

Thomas Harris, M.D., Naval Surgeon and
Founder of the First School of Naval
Medicine in the New World

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THOMAS HARRIS, a naval surgeon of the first half of the nineteenth century, is a relatively unknown name in the history of American medicine, yet he had a most distinguished career. He was a surgeon of national reputation who operated upon President Jackson; he became administrative head of the Medical Department of the Navy, the office corresponding to the present title of Surgeon General; and he established the first school of naval medicine in the United States and, indeed, in the Americas. He maintained this school practically by his own efforts for over twenty years, and while it was eventually closed for lack of funds, it was the forerunner of the present Naval Medical School at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland.

Thomas Harris was born in East Whiteland, Chester County, Pennsylvania, on January 3, 1784. He came of fine old colonial stock and his immediate ancestors were by no means undistinguished. His father, Brigadier General William Harris of the Pennsylvania Militia, served in the Revolutionary War and the Whiskey Rebellion and died at the beginning of the War of 1812. He was a farmer of East Whiteland, had served in the State Legislature, and was an Elder of the Presbyterian Church. Harris' mother was Mary Campbell, daughter of the Reverend John Campbell, a Presbyterian clergyman. The early education of Thomas Harris was at the Brandywine Academy, Brandywine Manor, Chester County, Pennsylvania. He entered the University of Pennsylvania as a medical student in 1806 and received his degree of Doctor of Medicine on April 19, 1809. He appears to have engaged in medical practice in Philadelphia, but at the beginning of the War of 1812 he was appointed a surgeon in the Navy. His commission was transmitted to him in the following letter:

Navy Dept.
6 July 1812.

Doct. Thos Harris
Philadelphia

Your nomination by the President to the Senate of the U.S. as a Surgeon in the

* San Diego, California.



Thomas Harris 1784-1861
The second Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

Navy of the U.S. having been confirmed, I have the pleasure to hand you herewith your commission as Surgeon in the Navy. . . .

His first orders were as follows:

Navy Dep.
22 Sep 1812.

Doct Tho Harris
of U. S. Navy Philada

You will report yourself to the commanding officer of U.S. Ship *Wasp*, as Surgeon of that ship.

(Signed) P. Hamilton

The *Wasp* was an 18-gun sloop of war carrying 137 men and commanded by Captain (Master-Commandant) Jacob Jones. Dr. Harris did not have long to wait to see plenty of action, for the *Wasp* cleared the Delaware Capes on October 13 in a storm. Five days later it encountered and engaged the British brig of war, *Frolic*, 18 guns and 110 men, Captain Thomas Whinyates commanding. The *Frolic* was accompanying a convoy of merchant ships from Honduras to England. The *Wasp* was to windward when the *Frolic* was sighted and could have avoided combat had the *Frolic* seemed too strong for her. As they made her out to be a vessel of about their own class, they bore down upon her. The weather had moderated somewhat, though a heavy sea was still running. The English ship accepted the action to protect her convoy. The two vessels fought almost yardarm to yardarm in an exceedingly fierce action. The *Wasp* lost her main and mizzen top masts and spanker gaff, while the *Frolic* had her boom mainsail shot away which rendered her practically unmanageable. The *Wasp* fell across her bow and boarded her. So severe had been the American fire that the decks of the British ship were covered with killed and wounded, and there was very little resistance to the boarding party. The whole action took only forty-three minutes. Of the British crew, thirty were killed and only twenty remained unwounded. The American loss stood at five killed and five wounded.

Dr. Harris had plenty of surgical experience, for in addition to caring for his own wounded, he at once assisted the British surgeon in caring for the large number of British wounded. Shortly after the battle, the British line-of-battleship *Poictiers* captured the *Wasp*, recaptured the *Frolic* and took both vessels into St. Georges, Bermuda. From here the American prisoners, including Harris, were returned in a cartel ship, the American brig *Diamond*, which left St. Georges apparently about November 5, 1812.

