NYC Landmark Celebrates P&S on 250th Anniversary of First Day of Classes

On Nov. 2, the Empire State Building Will Be Lit Blue to Mark the 250th Anniversary of Columbia Medical School's First Day of Classes in 1767

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If the students who enrolled in the King’s College new “School of Physick” in 1767 could be transported to the school today (now called Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons (P&S), one thing would be familiar: their medical education would begin with anatomy.

Today’s students begin their medical education with “Clinical Gross Anatomy.” On Nov. 2, 1767, at four o’clock in the afternoon, Dr. Samuel Clossy, professor of anatomy, delivered the school’s first class, an introductory lecture titled the “Usefulness of Anatomy.”

The students attending the first lecture at Columbia’s medical school in 1767 were joined by many New York dignitaries who attended and applauded Dr. Clossy’s presentation.
The entire day had been a spectacle. Earlier, the opening of the medical school—the first in New York and the second in the Colonies—was celebrated with a parade through lower Manhattan, where the school was located. The colony’s governor, Supreme Court judges in their robes, and lawyers in gowns marched with the president and governors of King’s College to College-Hall on Park Place near present-day City Hall.

King’s College campus in 1770

The New York Mercury newspaper captured the scene as Dr. Peter Middleton, King’s College professor of the theory of physick, delivered the opening address, “An Historical Inquiry into the Ancient and Present State of Medicine.” The audience was captivated.

“The satisfaction of the learned and splendid audience on this occasion, was universal; and more especially so, when they considered the performance, as the beginning of an institution, so replete with advantages to mankind in general, and to the inhabitants of this province in particular,” reported the newspaper.

Dr. Middleton’s lecture would be the first work on the history of medicine published in America. The other faculty of the new medical school—Drs. Samuel Bard, Samuel Clossy, John Jones, James Smith, and John V.B. Tennent—were just as prominent. Dr. Bard was a founder of what became New York Hospital (which merged with Presbyterian Hospital more than 200 years later), and John Jones wrote the first surgical text by an American to be published in America, “Plain Concise Practical Remarks on the Treatment of Wounds and Fractures.”

According to John Shrady’s 1903 book, “The College of Physicians and Surgeons of New York ... A History,” three medical students enrolled in 1767. He quotes from the original King’s College Matriculation Book now held by Columbia University Archives.
What did students learn in medical school back in the 18th century?

For one, they mainly attended lectures and little else, though anatomical dissection was always part of the curriculum. Notes by medical student James Graham date to Feb. 11, 1774, and reveal some details of the type of lectures given; He recorded details of Dr. Bard’s lecture on the “quinsy,” an inflammation or abscess of the tonsils. [Graham’s observations are the only known student notes from Columbia’s pre-Revolutionary War medical school and are on display in the exhibit “P&S 1767-2017: 250 Years of the College of Physicians and Surgeons” through Dec. 20, 2017, in Hammer Health Sciences Center, Lower Level 2.]

In the early decades of American medical education, students did not pay an all-over tuition but instead paid by the class, with the fees sent directly to the professor. In exchange, students received admission tickets. Classes could be taken in any order. Clinical training was optional and cost extra, though students were expected to apprentice with a practicing physician.

Student life was diffuse and unorganized in the first century and a half of P&S, and students lived in boarding houses around the city or at home. A sense of campus community came much later with the creation of the P&S Club in 1894 and the opening of Bard Hall in 1931, a few years after the school moved to its present-day location in Washington Heights.

Today, the first day of classes for new P&S students happens at summer’s end in August. Instead of a parade that marked the beginning of the school 250 years ago, P&S will mark the 250th anniversary with a modern spectacle: The tower of the Empire State Building will be lit in Columbia blue on Nov. 2, 2017. Anyone viewing the lighting in person is asked to share their photos on social media with the anniversary hashtag #ColumbiaPS250.

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