

John Miller Turpin Finney: The First President of the American College of Surgeons

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Dr Franklin H. Martin, a visionary gynecologist from Chicago, was the driving force for the formation of the American College of Surgeons. He had earlier founded the journal *Surgery Gynecology and Obstetrics* in 1905, and organized the Clinical Congress of Surgeons of North America in 1910.¹ He then decided that to elevate the standards of surgical practice and improve the care of the surgical patient in the United States, the country should form the American College of Surgeons, based loosely on the Royal College of Surgeons of England. An organizing committee of 11 surgeons was established to develop a structure for the new college, and to pick a man to be its first president. Because the goals of the college were to elevate the standards of practice and improve surgical care, the first president to represent this group had to be carefully chosen. He would need to be an ideal role model, representing what the founders of the college believed to be the gold standard they wished to achieve with this new organization.

Many individuals could have been chosen. William Stewart Halsted, arguably the most innovative, important, and influential surgeon this country has produced, would have been an ideal choice. The legendary Mayo brothers could have been chosen. The popular surgeon from New Orleans, Rudolph Matas, would have been an excellent choice. Dr W W Keene, in the twilight of a brilliant career in Philadelphia, was a possibility, as were Dr J B Murphy, the prominent surgeon from Chicago, and Dr John Collins Warren from Boston. They were all prominent, innovative, academically oriented surgeons who made many contributions during the evolution of the modern era of surgery. None of them was chosen. Dr John Miller Turpin Finney of Baltimore was nominated and unanimously elected as the first president of the American College of Surgeons. He was chosen because he was believed to represent the best of American surgery, and could be a role model for what the new college wished to achieve.

Dr J M T Finney was born June 20, 1863, in Natchez, Mississippi during the Civil War.² His father Ebenezer Finney was from Maryland, but at that time was the min-

ister of a small congregation in Greenwood, Mississippi. Finney was the second of two boys, with an older brother named William (Fig. 1) Finney's mother died when he was 5 months old, probably from typhoid fever. He was subsequently raised by four different foster mothers. His father moved from church to church but finally, in 1871, when young Finney was 8 years old, moved back to Maryland, to the city of Bel Air, not far from Baltimore. Bel Air was the birthplace of John Wilkes Booth, who had just 6 years earlier assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theater in Washington, DC.

Finney had a normal upbringing in rural Maryland. When he finished high school, he wished to enter the new Johns Hopkins University in a special science program, but did not have the appropriate background education. He entered the College of New Jersey in 1881, subsequently renamed Princeton University. His grandfather had graduated from the same institution in 1809, and his father had attended the Princeton Theological Seminary, graduating in 1849. Finney entered college as a sophomore, and graduated in 1884, only 3 years later (Fig. 2). Finney played football at Princeton and, in 1883, made the varsity team (Fig. 3). He was not a serious student in college and earned only average grades. He graduated in 1884 on June 20th, his 21st birthday.

In 1884, he entered Harvard Medical School, which should have taken 3 years to graduation. Finney missed most of 1 year with typhoid fever and it took him 4 years to graduate. During his illness with typhoid fever he was hospitalized at the Massachusetts General Hospital for 2 months, the first 2 weeks of which he was delirious. He then took time off with his brother to go to Florida to recuperate. During his first year at Harvard, he played on the football team, and is the only individual to play varsity football for both Princeton and Harvard. He was a more serious student in medical school than in college, and at the end of medical school received a much sought after position as a house pupil in surgery at the Massachusetts General Hospital. As a medical student at one point he developed abdominal pain and was seen by Dr Reginald Fitz, the Boston physician who wrote the classic article in 1886 defining acute appendicitis as a separate definite entity.³ Finney improved spontaneously without surgery. He felt his year and half as a house pupil in surgery at the Massa-

