

The Halsted Society



87 Years Strong and Counting

The Halsted Society –87 Years Strong and Counting **William A. Baumgartner, MD, David B. Adams, MD**

The Early Years

The Halsted Society held its first meeting June 9, 1924 at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. The primary person responsible for the birth of the Society was Dr. Walter Hughson. He was in the Department of Anatomy at Johns Hopkins from 1920-1925. There were mixed feelings among prominent surgeons as to the need for an additional Society during this time when the American Surgical Association and the Society of Clinical Surgery were the preeminent surgical organizations. After much discussion among several prominent surgeons and with the encouragement of Dr. William H. Welch, the organization was born whose name was to honor Dr. William S. Halsted, first Professor of Surgery at Johns Hopkins who had died in September of 1922. Initially called the Halsted Club, several years later the name was changed to the Halsted Society.

The mission of this new organization was to provide an opportunity for younger physicians to become members. The initial plan was that there would be approximately 30 members. In an exchange of letters between two founding members, Dr. Harry Murray wrote to Dr. Percival Bailey stating: "I would like to say that the real success of the organization depends entirely upon its membership. Of course it would be easy enough to elect four or five able-bodied clean cutting surgeons from the twelve largest cities in the United States, have enthusiastic meetings which each member read off an analysis of his last 75 gastroenterostomies and end up with a roaring dinner and a golf match, but who wants this? I should say that there were a few, very few, surgeons, or embryonic surgeons who think, who enjoy problems, who like surgery and science for their own sakes; who stimulate you when there is an interchange of ideas, etc., such men as Drs. Cushing and Halsted. My opinion would be that we must comb the country for such men – disregard organization, location, age, heredity, race, creed, color, humidity, and temperature. Three or four dead weights or one real second-rater and the club will be no better than the American Medical Association."

Although two of the founding members were Hopkins' trained and associated with the institution, most of the members were not associated with Johns Hopkins. By 1935 only three former Halsted residents had been elected to membership.

Eleven members attended the first meeting. These included: Percival Bailey, H. Cuthbert Bazett, Frank B. Berry, Loyal E. Davis, Walter Hughson, Robert W. Johnson, Jr., Monroe A. McIver, Harry A. Murray, Jr., Wilder Penfield, Arthur Purdy Stout, and Lawrence R. Wharton. Operations were observed, lectures were given, and dinner was held at the Baltimore Club on the evening of June 9th. As is the current practice, presentations on the first day were made by members of the host institution and second day presentations were made by members of the Society. According to Dr. Peter D. Olch, in describing the first meeting, "the climax came when Dr. William H. Welch sat in an overstuffed chair and began to reminisce about Dr. Halsted. Welch left the impression that Halsted was eventually cured (from his drug addiction); however, in later years Welch reported otherwise."

The second meeting was held at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital where there were nine members present. One of the original founders of the Society, Dr. Percival Bailey, had recommended Dr. Emile Holman for nomination to the Society. Dr. Holman had been the last resident to be trained by Dr. Halsted. Apparently at the meeting his nomination was "black balled," led by Dr. Hughson. Their dislike

for one another reportedly stemmed from days shared in medical school at Hopkins. As a result of this dispute, Dr. Bailey resigned from the Society. Dr. Holman was made an honorary member in 1972.

Initially there were no officers other than an Acting Secretary, and there was neither a constitution nor bylaws. Dr. I.S. Ravdin became secretary in 1933 and held the position for the next 13 years. The Society had grown to 38 members by 1936, and at that time it was decided that the membership would be limited to 50. Although there was a feeling towards the end of the 1930's that the Society should probably end after the retirement of the current members, the Society did continue on without interruption until 1941, when it recessed because of World War II.

The meeting reconvened in Baltimore in 1947, where the membership limit was raised from 50 to 60 and there was renewed enthusiasm to continue the Society from the members, particularly encouraged by Drs. Ravdin and Wangenstein. The upper age for new members was set at 40 and Dr. Ravdin was elected President at this meeting. One year later a constitution was adopted, officers were designated and active and senior membership categories were put into place. It was decided that active members would be limited to 60 in number which was eventually increased to 75 in 1957. However, upon the age of 55 or having been a member for 15 years, one could apply for senior membership. The idea behind capping the membership was to maintain the informal atmosphere that had been associated with the club since its inception. In 1952 the event was again held in Baltimore to celebrate the centenary of William S. Halsted's birth.

Unique content of the scientific sessions of the Society was commented on by Dr. Olch in his Hopkins Medical Journal article: "They covered a variety of surgical and related specialties and were presented in a sufficiently intimate atmosphere to encourage frank questioning and vigorous discussion. Of particular interest were the papers relating to the history of surgery and to medical education, subjects which appear with increasing frequency since the early 1950's."

According to Dr. Olch, by 1974 there were approximately 75 active members, 89 senior members, and two honorary members. He also stated that the group had maintained a fraternal feeling particularly among the members who consistently attended and participated in the meetings. During these years, the meetings were held primarily on the east coast and mid-west. However, on occasions they ventured as far west as Denver, Colorado and Jackson Hole Wyoming. The first meetings at high Hampton, Halsted's former summer estate in Cashiers, North Carolina, occurred in 1970 and 1973.

The Early Years segment is in large part a synopsis of Dr. Peter Olch's article entitled "The Halsted Society, 1924-1974" published in the Johns Hopkins Medical Journal, 1974

Contemporary Years (1974-2011)

At the 1974 meeting, which took place at the Hunt Valley Inn in Baltimore, Maryland, there were 57 members in attendance. The President was Dr. Richard Stark and the Secretary Treasurer was Dr. Brad Aust. This was the 50th Anniversary celebration of the Society. It was during this time that Dr. Olch presented his synopsis of the early years of the organization (1924-1974). The rate for a hotel room at the Hunt Valley Inn was \$23.00. There was an organized fishing trip during that meeting on the Chesapeake which was enjoyed by all in attendance.