Thus Harris in less than a month after entering the naval service found himself a veteran of one of the most famous and desperate single ship com-

bats in our naval history. His captain spoke in the highest terms of his professional skill, his devotion to his patients, and his work in caring for the wounded. The British captain also expressed his appreciation for his assistance to the surgeon of the *Frolic* and the English wounded, among whom was the British surgeon himself. The medal which officers and men of the *Wasp* received was not struck, however, until a number of years afterward. The document transmitting this medal to Dr. Harris is as follows:

In compliance with a Resolution of the Congress of the United States, the President directs me to present to you a Medal in testimony of the high sense entertained by Congress of your gallantry, good conduct and services in the conflict with the British Sloop of War *Frolic*.

(Signed) Smith Thompson
Feb. 10, 1820

After his return to the United States, following the *Wasp* and *Frolic* action, Harris appears to have been ordered to duty with the naval forces on Lake Ontario and vicinity. His name appears on the rolls of the U.S.S. *Mohawk* January 1, 1813, and he was carried on this ship until December 31, 1814. At that time his former captain on the *Wasp*, Jacob Jones, was in command.

Eight days after the treaty of peace was ratified which ended the war between the United States and Great Britain, President Madison recommended war with Algiers, and Congress declared war on that country March 3, 1815. The Barbary States had continued to prey upon the commerce of the United States and European powers, and it was now decided that since the war with Great Britain was over, the naval forces which had been accumulated during that conflict should be used against the Barbary powers to compel them once and for all to abandon their attacks on American commerce. It was also intended to stop all tributes to them and to demand the release of any American citizens held as prisoners. Two squadrons were assembled. One, under Commodore Stephen Decatur which sailed May 20, 1815, consisted of three frigates, the *Guerrière*, *Constellation*, and *Macedonian*, two sloops of war, three brigs, and two schooners. Harris on March 25, 1815 had been ordered to the *Macedonian*. This squadron on July 17 intercepted the flagship of the Algerian fleet near Cape de Gat and in a short action captured her with loss of twenty killed on the Algerian vessel, including the commander. The Algerians also had many wounded, and Harris was one of those ordered to the captured vessel, the *Mashuda*, 46 guns and 446 men, to care for the wounded. The American squadron had four killed and ten wounded, most of them by a gun explosion on the *Guerrière*.

This war was a short one and led to almost complete compliance with the American demands; a considerable part of the United States naval forces returned to the United States that fall. On November 27, 1815, Dr. Harris was granted a three months' furlough. Upon the termination of his leave he was ordered to report to the Navy Department in Philadelphia, which he did in the following letter:¹

Philadelphia, March 1, 1816.

Sir,
The leave of absence which you had the goodness to grant me for the purpose of attending the medical lectures has this day expired. If you are of opinion that officers cannot serve their Government more faithfully, or to more advantage, in time of peace, than by cultivating a perfect knowledge of their profession, I should consider myself particularly favoured by being ordered to duty on this station, that I might attend during the summer, the lectures on botany & mineralogy. I graduated, it is true, in this university, previous to my entering the Navy, but as valuable improvements are yearly making in our extensive science, my duty as well as ambition prompts me to endeavour to keep pace with them. Indulgences of this kind have been frequently granted to other surgeons who have not seen as much service as myself. Doctors McReynolds, Washington, Horsley, and New were privileged by the Department, to attend lectures and retained on full pay, even in time of war, and Doctors Marshall and Hunt have been doing duty on the same station these five or six years.

I have the honor to be
very respectfully
Thos Harris
Surgeon.

The Hon. B. W. Crowninshield
Secretary of the Navy.

