

Frederick May

(16 Nov 1773 – 23 Jan 1847)

The National Intelligencer, January 25, 1847

At his residence in this city, on Saturday night, at half-past 9 o'clock, in the 74th year of his age, Dr. Frederick May.

Dr. May was one of the oldest and most deservedly respected inhabitants of Washington, of which he had been a resident for nearly fifty years, during all the time practicing his profession with great assiduity and success, having been for many years the oldest Physician in our city.

His most estimable personal character secured to him, whilst he lived, not the respect merely, but the affection, of all who knew him well; and, dying, he leaves to lament his loss, besides a wide circle of sorrowing friends, a Family of Sons and Daughters grown up to manhood and maturity, to whom he was one of the most affectionate and devoted Fathers that ever lived.

The National Intelligencer, January 29, 1847

The Late Dr. Frederick May

At a meeting of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia, held January 25th, at the Washington Infirmary, Dr. James C. Hall, one of the Vice Presidents, in the chair, the death of Frederick May, M.D., the late President of the Society, having been announced by the Chairman--

On motion of Dr. Miller, a committee was appointed to draught resolutions suitable to the mournful occasion.

The Chair appointed Drs. Miller, Jones, and Reily as the committee.

Dr. Miller, on the part of the committee, presented the following biographical sketch and resolutions:

It becomes our painful duty to announce to you and the Medical Society the loss we have sustained by the death of our beloved and venerable President, Dr. Frederick May. He died on the 23d instant, at 9 1/2 p.m., in the 74th year of his age. Dr. May was one of the oldest residents of this city, and the oldest physician in it. Soon after the attainment of the degree of M.D. at the college in his native State, (Massachusetts,) he removed to this city, and settled in the practice of his profession. This occurred as early as the year 1795. At this period our city was a mere wilderness, and we believe he was the only practitioner of medicine. Soon he succeeded in securing the confidence of those then resident here; and, as the city increased in population, so did he add to his popularity and professional usefulness. He was, for many years, the physician and surgeon of Washington, and attended the most distinguished men of the country, assembled here at the seat of Government. In the even tenor of his way he passed on, with his professional standing ever gaining as he increased in years, and he saw spring from the wilderness a magnificent city.

In the year 1823 upon the establishment of a medical school in this city, he was appointed to the Chair of Obstetrics. In this he distinguished himself as a lecturer. As such, by the soundness of his doctrines, and by the beautiful and classic style of his lectures, by the urbanity and gentleness of his manner, he commanded the regard and confidence of his associates, and the admiration of his pupils. He continued his labors as professor in this school until its reorganization, which took place in 1839. Though solicited to retain his position, he declined, but continued to pursue the practice of his profession till overtaken by infirmities, induced rather by laborious professional life than by the effects of age.

Within the last year of his life he had withdrawn from its active duties, having filled the measure of his highest ambition by the attainment of an enviable position in his profession; by having reared to maturity and usefulness a numerous offspring; by having acquired the love and esteem of a large circle of friends, and among them the whole medical profession of this city; and last, not least, by having secured, as far as in his power lay, the hopes of a blessed immortality. He lived a bright example to his professional friends and brethren; and when called to yield his spirit to his God, he proved the importance and value of a well spent life. We are aware that custom has sanctioned elaborate and high-sounding praise of the merits and deeds of the dead; that overweening zeal often leads us to attach too exalted a value to the actions of deceased friends. In the present instance the charge cannot be alleged for we have but to speak the truth, and that truth will be praise enough; and by it, if but accurately portrayed, we shall recognize the man while living.

The life of medical men in private practice presents but few incidents from which to make an interesting or lengthened biography; but when these are characteristic, and serve as beacon lights by which rising generations may be governed, they should be shown forth. In the life and character of our friend, we have an example most worthy of imitation; his early struggles, distant from home and from friends, with no superfluity of earthly riches surrounded by strangers--yes, even in a wilderness attaining, by his exertions and his merits alone, the highest honors and distinctions of his profession; and still to retain so high a rank as to be looked upon as the guide--nay, as a patriarch of that profession--having for his reward wealth, the esteem and confidence of all his professional brethren, and this the result purely of his own exertion and merits.

