ASHBEL SMITH, M.D., 1805-1886: PIONEER EDUCATOR IN TEXAS*
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For a long time I have looked forward to the pleasure of an evening in this magnificent medical historical library. I am especially glad to be here since it affords me an opportunity to discharge a portion of a debt long owed by Texas to Yale. As Doctor Bayne-Jones has indicated, the New Orleans area, and the great Texas country to the southwest of New Orleans, has produced many remarkable people. Medicine in the early days of Texas, a century and more ago, was largely dependent upon inspiration from New Orleans, although many of the early Texas physicians were well trained themselves and toiled vigorously to develop healthy independence in medical as well as in other affairs.

Higher education and medicine in Texas owe much to Yale. It was an almost forgotten graduate of Yale who was largely responsible for establishing worthy standards for higher education in Texas and for stabilizing the medical profession in the Southwest area. Like so many others who did everything possible to secure Texas independence, Doctor Ashbel Smith devoted his adult life to the development of his adopted state. He did his best to follow the well-established traditions of culture which he had acquired as a young man at Yale.

Ashbel Smith was born in Hartford, Connecticut, on August 13, 1805. His mother, Phoebe Adams, was reputed to have been a niece of President John Adams. The Smiths were apparently able to provide very amply for their four children. Ashbel had a sister, who later became a Mrs. Kittredge, and two brothers—one, H. G. Smith, became Chief Justice of the District of Tennessee; the other, George Smith, studied medicine and also settled in Tennessee. He later acquired the dubious reputation of being the most prominent gambler in Memphis. The brothers had financial troubles, and Doctor Ashbel Smith was impelled late in his life to publish correspondence between himself and his brother George regarding the matter.

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Ashbel never married. While he had a reputation for courtliness and hospitality, he seems not to have had a particularly high opinion of the fair sex. He was a small man, with a rather ugly face and a disfiguring beard. He cultivated the full-flown courtesy of the southern gentleman and was quite renowned as a bachelor host. He talked slowly and carefully and seemed to have prided himself on his scholarly pursuits. As Doctor Pat Nixon describes him—he was short of stature and long on dignity.

He had attended Yale College and had received his Bachelor's degree in 1824. For some reason he determined to practise law in the western part of North Carolina, but the poverty of the settlers there did not promise well for a law career. His sympathetic interest in the sicknesses of his neighbors, and the obvious need for medical attention for the vigorous pioneers in the South, inspired him to study medicine. He returned to Yale and received his M.D. degree in 1828.

Ashbel Smith was a brilliant student. When he received his undergraduate degree, President Day is said to have called him the best student in Latin and Greek who had ever been at Yale. His medical studies gave him the urge to seek further medical training abroad. While his family apparently had funds sufficient to support him, he made an effort to take care of himself. He was attracted particularly to Paris, as was the case with so many of the young American medical students at that time. The Paris physicians and hospitals were offering the best medical training then available in Europe, and their influence was great through such subsequent American leaders as Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), James Jackson, Jr., (1810-1834), William Gerhard (1809-1872), and Weir Mitchell (1829-1914).

It is interesting to observe how the American contacts with European medicine gradually shifted from Edinburgh and London, as the great schools of the 18th century in those cities gradually declined, and turned toward Paris where modern scientific medicine was developing in the early 19th century. The contributions of Bichat (1771-1802), Laennec (1781-1826), Magendie (1783-1855), Louis (1787-1872), Cruveilhier (1791-1873), Flourens (1794-1867), Larrey (1766-1842), Dupuytren (1777-1825), Velpeau (1795-1867), Malgaigne (1806-1865), and Bernard (1813-1898) were so successful in suggesting a new scientific approach to medicine that they attracted students from all over the world. This was the era which established the dependence of Latin-American medicine on Paris.

While in Paris, Ashbel Smith became attached to the Necker
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Hospital. He apparently won great respect from his Parisian medical colleagues by his devotion to the sick in the hospital during the cholera epidemic in 1832. He made careful notes of his clinical experiences during this period and when he returned to New York he published an account of his observations.

At Paris, Ashbel Smith seems to have deeply appreciated the cultural opportunities about him. He began the collection of a technical library. He became a member of the Société de Géographie, prizing his membership and retaining it for many years.

After returning from Europe, Doctor Smith began to practise medicine in the North Carolina hills where he had observed the acute need for effective medical service. However, he became restless and dissatisfied with his practise. His letters to his family show that he was torn between the desire to render humanitarian service and his desire also to be a more vigorous intellectual connoisseur. Like so many other young men of that period in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, he was thinking of moving West. The disturbances in the Texas area attracted him. When a stirring call came for volunteers to defend the Texas settlers, Doctor Ashbel Smith responded.

