

THOMAS HARRIS
THE SECOND CHIEF OF THE BUREAU OF MEDICINE
AND SURGERY (1844-1853)

By CAPTAIN LOUIS H. RODDIS, *Medical Corps, U. S. Navy*

(With one illustration)

THE second Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Thomas Harris, was born in East Whiteland, Chester County, Pa., on January 3, 1784. He came of fine old colonial stock. He graduated from the Medical School of the University of



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Pennsylvania on April 19, 1809, and was appointed a surgeon in the United States Navy on July 6 and accepted on July 20, 1812. On September 22 of that year he was ordered to the U.S.S. *Wasp* then commanded by Jacob Jones. He thus took part in the celebrated

engagement between the *Wasp* and H.M.S. *Frolic* on October 18, in which the *Frolic* was captured. Later in the day the *Wasp* and her prize was taken by the British 74 gun ship of the line, *Poitiers*, and carried into Bermuda. The officers and crew of the *Wasp* were shortly returned to the United States. Dr. Harris was one of those who received the thanks of Congress and the medal awarded to all officers who took part in this action. He was on sea duty in the Atlantic and in Lake Ontario until the end of the war, and in 1815 he sailed with Decatur's Squadron which was sent to the Mediterranean to compel the Barbary powers to cease their attacks on American commerce and to surrender merchant seamen held as slaves.

During this little cruise, the Algerian flagship was captured after being very roughly handled by Decatur's squadron and Dr. Harris was placed in charge of the Algerian wounded.

His most important subsequent service was at Philadelphia where the first naval hospital there was built under his supervision; where he was for years president of the board to examine candidates for entrance or promotion in the Medical Corps; and where he organized and conducted a post-graduate medical school for the successful candidates. This was the first medical school in this country to give instruction in

naval medicine and, in fact, was the real forerunner of our present Naval Medical School.

Dr. Harris was one of the best known and most skillful surgeons of his day, and many distinguished civilians came to him for relief. In 1832, together with Dr. Triplett, he operated on President Jackson and extracted a bullet that had been received in a duel with Charles Dickenson in 1806.

He was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery on 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. His administration included the period of the Mexican War, the first war that the Medical Department of the Navy met after the central administrative unit was formed, a war by the way, in which the Navy played no inconsiderable part.

Dr. Harris had always been greatly interested in the character and professional qualifications of young medical men applying for entrance with the Navy and as seen by the school maintained by him at Philadelphia; did much to further prepare them for their new duties. As Chief of Bureau he did much to keep the standard for entrance into the Corps at a high level and this was one of the important contributions of his regime. He also attempted to introduce some uniformity in the drugs

and dressings used and the methods of procuring them. These two fundamental functions of the Bureau were first organized under him.

He retired in 1857. He was twice married. His first wife was Miss Jane Hodgson, and the second, Miss Ester McPherson, both of Philadelphia. Dr. Harris died on March 4, 1861 in Philadelphia where he is buried. 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 1812-15 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. Afterward when I had entered the Navy he seemed to me to be a rather lethargic old man who did not care very much except about lists of medicines, etc. But then as age steals on us we are all apt to become lethargic old men."

The portrait of Dr. Harris shows a face full of character and strength. There is a shock of hair and the side burns are curled as was the fashion at the time. The civilian coat collar and neckcloth of the 1830's are well illustrated.