

# PHILIP SKINNER WALES, SURGEON GENERAL OF THE NAVY (1879-84)

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

**T**HE eleventh Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery and the seventh to hold office as Surgeon General of the Navy was born in Maryland on February 27, 1834, and appointed from that State as an Assistant Surgeon on August 7, 1856. His first service was in the Asiatic, or as it was then called, the East Indian Squadron, on the steam frigate *Mississippi*. He returned at the beginning of the Civil War and was on the *Water Witch* during the early years of the war. Except for a short tour at the naval hospital at Norfolk in 1863, he was at sea the remainder of that conflict on the steamer *Fort Jackson* in the South At-

lantic and the west Gulf blockade. He was commissioned Surgeon on October 12, 1861, and Medical Inspector on June 30, 1873. He was employed on special duty from 1874 to 1878, probably in connection with the preparation of a medical history of the Navy during the Civil War. He was appointed Chief of Bureau by President Rutherford B. Hayes on August 20, 1879, and completed his term of office on January 27, 1884. His Assistant Chief of Bureau during the whole period was Surgeon A. Hudson.

An event of great importance to the Medical Corps in his administration, was the founding of the Museum of

Naval Hygiene in Washington, which when united later by Surgeon General Tryon with the old Naval Laboratory and Department of Instruction at Brooklyn, were the nucleus of the present Naval Medical School for the post-graduate instruction of young naval medical officers. Surgeon General Wales founded the museum in 1883 and placed in charge of it Medical Director J. M. Browne, afterward Surgeon General and one of the most able and active officers in the corps. Tryon, when Surgeon General in 1894, moved the museum to the old naval observatory building, where in 1902 Admiral Rixey, then just made Surgeon General, organized and established the present Naval Medical School.

It was intended that the Museum of Hygiene would be more than a collection on naval hygiene but would cover the whole subject of public health as is shown by the contemporary announcement which was as follows:

#### NAVY DEPARTMENT

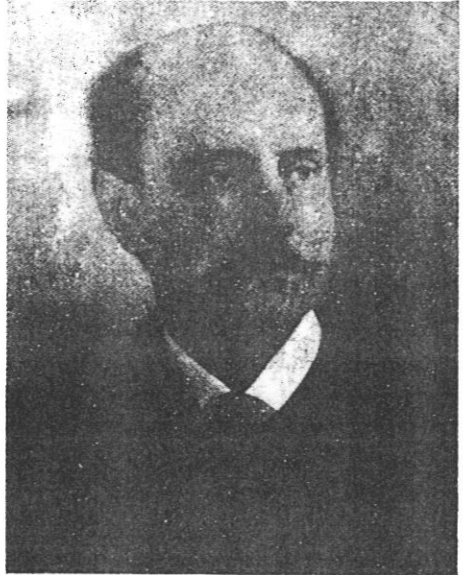
Bureau of Medicine and Surgery  
Washington, January 10, 1882

The Surgeon General of the Navy has established a Museum of Hygiene connected with this Bureau which the American Public Health Association has made its permanent central repository.

It is intended that it shall exhibit the present state and future progress of the Nation in all departments of hygiene, and to carry out this important scheme, the co-operation of physicians, engineers, architects, builders, manufacturers, inventors, and others interested in sanitary matters, is not only desirable but indispensable.

Contributors of articles, appliances,

models, drawings, etc., illustrating improvements in food, water supply, bedding, clothing, marine architecture, house and hospital construction and furniture; apparatus for heating, illumination, ventilation, and removal of excreta and refuse; culinary, laundry and bath facilities; appliances for physical culture and exercise; and whatever else tends to the pres-



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ervation of health and the prevention of disease, are therefore solicited.

Contributions should be sent to the address of the Surgeon General of the Navy. Donors and depositors will, in every case, be duly credited on the descriptive labels of their exhibits.

Respectfully,  
PHILIP S. WALES,  
Surgeon General, U. S. Navy

Another General Order directed that:

Commandants of navy yards, commanders of stations, and of vessels acting singly, will report direct to the Chief of Bureau of Navigation and Office of

Detail whenever any officer under their respective commands is transferred to a naval hospital, and when such officer returns to duty. If a medical survey should be ordered, a copy of the order for the survey, and a copy of the report of the medical officers in the case, will also be forwarded to that Bureau.

This order is not intended to dispense with the report required in such cases, by regulation, to be sent to the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.

WILLIAM H. HUNT,  
Secretary of the Navy

A general order of August 10, 1882 quotes the naval appropriation act for the year and states that: "The active list of the Medical Corps of the Navy shall hereafter consist of fifteen medical directors, fifteen medical inspectors, fifty surgeons and ninety assistant and passed assistant surgeons." The practice of navy wives "following the ship" was officially frowned upon in no uncertain terms in 1883, as the following general order testifies:

Naval officers attached to cruising war-vessels, especially commanding officers, are expected to leave their families at their usual or fixed places of abode, and not to attempt to transfer them to more convenient visiting points. Officers disregarding this injunction will be liable to be relieved from duty.