In those days it was a long and rough journey from North Carolina to Texas. Although Doctor Smith had been inspired by his friendship for the great Texas leader, Sam Houston, and although he made every effort to reach Texas to be of service during the war for independence, he did not arrive until after the decisive battle at San Jacinto, where Santa Anna's forces were thoroughly routed in the April swamps beside Buffalo Bayou. He seems, however, immediately to have undertaken the medical care of the wounded, and his ability was promptly recognized by his appointment in 1837 as the first Surgeon General of the Republic of Texas.

After two years' service as Surgeon General, Doctor Smith engaged in statesman-like leadership in the new Republic. He was made Secretary of State and was appointed as the first Minister of the Republic of Texas to England and France. This appointment was probably made on the basis of his familiarity with the capitols of these countries. Doctor Smith succeeded in obtaining the interest of England and France in the new Republic, and he undertook successfully to establish commercial relations between the new Texas area and Europe.

It is difficult to trace Doctor Smith's movements during the exciting early days of the Texas Republic and during the period when arrangements were made for its annexation to the United States. As Secretary
of State, he successfully arranged reasonable treaties between the Indians and the Republic of Texas which became the basis for later negotiations between the United States and the Indian tribes of the Southwest. He also negotiated the treaty of Texas independence from Mexico.

Following the admission of Texas to the Union, Smith continued to serve the commonwealth. He was elected to the Texas House of Representatives, and later to the Senate. He served briefly in the Mexican War. By this time he had established a large plantation on Galveston Bay called "Evergreen." Here he built a modest home where his 4,000-volume library was sheltered. He attempted to improve the property considerably and built a rather large dock into the shallow waters of the Bay. While it is reputed that he entertained (at "Evergreen") many wealthy friends who came into Galveston Bay with palatial yachts, this is probably a case of Texas exaggeration, for the Bay was not deep enough to accommodate much more than a shallow skiff. After Doctor Smith's death, "Evergreen" deteriorated. Later oil was discovered on it, and a part of it now has become a bustling community rejoicing in the name of "Goose Creek."

During the bitter slavery dispute, Doctor Smith vigorously opposed secession. He was enlightened enough to consider slavery archaic, and he was also convinced of the importance of preserving the Union. Nevertheless, when the Civil War came, he raised the Second Texas Infantry, and as its Colonel fought vigorously in the Mississippi Valley Campaign. He was wounded at the Battle of Shiloh and was furloughed home. In the reconstruction days, he strongly opposed the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan. Like all enlightened citizens of the South, he suffered severely as a result of the carpet-bagging tactics of cheap, selfish, and avaricious Northerners who followed the army of occupation.

Doctor Smith continued to hold elected public office in the Texas Legislature. Some of the campaigns were vigorous, following the pattern of personal vituperation which seems to have become so characteristic of the South. His emotional reactions to suspected insult led more than once to physical brawls with his political opponents, even on the floor of the Texas Senate. For these he always promptly and flourishingly apologized. These difficulties may have prevented him from seeking to represent Texas in the National Congress.

Medical activity

During all of his busy career Doctor Smith seems to have maintained an active participation in medical affairs. When he first came to
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Texas he practised in Galveston. Here he played a leading part in combating the epidemic of yellow fever which raged in Galveston in 1839. He kept careful records of his cases, and performed a surprising number of postmortem examinations. His subsequent publication of this experience exerted considerable influence\(^1\) and has now become rare. His case reports were especially complete and his pathological deductions were significant. He advocated the filling of marshy land and the removal of filth to prevent further epidemics.

Doctor Smith’s careful clinical work resulted from his Paris training. His account\(^2\) of the cholera epidemic in Paris in 1832 was widely distributed in this country and served to establish a considerable clinical reputation for him. As a result of his several clinical contributions to the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, he was honored by being asked to serve as one of its associate editors.

While Surgeon General of the Texan Army from 1837 to 1839, Doctor Smith built a makeshift hospital in Houston, which, however, served a surprisingly large number (50) of acute cases. Shortage of funds handicapped his efforts, although he tried to get needed supplies and equipment from every possible source. His report on his activities was succinct and well organized, but he resigned when it was apparent that funds would not be available to do a satisfactory job.

In 1853 there had developed sufficient interest among the physicians of Texas to bring about an effective organization of the State Medical Society. In this Ashbel Smith played a leading part. But in spite of his obvious clinical ability, and in spite of his scholarship and statesmanship, he did not receive the honors due him from his medical colleagues. He probably was too dominant, too active, and probably too intelligent to be accepted readily as a leader by the majority of the practitioners of the time.

