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WASHINGTON F. PECK

BY D. S. FAIRCHILD, M.D., DES MOINES, IOWA

DR. W. F. PECK was born in Galen, Wayne County, New York, January 22, 1841, and died at his home in Davenport, Iowa, December 12, 1891.

Dr. Peck received a common school education and with this rather limited preliminary education, matriculated in Bellevue Hospital Medical College, from which he graduated with the degree of doctor of medicine in 1863. After a year of interne service at Bellevue Hospital, he located in Davenport and engaged in general practice. By a process of evolution he gradually entered the field of general surgery for which he seemed particularly fitted.

Recognizing the limitations of his literary and professional training and being a man of great energy and high ambition, Dr. Peck availed himself of every opportunity to improve his mental equipment and his medical and surgical knowledge. The opportunities were not great and to the end of his life it could not be said of him that he was a learned man in the sense of our present day standards of surgery, but on the basis of natural endowments, self-reliance, and courage, he reached a high place.

Dr. Peck was gifted, to an unusual degree, with organizing and executive ability and early became identified with the development of local medical activities. Among his first positions he served as secretary of the county medical society and through him this society soon reached a state of activity. He felt the necessity of an organized hospital and materially aided in the founding of Mercy Hospital at Davenport, and later Mercy Hospital at Iowa City. Up to 1869, when Mercy Hospital was organized at Davenport, all his surgical work was done in private homes, often under the most unfavorable conditions.

In 1850 a medical school known as the College of Physicians and Surgeons, was organized at Keokuk, and had by various means become recognized as the medical department of the Iowa State University. This relation was only nominal, as was so often the case at that time, but the Keokuk school could never secure substantial aid from the State, although it had a nominal recognition from the legislature. The failure on the part of the Keokuk school to secure the status of an integral department recognition led Dr. Peck, as early as 1866, to agitate a plan for the organization of a real medical department to be located at Iowa City—the home of the University—with as close a relationship as possible. With the

aid of Judge John F. Dillon, himself a medical graduate, the medical department was organized in 1868, with Dr. Peck as dean and professor of surgery.

Dr. Peck's ambition was now realized in a very substantial manner. The University had difficulties in securing adequate appropriations for ordinary purposes even, and was too poor to help the medical school in any substantial manner, and the department was obliged to depend upon student fees largely, and to a man of less determination than Dr. Peck, the undertaking would have been most discouraging. There were, however, some personal compensations. The position as head of the medical school and professor of surgery were of no little value in developing his plan of devoting himself to the practice of surgery exclusively; he soon became recognized as the foremost surgeon in Iowa and calls came from all parts of the State for difficult operations. His reputation as an organizer and as a skillful surgeon secured him the position as chief surgeon of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railway Company in 1875, a position he held to the time of his death, being the first Chief Surgeon. This position was of material advantage also in extending his influence with a large staff of subordinate surgeons. Thus we see him holding two of the most important surgical positions in the State. No class of surgical undertakings practiced at that time were beyond his reach. He early began to do abdominal operations, at a time when but few of these operations were practiced outside the larger medical centers.

