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GEORGE BEN JOHNSTON

BY BEVERLY R. TUCKER, M.D., RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

DR. GEORGE BEN JOHNSTON was born July 25, 1853, in Tazewell, Virginia. His ancestors were noted pioneers, honored statesmen, famous warriors, and distinguished physicians. His mother, Nicketti Buchanan Floyd, was the daughter of Dr. John Floyd, who was a physician of prominence as well as a governor of Virginia. Dr. Johnston's father was Honorable John W. Johnston, United States senator from Virginia. To these may be added many illustrious relatives, among them Patrick Henry, who was a great-great uncle, and General Joseph E. Johnston of Confederate fame.

Born of this brilliant and sturdy stock and reared among the mountains of southwest Virginia, where the Alleghanies mound in foliage-covered ranges high toward the heavens, or suddenly break into wonderful gaps through which some clear stream works its way toward the ocean after giving liquid sustenance to beautiful and fertile bluegrass valleys, George Ben Johnston grew strong in mind, body, and soul.

In youth, Dr. Johnston's associates were whomever he might happen to meet in a day's journey. He was the intimate friend of the village blacksmith, the mountain trapper and hunter, the town wag and the county scapegoat, as well as of the dignitaries.

The boys of the mountains mostly settled their own disputes and difficulties either by a certain kind of embryo politics or by fist fighting. Young Ben Johnston—he was never called George or Benjamin—was an expert at both. Equipped with a fine memory, splendid reasoning power, patience, deliberateness and withal great attractiveness, sympathy, and far-sightedness, he naturally became a leader in matters open to argument. Handsome, well knit, strong, quick, and fearless, there were but few that could equal him in physical skill or endurance. Although not a quarrel picker he had many Anglo-Saxon fist fights.

Dr. Johnston's education was begun at the Abingdon Academy. Later he went to St. Vincent's, in Wheeling, West Virginia. From St. Vincent's he went to the University of Virginia. Here, for two years, he took academic work and then, following his natural bent, he devoted his third year to the study of medicine. Leaving the University of Virginia he went to the University of the City of New York to finish his medical education, and there he received his degree in

medicine in 1876, at the age of twenty-three. During the following two years he practiced medicine in Abingdon, being associated with Dr. E. M. Campbell, a physician of wide reputation. He left Abingdon in 1878 and settled in Richmond, where he spent the remainder of his life.