At the close of the War of 1812 there were forty-seven surgeons and sixty-six surgeon's mates. As was usual after our wars, there was a reduction in the military establishment so that by five years later the number had been reduced to forty-five surgeons and thirty-four surgeon's mates. It will be noticed that the principal reduction was in the junior ranks. As is always the case, there was some difficulty in obtaining employment, particularly at some special station, and Harris was anxious to be ordered to Philadelphia. His request for duty there was not granted, and he applied for duty on board the *Guerrière*. His request is quoted here as it mentions his service with Captain Jones and names Commodore Decatur for reference as to his professional ability and character:²

Philadelphia, Nov. 11, 1816.

Sir,
If there be no surgeon attached to the U. S. frigate *Guerrière* you will do me a particular service by ordering me to join that vessel. As I have sailed with Captain Jones from the commencement to the termination of the two late wars; and as I was

¹ Letter No. 105, Officers Letters, Vol. 1, Jan.-
Feb., 1816.

² Letter No. 75, Officers Letters, Vol. 4, 1816.

placed on furlough contrary to my wishes immediately upon my landing at Newport I hope it may not be considered too great an indulgence to be again placed under his command even though the ship be now in ordinary.

For my qualifications and character I beg leave to refer you to Commodore Decatur, to whom I have the honor of being personally known.

Very respectfully
Thos Harris
Surgeon

The Honble B. W. Crowninshield
Secretary of the Navy.

It was not until November, 1817, that he was finally ordered to Philadelphia as surgeon attached to the Marine Corps at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. It was while on duty at Philadelphia that Dr. Harris proposed to the Navy Department the establishment there of a school where newly appointed surgeon's mates could be given a short postgraduate course of instruction in the different branches of their profession, and also in the customs and regulations of the Navy. His letter, which was addressed from Philadelphia on May 10, 1823 is of the greatest interest, for it is a most admirable presentation of the need for such a school and a plan for it. It constitutes, in a sense, a charter of the first naval medical school in this country and is, so to speak, the forerunner of the present Naval Medical School at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland. It is therefore quoted in its entirety, as is the letter of approval from the Secretary of the Navy, which was dated from Washington only nine days later:

Philadelphia, May 10, 1823.

Sir,

Many of the Surgeon's Mates, as well as younger Surgeons of the Navy, manifest, at present, a very laudable anxiety to acquire an intimate knowledge of their profession. As their slender pay deprives them, however, of the necessary means of instruction, the fostering assistance of government is respectfully solicited.

From the willingness which you have always discovered to improve the different branches of the service over which you so ably & judiciously preside, they feel a hope that you will accord such advantages as are essential to qualify them as useful and skillful surgeons. For this purpose they are desirous that you would afford such of them as are not on public duty, an opportunity of hearing lectures on nautical medicine, and military surgery, as well as of pursuing a course of dissections under the superintendence of some one, whom you may deem competent to this duty. In a letter to me, which I herewith enclose, the medical officers have expressed a wish, provided the scheme met your approbation, that I would take charge of this establishment, and give lectures on the branches already mentioned.

In order that you may form a judgment of the advantages which such an institution would present, I beg leave to submit a plan of instruction, which under such circumstances I should deem it advisable to pursue.

1. I would superintend the studies of the medical officers, and furnish them from my private library, with medical books, and journals.

2. I would constantly superintend their dissections, and particularly direct their attention to surgical anatomy.

3. I would deliver lectures on *Nautical medicine* in which I would instruct them in the medical economy of the ship—in the most approved methods of purifying vessels, and of keeping them healthy in tropical climates in the peculiar predisposition of mariners to particular disorders—in the diseases to which seamen are liable in tropical climates, to which should be added, the experience of the Naval surgeons of Europe, as well as of this country, on the best means of preserving their health, in all latitudes.

In connection with this, I would deliver a course of lectures on military surgery, which I would not only show them the manner of performing operations on the dead subject, but to aid their manual dexterity, I would afford them opportunities to perform similar operations themselves.

