

■ a moment in time

Historical Perspective: California Organized Medicine in the 1800s

Founder and First President of the California Medical Association: The Great, Great Grandfather of a Permanente Physician!

Suspecting that many of our readers are as interested as I am in the history of medicine, I thought that many would enjoy this genealogical linkage of Permanente to the genesis of the California Medical Association.

Benjamin F Keene, MD, was elected first President of the California Medical Society at the organization meeting in Sacramento on March 12, 1856. Dr Keene was the great, great grandfather of Dr J Harper Gaston, an internist/cardiologist who spent 23 years with The Permanente Medical Group (TPMG) in Northern California, where he held an administrative position for over 20 years (including eight years as Physician-In-Chief, Hayward-Fremont Service Area) and nine years as the Founder and Executive Medical Director of The Southeast Permanente Medical Group (TSPMG) in Atlanta, Georgia. Anne Gaston, MD, also had a distinguished career with TPMG, practicing 23 years as a pediatrician-neonatologist in Hayward and Oakland and for 12 years Director of the Regional Intensive Care Nursery in Oakland. Both physicians are now enjoying semiretirement in Greenville, Georgia.

Drs Harper and Anne Gaston both can be proud that as long-time Permanente physicians (55 full-time years), they had a major role in improving the health of the citizens of California. Dr Harper Gaston also had a role later in Georgia. Dr Harper can also claim what few can: He is a direct descendant of a physician who took the first step in organizing California physicians in the 1800s to address the many health needs of the state's early citizens. Clearly, generations of Californians have benefited from this family.

Included below are excerpts from an article on Dr Keene written by his granddaughter, Louise Frederick Hays, Georgia State Historian, and published in May 1942 by the California Medical Association. Following this historical piece is Dr Harper Gaston's account of the Gastons' move, in 1961, from Atlanta to California to take their first jobs as Permanente physicians—a journey in which they encountered the past while establishing their professional future.

I want to thank Dr Gaston for giving the readers of *The Permanente Journal* a glimpse of his exciting family history.

—Lee D Jacobs, MD, Section Editor



Photo reprinted from California and Western Med.

Benjamin Franklin Keene, MD, 1809-1856, First President of the California Medical Association

Excerpts from CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE 1942 May; 56(6):p 296-300, reproduced with permission from the BMJ Publishing Group. Written by Louise Frederick Hays, Dr Benjamin Keene's granddaughter

Benjamin Franklin Keene was born September 1, 1809, in Lynn, Massachusetts, son of Josiah Keene and his wife, Avis Swift Keene. On his father's side his genealogy may be traced back directly to John and Martha Keene, who came to New England in

1638; to Thomas Prence, Governor of Plymouth Colony, 1632-1673. On his mother's side, he was descended from Francis Cooke, who came over on the Mayflower.

Early Education

Benjamin ... was sent to the Friends School at Providence, Rhode Island, now Moses Brown College ... from 1827 to 1828. Here he met Joel Branham, and in the summer of 1827 he went with him for vacation to his home in Eatonton, Georgia. While there, Joel's older brother, Dr Henry Branham ... persuaded the boys to study medicine, offering to teach them and take them into his office. Benjamin returned to his school in Provi-

dence, and then went to Nantucket, Massachusetts, and read medicine under his uncle, Dr Paul Swift, who afterwards became President of Haverford College in Philadelphia. In 1830, Benjamin returned to Georgia to join the Branham doctors in Eatonton for practice as "Physician, Surgeon and Dentist." After a year in Eatonton, Dr Keene realized that three doctors were too many for so small a place, so he moved 18 miles south to Hillsboro, Jasper County, Georgia.

Family History

[Dr Keene] soon became infatuated with the beautiful Harriet Bell ... and they were married May 12, 1831. He then moved to Brownsville, near Forsyth, Georgia, where his two daughters, Lucinda Morris and Virginia, were born.

In December 1832 ... he was granted, on the presentation of a thesis on Cholera Infantum, a "permanent license" to practice medicine in Georgia by the State Board of Physicians and Surgeons.

