

1844-1994



Our

Medical

Heritage

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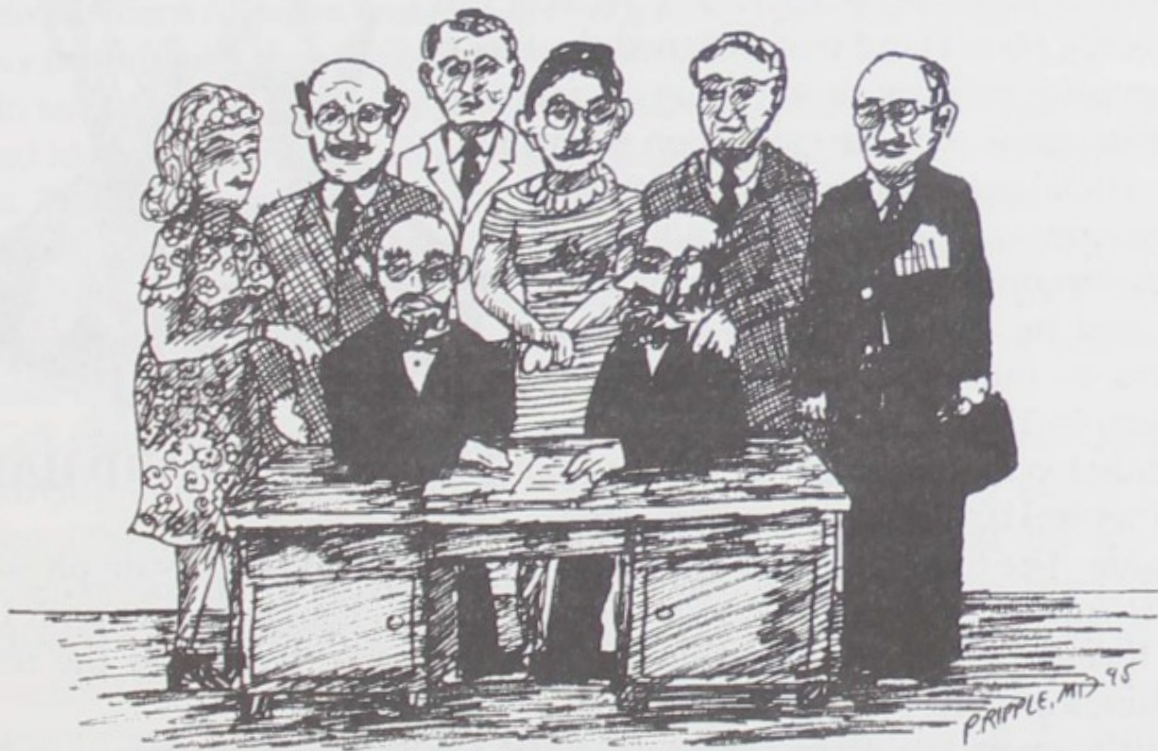


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Lancaster City & County Medical Society

Section 3

Prominent Physicians



Chapter 27

George Kerfoot, M.D.

When George Barrett Kerfoot graduated from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1830 the practice of medicine or the art of healing was remarkably open-ended. A wide variety of educational backgrounds with an equally wide variety of conflicting medical theories were represented in the profession. Physicians who had graduated from respectable medical schools were known as "regular" physicians; those who had little schooling in the art and science of medicine were "practitioners." Both competed for patients, and somehow they got by without a formal code of ethics. In time these distinctions blurred.

It was in this milieu that George Barrett Kerfoot began his practice in Lancaster. Full of vigor and creativity, Kerfoot brought both a well-schooled and open mind to the art of healing. He knew that his Jefferson education was valuable and yet he sought insights beyond the medical establishment.

Kerfoot was born May 25, 1808 in Dublin, Ireland, to Richard and Christian Barrett Kerfoot. Richard came to Philadelphia, and then to Lancaster in 1818. The following year the rest of the family joined him in Lancaster. George's younger brother, John, became the first Episcopal bishop of Pittsburgh. In Lancaster the Kerfoots were members of St. James's Episcopal Church.

Dr. Samuel Humes, the family's physician, noticed "the brightness of the lad" and "induced his mother to allow him to enter his office." Thus at age fifteen George Kerfoot began to study with, arguably, Lancaster's most eminent healer. After serving an apprenticeship with Dr. Humes, and acquiring a good classical education, Kerfoot enrolled at Jefferson Medical College. When he returned to Lancaster, not quite twenty-one years old, to establish his medical practice, he was full of ideas, full of himself, and spring-loaded to make a major impact on the small community. Lancaster physicians, holding degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and Jefferson were a surprisingly large group. Eighteen doctors were available to treat a town of 7,704 persons. Kerfoot faced stiff competition.



DR. GEORGE KERFOOT

One way that Kerfoot chose to distinguish himself was by presenting public lectures on science, anatomy, and physiology. He opened an anatomical hall, and spoke frequently at the Lancaster Lyceum, arguing that "in this republican age all should study anatomy." Furthermore he believed knowl-

edge of science would serve as an excellent defense against quackery. Kerfoot's intense interest in anatomy and physiology may explain his predisposition to accept phrenology as a science and to defend it vigorously in his lectures.

Kerfoot's wide-ranging studies even considered the difficulty in determining when a newly born child is legitimate in the eyes of the law. This was important in the time when inheritance was based on legitimacy of heirs.

The study of Mesmerism occupied Kerfoot, and resulted in "A Lecture of Magnetism" delivered to the Lancaster Lyceum. Kerfoot denied being either an advocate or foe of Mesmerism, but he did criticize those who refused to approach the matter with open minds.

Dr. Kerfoot's most unusual means for reaching the public was Anatomical Hall on South Queen Street. Opened in 1833 the hall featured paintings, busts, diagrams and anatomical specimens. A course on anatomy was offered and Kerfoot promised this would include a study of the craniums of several prominent individuals for signs of moral depravity. As fascinating as this may sound, Lancastrians, beyond initial curiosity, did not support the enterprise and keep it open. Kerfoot attributed this to the misconception that the study of anatomy was just for medical students. Of course, half of his potential customers were lost to the social constraints of the 1830s that excluded women from the study. He reopened the hall in 1837, and the second effort was more successful. Medical students were charged \$10 for the course; others \$5.00. Single lectures cost 20 cents. It would appear Kerfoot gave up the lectures in 1843, the same time he closed his drug store and gave up the promotion of patent medicines. Kerfoot's many advertisements in the newspapers - occasionally as many as ten ads in one issue - offered for sale in addition to the patent medicines such items as surgical instruments, stomach pumps, brass and silver lancets, and dental instruments.

When Henry Kobler Musselman was sentenced to be hanged in 1838 Dr. Kerfoot paid him five dollars for the right to experiment upon his dead body. Reportedly a large number of physicians attended anatomical hall to observe the experimentation in which breathing was simulated and nervous reaction to stimulation by galvanic battery was conducted.

After Dr. Kerfoot closed his drug store, ended the lectures, and ceased his much-publicized experimentation he pursued a more conservative medical practice. He died in 1851. The question of why Dr. Kerfoot suddenly changed to a more conservative style between 1843 and 1851 offers several interesting possibilities. One would be the influence of the medical societies now beginning to appear. The Lancaster City and County Medical Society was organized in 1844. Dr. Kerfoot was sufficiently well connected with the medical establishment to know that medical societies were being organized, and when organized, practices once deemed quasi-acceptable would be condemned.

Adapted from an article that appeared in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. CXVI (1952).