Institutions of this character are connected with all the military establishments in Europe, and from which have resulted the greatest benefits to military surgery. No one can so properly appreciate its importance as the surgeon who feels the great responsibility of his charge, and the value of the lives committed to his charge. He well knows that if he has not had proper opportunities to instruct himself in operative surgery, and especially in surgical anatomy on his familiarity with which his success in operations depends, he is not qualified to perform the duties of the important office with which he is invested. Besides a knowledge of the elements of surgery, which is required at our medical universities, it is necessary in order to acquire proficiency & skill, to diligently prosecute anatomical researches, and to repeatedly perform operations on the dead subject.

At present our Navy Surgeons are not presented with the means of continuing their pursuits in this manner, after entering the public service; and it is not an infrequent occurrence that the first time they pass through the details of an operation is on a patient, when it must be necessarily attended with embarrassment and awkwardness. The evils which must result on many occasions from circumstances of this kind, and the advantages to the service of measures that would enable our junior medical officers to perfect themselves in their profession, must be so apparent, that I feel persuaded of your friendly disposition to the measure proposed.

For my qualifications as a teacher, I must beg leave to refer you to the enclosed certificates from the learned and distinguished professors of the University of Pennsylvania.

The location of an institution of this character in Philadelphia would be attended with many and great advantages. Among the most important of which, is the facility with which dead subjects may be obtained for operations and dissections. Whilst, too, our medical officers were thus enjoying benefits so essential to render them useful, they could also possess the privilege of revising their general knowledge of the sciences by attending the lectures which are delivered in our most celebrated University.

Very Respectfully
Your Obdt. Servt.
Thos. Harris

The Honble Smith Thompson,
Secy of the Navy.

Navy Department
May 19, 1823.

Doct Thomas Harris
Surgeon, U. S. Navy
Present.
Sir,

I have given to your communication dated the 10th inst. that consideration which the importance of the subject justly merits. The plan you propose for the improvement of the Surgeon's Mates and younger Surgeons of the Navy in the different branches of their profession, offers fairly to be productive of much utility to the public service & receives my entire approbation and I consent to apply for the present year the sum of four hundred dollars in aid of the undertaking.

I am respectfully &c
(Signed) S. T.
(Smith Thompson
Secretary of the Navy)

1823-43

From the inception of this school and for a period of twenty years young surgeons and surgeon's mates were sent regularly to it. During this time an extensive correspondence was maintained between Dr. Harris and the Navy Department, principally in regard to the progress of young naval surgeons in the school, reports on their graduation, and recommendations of various individuals for special duties because of their particular abilities. Nearly all the medical men enrolled in the navy during the period 1823 and 1843 received instruction in this school, and the effect upon the professional standards and the treatment of the sick and wounded of the navy was of a most far-reaching character. Among those who graduated from the school were G. B. R. Horner and W. S. W. Ruschenberger. The former was the author of the book on naval medicine, *The Diseases of Seamen*, long a standard work. Dr. Ruschenberger was eminent both as a naval surgeon and a scientist. As an example of the correspondence, a letter of February 23, 1829, recommends Dr. Titian Peale to the position of naturalist to a scientific expedition. Another one dated September 15, 1831 gives the period of attendance of a number of students. In another Harris pointed out to the Secretary the great advantage that young surgeons received from the opportunity of attending the school since they were able to receive free post-graduate courses in professional subjects that would ordinarily cost about \$100 a course. He also pointed out that as the Surgeon's Mates, or, as they were called after 1828, Assistant Surgeons, received only \$45.00 a month when on shore, they would scarcely be able to have such postgraduate instruction if it was necessary for them to pay for it. In one letter to Harris the Secretary of the Navy mentioned sending a small bottle of poppy seeds to him in order "that you may have an opportunity of making an experi-

ent upon its cultivation for the production of opium." This is an interesting reference, probably the first one in print, to a government attempt to encourage the production of opium for medicinal purposes in this country.