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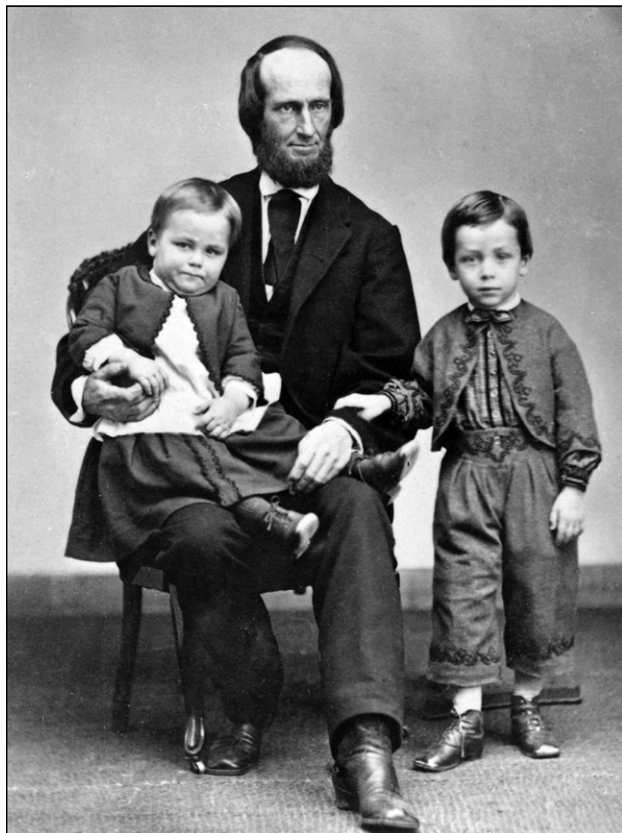


Figure 1. Young J M T Finney sitting on his father Ebenezer's lap, with his older brother William standing. (From the Finney family, with permission.)

chusetts General Hospital was extremely valuable in preparing him for a career in surgery.

Late in 1888, he visited the not yet opened Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore in the hopes of meeting Dr Halsted. Dr Halsted was away in Europe at the time and he was hosted by Dr William H Welch, the first chief of pathology. He later received a letter from Halsted inviting him to come to the opening of the Johns Hopkins Hospital on May 7th, 1889. Finney traveled to Baltimore and after the official ceremonies approached Dr Halsted. Halsted stated, "big crowd isn't?" Finney replied, "yes sir." Halsted said, "nice day isn't it?" Finney replied, "yes sir." Halsted then said, "I'll have to ask you to excuse me, as I have an appointment in the laboratory in a few minutes. What time can you report to duty?" Finney replied, "I beg your pardon sir?" Halsted answered, "Oh I want you to come down here and work in the surgical dispensary. When can you begin work?"² Finney said that the conversation only took 2 or 3 minutes. There was no discussion about compensation because there was none.

Later in 1889, after Finney had finished his rotations at the Massachusetts's General Hospital, he came to Balti-



Figure 2. J M T Finney's Princeton class photograph. (From the Princeton University Archives, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, with permission.)

more to start working in the Johns Hopkins Hospital's Dispensary (Fig. 4). Initially, he had no admitting privileges at The Johns Hopkins Hospital; only Dr Halsted and his chief resident could admit surgical patients. Finney started a private practice, operating principally on patients in their homes and in a private hospital, the Union Protestant Infirmary. During his early days in Baltimore, when he often operated in patients' homes, he put together a trunk with all the supplies needed for home surgery. In addition, when the trunk was delivered to the patient's home, there were legs that could be attached to the trunk, converting it into a makeshift operating table.

He married a Johns Hopkins Hospital nurse, Mary E Gross, and they had four children, three boys and one girl—two of his sons went on to become surgeons. During his first year in practice his total income was \$200. He slowly built up a private practice, worked in Hopkins Dispensary, and gained the confidence of Dr Halsted. Often, when Dr Halsted was away from Baltimore, he would sign out to Dr Finney (Fig. 5).