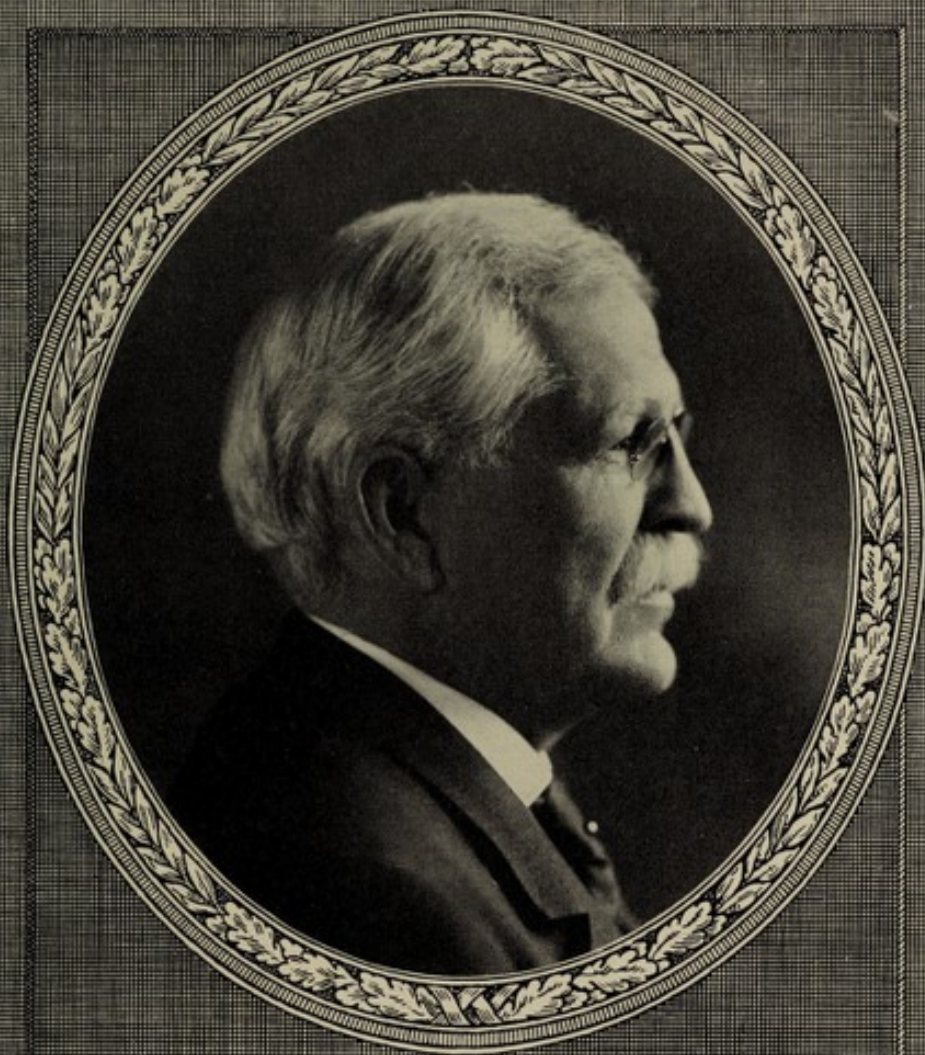
From this time on his reputation grew until he became recognized as one of the foremost surgeons of America. In 1879 he performed the first operation in Virginia under "Listerism." He contributed to Keen's *System of Surgery*, Bryant and Buck's *System of Surgery*, and wrote many conspicuous papers, among them being "The Treatment of Osteomyelitis of the Tibia," "Fixation of the Kidney," and "A Description and Report of Cases of the Operation of Splenectomy," and with Dr. Murat Willis he devised and published the Johnston-Willis operation for suspension of the uterus. These and other papers have been extensively quoted.

Dr. Johnston was a born surgeon who, with wonderful energy, vast resourcefulness, and a tremendous practice, kept himself not only abreast but ahead of the times. He did but few exploratory operations. He used every means of his splendid clinical instinct to make a diagnosis, and he was one of the first men in the South freely to call specialists in consultation. In his operations he was deliberate, skillful, astute, and thorough.