The following excerpts from letters of Harris addressed to the Secretary of the Navy from Philadelphia, dated March 19, 1829 and March 31, 1829, cast some light upon instruction in military and naval medicine, both in this country and abroad, and some of the medical men and institutions in Philadelphia in the early half of the nineteenth century:³

In the year 1823, a period when efforts were making to improve the condition of the surgical department of the navy, a letter was addressed to me by a number of the senior medical officers wishing me to give for their benefit, an annual course of lectures on military and operative surgery. These are branches of our profession of vast importance to military surgeons, and for the most part neglected in our medical colleges. Such establishments are connected with the naval and military services of France, Russia and England, and have contributed mainly to the present exalted condition of surgical science in those countries.

The letter to which I refer was submitted by me to the Honble. Smith Thompson, then Sec. of the Navy, who at once perceived the importance of the suggestions there made, and accordingly ordered me to give an annual course of instruction embracing these subjects. To carry these orders into effect he made a small annual allowance to meet the expenses of renting lecture and dissecting rooms, wages for attendants, subjects for dissection, materials for anatomical preparations, fuel, candles, etc. etc.

More than a year ago I was solicited to accept the chair of operative surgery in the "Medical Institute" of this city. I consented to contribute my services in the way solicited, provided the medical officers should be permitted to attend *all the lectures gratis*. This arrangement was assented to by the professors, and received the approbation of our predecessor. So that now the medical officers of the navy have the privilege of attending the fullest, and most perfect course of medical instruction delivered in the United States, and without any additional expense.

The names of the lecturers in this institution are:

- Dr. Chapman on the theory and practice of physic
- Dr. Horner on anatomy
- Dr. Mitchell on chemistry
- Dr. Jackson on *Materia Medica*
- Dr. Bell on physiology and pathology
- Dr. Deevers on obstetrics
- Dr. Hodge on the principles of surgery
- Dr. Harris on operative and military surgery.

My associates in this institution are among the most distinguished physicians of this city. These lectures commence on the first of April, and terminate on the last of October. The following assistant surgeons availed themselves of this course of instruction during last season:

- | | |
|-------------|--------------|
| Dr. Belt | Dr. Macomber |
| Dr. Boyce | Dr. Beers |
| Dr. Moore | Dr. Chandler |
| Dr. Rapalje | Dr. Tinslar |

³Letter No. 43, Officers Letters, 1829, Vol. II.

I have regularly made annual reports detailing my course of proceeding, all of which may be found on the files of the navy department. Should you concur in opinion with your predecessors, that this establishment is worthy of being fostered, I should be gratified by your granting the requests of Drs. Moore and Horner, as well as any other assistant surgeons who can be spared from duty. Taking into consideration the rigid examinations which these gentlemen are obliged by law to undergo before promotion, it seems almost indispensable that they should avail themselves of the advantages which this institution offers.

Very Respectfully
Thos. Harris Surgeon
U. S. Naval Asylum.

The Hon. John Branch
Secy of the Navy.

The letter of March 31, 1829 requests permission to accept appointment as one of the surgeons of the Pennsylvania Hospital and indicates the high opinion his professional colleagues in Philadelphia had of Dr. Harris:⁴

Philadelphia March 31, 1829

Sir

I was elected yesterday one of the surgeons of the Pennsylvania hospital in place of Dr. Parrish resigned. The time required of me to perform this duty, is one hour twice a week, for four months in the year. As there is no emolument whatever attached to this appointment, and as it cannot, nor shall not, interfere with my public duties, I hope you will not object to my accepting it.

This interesting charity affords the best field for the exercise of surgical talents in the U States, and perhaps in the world. There is seldom a prescribing day in which there is not some operation of greater or less magnitude. This circumstance added to the opportunity of consulting in all important cases with the most eminent surgeons of our city who are associated with me, will be most improving, by enlarging the sphere of my experience, and thus rendering me better qualified to discharge my duties at the naval asylum.

