil War, invading Northern forces ransacked the Reeds property and at one time took the young Reed and a brother as hostages. The family settled in Charlottesville, Virginia shortly afterward.

Since Lemuel Reed was already putting two sons through college, a difficult task on a minister's salary, Walter knew it would be impossible for him to pursue the usual three or four-year college education. So, mustering as much courage as he could, he asked the faculty of Medical College at Charlottesville if he would be granted a doctor of medicine degree if he could pass the examinations.

Amused at the thought that anyone would even attempt to pass the university's medical examinations with no formal college training, the faculty agreed. Reed took them at their word and began to study. Nine months later, at the age of seventeen, he earned his M. D. degree, graduating third in his class. Reed was the youngest person ever to graduate from the Medical School at Charlottesville.

He then traveled to New York City for study at Bellevue Hospital Medical



DR. WALTER REED

College receiving a second medical degree there in 1870.

He shortly afterward took a position with the Brooklyn Board of Health in New York, but soon left to enter the Army Medical Corps. He was commissioned as a first lieutenant and assistant surgeon.

He married his long-time sweetheart, Miss Emilie Lawrence of Murfreesboro, N. C., in April, 1876, and was sent to a lonely Arizona post with the Army two weeks later.

Thus began what was to be 18 years of garrison life, most of which was spent in the sparsely settled Far West. His life as an Army surgeon included ministering to the people of the surrounding communities in addition to the soldiers and their families at the outposts. Biographer Kelly says the doctor was "loved by all". Reed at one time took in a badly burned Indian child, nursed her back to health, and raised her in his own household.

In 1889, Reed moved back to the civilization of Baltimore when he was appointed attending surgeon and examiner of recruits. He immediately made contacts at the Johns Hopkins Medical School to take classes in bacteriology and pathology.

After several more years on the frontier, Reed was given a permanent position as curator of the Army Medical Museum and professor at the U. S. Army Medical School in Washington. He was promoted to major with the title of full surgeon.

Reed spent much of his time in Washington doing research on a variety of

diseases. He did an intensive investigation of the medical management of typhoid fever among American troops in the Spanish-American War.

Along with Dr. James Carroll, also an Army surgeon, Reed got his first intensive look at yellow fever in the late 1890's. An Italian researcher, Dr. Guiseppi Sanarelli, had published an article in the *British Medical Journal* announcing that he had isolated the yellow fever bacillus. After several months of research into the matter, Reed and Carroll proved conclusively that the Sanarelli bacillus was a form of hog cholera and had nothing to do with yellow fever.

Reed's pioneering work which led to elimination of yellow fever as a public health hazard came in 1900 after an outbreak of the disease among American soldiers in Cuba.

The illness itself is characterized by high fever, jaundice, and bloody vomit. Records show at least 112 outbreaks of yellow fever in the United States between 1702 and 1878. Although usually a disease of the South, an epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 took 4,041 lives, nearly one-tenth of the population of the city at the time.

Because of the large number of cases among the troops in Cuba, the Army set up a commission to study the problem first-hand and make recommendations to eradicate the disease. Reed, along with Carroll and several other Army surgeons, were sent to Pinar del Rio barracks to investigate.

Through a series of experiments, some of which used the physicians as guinea pigs, Reed and his colleagues proved that yellow fever is transmitted by a type of mosquito and that personal contact with a yellow fever patient or contact with infected clothing had nothing to do with the spread of the disease.

Publication of these results initiated a massive campaign to put an end to mosquito infestation in the area. News of Reed's work soon spread to other nations troubled by the disease, and they too began to destroy the mosquitos. Reed received praise as the man who delivered mankind from the ravages of yellow fever.

In 1902, Harvard University granted Reed an honorary M. A. degree for his

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