It was not by the possession of ordinary talents and professional skill that this was attained, it was not by assumption that it was arrived at. No: it was by his untiring zeal in the profession--his interest in its welfare, and by that constant and uniform courteous bearing (so characteristic of him) to all the members of the profession, that gave him the confidence and esteem of those nearest his age and standing, whilst these, together with his marked consideration for the juniors in the profession gained him their warmest regard. No one ever possessed the latter quality in a higher degree than did Dr. May. None ever more ready to extend assistance, to inspire and sustain laudable ambition in the enterprising aspirant for fame in his profession, and none ever more prompt or more successful in placing before such bright example and sound precept.

As evidence of the high esteem entertained for Dr. May by his professional brethren of our city, there was seldom a post of honor or distinction at their disposal for which he did not receive the unsolicited and unanimous voice of the profession. Over our medical councils he was ever called to preside. At the period of his death he was the presiding officer, not only of the body, but the Medical Association of Washington in all conferences of the profession for the promotion of its interests and welfare, he was ever consulted, and his views appreciated. But recently he was re-elected President of this society, although it was known that he was unwilling to accept this office, lest he should be incapable from ill health of discharging its duties. Yet he was unanimously re-elected, and a complimentary notice accompanying the announcement of his election was received by him but a short period before his death. These marks of distinction were fully appreciated by him, and he was never allowed an opportunity to escape that he did not, in his unassuming and unostentatious manner, acknowledge them.

The early education of Dr. May, as is the case with all the profession in this country, fitted him for the practice of its several branches. Whilst he engaged in the duties of a general practitioner, he, at an early period of his professional life, became particularly devoted to obstetrics and diseases of women, in this branch he became most distinguished, and was most extensively and successfully engaged. Few can boast of possessing a more extensive confidence among the female set than he, and none more deservedly. As an obstetrician he was unsurpassed--patient, trusty, yet skillful and firm. His example will be long remembered by his contemporaries, while the succeeding generation will have much to

regret, in the absence of any written record of his observation and experience. In his professional intercourse we have said that he was courteous; to his patients he was mild, gentle, conciliating in his manners, observing always the utmost delicacy. To his professional brethren the word courteous can scarcely convey a proper idea of his course of conduct. Conciliating, dignified, and confiding, prompt and punctual in his professional engagements, he was seldom ever known to be a minute before or after time; he often would impress on his juniors in the profession the importance of the observance of punctuality, and, when it was not observed, his gentle chiding and admonition gave rather pleasure than offence. In his intercourse with society he was much restricted, his time being so wholly devoted to his profession duties, though none, we are informed, in the earlier periods of his life enjoyed social intercourse more than he. Honorable and just in all his dealings, he maintained the highest respect and regard among his unprofessional friends. In his habits regular and temperate; in this respect being a bright example not only to our profession, but to the community at large. It was, however, in his private relations that the character of our friend shone most beautifully. Though actively engaged in the duties of an arduous profession, yet he so arranged his time as to be able to enjoy the social pleasures of the family fireside.

Deprived by death early in life of the partner of his bosom, he devoted himself closely to the education of a large family of children, who by his paternal care were reared to maturity and usefulness, and who now prove themselves the not unworthy offspring of a most honored sire. Tutored by such a hand, who could have expected otherwise of them! To his friends it is peculiarly gratifying, and to himself it was a source of great comfort, that he should have lived to have experienced the completion of his efforts for his family. More than once he would express his thankfulness and gratitude on this point, and conclude by saying that he had nothing now to live for; that he had fulfilled the duties assigned to man; that he had completed his task, and was now ready and willing to depart. It is true, indeed, he had fulfilled his duties to his country, his profession, his family, and his God.

