

Dr. John Bowman: Planning a Life in Medicine

Lancaster Medical Heritage Museum Oral History Series

At ninety-four years of age, Dr. John Bowman remains a gifted storyteller. Seated in his Lancaster County home, he recalls nearly a century of family history, medical education, service, and surgical innovation with remarkable clarity. His memories span from Depression-era Ephrata to the Navajo Nation in Arizona, from the halls of Jefferson Medical College and the Mayo Clinic to a distinguished ophthalmology practice in Lancaster.

Throughout the conversation, one theme emerges repeatedly: thoughtful preparation. It is the lesson Dr. Bowman returns to when reflecting on his life and career.

“Plan your occupation, plan the place where you want to live, plan your future very carefully,” he says. “You may have to make some changes but plan it well.”

Deep Roots in Lancaster County

The Bowman family’s connection to Lancaster County stretches back more than three centuries. Family tradition traces their origins to Switzerland, from which they migrated to colonial Pennsylvania in 1709. Eventually, the family settled near present-day Ephrata along the Cocalico Creek. By the time John Bowman was born in 1932, generations of Bowmans had lived, farmed, and worked in the region. Growing up in Ephrata, he enjoyed a childhood that would be familiar to many Lancaster Countians of his era. Summers were spent fishing and swimming in the creek, while winters brought skating, sledding, and skiing on former family farmland. The landscape itself became an important part of his education.

“I was very fortunate,” he recalls. “I could just walk a block and a half and be on the (historic) family property.”

His family history was not merely a matter of genealogy. The old Bowman farm, historic homes, and local landmarks connected him directly to Lancaster County’s colonial past. Those roots remained important to him throughout his life, even as medicine eventually took him far from home.

A Calling Toward Medicine

Bowman attended Ephrata High School and graduated in 1950. Strong interests in science and mathematics led him to enroll at Moravian College, where he pursued chemistry and biology while preparing for medical school. Although medicine seemed a natural choice in retrospect, he credits several influences for guiding him toward the profession. Among them was a cousin, Dr.

Jacob Brubaker, a Jefferson Medical College graduate who served during World War II. Conversations about medicine and military service left a lasting impression.

During his college years, Bowman worked summers in a coal and lumber yard in Denver, Pennsylvania. The work was physically demanding but helped support his education.

“There was never a period of time when there was nothing to do,” he remembers. “If I wasn’t loading lumber, I was shoveling coal.”

The experience reinforced habits of discipline and perseverance that would later serve him well in medicine.

Jefferson Medical College

Following graduation from Moravian College in 1954, Bowman entered Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. Like many medical students of the era, he faced a demanding curriculum that required complete commitment. At Jefferson, anatomy was taught with particular rigor. Bowman vividly recalls faculty members whose questioning could leave students trembling. Yet he loved the challenge.

“I enjoyed medical school. I thoroughly did.”

While studying medicine, he married his childhood sweetheart. Together they navigated the financial realities of professional education, living modestly while pursuing their respective careers. Bowman also began developing what would become one of his defining professional strengths: taking careful patient histories. To earn additional income, he spent Sundays at Chester Hospital performing preoperative histories and physical examinations. The work taught him a lesson he never forgot.

“Your history is going to lead you into the right diagnosis.”

Decades later, he would still regard the medical interview as one of the physician’s most important tools.

Learning Medicine on the Navajo Nation

Bowman graduated from Jefferson in 1958 and, after completing his internship at Lancaster General Hospital, he joined the United States Public Health Service. Rather than seek a prestigious urban assignment, he requested placement where he could practice as much medicine as possible.

The Public Health Service sent him to Fort Defiance, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation. It proved to be one of the most formative experiences of his career. At only twenty-eight years old, Bowman found himself serving in a major referral hospital that cared for Navajo, Hopi, and Zuni patients from across the Southwest. The clinical experience was extraordinary. Physicians routinely

treated everything from trauma and infectious disease to obstetrical emergencies and chronic illnesses. Equally important were the cultural lessons.

Many patients preferred speaking Navajo, and Bowman quickly realized that effective care required communication. With help from local nurses, he learned key Navajo phrases that allowed him to greet patients, conduct examinations, and build trust.

“I could do an examination without an interpreter helping me,” he recalled proudly.

The experience broadened his understanding of medicine beyond technical expertise. It taught him that listening and communication were often just as important as diagnosis and treatment.

Discovering Ophthalmology

Bowman originally expected to become a general practitioner. While at Fort Defiance, however, he met visiting ophthalmologists whose influence changed the course of his career. One physician from the Mayo Clinic encouraged him to consider ophthalmology and advanced specialty training. The suggestion resonated.

Bowman eventually entered residency training at the Mayo Clinic, where he spent three years immersed in one of the world’s premier medical institutions. There he encountered exceptional teachers, cutting-edge research, and a culture of clinical excellence. One moment stood out.

