



"Syndicate House" built circa 1728 on Dalton Road (Photo by Parkhurst)

Profile

Dr. John Call Dalton: Pioneer physiologist and college president

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

Ever since the town was incorporated in 1655, Chelmsford has always had one or more physicians to care for the health of its citizens, starting with the Rev. John Fiske, the first minister, who ministered to the physical as well as the spiritual needs of his parishioners. A few of these doctors have later achieved national, or international, renown but only one has been honored by being elected to the presidency of a prestigious medical school. He was Dr. John Call Dalton, Jr., who, in addition to a distinguished medical career, became the tenth president of Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons (P & S). Although he himself did not practice medicine here, he was the son of the family doctor for the residents of Chelmsford Center.

Remembered as America's first professor of physiology and author of a widely used textbook, Dr. Dalton spent his youth here. He was born in Chelmsford on Feb. 2, 1825, the son of Dr. John Call Dalton, Sr. and Julia Ann (Spaulding) Dalton, whose ancestors had been natives of this town since 1656 when Deacon Andrew Spaulding came.

The house in which Dr. J. C. Dalton, Jr. was born and raised still stands at the corner of North Road and Dalton Road. This Gothic style home had been built by Col. Simeon Spaulding, Dr. Dalton's great grandfather. In later years it was known as the "Syndicate House" because it was used as a place for rest and relaxation of employees of the telephone syndicate. The street passing to the south of the homestead was, at one time, called Syndicate Road but was officially given the name Dalton Road in honor of the Dalton family.

It is probable that Dr. Dalton received his early education at the "1802 Schoolhouse" located in the corner of Forefathers' Burying Ground since he lived in School District No. 1. He enrolled at an early age in Harvard College from which he graduated in 1844 when only 19.

Three years later he completed studies at Harvard Medical School. He worked for a while at the Boston Cholera Hospital during an epidemic and in 1850 went to Paris where he studied under Claude Bernard, the French physiologist who specialized in the nervous and digestive systems. When the young doctor said he "thought" a certain function must be so, Bernard exclaimed, "Think! Why think when you can experiment?" Dalton adopted this principle and devoted his life to experimental physiology and teaching. His medical students appreciated his demonstrations, lucid lectures, and colorfully illustrated "chalktalks."

After teaching at the University of Buffalo and Vermont Medical College, Dr. Dalton was appointed professor of physiology at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1855 and at Long Island College Hospital in 1859. The following year he published his famous treatise on "Human Physiology," for many years regarded as the outstanding textbook on the subject.

He was one of the first physicians to join the Union Army during the Civil War where he served as surgeon of the 7th New York regiment and later Brigade Surgeon of Volunteers. In 1864 he returned to P & S to continue his teaching and research. For several years he served as vice president of the New York Academy of Medicine and from 1883 to 1888 he was president of P & S.

Probably his greatest achievement was the introduction of the experimental method of teaching medicine. One of his contemporaries said of Professor Dalton that he had "the skill to make the difficult appear simple...the rare gift of making those who listened desire to become investigators. He made men think."

Dr. John Call Dalton was truly one of Chelmsford's illustrious sons.