On account of his wife's failing health he returned to Hillsboro His wife lived only a short time after their return to Hillsboro, and in December 1841, Dr Keene was married Ann Eliza Frances Reese, [who died in October 1843] leaving Dr Keene with [their one year old daughter, Medora Ann Keene, mother of Louise Frederick Hays. Dr Keene practiced in Hillsboro until 1847, when he enlisted and served in the Mexican War, and then went on to California in 1849, leaving his three children with their grandparents.]

From old records, family tradition, and patients, it has been learned that Dr Keene had a wide practice Miss Joe Varner, who lived perhaps 20 miles away in the adjoining county of Jones, remembered him as their "handsome family physician, when he came on horseback, wearing a bottle-green broadcloth suit, with his medicine in his saddle bags."

During these years he was called upon for "orations" at public gatherings [A record] of his eloquent speaking is contained in a letter written by Dr Keene, dated June 15, 1846 ... to his daughter Lucinda ... [that stated,] "I have been appointed to deliver an oration in Monticello on the 4th of July."

Mexican War

[Dr Keene] went to the Mexican War, family tradition says, as a surgeon, but the records of the War Department show: "Enlisted June 7, 1847 at Austin for 12 months. Private in Capt Kimsey's Co K, 1st Reg. (JC Hays) Texas Mounted Volunteers. Promoted January 14, 1848, corporal, mustered out, with his Co Apr 30, 1848 at Vera Cruz, Camp Washington, Mexico."

Jefferson College Confers MD Degree

According to family tradition, Dr Keene and Dr Branham went to Philadelphia "for lectures," and perhaps for advanced courses. The records of Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, show that the "degree of Doctor of Medicine was conferred on Benjamin F Keene of Georgia in 1847." His name is on the list of Board members [of the Board of Physicians and Surgeons of Georgia present in December 1848.]

Arrival in California

The roving spirit of Dr Keene could not withstand Horace Greeley's advice, "Go West, young man," and the Gold Rush of 1849 appealed to his wanderlust. Over land he went to California and landed in Hangtown, now Placerville, where after a flare at mining, he settled down to his chosen profession of medicine

State Senator from El Dorado County

Dr Keene became Senator from El Dorado County in 1852, the third session of the California Senate, and was re-elected in 1853-54 and 1855, over which body he presided as President pro tem.

First President of the State Medical Association

Perhaps his most notable achievement will live in the part he took in the organization of the "Medical Society of the State of California," the first medical society on the Pacific Coast. Having served many years on the State Board of Physicians in Georgia, he saw the need of such a society in California [He was elected first President of the California Medical Society (former name of the California Medical Association) at the organization meeting in Sacramento on March 12, 1856.]

... according to records, on taking the chair, "Dr Keene addressed the Convention, returning thanks for the distinguished favor extended him. He regarded the Convention as composed of representatives of a profession which ... [has been] set apart as the only finite power capable of removing the ills to which we are subjected. ... He had never before met with any body more earnest in a desire to cooperate in the advancement of the interests and the elevation of the tone of the medical profession."

The Death of Dr Benjamin Keene

Quoting from the *History of El Dorado County*, California, p 22, "Hon. BF Keene, MD, died of paralysis in Placerville on the 5th of September, 1856." ... Dr Keene

was buried ... in the Old City Cemetery, Sacramento Hill, Placerville, California. On the headstone marking his grave is carved ... the words: "BF Keene, MD, a native of Georgia and first President of the California's State Medical Society." When this grave was located in

1912 by his granddaughter, Louise Frederick Hays, the slab had fallen and was broken; but in 1923 the California Medical Association had the old slab embedded in concrete on the top of the grave, and a new marker placed at the head.

Retracing Dr Keene's Steps—From Georgia to California

The Future and the Past Meet

By J Harper Gaston, MD

In early 1961, Anne Gaston and I made the decision to move to Northern California to join TPMG of Northern California, in the San Leandro office. We had both just finished our residency programs, Anne as a pediatrician-neonatologist and I as an internist-cardiologist, at Emory-Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. In early August 1961, having spent the night in South Tahoe, we were on the last leg of our trip when we were surprised to see a sign up ahead "Placerville": The burial site of my great, great grandfather.