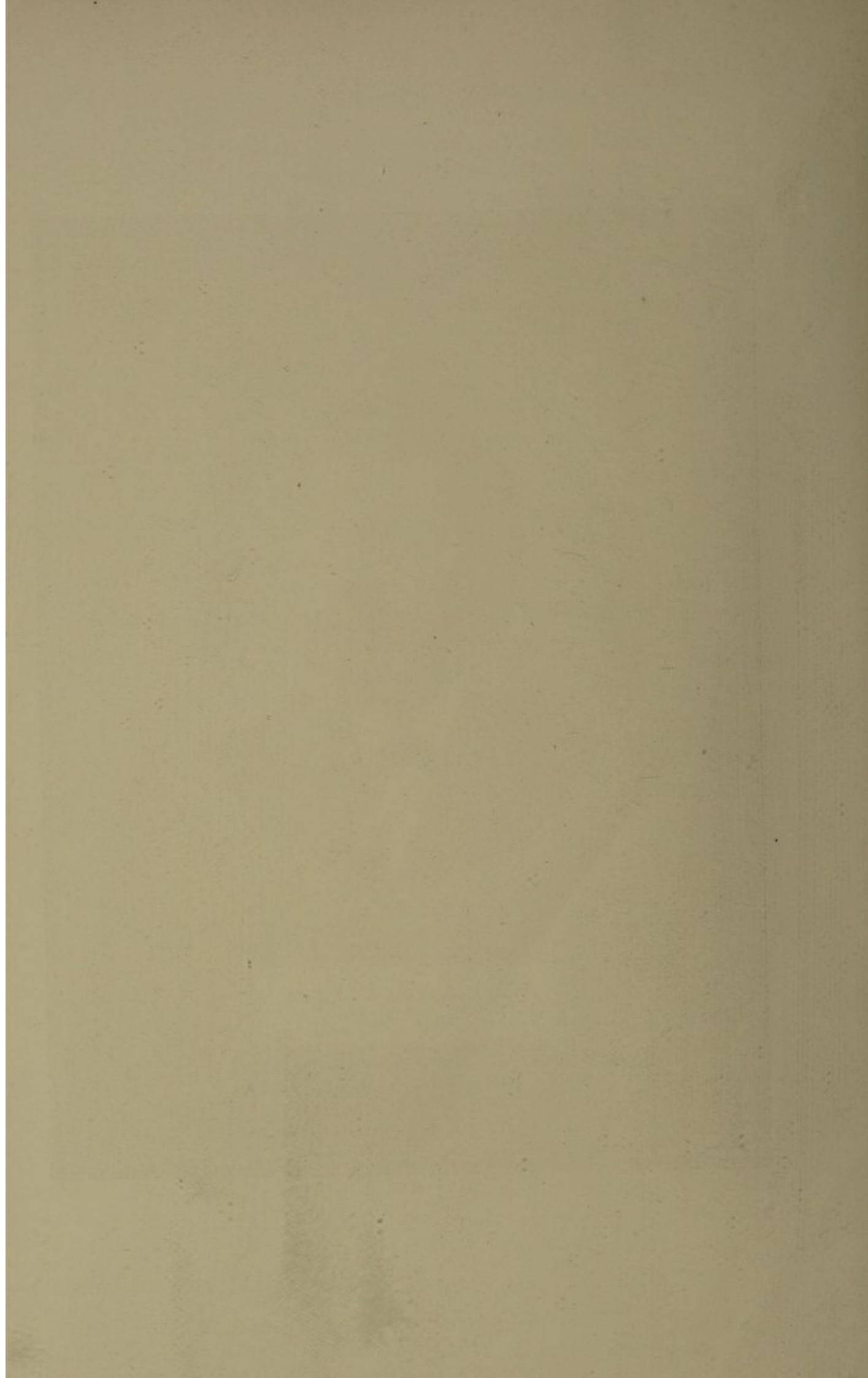
In 1886 Dr. Peck visited Europe for six months' study. Here he came under the influence of Lawson Tait, of Birmingham, whose marvelous success in ovariectomy particularly influenced Dr. Peck and led him to accept Tait's views that bacteria were not pathogenic. He failed to recognize that hot water and soap were really antiseptic agents and that hot water, rapid and dextrous operative technique fulfilled the principles of Listerism. Dr. Peck returned fully imbued with the idea that Listerism was not good surgery.

This antagonism to Listerism, which Dr. Peck maintained to the end, raised much controversy and had some influence in impairing his position of leadership in surgery in his later years. Notwithstanding his avowed position in relation to pathogenic bacteria, he unconsciously carried out the essentials of modern aseptic surgery, which, together with rapid operative technique, accounted for much of his success. There is no doubt that if Dr. Peck had lived a few years more he would have accepted the theory of antiseptic and aseptic surgery.

In the days of his active surgical practice, abdominal surgery was limited largely to removing ovarian tumors—which in those days often reached enormous size—and to the Battey operation, for the removal of ovaries for painful menstruation. Dr. Peck had a goodly number of these operations to his credit. But in this he was only following the gynecological fashion of the day. In his technique he followed the usual method of using silk ligatures in tying off the stump, employing the clove-hitch. In closing the abdomen he employed rather a



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novel method, of transfixing the abdominal walls with large hare-lip pins and securing the wound with heavy silk figure-of-eight about the pins. This procedure was often attended with infection of the abdominal wound and was generally painful.

Dr. Peck did not pose as an abdominal surgeon, but did the greater part of this work in Iowa. He was unusually skillful and successful in general surgery, as it was practiced during his 25 years of active practice. He was a skillful diagnostician and his opinions were generally recognized as final. He did not enjoy the advantages of the X-ray or other instruments of precision, and he had for so many years relied on the history of the patient, the result of physical examination, and the exercise of intellectual process in determining the nature of the disease or condition, his good sense, judgment and experience, that it is reasonable to believe that he would have been slow to rely on laboratory methods in diagnosis. However, it is likewise reasonable to believe that had he lived to witness the new fields of surgical enterprise that have been opened up in recent years, he would have availed himself of every method of investigation.

Dr. Peck made no important contribution to surgical literature, his work was purely clinical. As a lecturer on surgery he was impressive and interesting, so much so as to predominate over other members of the faculty. When the American Surgical Association was organized, Dr. Peck was invited as a charter member, he served also as chairman of the surgical section of the American Medical Association, and later as a vice-president.

In 1865 he became a member of the Iowa State Medical Society; in 1876, the president. The one great contribution Dr. Peck made to surgery was the organizing of the University Medical School, and it should be remembered that the successful opening of the school in 1870, would have been deferred many years in the hands of a less energetic and resourceful man.

