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Contributors

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CHARLES BURNAM PORTER

By J. M. T. FINNEY, M.D., F.A.C.S., Baltimore, Maryland

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CHARLES BURNAM PORTER

By J. M. T. FINNEY, M.D., F.A.C.S., BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

CHARLES BURNAM PORTER was born in Rutland, Vermont, January 19, 1840, and died in Boston, May 21, 1909. He came from good old English stock. His original American ancestor, Daniel Porter, came to this country about 1650 and settled near Farmington, Connecticut. He was a surgeon and bone-setter of note.

The story of the Porter family is that of one of the most remarkable medical families in America, and it is doubtful if it could be duplicated. Apparently the male descendants of Daniel Porter throughout seven generations in this country were all doctors. Charles Burnam Porter, the subject of this sketch, was the seventh physician in his family in direct descent. There have been altogether eighteen physicians of this name of whom there is a record. The son of Dr. Porter, Dr. C. A. Porter, is a prominent surgeon practicing in Boston at the present time. He, too, has a son contemplating the study of medicine. All of the members of the family lived active lives in western Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Several of them attained considerable reputation as surgeons and bone-setters. James Porter, the great-grandfather of Charles Burnam Porter, was a Vermont Tory. He received a commission as surgeon under the British flag, and served in Howe's Army of invasion on Long Island.

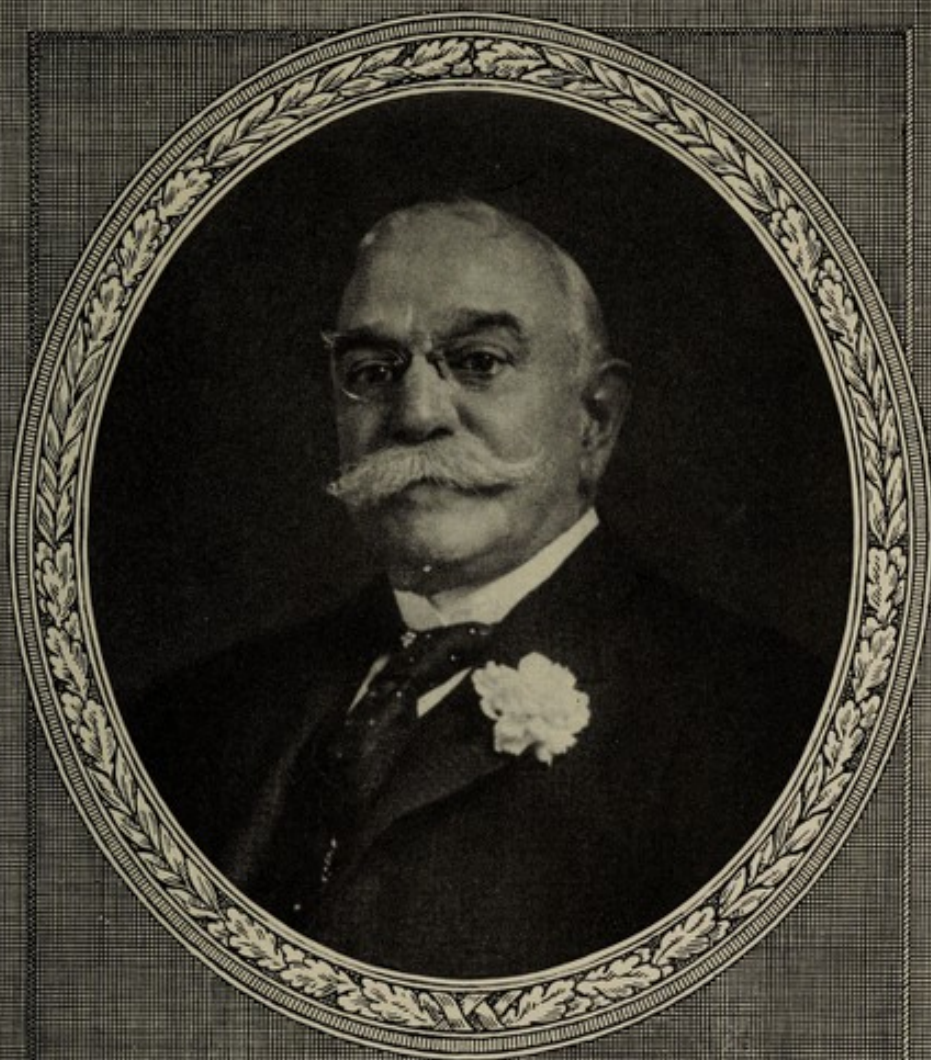
Charles Burnam Porter grew up a vigorous out-of-doors lad in Vermont. At the age of eighteen, he entered Harvard University, and was graduated with the A.B. degree in 1862. He at once began to study medicine in the old North Grove Street School, and passed from there to the Massachusetts General Hospital, where he served as interne in 1864. He was graduated in medicine from Harvard Medical School in 1865, during the Civil War. He immediately went to Washington, looking for Army Service, and, by dint of great perseverance, succeeded in obtaining an appointment on the staff of one of the principal military hospitals, where he served with great credit until the end of the War. Within a short time after receiving his appointment, he was placed in charge of one of the large surgical wards. It is a matter of record that he had at one time as many as seventy-four cases of compound fracture under his care, which in those days of septic wounds meant a deal of dressing and personal attention.