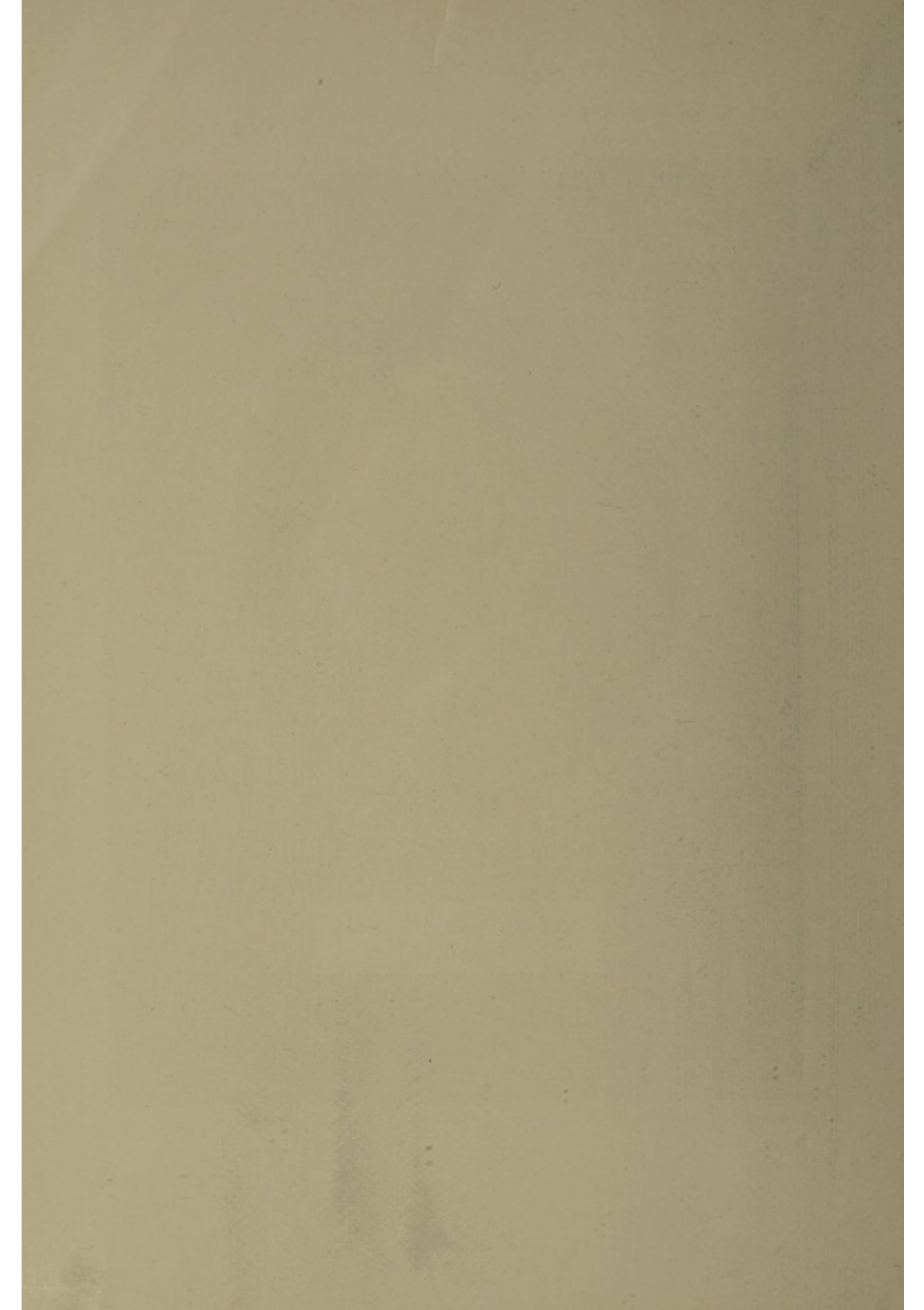
Dr. Johnston was, at various times, president of the American Surgical Association, president of the Southern Surgical and Gynecological Association, president of the Norfolk and Western Railway Surgeons' Association, president of the Richmond Academy of Medicine and Surgery, president of the Medical Society of Virginia, a member of the House of Delegates and of the Judicial Council of the American Medical Association, delegate from the American Surgical Association to the International Medical Congress at Madrid in 1903, delegate of the United States to the International Periodical Gynecological Congress in 1896, and had many other honors bestowed upon him. In 1905 he was elected professor of surgery and head of the medical department of the University of Virginia, at Charlottesville, which position, however, he did not accept.

Dr. Johnston was connected with the Medical College of Virginia in various subsidiary capacities until 1884, when he was elected professor of anatomy. In 1893 he was made professor of didactic and clinical surgery; in 1896 this title was changed to professor of surgery and clinical surgery; in 1907 to professor of gynecology and abdominal surgery; later, to professor of abdominal surgery; and when the amalgamation with the University College of Medicine was effected, he was elected professor of surgery, which chair he resigned two years before his death to become a member of the Board of Visitors of the Medical College of Virginia.

He early saw the necessity of a hospital for teaching purposes, and in 1893 he established the Hospital of the Medical College of Virginia, afterward the Old



GEORGE BEN JOHNSTON
1853-1916



Dominion Hospital. Soon the necessity for a larger and better equipped hospital became recognized and he interested Mr. John L. Williams, and organized and built the Memorial Hospital. Dr. Johnston always thought that a negro hospital was to be desired in Richmond, and he lent his influence in every possible way to a campaign which was successful in raising \$250,000 for a seven story negro hospital and contagious pavillion connected with the Memorial Hospital. He also organized the hospital department of the City Home of Richmond.

In 1909 he and Dr. Murat Willis, built the Johnston-Willis Sanatorium, a hospital for their private surgical practice. As outgrowths of this hospital, the Abingdon Hospital was established in 1910, and the Park View Hospital in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, was organized in 1914. Thus to this one man's instrumentality, five active hospitals owe their existence.