The first medical school in Texas was established by Greensville Dowell (1822-1881) in Galveston in 1866. This institution had a precarious existence. Doctor Dowell was an impetuous and apparently an irascible sort of a practitioner who certainly did not get on well with his colleagues. There was much dissension in the school, as has often been the case with early American medical schools. Finally Doctor Dowell was forced out of the institution, and Doctor Ashbel Smith was called in to reorganize the school and to act as Dean. He served in this capacity for a number of years during the 70’s. Apparently the school did well under his influence and guidance. A general hospital was erected and a special ward was opened for marine cases. Doctor Smith
continued the earlier efforts of Doctor Dowell to establish a quarantine station and a board of health. The poverty of the people of the area, however, made it difficult to get a first-rate medical school in operation, or to implement measures in behalf of public health.

It may have been Doctor Smith's experience with the Galveston Medical College which inspired him to take steps toward establishing the University of Texas and convinced him of the necessity for a good state university, supported at public expense, to provide the proper kind of professional training. Such a state university had been proposed by the founders of the Republic of Texas, but nothing had come of it. It was probably Ashbel Smith's influence which resulted in the Texas Constitutional provision in 1876 for the establishment of a "University of the First Class" at Austin, and a Medical Branch at Galveston.

**Educational interests**

The Yale training of Ashbel Smith had successfully inspired him with scholarly zeal. He was an outstanding student, who maintained an interest in scholarly pursuits throughout his busy life. While studying at the Necker Hospital in Paris, he became a member, as was previously mentioned, of the Société de Géographie. A few years after he had come to Texas, Doctor Smith wrote a considerable account of the geography of the state, together with a description of its flora and fauna, and a discussion of the commercial possibilities. The article was written in French for publication in the *Bulletin of the Société*. At about this same time Doctor Smith wrote an English description of the climate, soil, and products of Texas for inclusion in a volume published in New York by H. S. Foote (*Texas and the Texans*, New York, 1841).

In 1848, on Washington's birthday, Dr. Smith delivered in the City of Galveston a major public address which was favorably received and was subsequently published. Later in this same year, having been appointed to the Board of Visitors of the United States Military Academy at West Point, he was asked to give the address before the first class to be graduated from the Academy. This was a considerable honor and he acquitted himself with distinction. The address contains many classical references and is properly inspirational.

The year following, Doctor Smith was asked to give the Phi Beta Kappa oration at Yale. This address is also replete with classical allusions and again is an excellent example of the inspirational address which college graduates of the time found stimulating. These invitations
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from West Point and Yale indicate that Doctor Smith enjoyed a considerable reputation.

In 1849 he made a rather remarkable effort to establish a university at Memphis, prompted without doubt by his brothers who were still living in Tennessee. Doctor Smith prepared a "letter" to the Trustees of Memphis University regarding the establishment of the proposed university. This letter was printed for wide distribution. In this letter Doctor Smith emphasized the fact that a university should be developed on a first-class basis. His insistence in this respect and the terms which he used reflect the sort of sentiment expressed when the University of Texas was established many years later.

Doctor Smith apparently had little time for publications during the Civil War and Reconstruction Period. It was not until the relative calm of the 70's that he could again turn to intellectual interests. In 1875 he gave the annual address before the Historical Society of Galveston, and this was considered important enough to be published.

When the State of Texas finally arranged for the establishment of a university, Ashbel Smith played a leading part in its development. He had been a member of the State Legislature, and probably was instrumental in planning the necessary legislation. When the University was organized, he was appointed to the Board of Regents and elected Chairman, and it must have been very gratifying to him to preside at the laying of the cornerstone of Main Hall of the University of Texas on November 17, 1882. His address on this occasion was printed in the first catalog issued by the University. The cornerstone is now preserved in the arcade of the Main Administration Building of the University of Texas, together with some of the inspiring words of Doctor Smith on the occasion of its laying.

This was his last significant public act, but a most appropriate one in connection with the development of the culture of the Texas and Southwest area. Doctor Smith must have been aware of the potentialities of this "empire" for he refers to the establishment of the University of Texas as perhaps the most important project which the people of the area could support. At least he lived long enough to see the University opened and functioning. He died on January 2, 1886.

Appreciation

Ashbel Smith was inspired by his early educational opportunities at Yale to engage in a busy and varied career under pioneering conditions.
As physician, statesman, and educator, he contributed significantly to the development of Texas and, through him, Texas owes a real debt to Yale. Doctor Smith was an excellent example of the many hundreds of brilliant men who have carried the traditions of Yale culture to all parts of the earth, and who under the trying circumstances of frontièring conditions, have pioneered gloriously for the highest standards of culture in the West.

Acknowledgments


REFERENCES

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4 An address delivered in the City of Galveston on the 22nd of February, 1848, the Anniversary of the Birthday of Washington, and of the Battle of Buena Vista. By Ashbel Smith, News Office, Galveston, W. Richardson, 17 pp.
5 Address before the Officers and Cadets of the U. S. Military Academy. Ashbel Smith, June 16, 1848, New York, 14 pp.