

JOHN STAIGE DAVIS

1872-1946

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON of December 23, 1946, while final preparations for family reunions and joyful Christmas festivities were being completed in millions of homes throughout our land, the good people of Baltimore were rudely shocked by the sudden death of one of their most distinguished and best-beloved surgeons, Dr. John Staige Davis.

My acquaintance with him, which began as a fellow-Virginian, dates back almost to the beginning of our respective careers more than 40 years ago



John Staige Davis

and, through mutual professional interests and activities centering mainly at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and the Union Memorial Hospital, soon ripened into an intimate, congenial and enduring friendship, the memories of which I shall always dearly cherish.

Doctor Davis was born in Norfolk, Virginia, January 15, 1872, the son of William B. and Mary Jane (Kentie) Howland Davis, and later became the third generation of doctors in the family. His ancestors on both sides from Colonial times were Virginians. At the time of his birth, his father was Assistant Surgeon in the U. S. Naval Hospital at Portsmouth, Virginia, but later transferred to the U. S. Army and, as Assistant Surgeon, established a long

record of loyal service to our country. Young Staige attended the Episcopal High School of Virginia, 1887-1888, then Saint Paul's School at Garden City, Long Island, which was then a military school, from 1888 until his graduation in 1892. From there he entered Yale University in the Sheffield Scientific School in order to take biologic training under Professor Russell H. Chittenden. He graduated from Yale in June, 1895, and entered the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in the fall of that year, where he obtained his medical degree in 1899. He then served as Resident House Officer at the Johns Hopkins Hospital for one year and as Resident Surgeon and Superintendent at the Union Protestant Infirmary (now the Union Memorial Hospital) under the supervision of Dr. J. M. T. Finney for three years. Upon completion of his apprenticeship, Doctor Davis was appointed Assistant in Surgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital Dispensary, and for several years participated in the Surgical Service of the Robert Garrett Children's Hospital. He also was Instructor in Surgery at the College of Physicians and Surgeons until that institution was later merged with the University of Maryland.

In 1907, he married Kathleen Gordon Bowdoin, whose exceptional charm, conspicuous talents and unflinching devotion enabled her to create and to maintain that delightfully congenial home atmosphere which contributed so magnificently to his career. She now survives him together with one daughter, Mrs. Charles E. Scarlett, Jr., of Baltimore, and two sons, Major W. Bowdoin Davis of the Army Medical Corps, a graduate of Princeton University in 1934, and of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in 1938, who, after serving one year as Surgical Intern at the Union Memorial Hospital, Baltimore, transferred to the Presbyterian Hospital, a unit of the Columbia Medical Center in New York, for several years of intensive apprenticeship in the field of general surgery and as Resident in plastic surgery before being assigned to duty in this specialty at the Valley Forge General Hospital in Pennsylvania. He has now been released from the U. S. Army Medical Corps and, happily, will continue his father's specialty in Baltimore. A second son, Howland Staige Davis, established a brilliant record as Lieutenant Commander in the Naval Air Corps during the recent war. Five grandchildren also survive.

Doctor Davis served as Captain in the Medical Corps of the U. S. Army during World War I, from June, 1917, to January, 1919. During World War II he was appointed by the Surgeon General of the U. S. Army as a member of a committee to organize plastic surgery units for the Army Medical Corps. He also assisted with his advice and experience at the Walter Reed General Hospital, in Washington, and in other army hospitals during the war years. Furthermore, he was a member of the Advisory Committee for Medical Preparedness in Maryland, and of the Subcommittee on Plastic and Maxillofacial Surgery of the Division of Medical Sciences of the National Research Council.