In June, 1865, he was married to Miss Harriet A. Allen, of Cambridge. At the close of the War, he returned to Boston. Three years later, he went abroad with his wife and two children, studying for nearly two years in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. Returning to Boston, he received important professional appointments in rapid succession—physician to Out-Patients, Massachusetts General Hospital in 1866; district physician, in 1866; physician to the Boston Dispensary in 1867; assistant demonstrator of anatomy, Harvard, in 1867; demonstrator of anatomy, under Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1868; visiting surgeon to the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1875; instructor in surgery, under Henry J. Bigelow, in 1879; assistant professor of surgery in 1882; professor of clinical surgery in 1887, which position he held until 1903, when, by reason of the age limit, he automatically retired.

Dr. Porter had taught medical students continuously for 37 years, a record almost equal to that of Henry J. Bigelow's 40 years in the same institution. As a result of his work through those 37 years, he came to be regarded as one of the soundest clinical surgeons and one of the best teachers in New England; a man of singular simplicity of life; rarely given to speech in public, or the writing of professional papers. The arts of the medical politician were foreign to his make-up, and his steady advancement in Harvard and the Massachusetts General Hospital were through merit alone. While his appointments at the Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital were purely surgical in character, he always combined general practice with surgery, and had for many years a large private practice in addition to his hospital and medical school work.

His contributions to medical literature were not voluminous, consisting chiefly of papers read before medical societies and publications in medical journals on a wide variety of subjects in which, at the time, he was particularly interested. Perhaps his special interest lay in the line of plastic surgery, in which he excelled. No one of his numerous assistants or students can look back upon his service with Dr. Porter without recollecting with great pleasure and satisfaction the manual dexterity, technical skill, and surgical judgment which he constantly exhibited in all of his work. It was a real joy to watch the neatness and exactness and dispatch which always characterized his work. His flaps always fitted perfectly; he never had to trim them. In typical operations of all kinds, he was a past master. His work was made more efficient, undoubtedly, by his long anatomical training and familiarity with the teaching of operative surgery.

An outstanding characteristic of Dr. Porter's work was the uniform kindness and consideration which he always showed to his patients, and to his staff as well; a quality of heart which greatly endeared him to all those who served under him, in fact, to everyone associated with him in any capacity. There



CHARLES B. PORTER
1840-1909



lingers still in the memory of those who so greatly profited by his professional counsel and personal kindness, grateful recollections of the great privilege and benefit they obtained through association with him.

The qualities of head and heart here so inadequately set forth; the long years crowded full of fruitful service to his fellow-men as teacher and practitioner of surgery; his contributions to the science of surgery and his extraordinary proficiency in the practice of its art, all entitle Charles Burnam Porter to an honored place among the master surgeons of this country.