My mother had reminded me prior to leaving Georgia that when I arrived in California I should look up the grave of my great, great grandfather, Benjamin F Keene, MD. My grandmother had visited his gravesite with her stepdaughter, Mattie Hays, in 1912. Shortly thereafter, the California Medical Association, with her encouragement, restored the monument honoring him.

The Search for the Gravesite

Placerville was a very small town, similar in many ways to many small towns in Georgia except for the mountains overlooking this beautiful site. As we pulled onto the main street, I saw a police officer, and I stopped to ask his help in locating my great, great grandfather's grave.

He asked me when my grandfather had died, and he was somewhat surprised when I told him 1856. He probably had never encountered anyone with such a deep southern accent or anyone with such an unusual request. His reaction prompted me to simply ask for directions to the nearest cemetery. The officer mentioned that there were three cemeteries, and the closest one was just a short distance from downtown.

After a few blocks, we turned onto a dirt road of California red clay and stopped. Surprisingly, it looked very much like the red clay back in Georgia. Although we could not identify headstones from the car, I ascended a small hill and discovered that in fact it was an old cemetery. I waved my family to follow. Within a few minutes after walking through the cemetery for probably 100 yards, I suddenly found myself standing at the foot of Benjamin Franklin Keene's grave.

It was an eerie feeling for me as I realized that almost 50 years after my grandmother visited this site in 1912, I had walked directly to his grave within less than ten minutes from leaving downtown Placerville. I felt drawn and guided by some irresistible force, which was completely mystifying to me. It was an unbelievable experience for me to

realize that on my journey to start my professional career, I had found my California roots. It was as if a voice were telling me that I had finally come with my grandfather's approval and perhaps with his direction. We were now looking forward with a great deal of enthusiasm for the opportunity to practice medicine in California, just as Dr Keene had done more than 100 years earlier.

California Organized Care Meets Permanente

Several months later, Anne and I decided that it would be important for us to join the Alameda County Medical Association. I was somewhat surprised that we would have to be interviewed prior to being accepted into the organization, because I was unaware that Permanente physicians were considered to be "the other guys." In fact, Henry Kaiser became so distressed about the failure of the American Medical Association (AMA) to accept Permanente physicians, that shortly after World War II ended, in 1946, he went to the AMA office in Chicago on behalf of Permanente and insisted that there be no further discrimination of our physicians.

When Anne and I arrived at the meeting for our interviews, we were received in a very cool fashion. We

walked up to a group of three physicians and introduced ourselves. I stated that I was glad to be in California and felt right at home with them. Their bewilderment was further enhanced when I informed them that my great, great grandfather, Dr Benjamin F Keene, not only founded the California Medical Association but that he was its first President! I think that if I had thrown a bucket of cold water on those three physicians I could not have created a greater sense of disbelief or amazement. I left them speechless and unable to respond to the very idea that a Permanente physician's ancestor was the founding President of the California Medical Association.

Their reaction of rejection, and the overall reception that Anne and I received, intensified our desire to not only be successful in the practice of medicine with TPMG but to follow in Dr Keene's footsteps and for both of us to become leaders in this new world of California. ❖

The Gastons' Community Service in California

An overview of Drs Anne and Harper Gaston's commitment to community service:

Harper—President of the California Heart Association; Chairman of the Emergency Medical Care Committee in Alameda County for many years; and Founder and Director of the Heart Station, staffed by volunteer physicians and nurses at the Oakland Coliseum for ten years.

Anne—For 20 years, she taught medical students and residents in the ICN, University of California Medical School, San Francisco. She was one of the few Permanente physicians who started in the 1960s as an Instructor and became a full Professor—Professor of Pediatrics in 1979. At the same time, she was for five years Director of the ICN at Marin General Hospital by a special contract with TPMG for her services.



Anne H Gaston, MD and J Harper Gaston, MD, 2004

History

[History is] a means of furnishing the present with an understanding of the events and reasoning that shared and influenced the establishment of principles and programs of the past.

— Ray Kay, founding Medical Director of the Southern California Medical Group
 This "Moment in History" quote collected by Steve Gilford, KP Historian