Early during his career at Hopkins, Finney was offered the chair in surgery at the University of Texas at Galveston. He felt that because he had just finished his training, and had just joined the staff at Hopkins, it was too early for a move, and so he turned it down. This was the first of many offers he would receive. He would later say, as a reason for



Figure 3. J M T Finney and the Princeton University football team 1883. Finney is sitting in the front row (F). (From the Princeton University Archives, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, with permission.)

turning down the many offers that he received, “to one constituted as I am to whom old friends, old associations and familiar surroundings mean much, frequent changes of environment does not appeal.”² In 1893, when he had been practicing for 4 years, he took a vacation and traveled to Europe to see the best surgeons on that continent. He visited von Mikulicz in Breslau, Bassini in Padua, and Kocher in Bern. He gradually built a reputation for being an outstanding clinical surgeon, an excellent technical surgeon, an individual with unshakeable ethical and moral values devoted to community service and an outstanding human being. He was a very religious man, whose grandfather, father, and brother were all Presbyterian ministers. He himself served on the Board of Elders at Brown Memorial Church in Baltimore for many years.

In May of 1913, during an organizational meeting of the American College of Surgeons in Washington DC, he was elected the first president of the American College of Surgeons. He later reflected, “Much to my surprise and not altogether to my liking, because my tastes have always inclined to private rather than public life, I was elected the first president of the College.”² Finney was chosen not because he was a famous, innovative, or original surgeon, but because he was a sound surgeon with strong moral and ethical values, and an outstanding human being. He was the ideal individual to serve as a role model for the American College of Surgeons, a young association dedicated to elevating the standards of surgical practice and improving the care of the surgical patient in the United States (Fig. 6).

Although Finney was always closely associated with the Johns Hopkins Hospital, early in his career, even though he ran the dispensary, he did not have admitting privileges and



Figure 4. J M T Finney (second from right sitting, front row) and the early faculty of the Johns Hopkins Hospital (1897). Third from the left is Dr William Stewart Halsted, to his left is Dr William Osler, and to his left is Dr Howard Kelly. (From the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, with permission.)

operated principally at a private hospital in town, the Union Protestant Infirmary. The hospital had been founded in 1854 and one of the early trustees was Mr Johns Hopkins. The hospital moved to a new location in 1920, and was renamed the Union Memorial Hospital. Dr Finney was the driving force behind the growth of the hospital and he was chiefly responsible for its excellent reputation, which it retains today. Finney was a strong believer in taking a good deal of time off during the summer for relaxation and retooling. He decided that he needed to be far enough away from Baltimore so that calls from ill patients could not be responded to and would not interrupt his time off. He chose Chester, Nova Scotia, and purchased a small home on a 2-acre island called “Little Fish.” There he spent time sailing and fishing. It was a time for relaxation. There was no telephone and, of course, the island was too small for automobiles. That property has been maintained in the Finney family, and his descendents still enjoy the benefits of time there during the summer months.

In 1898, Finney joined the National Guard. In 1917, when America joined the World War I effort, he was placed in charge of the Johns Hopkins Hospital Unit, which was sent to France with the American Expeditary Force. His unit included 32 Johns Hopkins University medical students, 1 of whom was one of Finney’s sons. Shortly after arriving in Europe, Finney was named the chief surgical consultant to the American Expeditary Force. This assignment was made because of his organizational abilities, his leadership qualities, and his ability to work with people. An interesting encounter occurred during his time in France. He had lunch with an old colleague of his from Hopkins, Dr John McCrae. McCrae was a Canadian physician who wrote what has become one of the most beautiful and famous wartime poems ever written, “In Flanders’ Fields.” It



Figure 5. J M T Finney (F) assisting Dr Halsted (H) at the “All Star Operation” in 1904. Cushing (C) is at Finney’s right. (From the Alan Mason Chesney Archives of the Johns Hopkins University, with permission.)

is a poem that beautifully expresses the fatalistic approach that probably most individuals participating in this war of trench warfare, with an incredibly high mortality, had at that time. Two weeks after the lunch, McCrae was dead from pneumonia and meningitis. In 1918, Finney was called to see General Pershing, who knew he was a friend of President Woodrow Wilson. General Pershing wanted Finney to travel to Washington, DC to lobby for the installation of Dr Ireland for Surgeon General. Finney was successful, and Ireland received the appointment. Because of his 2-year tour of duty in France, Finney was awarded The Distinguished Service Medal from the United States, the *Commandeur de l’Ordre de la Couronne* from Belgium, and the *Officier de la Legion d’Honneur* from France.

