

SOME EPISODES IN THE HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING
OF THE MEDICAL COLLEGE OF THE STATE
UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

[The following brief account was written by Jno. P. Irish, who had a part in the founding of both the Law College and the Medical College of the State University of Iowa. Two letters by the same writer with regard to the founding of the Law College are printed in *THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, Vol. VIII, pp. 553-557.—EDITOR.]

Though the present interests and occupies men, and the future fixes their attention, the past, the field of the beginning of things, always fascinates. When we witness the remarkable development of the two great professional colleges of the University of Iowa, the Colleges of Law and Medicine, we think of their distant beginnings and of their early struggles, and would know how they came to be.

I have already written of the founding of the Law College, and of the causes that led to it. In dealing with it and with the Medical College I have to deal with my own part in the origin of both. My activities were inspired by a determination that Iowa should have a great University, and that it should not be starved to death by a combination of the many denominational colleges and academies of the State, whose managers mistakenly assumed that their place would be more secure if the University were weakened or even destroyed. There was a combat and its field was the primitive Iowa of a half century ago. The rescue of the University from its low condition required a call upon the taxpayers for support, and this put a strong weapon into the hands of its enemies. Its denominational rivals were supported by the voluntary contributions of the sects they represented. They drew nothing from the public revenues, and they were not to be blamed for using this as an argument that made a very powerful appeal to the taxpayers.

When I introduced the bill for the first appropriation to the University out of the State treasury, I was accused of intending to establish "an aristocracy of learning," at the expense of the taxpayers. After this opposition was overcome in the legislature, and the appropriation measure was passed, I was elected by the legislature a Trustee of the University. Believing that the battle for

the institution was only begun, I sought to strengthen it by securing the support of the professions of law and medicine through the establishment of a Department for each. In the case of the Medical Department there were peculiar difficulties in the way. In Keokuk was an established medical school, known as a branch of the State University. Its principal was Dr. Hughes, a powerful man, of attractive personality, and with great personal and political influence. He was able to enlist in his fighting force the graduates of his school and others of the profession all over the State.

Under these circumstances it was evident that the founding of a Medical Department would be a far more difficult undertaking than the creating of the Law Department.

The first steps were taken in my office. The Trustees of the University were Hon. Samuel Merrill, Governor of the State, Dr. James C. Black, President of the University, and Coker F. Clarkson, R. M. Burnett, H. C. Bulis, C. W. Slagle, C. W. Hobart, L. W. Ross, and John P. Irish.

The aim at the meeting in my office was to present to them a complete programme.

At the meeting were Dr. W. F. Peck, Prof. Gustavus Hinrichs, and myself. The Faculty then selected was:

Hon. Jno. F. Dillon, Professor of Medical Jurisprudence

Prof. Hinrichs, Chemistry

Dr. W. F. Peck, Surgery

Dr. P. J. Farnsworth, Materia Medica

Dr. J. H. Boucher, Anatomy

Dr. W. S. Robertson, Theory and Practice

Dr. J. F. Kennedy, Obstetrics

Dr. W. D. Middleton, Physiology

Dr. J. C. Shrader, Diseases of women and children.

Dr. Kennedy did not qualify, and in 1871 Dr. Clapp took the place of Dr. Boucher as Professor of Anatomy.

After long discussion and the disclosure of many misgivings, the Trustees endorsed this programme and the Department was founded. Much opposition, some of it very virulent, appeared in many parts of the State, and it was evident that the venture was to have a stormy road to go.

But at the opening a satisfactory number of students enrolled and the professors entered upon their work with zeal and industry. From the beginning the master spirit was Dr. Peck. He was

young, vigorous, and had had a large experience as an army surgeon during the Civil War. He had a rare capacity for leadership, for he always knew what to do next. Recalling that time of stress and strain, I am sure that the Department would have been wrecked early, without his courage and influence.

By the close of the year 1870 it had fought its way to calmer conditions, when suddenly it was struck by an almost fatal blow.

