

Past Observances

1862 SEMI-CENTENNIAL

Planning for the Rhode Island Medical Society's semi-centennial celebration "with appropriate oration and ceremonies" began 16 months in advance with the appointment, in December 1860, of a three-person committee chaired by Dr. James H. Eldredge. The

following June, Dr. Eldredge reported that Dr. David King of Newport had agreed to deliver the semi-centennial address, which was to take place nine months hence, on April 22, 1862, precisely on the fiftieth anniversary of the Society's

original organizational meeting.

Dr. King was an inspired choice for the occasion. Like the Society itself, he had been born in 1812, the son and namesake of one of the original 49 founders. He had received his medical degree at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1834 and joined the Rhode Island Medical Society that same year. He had served as its president in 1848–1849. His extensive personal library reflected his deep interest in history, medicine and literature. In his lifetime he traveled extensively in Europe. He was known as an eloquent speaker and writer. His oration was



Theodore Wheaton King (1841–1862)

to be the centerpiece of the Society's fiftieth anniversary celebration.

However, at the time Dr. King agreed to deliver the commemorative address, he had a 19 year-old son named Theodore Wheaton King, who, "on his way to school" in April 1861, heeded Lincoln's call for 90-day enlistees to defend the nation's capitol. When the 1st Rhode Island infantry regiment left for Washington in late April, Theodore was with them. Shortly after July 21, 1861, Dr. King learned by telegram that his son had been gravely wounded in the Battle of Bull Run.

Dr. King immediately set out for Washington by train. From there, on July 29, he wrote a poignant letter to Colonel William Porcher Miles, a South Carolinian on the staff of the Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard, saying in part "I wish to be allowed to come into Virginia to see my son if alive, or to search for his body if dead." King was permitted to visit his wounded son at the military hospital in Richmond and to transport

him to Philadelphia. Theodore died there five months later, in January 1862.

The official record of what was to have been the Medical Society's commemorative semi-centennial meeting, held on Tuesday, April 22, 1862, in the hall of the Franklin Society on North Main Street in Providence, states that "Dr. David King, the Orator for the Day, had been unable, on account of severe domestic affliction, to prepare a discourse for this occasion." Dr. King, however, kept his commitment to the Society and delivered his address 14 months later on June 3, 1863. The text of King's address does not survive.

1912 CENTENNIAL

As the Society prepared to enter its second century, it could hardly have conceived of a grander monument to itself than the library it constructed during 1911–1912 at 106 Francis Street. The ultimatum delivered a few years earlier by the Providence Public Library, requiring the Society to find a new home for its growing collection, galvanized the Society to realize plans that had been in preparation for decades.

The result was not only a handsome addition to the Providence cityscape. The library's location on Smith Hill near the new State House was also symbolic of the Society's awareness of its abiding obligation to be active in the public life of Rhode Island in the new century.

The Society's centennial celebration occupied two full days: Wednesday and Thursday, June 12 and 13, 1912. Wednesday began with an outing for Society members and guests at Rocky Point amusement park. The steamer *Squantum* left the Dyer Street wharf shortly after ten o'clock that morning

with about 150 aboard. On the trip down Narragansett Bay, "several colored men entertained with orchestral selections and buck and wing dancing."

After photos at Rocky Point (none are known to survive), two teams of physicians faced off for a game of baseball. The *Diplococci Intracellulares Wechselbaumii* nine pitted themselves against the *Polymorphonuclei Leucocytes* (i.e., germs versus white cells; the germs won handily). Slapstick entertainment followed the ball game. After lunch, the outing included an exhibition of boxing and wrestling. The steamer brought the party back to Providence by about five o'clock.

That evening, more than 400 people, including state and city officials, officers of Brown University and leaders of many community organizations, thronged to Francis Street to tour the new library. The *Providence Journal* reported that the evening reception was "a brilliant affair," featuring "banks of palms and huge bouquets on tables in all the rooms."

On Thursday morning, June 13, 1912, the festivities continued with

an excursion by automobile to Wannamoisett Country Club, where a luncheon was waiting. Back in the new auditorium at 106 Francis Street, scientific presentations and the annual business meeting filled the afternoon.

On Thursday evening, 250 people attended the centennial banquet at the Eloise Hotel.

1962 SESQUICENTENNIAL

The introduction of the first oral polio vaccine in 1962 provided a fitting harmonic for the Rhode Island Medical Society's 150th anniversary theme of medical and scientific progress. The previous half century had seen other momentous advances: the discovery of penicillin; vaccines for influenza, typhus, yellow fever, tetanus, tuberculosis, pertussis and diphtheria; the first cardiac pacemaker; Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA; the first kidney transplant. In February 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit the earth.

For its part, the Rhode Island Medical Society observed its sesquicentennial by welcoming 82,200

visitors to "the greatest audio-visual health education program for the public ever staged in New England." The Society's nine-day "Exposition of Health Progress" took place in the Cranston Street Armory April 6–14, 1962. More than 200 members of the Society served as volunteer docents.



RIMS' Exhibition of Health Progress included free vaccinations against polio.

Thousands of exhibition-goers were inoculated against polio.

Simultaneously, the Society was laying ambitious plans for an even greater gift to Rhode Islanders: RIMS' Child-School Health Committee organized and launched the nation's first state-wide End Polio Campaign. Rhode Island physicians administered 1,958,759 free doses of Sabin oral polio vaccine, Types 1, 2 and 3, over three Sundays in March, April and October 1963. As a result, Rhode Island became the first state to immunize its entire population.

The first comprehensive history of the Society, *The History of the Rhode Island Medical Society and its Component Societies 1812–1962*, was published in 1966.

Rocky Point Park ca. 1880