After presenting a particularly complex patient with thyroid eye disease, Bowman received praise from a senior physician who described his workup as one of the finest histories and physical examinations he had ever seen. The compliment validated years of effort and reinforced a principle Bowman already believed deeply: careful listening remains the foundation of good medicine.

Bringing Modern Ophthalmology to Lancaster

Following his Mayo Clinic training, Bowman returned home to Lancaster County and established an ophthalmology practice in 1965. The decades that followed coincided with a period of remarkable technological transformation in eye surgery. During his career, cataract surgery evolved from large-incision procedures requiring extended recovery periods to increasingly sophisticated techniques that dramatically improved patient outcomes. Bowman embraced innovation while maintaining high standards of patient care.

He trained in emerging cataract techniques and was among the early ophthalmologists in Lancaster to adopt phacoemulsification technology pioneered by Dr. Charles Kelman. Community support played an important role in making these advances possible. The Lancaster Lions Club helped fund the acquisition of expensive surgical equipment, allowing Lancaster patients access to state-of-the-art care close to home. Looking back, Bowman viewed these developments as evidence that medicine is always changing.

“Things do change,” he reflected. “And you have to be ready for it.”

Bowman shared his expertise with the community and dedicated hours of board membership time and service to the Lancaster Association of the Blind, now Vision Corps of Lancaster.

History and Genealogy

While practicing medicine, Bowman joined a group of physicians dedicated to acquiring and preserving medical artifacts for future display and interpretation. Recognizing that the collection told important stories about healthcare in Lancaster County, they formalized their efforts to preserve and share that history. As awareness of the project grew, significant donations arrived from organizations and private collections. The expanding collection required extensive cataloging and several relocations. It was first housed in the basement of the Medical Bureau of Lancaster, then moved to a warehouse on Marshall Avenue, and later to another facility in the Burle Business Park on New Holland Avenue. These efforts ultimately led to the establishment of the Lancaster Medical Heritage Museum, now located on North Lime Street near Lancaster General Hospital.

Bowman’s interest in Lancaster history included the story of his own origins. By researching the Pennsylvania Archives at the Lancaster County Historical Society and records housed in the basement of the County Courthouse, he documented his family’s Swiss lineage.

One ancestor, John Bowman, emigrated from Switzerland to the Palatinate region of Germany before arriving in Philadelphia at the age of nine. In 1737, he secured a patent for 212 acres in the northwestern portion of present-day Ephrata Township. His son Daniel was born in 1737 and was a member of the Lancaster County Militia during the American Revolution. Along with documentation of two other ancestors who were listed as members of the Pennsylvania Militia, he joined the Pennsylvania Society Sons of the Revolution. Through that organization, he participated in recruitment efforts and programs honoring the sacrifices of Revolutionary-era patriots.

Community, Family, Travel, and Retirement

Outside medicine, Bowman also remained active in a variety of civic and social organizations, including Lancaster Country Club, Lamberton Lodge No. 476, the Tucquan Club of Lancaster, the Lancaster Pirates, and the Slumbering Groundhog Lodge of Quarryville. He enjoyed fly fishing and once held an amateur radio license.

Bowman devoted himself to family life. He and his wife raised three children - John Douglas, Lisa Anne, and Charles Edmund - and shared a love of travel that continued long after retirement. The couple explored America extensively, crossing the country multiple times by automobile. Rather than focusing on major highways and tourist destinations, they preferred

back roads, small towns, and conversations with local residents. Retirement at age sixty-five marked the end of surgery but not of learning.

He joined the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania as a volunteer in visitor services, where he enjoyed interacting with fellow railroad enthusiasts. He studied the museum's locomotives and railroad cars in order to become an effective and engaging tour guide. Following his retirement from the museum, he donated his extensively researched histories of the museum's rolling stock to its archives.

Bowman remained intellectually curious, continued reading widely, and enjoyed reflecting on the many changes he had witnessed in medicine and society.

Lessons from a Lifetime

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Dr. Bowman's oral history is the consistency of his message. Whether discussing colonial ancestors, medical school, service on the Navajo Nation, or advances in cataract surgery, he repeatedly returns to the value of preparation and thoughtful decision-making. He encourages young physicians to keep an open mind, explore different specialties, and seek work that brings genuine satisfaction. Most importantly, he urges them to listen.

The patient, he believes, will often tell you exactly what is wrong—if only you take the time to hear the story. For a physician whose career spanned more than four decades and whose life has encompassed nearly a century of Lancaster County history, it is a fitting conclusion. Technology changes. Treatments evolve. Medical knowledge expands.

But the art of listening remains.

This profile is based on an oral history interview conducted for the Lancaster Medical Heritage Museum as part of its effort to preserve the stories of physicians who shaped healthcare in Lancaster County.