

## History of the Medical Society of Delaware

The Society is one of the oldest institutions of its kind in the United States and rich in history. It was founded in 1776 and incorporated on February 3, 1789, only 12 days after President Washington took his oath of office.

The first official meeting of the Society was held in Dover on May 12, 1789. It was called to order by Dr. James Tilton, who was unanimously elected chairman pro tem, and Dr. Edward Miller was chosen secretary. A committee consisting of Drs. Preston and Miller was appointed to prepare a draft of a constitution. The committee reported in the evening, and the constitution was ratified, after which the following were elected officers of the Society for the ensuing year: President: James Tilton, MD; Vice President: Jonas Preston, MD; Secretary: Edward Miller, MD; Treasurer: James Sykes, MD; Censors: Nicholas Way, MD, Matthew Wilson, MD, DD, Joshua Clayton, MD, and Nathaniel Luff, MD.



James Tilton, M.D., the Society's first President, became a crusader for sanitation and established the first isolation wards for contagious diseases, observations learned while serving as Regimental Surgeon during the Revolutionary War and afterwards in the War of 1812. Later, in 1813, Dr. Tilton was appointed the first Surgeon General of the U.S.

Regarding our Founding Fathers, at the Annual Meeting of the Society held in Dover on June 11, 1889 celebrating the centennial anniversary of the organization, Lewis P. Bush, MD, Delegate to the American Medical Association, commented on the beginnings of the Society and the period of time during which it was created. He stated, the Society was formed

*"...under difficult and discouraging circumstances; the roads were wretched, the conveyances uncomfortable, hotels anything but luxurious. Its purpose was for the mutual improvement, and to advance the knowledge of medicine for the benefit of mankind. We cannot but admire the esprit de corps which possessed these men, thus to demonstrate that they were not satisfied with their attainments, but sought still further, by mutual contributions of their observation and experience, to broaden their views and preserve a healthful association as members of the same brotherhood. The country needed such an association to hold up a banner against the prevailing ignorance upon the subject of medicine, and to show the people that there was something better in the world than the nostrums of ignorant and unprincipled quacks and the domestic remedies of foolish old women. It was no child's play to practi[s]e medicine in those days, when the physician was compelled to make his visits on horseback in the most inclement season of the year, and to carry his stock of medicines – always including the indispensable calomel and jalap, Peruvian bark and Epsom salts – in his saddlebags, glad even that his compensation would be made, if made at all, in corn or shucks, in cider or apple jack."*

In 1822 an Act of the Legislature empowered the Society to appoint the members of the Board of Medical Examiners (now known as the Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline). This Board was given the duty of granting licenses for the practice of medicine in the state upon the presentation of a diploma conferred by a reputable college of medicine, or who otherwise submitted to a full, strict, and impartial examination by the Board and read a satisfactory thesis upon some medical subject. A penalty was imposed upon any one who should practice medicine in the State without proper authority from this Board. The fee for a medical license in 1822 was \$10. Today, the Board is appointed by the Governor.

At the 1876 annual meeting, the Society appointed a committee of three to draft a bill establishing a State Board of Health. The act was finally passed by the General Assembly in 1879.

The annual meeting of 1880 is noted for the acceptance of the first "lady doctor," Josephine M. R. White, M.D., into its membership.

The advent of "modern medicine" came with the discovery in the late 19th century that bacteria and fungi were the cause of many common diseases, with the result that many physicians became interested in special areas of medicine. The turn of the century saw numerous health laws enacted pertaining to contagious diseases and the duties of the physicians in reporting them. The Medical Society of Delaware continued to be among the forerunners of public health improvements.

In 1909 the [Delaware Medical Journal](#) was established. The Journal's original purpose was to record the events of the annual meetings of the Society. The Journal today serves as a source of medical education, as well as continuing to document the Annual Meeting proceedings.

In May 2010, the Society moved into its permanent home, located at 900 Prides Crossing in Newark, Delaware. Since the inception of the organization, it did not have a permanent location to call its own, having no official address in its infancy to later utilizing physician offices or renting space. A time capsule was built within our building to include historical and present day items of significance and is scheduled to be opened at the 300<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the organization.

Although much has changed in the medical profession, the principle upon which this Society of physicians was founded has remained steadfast: to further the medical profession in such a way that the health and well being of the citizens of Delaware can be enhanced. We exist to serve our members and, through them, the citizens of Delaware. We do this in four areas: advocacy, representation, public service, and education.

The original 27-member organization has grown to a present membership of over 1,600 physicians throughout the State of Delaware.

The Medical Society of Delaware continues its support of physicians in their vigor and spirit to advance the profession, which was the basis for its creation.