

John Frederick May

(19 May 1812 – 2 May 1891)

The Evening Star, May 2, 1891

Death of Dr. John F. May

A Distinguished Physician Dies at a Ripe Old Age

One of the men whose lives were conspicuously a part of the early history of the national capital -- Dr. John Frederick May -- died yesterday after an illness which lasted about six weeks. Pneumonia was the primary cause of dissolution, but death resulted directly from the failure of worn-out nature to react.

Just after the present century opened there came to the federal city a Dr. Frederick May, a Bostonian, who had studied the healing art under the most eminent American physicians, and to this Dr. Frederick May was, on May 19, 1812, born a son, who was christened John Frederick. This son was educated here, graduating from Columbian College and in 1836 went to Paris, where he applied himself to medicine and surgery. After a lengthy course of instruction the young doctor returned to Washington, and in company with Dr. Sewell, reorganized the medical department of Columbian University. Dr. May was then appointed professor of anatomy and surgery, a chair he filled for a number of years. His skill and learning received broad recognition, for when he was but twenty-five years of age he was honored with the professorship of surgery in the University of Maryland. Thirty years ago he delivered two winter courses of lectures at Shelby Medical College, Nashville, Tenn.

His Eminence in Surgery

Dr. May will always be remembered among surgeons as the American surgeon that ever made successful amputations at the hip joint, all attempts previous to his in this country resulting disastrously to the patient. Locally he led his profession and he was nationally regarded as one of the most daring and successful surgeons of his day.

He fully identified the body of John Wilkes Booth by a scar that marked the seat of an operation which he had performed on the actor-assassin.

About twenty years ago the doctor's health failed, asthma and bronchial affections causing him much trouble.

Dr. May's wife and six children survive him, one of the children being Dr. William May, now practicing in this city.

The funeral services will be held on Monday afternoon at 3 o'clock in St. Paul's Church, 23d street. Interment will be in Rock Creek cemetery.

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In Memory of Dr. May

A special meeting of the Medical Society was held at noon today to take action concerning the death of Dr. J.F. May. The deceased was highly eulogized by the members of the society and was referred to as the oldest and most distinguished member of the medical profession in the District. Resolutions were adopted setting forth "That in the death of Dr. J.F. May the profession of this District has lost its early pioneer, in the practice of surgery, and the community one whose professional skill will not soon be forgotten," and "that this society proffers it sympathy to the family of the deceased and that we attend the funeral in a body."

Dr. J.M. Toner, who seconded the resolutions, read an interesting sketch of the life of deceased.

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Dr. J.F. May's Funeral

The funeral of the late Dr. John Frederick May took place this afternoon. Services were held at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, conducted by Rev. Alfred Harding, D.D., assisted by Rev. Dr. Buck of Rock Creek Church. The pallbearers were Dr. Eads, Mr. Burke, Admiral Rodgers, Dr. N.S. Lincoln, Surgeon General Gunnell, Mr. Selden, ex-Commissioner Wm. B. Webb and Mr. Reginald Fendal. A large number of well-known citizens were present at the church.

History of the Medical Society of D.C., 1811-1909

Son of Dr. Frederick May, *supra* Born May 19, 1812, D.C. A.B., 1831; M.D., 1834, Columbian. Removed to Nashville, Tenn., 1858. Returned to D.C. in 1880. Father of Dr. William May, *infra*. Died May 2, 1891. Soon after graduation in medicine he went to Europe and spent over a year in the hospitals of London and Paris. Licentiate, M.C.F., Maryland, 1837. In 1839 became Prof. Anatomy and Physiology, Med. Dept. Columbian College, Washington; in 1841, Prof. Surgery; resigned in 1858. Was also Prof. Surgery, 1837-9, in Univ. Maryland; member National Institute; Med. Association, D.C.; Pathological Society, Washington; Amer. Med. Association. In 1858 became Prof. Surgery in Shelby Med. College., Nashville, Tenn., and continued there till 1861. Sometime Surgeon to Washington Infirmary. About 1865 removed to New York City. Returned to Washington in 1880. In 1884 became member of consulting staff Garfield Hospital; President for five years. See Minutes Med. Society, May 4, 1891; Stone's Biog., 1894, p. 319; Jour. A.M.A., 1891, XVII, p. 121; Busey's Reminiscences, p. 158; Cordell's Med. Annals of Maryland, 1903, p. 492.