In 1919, at the end of World War I, Finney returned to civilian life after spending 2 years in military service. Three years later, Dr William Halsted died, and the job of Chief of Surgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the Johns Hopkins Univer-

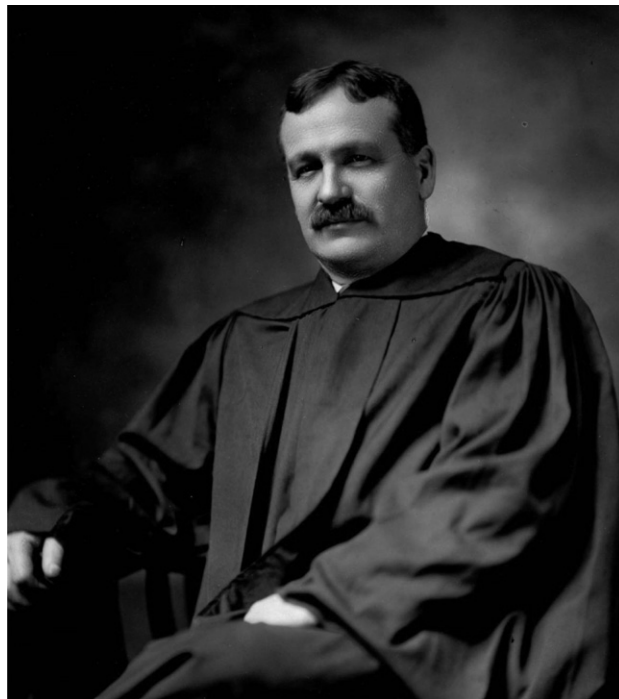


Figure 6. Finney at age 50, at the time he was elected President of the American College of Surgeons. (From The American College of Surgeons, with permission.)

sity was offered to Dr J M T Finney by the Board of Trustees. At that time, Finney was 59 years old. He considered it a great honor, but eventually turned it down because of his age, because of the full-time system, which he felt would interfere with the patient–doctor relationship, the fact that he was most interested in the private practice of surgery and not academics, and because of the economics involved. He served as interim chairman for 3 years until Dr Dean Lewis was appointed as Halsted’s successor. Dr Finney had previously turned down a professorship of surgery at Harvard University in 1920.

Finney was very active in the community. He was a member of the Baltimore City School Board and served on the Maryland State Board of Education. He served as the chair of the Board of Trustees of two prominent boys’ schools in Baltimore, McDonogh School and Gilman School. He served on the Board of Trustees of Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. He served as the chair of the Baltimore Chapter of the National Red Cross. The job of which he was most proud was serving as a Trustee of Princeton University. Interestingly, when Woodrow Wilson resigned the presidency of Princeton in 1912 to become Governor of New Jersey, the job of president of Princeton was offered to Dr J M T Finney.² This was a tremendous honor for a graduate of Princeton, whose father and grandfather were also graduates. He debated long



Figure 7. J M T Finney performing his imitation of “Teddy Roosevelt, the Rough Rider.” (From the Finney family, with permission.)

and hard, but eventually turned the job down because he did not want to leave the practice of surgery in Baltimore.

Finney not only served as the President of the American College of Surgeons, but also served as President of the Southern Surgical Association and the American Surgical Association. He received honorary degrees from Tulane University, Harvard University, and Loyola University of Maryland. From the Surgical Society of Boston, he received the prestigious Bigelow Medal. He was made an honorary fellow of the Medical Society of London, the Hunterian Society, and the Royal College of Surgeons of England, of Ireland, and of Edinburgh.