There is another important consideration which urges me to accept this appointment. The junior medical officers who come to this city to attend my lectures, in order to prepare themselves for their second examination will have an opportunity of attending not only the surgical but medical practice of this institution without expense. My system of instruction will be thus rendered more perfect. Until the naval asylum is in full operation, this arrangement will be of vast utility to them, and indirectly on the service.

I have the honor to be
Very Respectfully
Thos. Harris.

The Hon. John Branch
Secretary of the Navy.

A notation on the back of the above letter grants the request so long as it does not interfere with his public duties.

He was in the habit of making an annual report on the school. In that

⁴ From Officers Letters, 1829, Volume II, No. 94.

On July 1, 1839, he names fifteen surgeons and assistant surgeons who had been in attendance during the last year. He also listed nineteen officers whom he had performed successful operations, for he was the principal navy operating surgeon at Philadelphia. Among the names of assistant surgeons were those of Ninian Pinckney, afterwards a fleet surgeon during the Civil War, and J. M. Foltz, subsequently Surgeon General of the Navy; and among officers operated on were Captain Shrubick and Commander Charles L. McCawley. During this twenty-year period, Dr. Harris had risen to eminence as a surgeon as well as a teacher and had come to be known as one of the leading medical men in Philadelphia. His reputation as a surgeon is shown by the fact that when President Jackson desired to have a bullet extracted that he had received in a duel with Charles Dickson in 1806, it was Harris, together with Dr. Triplett, who operated on the President. This was in 1832, twenty-six years after the wound had been received.

In these days when budgets run into millions or billions, it is of interest to note that Harris maintained this school of instruction in naval medicine for a period of twenty years on a budget of approximately \$400 a year. He kept a very accurate account of expenditures. In 1841 the cost was \$370 and in 1842 the annual cost was \$343. The whole school came abruptly to an end in 1843, apparently because the Secretary of the Navy, who at that time was P. Upshur, found that there was no proper authorization for allocation of funds for this purpose. He announced this fact to Harris in a letter dated January 20, 1843, which is here quoted:⁵

Navy Department
January 20, 1843.

Surgeon Thomas Harris

Philadelphia.

Sir,

It has come to my knowledge this morning, for the first time, that an allowance has been made, from year to year, for many years past, for the rent of a Lecture room, and for the purchase of subjects for dissection, &c &c, under your supervision and authority. I am fully persuaded that this could not and would not have been done, without some sanction from the Navy Department, although the Auditor has not yet been able to discover at what time or in what manner, the practice commenced. It is not my purpose therefore, to express any censure upon those who have heretofore been engaged in it.

But as I cannot find any shadow of authority in the Department to make any such application of the public money, I merely announce to you my intention not to sanction such expenditure for the future.

(Signed) A. P. Upshur

Dr. Harris apparently replied at once in a long letter in which he gave details of the origin of the funds and the history of the school from foundation. He mentions incidentally that it started as a private dissection course in 1822, at which time he invited some junior medical officers who liked the instruction and urged him to give a series of lectures. He suggested that they request it in writing, and it was these requests which formed the basis for the first authorization. On January 31, 1843, the Secretary immediately replied to Harris in terms that were very pleasing as regards his opinion of his integrity, but not so pleasing in that he pointed out that he felt there was no allowance under the law to continue payments for the school and that they would therefore be discontinued. Because it expresses the whole matter so well, this letter is also quoted:⁶

Navy Department
January 31, 1843

Surgeon Thomas Harris,
U. S. Navy, Phila.

Sir, Your letter of the 26th inst has been received. I am satisfied, from your statement, that I owe it to my own want of memory alone, that I have expressed any surprise at the expenditure in question. It is not possible for me to doubt, & I certainly do not doubt, that any fund entrusted to you will be faithfully administered. Neither do I doubt the utility of the lectures you have been in the habit of giving, & sincerely regret that they cannot be continued. I do not see however, that I have any right or power to authorize such an expenditure of the public money. When the subject was before me in 1841, I did not enquire into this matter, but took it for granted, I presume, that the authority was properly given. I am however, very clearly of opinion that the Secretary of the Navy has no such discretion. While, therefore, you have faithfully performed your trust, I feel obliged to discontinue the allowance as unauthorized by law.