On the night of the 31st of December, 1870, I was roused from sleep in my room in the old Clinton House by a number of medical students, who told me that a grave in the local cemetery had been violated, that the cadaver was in the Department dissecting room and the sheriff was getting out a search warrant to break in and recover it. Instantly I saw that if it were found there the Department would be destroyed. I told the students to send one of them on horseback to the copse west of the University, and for the rest to pass the body out of the window of the dissecting room, consign it to the horseman and for him to ride into the country and conceal it in a safe place.

It was midnight, with a keen winter air. From my open window I heard the horse leave the stable and go to the rendezvous, and in due time heard his hoof beats cross the bridge and die away on the hard road west of the river. Within twenty minutes a crowd followed the sheriff down Clinton street, across the campus to the rooms of the Department in the old South Hall. Not sharing their disappointment at finding nothing, I retired and slept.

The body was that of a much respected elderly lady, a friend of mine, and the incident filled me with conflicting emotions. At that time there was no law in Iowa nor any western state, legalizing the possession of the human cadaver for dissection. In organizing the Department I had stipulated that such material should not be taken from the local graveyards. Yet the material must be had, for the surgeon must dissect the dead or mangle the living.

The next day the town was in a turmoil and I was the object of most heated and abusive attacks. The relatives of the dead lady sought me to say that if I would have the body returned, the incident would end as far as they were concerned. But I said they might later claim that I had guilty knowledge of the violation of the grave. This they solemnly promised not to do, and I dismissed them with the promise to try. Next I ordered the undertakers Nixon & Doe, in the old Metropolitan Hall building, where the

Hotel Jefferson now stands, to put a coffin at their back door at twenty minutes to twelve that night and take it in at twenty minutes after twelve. I then sent a letter to every one of the medical students ordering the body returned and put in that coffin, pledging them that no one would observe or disturb them. This was in order that I might not know who returned it. My instructions were obeyed. The body was again prepared for burial and duly returned to its sepulchre.

Then many leading papers of the State took up the sensation and demanded the abolition of the Medical Department and were re-enforced by the influence of Dr. Hughes and many members of the profession. In 1871, I was nominated for the third time for the legislature. In the midst of my campaign I was arrested for body-snatching, gave bail, and went on with my fight. The opposition went to the people asking if they wanted to be represented by a body-snatcher?

I proceeded to educate the people upon the needs of medical and surgical training and promised that if elected I would promote a bill for a law to legalize the use of the human cadaver for dissection. I was elected and in the ensuing session promoted the bill, that I believe is still the law of Iowa, and that has immensely benefited humanity by legalizing dissection. The student out of his present abundance of opportunity will look back upon all this as upon the dark ages.

But the pursuit did not end. A bill was introduced to legislate me off the Board of Trustees of the University by a reorganization. After beating this five times in the House, it finally passed by one vote and my official connection with the University ceased. A further attempt was made in the new Board to abolish the Medical Department, but it was beaten by the vote of Dr. Thatcher, who became President of the University upon the resignation of Dr. Black.

Now what was saved when the Medical Department was saved? All of the splendid results of its subsequent history; all of the benefit to suffering humanity by the University hospitals; all of the inestimable boon to deformed and distorted infancy conferred by the recent foundation for the treatment of deformity. There was saved an equipped Department to take advantage of bacteriology, and the splendid discovery by Lister of aseptic and antiseptic surgery; of the safety of laparotomy, of the use of the X-ray.

Of that Board of Trustees I am the only survivor. Of that first Faculty only Hinrichs and Clapp are yet living. But their works do follow them, and the University enjoys the solid support of the great healing profession of the State.

In all of the foregoing I have, of necessity, had to deal with my own part in this history. When I promoted the bill legalizing dissection, its opponents charged that I had not only established at Iowa City "an aristocracy of learning," to the impoverishment of the people, but now I proposed to follow them into the poor house and cut up their dead bodies, like slaughtered hogs. All this was faced by a steady and relentless discussion of the beneficence of surgery and its life saving office. If such an argument were powerful then, how irresistible is it now, with the safe expansion of surgery over fields wherein it would have been fatal then?

Verily Dr. Peck survives himself, and he should be commemorated by a tablet at the scene of his labors.

JNO. P. IRISH