Because of Hopkins’ proximity to the White House and Finney’s reputation as an outstanding clinician, he was of-



Figure 9. Photograph of gravesite of J M T Finney in Churchville, Maryland. (From the Finney family, with permission.)

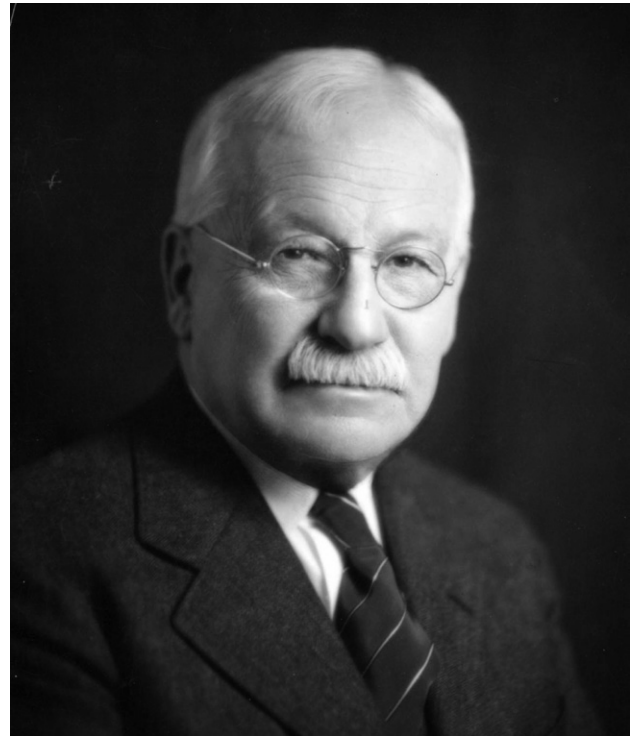


Figure 8. One of the last formal photographs taken of J M T Finney late in his career. (From the Finney family, with permission.)

ten called to Washington to examine members of the White House staff who were ill. He was an acquaintance and friend of President Theodore Roosevelt, President Woodrow Wilson, President William Harding, and President Calvin Coolidge. He was called to Washington, DC when President Roosevelt’s daughter was ill with appendicitis and performed an appendectomy on her in the White House. Finney was often mistaken for Theodore Roosevelt because of the physical resemblance and their mustaches (Fig. 7).

Finney was from an era when most surgeons in the United States were self-trained. His only formal training was 18 months as a surgical house pupil at the Massachusetts General Hospital. On his own, he became an excellent clinician and a superb technical surgeon. He was a broad general surgeon, but had a special interest in abdominal surgery, especially of the stomach and duodenum. When Dr Halsted’s wife Caroline developed appendicitis, Dr Halsted chose Dr Finney as the surgeon. Dr Finney was clearly a surgeon’s surgeon. When Dr Halsted died, the following statement was written by Finney. “I feel I owe him as my Chief a debt of gratitude that cannot be made. I have to thank him for whatever measure of success I may have attained in my chosen profession. He left a lasting imprint not only on the surgery of his own time, but of all time.”²² Finney recognized the importance of role modeling in his former chief. Long before the term *role model* was coined,

he stated in his autobiography the following, "We are all in a measure copy cats. How often do we see reflected, unconsciously perhaps, in students certain idiosyncrasies of their teachers—it may be methods of thought, modes of expression, mannerisms, poses, or whatnot . . ." and so ". . . we should conduct ourselves in such ways of thought and action as to make our influence count in right direction."²

The American College of Surgeons could not have picked a better role model for their first president. He was an outstanding clinician, an excellent technical surgeon, and had principals and ethics that the College was trying to promulgate in its efforts to elevate the standards of surgical practice and improve the care of the surgical patient (Fig. 8). When he died, his obituary contained statements such as, "idealistic in his attitudes," "unyielding in his principles," "selfless," "inspiring young men and women," "service to patients," and "ideal physician." On his grave stone in Churchville Maryland is engraved "who went around doing good" (Fig. 9).

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