I am, respectfully yours
(Signed) A. P. Upshur

A year later, on April 1, 1844, Harris was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to succeed Dr. W. P. C. Barton. He was appointed by President Tyler and as he served as Chief of the Bureau until 1853, he held office under five presidents—Tyler, Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, and Pierce. With Dr. Barton, whom he succeeded as Chief of the Bureau, Harris had long been at enmity. The origin of their difficulties seems to have been in some measure the desire of both to remain on duty in Philadelphia in charge of the hospital there. In the latter part of 1817 Harris had been detached from the Medical Department at Philadelphia and replaced by Barton. He made allegations that this had been done as the result of false representations to the Navy Department, and a court-martial and court of

⁶ Letters to Officers, Ships of War, No. 34, page 158.

inquiry found that this appeared to be the case and directed by an order of the 4th of March 1819 that Harris be restored to his former situation. At that time Harris, in an extremely bitter letter addressed to the Secretary of the Navy, pointed this out, as well as the fact that Barton had remained ashore throughout the War of 1812, while he had spent practically the entire period of the war at sea and had also served in the Algerian War in Decatur's Squadron in 1815 or, as he expressed it: "During the war I attended to the duties assigned to me by my government, without the intermission of a day . . .," and by contrast he states that Barton ". . . absented himself from duty and declined the orders of his government to join our vessels when on the eve of sailing and were in want of a surgeon."

Dr. Harris was one of the three medical officers selected to report their opinions as to the use of distilled spirits by midshipmen, Dr. Barton being one of the other medical officers whose opinion had been sought upon the subject. On this occasion Harris agreed with Barton, however, both of them strongly condemning the practice of issuing distilled spirits to midshipmen. The following few paragraphs are quoted from his report showing the forthright way in which he expressed his opinions, as well as the plain common sense reflected in them:

It is not by injuring the morals and health of midshipmen alone as such, that the daily ration of ardent spirits appears to be objectionable. They rise to the highest rank by gradual promotion, and therefore are educated for important and responsible commands, by passing through all the gradations of the public service. An intemperate midshipman, will not become a temperate lieutenant, or captain. It would be therefore painful to reflect on the possible results of important enterprises conducted by individuals whose judgment had been impaired and energies enfeebled by unrestrained indulgence.

Example is a powerful engine in all human actions, and its influence here on the character and discipline of the Navy ought not to be overlooked. The subordinate looks up to his superior as a director and pattern, and the color of his own conduct will partake largely of that which constantly passes before him. If the superior should be intemperate, which happily is a most rare occurrence in our navy, those under his command, disposed to intoxication, will cease to consider the act either criminal or officerlike. The hurtful operation of such an example extends to the lowest ranks of the service, and opposes an unsurmountable obstacle to every effort at reform.

Though our officers in general are as temperate as an equal number of citizens in any other situation in life, yet it is in vain to conceal, that there are too many, among the junior officers particularly, who drink more than is consistent either with health or sound morals. It should be therefore a matter of congratulation, that the energies of government are about to bear on this point. If there is any thing now which can rest the navy in its career of usefulness and glory, it is the deadly atmosphere which is diffused around it by this desolating poison.

Of interest is his observation, which is undoubtedly perfectly true, that

"... our officers in general are as temperate as an equal number of citizens in any other situation in life."

Another interesting fact is that Harris concurred in the belief that spontaneous combustion of the human body can take place in the alcoholic. Indeed, it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that it was accepted that prolonged and excessive use of alcohol could not produce spontaneous combustion of the body.

His administration as the second Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery was of considerable importance to the Medical Department of the Navy. As has been mentioned, he was appointed Chief of the Bureau April 1, 1844 and served until September 30, 1853. Thus, for nine years the newly organized Bureau had at its head this able and energetic medical officer, and his work did much to place the new central medical administrative unit on a firm foundation.