It was our melancholy privilege to witness the last moments of Dr. May. For more than a year has his life been ebbing. Several attacks of disease enervated a constitution already shaken by laborious professional duties, which he was now compelled to relax; though up to within a few months past he continued to give advice to a few friends, or meet his brethren in consultation. About the 1st of November it became necessary for him to confine himself to the house for a very slight indisposition. From this time he rapidly emaciated without an assignable cause, without suffering a single pang, and this condition existed to the last: gradually day by day he declined, looking forward for the approach of death, of which he spoke familiarly. But one wish on earth remained ungratified. It was to see his sisters and brother. With the greatest anxiety he watched their coming, hoping that they would reach here whilst he was in the enjoyment and possession of his faculties. This wish was gratified; they came, he recognized them, conversed with them, blessed them, and then slept that long sleep of death, from which he will only be awakened by the last trump.

Dr. M. then moved the following resolutions:

Resolved, That the Medical Society of the District of Columbia have heard with deep emotion the annunciation of the death of their venerable President, Dr. Frederick May.

A History of the City of Washington, Its Men and Institutions

(Found under biography of Colonel Henry May -- grandson of Frederick May)

The Mays of this country are from the Anglo-Norman family of De Maies (such it seems was the original spelling), and are the descendants of two Knights, Eleaz and John De Maies, of the Demesne of Barfleur, Val de Saire, Normandy. These gentlemen entered England in the suite of William the Conqueror, and for valorous services at the battle of Hastings were, by royal charter granted the manor known as "King's Chase," afterwards Mayfield, in the county of Sussex. Here the family lived in

opulence, and as befitted their rank, up to the close of the "War of the Roses," when through such misfortunes as overcame many others of the nobility, they were reduced in circumstances, and turned their attention to business pursuits. A descendant of Eleaz and John De Maies was John May, born at Mayfield, England, in 1590. In 1616 he came to America in the ship St. James, landing at Boston, and subsequently locating at Roxbury, Massachusetts, where the family lived for many years and where were born and reared some of its illustrious sons. John May here died in 1670. Colonel John May, a grandson of the American pioneer of the family, was a soldier in the Continental army of the revolutionary war; served as colonel in the First Massachusetts Regiment, and later did service under Rochambeau in the Rhode Island campaign. He was also a member of that band of patriots who composed the "tea party" in Boston harbor on that memorable December 16, 1773.

When Washington was but a straggling town, attractive only in location, Frederick May moved here from Roxbury, Massachusetts. He took up his residence in New Jersey avenue, on Capitol Hill, in what is now known as the "May residence," a place of historic interest, and still in good state of preservation.

Frederick May had six sons:

John Frederick May, Surgeon

Charles May, Colonel, 2nd Dragoons, U.S. Army

George May, Merchant at New Orleans

Hon. Henry May, Member of Congress and Lawyer

William May, U.S. Navy saw service in Mexico and South Pole Expedition

Julian May, Mounted Rifles, U.S. Army saw service in Mexican War

History of the Medical Society of D.C., 1811-1909

Born Nov. 16, 1773, Boston, Mass. M.B., 1795, M.D., 1811, Harvard. Incorporator of the Society under both charters; President Med. Assn., D.C., 1833-46. Father of Dr. John Frederick May and brother of Dr. Geo. W. May, *infra*. Died Jan. 23, 1847. Came to Washington in 1795. Physician to the Eastern Cholera Hospital in 1832; member of National Institute, Patholog. Society of Washington, and first Board of Health, Washington. In 1823, on the establishment of the Med. Dept. Columbian College, Washington, he was appointed Professor of Obstetrics. See Minutes Med. Society, Jan. 25, 1847, published in Boston Med. and Surg. Jour., 1847, XXXVI, p. 249; also Drake's Dict. Amer. Biog., 1872, p. 611; Busey's Reminiscences, p. 124.

Will of Frederick May, of Washington City, D.C. (dtd. Jan. 21, 1847, probated March 9, 1847; Book 6, pp. 122-123, Box 19)

My servant man Charles and my servant woman Harriet shall be free in 5 years after my decease.

Mary, the infant child of servant woman Harriet to be free at my decease, as well as further increase.

Servant boy John who is now about 12 years and 3 months old, to be free when he becomes 30 years of age.

Servants Charles and Harriet to children for and during their terms of servitude; boy John to dear and faithful friend Mary E. Waller or her children.

Wits.: Henry May; George W. Slacum