In leadership Dr. Johnston was strong and expected loyalty as he gave loyalty, but he never made unreasonable demands and he fought in the open. Defeat meant to him simply an incentive toward further and more patient effort and the knowledge that he must plan more infallibly, for he knew that if his object was worthy and his plans were correct, success must eventually be his. When his object was achieved, there was no dividing of the spoils, no blare of trumpets, but simply a readjustment to suit the new order of things so that still greater accomplishments might be planned.

Dr. Johnston was a handsome man; in fact, he was unusually distinguished looking. About average in height, his bearing was such that he gave the impression of being taller than he really was. His head was splendidly shaped and his hair, brown and wavy in early life, gray in mid-life, and white later, grew gracefully about his broad, fine brow. His features were regular and clear cut, and he wore a short mustache. His face and forehead were seamed with lines of care, but his complexion was ruddy and his expression extremely mobile. There was no hiding his feelings behind a mask, but he had a way of concealing his thoughts by a quizzical expression, so that one could never tell what question he was going to ask or what he was about to say. As he walked the streets in Richmond, he knew every other person he met, never having forgot their faces and rarely their names. To many he had been their physician, or had rendered them some service, which gave a somewhat intimate personal touch to his greeting.

Dr. Johnston had a high pitched voice which added piquancy to his conversation and probably made one pay closer attention because of its distinctiveness, but which kept him from being a forceful public speaker. In speech he was deliberate, in statement accurate, in argument conclusive, and it has been truthfully said of him that he was "powerful in counsel." His courtly and gracious manner, his distinguished appearance and elegance of poise were such that, upon his entrance, he immediately became the center of attraction of nearly any gathering, and men instinctively paid him deference. His stories, anecdotes, and say-

ings his friends will never forget, but only one may be mentioned here. During one of the sessions of the Virginia Legislature a very undesirable osteopath bill came up for committee hearing. Ex-Governor Charles T. O'Farrell was attorney for the osteopaths and Dr. Johnston represented the interests of the medical profession. During his speech Ex-Governor O'Farrell stated that the medical profession built a fence around itself which was *horse high, bull strong, and pig tight*, and he repeated this phrase time and again. When Dr. Johnston arose he ignored all the rest of his opponent's speech and responded in his quizzical and deliberate way, in his high pitched voice, "Yes, gentlemen, it is perfectly true that the medical profession builds a fence around itself which is horse high, bull strong, and pig tight, but it is with no idea of excluding those who can enter through its scientific gates, but simply to keep the jackasses out." He sat down and the bill was killed in the committee.

With an inexhaustible fund of information gathered from an active life full of experiences, and with a deep insight into human nature, he was always an instructive and interesting conversationalist.

Dr. Johnston had an enormous surgical practice and a most grateful clientele. As he went from room to room making his rounds, it was a rare treat to see him infuse the radiance of his wonderful personality into the sick room. A few perfectly chosen words from him would change the whole attitude of a patient from dejection to hope or from despair to resignation. Possessing a vision almost prophetic, with advice, encouragement, and assistance, he guided many a medical career through college, through hospital and special training, to the fruition of a large and useful practice. His time, his labor, his resourcefulness and his influence were ever at the disposal of those who wished them.

Previous to the last few years of his life, Dr. Johnston had been in practically perfect health, and except for an attack of catarrhal jaundice he had never been in bed a day. The feeling of either mental or physical fatigue was almost unknown to him and he had rarely taken a dose of medicine.

Several years before his death Dr. Johnston began to suffer from angina and frequently he would have an attack and turn and walk to the window or stop on the street to look at something and take a nitroglycerine tablet in such a way that those who were with him did not know that he was in the least uncomfortable. He would often tell his intimates: "God bless the man who invented nitroglycerine!" He was on his feet to within a few weeks of his death, which occurred on December 20, 1916. His wife and four daughters survived him. The whole state mourned its loss and it has been written of him—

"No duty could overtask him,
"No need his will outrun,
"And ere our lips could ask him,
"His hands the work had done."