

1844-1994



Our

Medical

Heritage

1844-1994



Our Medical Heritage

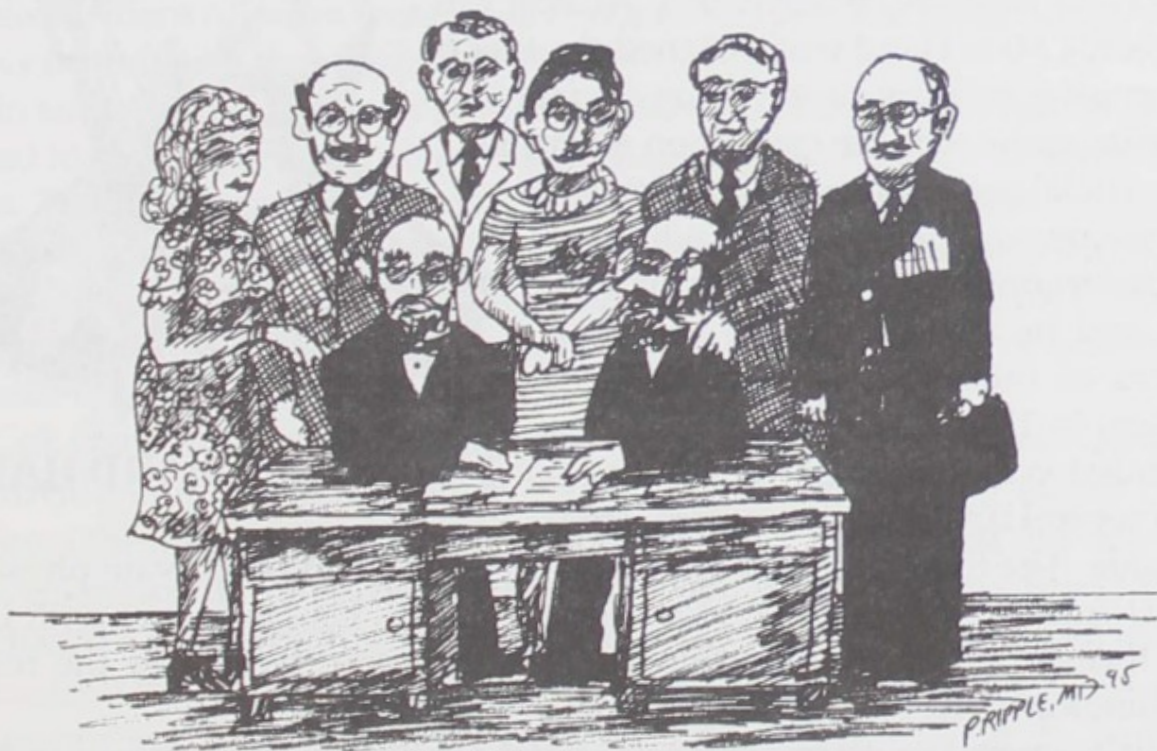


© 1995

Lancaster City & County Medical Society

Section 3

Prominent Physicians



Chapter 28
Jonathan Foltz, M.D.
19th Century Surgeon in the U.S. Navy

Over 160 years ago in 1831, Jonathan Messersmith Foltz was one of five candidates recommended to President Andrew Jackson for commissioning as an assistant surgeon in the U. S. Navy. Dr. Foltz walked almost 100 miles from Lancaster, Pa. along the dusty roads to Washington to present his petition, with a recommendation from James Buchanan, to receive his commission from President Jackson at the White House.

In April 1831, Jonathan Foltz launched a career that was to be filled with adventure and introduction to, and sometimes comradery with, famous personages of his day. He saw Queen Victoria as a young lady; he was the attending physician at the Cilley-Graves duel, a duel that was to put an end to this dangerous activity in this country. He chatted with Abraham Lincoln, became a personal friend of Samuel F. B. Morse, and lent money to Edgar Allan Poe; he provided medical attention to James Polk and James Buchanan. He met Napoleon III, Dom Pedro, the Duke of Wellington, President Zachary Taylor and other famous personages. He rose to the position of Surgeon-General of the U.S. Navy under President Ulysses S. Grant.

Jonathan Foltz was born in Lancaster on April 25, 1810, and graduated from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1830.

In 1831, practically all ships were sailing ships and the steamboat was a novelty. His first naval assignment after his commissioning was aboard the frigate, *Potomac*, with Commodore Downes in command. They sailed for Sumatra from New York via Rio de Janeiro and around the Cape of Good Hope. The ship departed from New York on August 19, 1831 and arrived off the Sumatra coast on January 31, 1832. The purpose of this mission was to punish the pirates of Malay in one of our long forgotten little wars.