In 1846 the Mexican War began, concluded by the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. This was the first war after the organization of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery and the first war, therefore, in which that Bureau exercised an influence over the health of the Navy and the care of the sick and injured during the war period.

It was natural that one who had been so greatly interested in the character and professional qualifications of young medical men applying for entrance in the Navy should do much to keep the standard for entrance in the Corps at a high level. He also began to introduce uniformity in the types of drugs and dressings used in the Navy, and to the methods of procuring them. It would not be too much to call him the father of medical procurement in the Navy as this fundamental function of the Bureau was first organized under him.

Upon the completion of his duty as Chief of the Bureau, Harris spent the next four years as President of the Examining and Retiring Board in Philadelphia. He himself retired in 1857 and continued his residence in that city. Dr. Edward Shippen, in a letter dated October 27, 1909, a copy of which is in the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Navy Department, says: "He lived in a very lovely old house (9th and Spruce) with a terrace and a garden (Philadelphia) now all swept away. You know that for very many years after his service in the War of 1812-1815 he lived in Philadelphia and had a very large practice. The City of Philadelphia voted him a silver service for his work in the cholera year of 1832."

He was made a member of the American Philosophical Society in

1828. He was also the author of the *Life of Commodore Bainbridge, United States Navy*.

He was twice married, first in January, 1820 to Miss Jane Phillips Hodgdon, the daughter of Major Samuel Hodgdon who had been an officer of the United States Army and was Quartermaster General and Paymaster in General St. Clair's army in the expedition against the Indians in 1791. Of this marriage, he had five children, three sons and two daughters. Two of the sons became physicians; one of them for a time was a surgeon in the Navy. After the death of his first wife, he married on April 30, 1839 Miss Ester White MacPherson, also the daughter of a Revolutionary soldier. Her maternal grandfather was William White, the first Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania. There were no children by the second marriage.

Dr. Harris died on March 4, 1861 in Philadelphia where he is buried. His death occurred on the Inauguration Day of President Abraham Lincoln for his first term as President. The following letter from the Commandant at Philadelphia to the Navy Department, informing them of his death, is quoted:

Sir:

March 8, 1861.

It becomes my duty to report to you the death of Surgeon Thos. Harris of the Navy, which occurred in this city, on the 4th inst. He was interred yesterday with appropriate Military honors.

I have the honor to be,
Very respecty yr obt servt
S. F. DuPont
Comdt.

The portrait of Dr. Harris shows a face full of character and strength. There is a shock of hair and the sideburns are curled as was the fashion at the time. The civilian coat collar and neckcloth of the 1830's are well illustrated. There is a description of him as a young man taken from a passport dated October 15, 1812, when he was one of a number of American prisoners from the *Wasp* captured after her action with the *Frolic*. Dr. Harris is described as: "Thomas Harris, Surg., 26 yrs., 5'10", slender, oval visage, light complexion, black hair, blue eyes."

Note on Sources of Information

Much material concerning Dr. Thomas Harris was accumulated by Mrs. Alma R. Lawrence, formerly of the Naval Records and Library, Navy

Department, and was turned over to the writer who wishes to express his appreciation of Mrs. Lawrence's painstaking work as a collector of biographical material on this eminent medical man.

Information has also been obtained from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, whose Alumni Records Office furnished facts about his graduation from the medical school.

Considerable information was obtained from Mr. Joseph Smith Harris of the Reading Terminal, Philadelphia, a descendant of Dr. Harris.

His record of naval service was examined in the files of the Personnel Division, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Navy Department, Washington, D.C. The Commandants' Letter Books, now in the National Archives, contain correspondence between the Navy Department and the Navy Yard at Philadelphia. Letters and reports of Dr. Harris regarding the school of general and naval medicine he maintained at Philadelphia were made to the Navy Department, and this correspondence is also in the National Archives.