Early in his professional career he became interested in the mastery and development of plastic surgery, and was the first surgeon to devote himself

exclusively to that field, to the enrichment of which he so brilliantly contributed for 40 years. In 1919, he published a book, "Plastic Surgery: Its Principles and Practice," which still is regarded as an authoritative work. In addition, he contributed numerous excellent articles on plastic surgery to various surgical journals. But perhaps his most enduring contribution to the development of his specialty was made through his superb training of a long list of Resident House Officers in the several hospitals with which he was associated. From these inexperienced assistants at the operating table he exacted the same meticulous care of detail that so faultlessly characterized his own work, and, in return, with uncommon clarity, he generously imparted to them from his vast storehouse of knowledge and experience, lessons in plastic surgery that they will never forget and from which many patients will later benefit.

From 1923 to within a brief period prior to his death, Doctor Davis served as Associate Professor of Surgery in the Johns Hopkins University in charge of Plastic Surgery. In addition to this work, he participated actively in the affairs of the Union Memorial Hospital, where for many years he was first a member and later, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Staff. Throughout most of his active career he served also as Visiting Plastic Surgeon to the Johns Hopkins Hospital, the Union Memorial Hospital, the Children's Hospital School, and the Hospital for the Women of Maryland. He was a member of the American Medical Association; the American Surgical Association, serving as Vice-president in 1937; the Southern Surgical Association, serving as President in 1940; the American Association of Plastic Surgeons, serving as President in 1945; the Interurban Surgical Society; The Baltimore City Medical Society and the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland. He was certified by the American Board of Surgery, the American Board of Plastic Surgery and the American College of Surgeons. He was a member of the Military Order of the World War and the Sons of the American Revolution. Just before his death he resigned as Chairman of the American Board of Plastic Surgery, and had just been appointed to the Board of Regents of the American College of Surgeons. He was also a member of the Maryland Club, the Elkridge Club and the Yale Club of New York.

But how imperfectly does this brief recital of some of his achievements in the field of plastic surgery and of the honors so worthily bestowed upon him in recognition of them, portray my friend Staige Davis as I knew him! Creditable, to be sure, is this imposing summary, but it is altogether inadequate. One does not find here the secret of his irresistible personal magnetism which so endeared him to a host of colleagues, friends and grateful recipients of his professional skill. This is to be found rather in the collective attributes of his personality. He was a quiet, gentle person, richly endowed with intellect, sound judgment and an indomitable will, all of which were consecrated to the service of humanity. His sturdy countenance radiated character, honesty, sincerity, kindness, magnanimity, tolerance, sympathy and immeasurable patience. And the motivating force that activated his many virtues was a consuming and sustained desire modestly but efficiently to serve his fellow man, to relieve

suffering, to correct deformities and disfiguring scars and blemishes, to restore function and to abolish the inferiority complexes that so often shackle and torture those unfortunates who require this branch of surgery. All of this he achieved magnificently and, in addition, as teacher, investigator, counselor and consultant, his influence in the development of plastic surgery reached far beyond Baltimore and contributed in no small measure to the rehabilitation of thousands of veterans of two world wars.

He was a member of Saint Paul's Protestant Episcopal Church of Baltimore, and as fine a Christian gentleman as I have ever known.

Approximately one month prior to his death, he was confined to his house for several weeks by order of his physician because of exhaustion from overwork. His prompt improvement was so reassuring, however, that he was permitted to attend the last meeting of the Southern Surgical Association at Hot Springs, Virginia, which both he and Mrs. Davis thoroughly enjoyed. He returned to a slower operative schedule, and on the morning of December 23, 1946, he operated at the Union Memorial Hospital, had office hours, attended to some minor professional duties, and later lunched with a group of his colleagues at the Maryland Club. He was in excellent spirits and appeared to be rapidly regaining his strength. After lunch he rejoined his wife at home and lay down for a period of rest. He quietly and peacefully fell asleep, only to awaken shortly thereafter into a more abundant life which he so richly deserved. His passing is lamented by many, and his loss is indeed a grievous one, not only to his family and intimate friends, but also to Baltimore, the State of Maryland and American surgery.

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