

Early medicine had some modern ideas

By George A. Parkhurst

During the 331 year existence of the town of Chelmsford, medicine has undergone phenomenal changes, but are you aware of the part played by some of our local doctors?

One of these was Dr. Willard Parker who, because of his worldwide fame, was eulogized in "Harpers Weekly" at the time of his death a century ago (1884).

His youth was spent at the family homestead at 155 Boston Rd. His father, a farmer, was Jonathan (known as "Hill Jock") Parker, to distinguish him from his neighbor "Trooper Jock" Parker.

Willard received his early education at the 1802 Schoolhouse in the Center, where later he taught. He graduated from Harvard College in 1826 and received his M.D. in 1830.

Nine years later, he was named professor of surgery at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. According to Webster's "Biographical Dictionary," he was "reputedly the first American to operate successfully on an abscessed appendix."

Dr. Parker continued to maintain his house here and retained his interest in



Chelmsford until his death. He was the principal speaker at the dedication of the Revolutionary War Monument on the Common in 1859.

Another physician who achieved fame was Rufus Wyman, M.D. (1778-1842), who settled in Chelmsford in 1805, having received his M.D. degree from Harvard the previous year.

He lived in what was later known as the Timothy Adams House on the site of the present Town Office Building on Billerica Road. In addition to his duties as the local family doctor, he served as Town Moderator and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Chelmsford Classical School. When the McLean Asylum for the Insane was opened in Charlestown (now Somerville) in 1818, he relocated there as the first superintendent and physician.

Another Chelmsford boy who made a name for himself in the field of medicine was Dr. Rufus Wyman's son, Jeffries Wyman, who was born here in 1814.

He attended Phillips Exeter Academy and entered Harvard at the age of 15, graduating in 1833. Four years later he received his M.D. From 1847 to his death in 1874 he was Professor of Anatomy at Harvard, where he was instrumental in building up the Anatomical Museum. He was also curator of the Peabody Museum at Harvard from its organization in 1866.

It is interesting to note that much of the evidence presented at the famous trial of Professor Webster, who was accused of murdering Dr. Parkman, was based on the scientific investigations of Dr. Wyman.

Another, Dr. John Call Dalton, Jr., who was born in Chelmsford Feb. 2, 1825, is remembered as America's first professor of physiology, the author of a widely used textbook and the 10th president of the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

His father was Dr. John Call Dalton Sr., successor to Dr. Rufus Wyman as town doctor. They lived in the "Syndicate House" at the corner of North Road and Dalton Road — named in honor of this illustrious family. Probably the greatest achievement of the younger Dalton was the experimental method of teaching medicine. It was said 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."

In more recent times, Chelmsford was the residence, for a few years, of a woman doctor who achieved distinction in the medical academic world.

Dr Anna Q. Churchill was the recipient of degrees from Radcliffe and Smith Colleges as well as an M.D. from Tufts University.

At the time of her retirement in 1955, Dr. Churchill was Assistant Professor Emeritus of the School of Medicine and Dental Medicine at Tufts. She had joined the faculty there in 1918 and was believed to have been the first woman ever to have served on a medical school faculty.

A prize for undergraduates in biology was established at the college in her name. She lived at 88 Dalton Rd. in the 1950's.

Those were a few of our local doctors of the past.

George A. Parkhurst is a noted Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.

Town's churches have early beginnings