At the 1978 meeting in San Antonio, Peter Olch, then Secretary /Treasurer, was nominated as Vice President/President elect. In accepting that nomination he said the following: "I can say without

qualification that the past three years have been a labor of love. As a single 'renegade' surgeon who once drove one of our senior members distraught at the operating table ("My God Olch, are you with me or against me!). I am deeply honored to have been elected Vice President/President-elect of this magnificent organization."

At the annual business meeting in 1978 there was protracted discussion about poor attendance at the annual meeting by some of the active members. The President was asked to write a letter to those individuals "informing them that they have been dropped from the rolls of the Society or if warranted a warning to attend the next meeting." An additional discussion was also held regarding who should present papers at the annual meeting. Although there were several points of view, "it was unanimously agreed that a resident or staff associate should not present a paper to the Society if his/her sponsor is not in the audience to defend and further discuss the paper. This did not include however the staff of the local host institution."

Humor has always been a value of the Halsted Society and is well illustrated by Gill Campbell's July 16th, 1979 letter to the Halstedians in reference to the 1979 meeting planned for Little Rock, Arkansas. To quote Dr. Campbell: "How in the hell does anyone get to Little Rock? The Little Rock Hilton Inn is a typical city facility with all of the warmth and sincerity of a mother-in-law's kiss." The next several meetings, which took place in the cities of Gainesville, New York, Indianapolis, Amelia Island and Los Angeles, had no significant points of discussion during the annual business meetings.

At the 1982 meeting, in reaction to a membership questionnaire in which half of the votes cast were put into the "do not know" category, it was decided that a candidate's sponsoring letter would be included with the ballots. It was emphasized that this sponsoring letter should be sufficiently detailed to "jog memories and provide a method for more rational judgment."

To further enhance the membership process, the 1985 membership committee "strongly recommended that potential candidates be invited to the meeting as a guest of an active or senior member of the organization. Other than the nominees elected to active membership in 1985 many of the nominees were known by less than 80 percent of the election poll."

Several of the next meetings held in places including High Hampton, Jackson Hole, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati, had a recurring "issue of attendance" theme at the annual business meeting.

In the 1989 meeting in Philadelphia with Dr. William Curreri as President, Dr. C. Rollins Hanlon, and Dr. Jonathan E. Rhoads were introduced as new honorary members of the Society.

In 1991 at High Hampton, President John MacDonald announced that Peter Olch had died during the previous year. Dr. MacDonald proposed that the Peter Olch lecture be made permanent and be a competition among historical papers submitted to the program committee. This was unanimously passed.

At the 1992 meeting with Dr. Gill Diethelm as President, Dr. Bradley Aust gave a report of the bylaws committee in the absence of Dr. John Sawyers. The principal changes noted: "When new members are accepted for membership they do not formally achieve membership until they have presented a paper before the membership of the Halsted Society." The practice of senior members not holding office was retained. However, the practice of allowing members to choose whether they wish to become senior members after either twelve years of membership or age 55 was continued. It was noted by Dr. Aust

that members who join the Halsted Society at a very young age, should become eligible for holding office after they have been members for more than twelve years.

At the 1996 meeting it was decided that to maintain better continuity within the Society, there should be a Secretary/Treasurer-elect position who would serve one year during the final year of the Secretary/Treasurer, in order to become familiar with the overall process of meeting management. Dr. Lewis Flint was the first Secretary/Treasurer-elect and because of this bylaws change, Dr. John Cameron was asked to continue for one additional year as Secretary/Treasurer. The other significant bylaws change at that time was that the immediate past President was included as a member of the council.

In 1997, in Los Angeles, Dr. David Bloom was officially appointed by Dr. J. Grossfeld, then President, as the official photographer for the Halsted Society and Dr. Daniel Nunn as the official historian.

The 2001 meeting, to be held in Boston, was cancelled because of the tragic events associated with destruction of the World Trade Center Towers.

At the 2007 business meeting, "there was a motion, a second and unanimous approval to raise the annual dues from \$50 to \$100- still one of the lowest membership figures of any professional organization."

At the 2008 business meeting presided over by President L. D. Britt at High Hampton, the Secretary/Treasurer Dr. Krummell "reviewed the meeting cancellation policy which is that registration fees will be returned if registration is cancelled within one month of the meeting date. Fifty percent of the registration fee will be refunded if done so within two weeks of the meeting and a refund will not be made for cancellations less than two weeks within the meeting date."

In the most recent years the only significant bylaws change was to increase the active member limit to "eighty surgeons and other individuals in allied branches of medicine."

The last meeting of the "Contemporary Years" (1974-2011) was held at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, in September of 2011. President Dr. William Baumgartner presented the membership with a pamphlet of the history of the Halsted Society from 1924 to 2011. This document will be given to all new members.

In closing this synopsis of the Halsted Society Dr. Peter Olch's conclusion in his 1974 Johns Hopkins Medical Journal article, "the Halsted Society, 1924-74" should be revisited as its sentiment remains true and fundamental to the core of the Halsted Society:

"Though larger than the founding members had envisioned, the Halsted Society today fulfills the purposes of the Society as listed in the constitution: to perpetuate the memory of Dr. William Stewart Halsted, to further the scientific principles and ideals for which he stood, to encourage the exchange of ideas, free and informal discussion, in a spirit of sociability and good fellowship among its members."