Whenever the Navy was not in need of his services, he practiced part-time in Washington. During this time, he became friends with Edgar Allen Poe and Samuel F. B. Morse.

In 1839, he was assigned to the *Great Western* steamship under Captain Hoskins. The wharves and every ship and all of the windows along the East River and Battery were crowded with people to see the unusual sailing of a ship powered by steam as they departed amid the roar of artillery. Their destination was Bristol, England to be followed by the island of Minorca.

Assistant Surgeon Foltz served in the War with Mexico in which sea power was of considerable value. After his involvement in that war, he became ill and went to Newport to recuperate. While he was there, James Buchanan, then Secretary of State, sent for him to come to Washington to care for a personal medical problem.

Scurvy had appeared in the Gulf (of Mexico) Fleet, and in 1848 the *American Journal of Medical Sciences* published "Report on Scorbutus" by Dr. Jonathan Foltz telling about the effect this malady had on our naval forces.

In strange contrast to his hectic days on the Mexican coast, he returned to Lancaster. While attending the Moravian Church the young physician looked at the "two pew-family" near him. The family was headed by the hardware merchant, John F. Steinman. Jonathan noted how the children had grown, especially the daughters. With one of them, dark-eyed and black-haired

Rebecca, he immediately fell in love. In spite of the fact she would not look his way that Sunday morning, he did manage to meet her and they were married several years later in June, 1854.



DR. JONATHAN M. FOLTZ

In 1848, President Polk requested that Dr. Foltz accompany him as his medical advisor to Bedford Springs Hotel in Bedford, Pa. The President had some respiratory problems and sought a rest and reprieve from his weighty problems in order to improve his health. Although he did survive his term as President, he died three months after its completion.

Dr. Foltz maintained a close relationship with James Buchanan. After Mr. Buchanan was elected President of the United States, he accompanied the President-elect to Washington to choose his cabinet and prepare for his presidency. James Buchanan stayed at the National Hotel against the advice of many. While there, he and some of the other notable guests became ill. Dr. Jonathan Foltz was kept busy caring for the President-elect and some of the other guests. James Buchanan became alarmed about his condition and sent for his personal physician, Dr. Henry Carpenter, in Lancaster. Dr. Carpenter spent one week with the President-elect until he had recovered.

This was Washington and this incident prompted an investigation, even in those days. Several conclusions emerged. One was that the hotel had been having trouble with rats, and the management had used arsenic to poison the rats. The hotel guests drank water from a cistern in which dead, poisoned rats were found. Another report said that Vice-President Breckenridge was pro-slavery and many people would have preferred him as president.

During the early months of Buchanan's presidency, Dr. Foltz often stayed at the White House at the president's insistence. Jonathan Foltz frequently advised the president of the unfavorable reactions to his policies, and became very frustrated with his timorous shifty weakness. As a result their friendship suffered. In 1850, several years prior to his election to the highest office of the land, James Buchanan had confided to Dr. Foltz during a walk around Wheatland, "There will be two Republics. Maryland and Delaware

will join the North and there will be no civil war or insurrection."

During the Civil War, Surgeon Foltz was the Fleet Surgeon for Admiral Farragut and this fleet fought many battles on the Mississippi River. Dr. Foltz was kept feverishly busy carrying out his medical responsibilities for a fleet of more than 40 vessels and over 7000 men. They attacked and conquered many Confederate fortifications including Fort Jackson, Chalmette at New Orleans, Port Hudson and Vicksburg. People at Natchez watched this armada sail up the Mississippi River toward Vicksburg. Although more than 3000 robust sailors were in the fight at Vicksburg, 200 were killed, and one officer said that he would be unable to produce 1000 men that could parade after the battle.

In the spring of 1867, Admiral David Farragut asked his former Fleet Surgeon to be his Fleet Surgeon to cross the Atlantic Ocean. On board the newest steamship, *Franklin*, his exciting career would end with a cruise to the Old World where European rulers vied with one another to honor our flag and Admiral Farragut, one of the heroes of the War between the States.

In June 1871, Surgeon Foltz was commissioned Medical Director of the Navy and in October of that year, he was called to Washington and appointed Surgeon-General of the Navy and Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery by President Ulysses S. Grant. He retired in 1873 and in March 1874, he delivered an address to the alumni of his alma mater, Jefferson Medical College. In the summer of 1875 he was completely disabled by the painful malady from which he finally died on April 2, 1877.