WILLIAM E. CHANDLER  
Secretary of the Navy

There is an interesting notation of the meeting of the Naval Medical Society of the District of Columbia which shows how long and honorable an ancestry our present medical meeting now held at the U. S. Naval Medical School possesses. This notation is as follows:

Washington, D.C., May 24, 1882

Dear Sir:

At the last meeting of the Naval Medical Society, held May 18, nearly all of the Medical Officers of the Navy now on duty in Washington were present. The discussion of Dr. P. M. Rixey's paper and pathological specimen of a remarkable case of atheroma of the cerebral arteries was extended and animated, and thus far, the Society promises well. At that meeting the Business Committee was further instructed to inform you of the action already taken, and to request your active co-operation in the purpose of the Society.

This purpose is simply and only the establishment of a means of communication, whereby the varied professional and scientific experiences of Naval Medical Officers may be exchanged, to their mutual advantage and better acquaintance. It is hoped that the most interesting and valuable part of the proceedings of the Society will be found in written communications from those at too great a distance to be present in person; and we therefore request, in accordance with our instructions, that you will, if interested in the maintenance of the Society, notify Dr. T. D. Myers, Navy Department, of your intention of membership, and that you will present, in the manner most agreeable to you, such notes, dissertations or specimens of medical or scientific interest as are at your disposal. It is hoped that arrangements can be made for the publication of important papers and discussions without the necessity for increasing the annual dues. These were fixed, at the meeting above referred to, at \$4 per year for members resident in Washington, and \$1 per year for those resident elsewhere.

The first regular monthly meeting will take place on Thursday, June 1, at the Museum of Hygiene building, No. 1744 G Street N.W., at 8 P.M. It is expected that the principal subject of discussion will be "Diphtheria, and recent experimental

researches upon its connection with minute organisms." Contributions to the discussion are earnestly requested and, as the Society is still young enough to be profitably instructed, any suggestions which may occur to you as to its organization and mode of working will be respectfully received and carefully considered.

Very truly yours,

A. HUDONS  
A. A. HOEHLING  
J. H. KIDDER

It is of interest that not only is diphtheria just being discussed as a germ disease but dyes were \$4 a year.

Some interesting comparative statistics of the Navy and the Medical Corps in 1880, when Dr. Wales was Surgeon General, and fifty-four years later, are given below. Statistical data are for the calendar year where diseases and injuries are concerned, otherwise for the fiscal year.

Of course, the methods of collecting and compiling statistics then and now are not strictly identical—so the comparison is only approximate in character. Still it is likely that the comparisons are not without significance. It would appear from them that the venereal rate has altered very little, alcoholism has declined, and the death rate from all causes is much less.

The history of yellow fever in our Navy is a subject awaiting a naval medical historian and would furnish a theme of great interest. Dr. Wales, in one of his reports, comments on the frequency with which ships returned from tropical ports and that "It has happened, in spite of the closest attention to hygienic regulations, that yellow fever has gained a footing among the crews of vessels and raged with such violence that nothing short of immediate departure for a northern climate sufficed to stamp it out." It was experiences such as this as for example in the yellow fever epidemics on the *Plymouth* and the *Susquehanna* which led to the establishment of a naval hospital and yellow fever quarantine station at Widows Island, Maine.

During the latter years of his administration Dr. Wales discovered that the Chief Clerk of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, with the assistance of a confederate in the auditor's office, had been for years embezzling large sums of money. He obtained the signature of Dr. Wales (and probably those of several previous Surgeons General) by placing blank requisitions among copies to be signed and by simply turning up the bottoms of the

	1880	1934
Deaths per thousand.....	11.1	2.73
Leading cause of death.....	Pneumonia	Motor-Vehicle accidents
Second most important cause of death.....	Tuberculosis	Drowning
Admissions for venereal diseases per thousand.....	81.64	90.28
Admissions for alcoholism per thousand.....	17.3	1.43
Percentage of recruits rejected.....	31	34
Total complement of the Navy and Marine Corps.....	10,235	109,383
Medical Officers.....	171	832

vouchers for the Surgeon General to sign. He thus secured blank signed requisitions. Although there was no question of the integrity of the Surgeon General himself, who was indeed partly responsible for discovery of the frauds and testified before the grand jury that indicted the culprits, he was tried by general court martial on charges of neglect of duty and culpable inefficiency in the performance of duty with 64 specifications. The trial was a celebrated one and caused an enormous amount of comment and controversy, as it was felt by many that Dr. Wales was the victim of circumstance and had been dealt with unjustly.

The court met on March 9, 1885. There were several things in the trial which may excuse the mixing of a little naval legal history with the medical history. The court itself consisted of the full 13 members allowed by law. The record, consisting of three large volumes, is probably the first proceedings of a court martial in our Navy to be typewritten. It was also one of the first in which oral questions and oral arguments were permitted. The question of the jurisdiction of the court was raised by the defense and was settled by the Supreme Court. Dr. Wales was found guilty and sentenced to receive furlough pay and to retain the number in his grade that he then held for 5 years. In approving the findings, July 31, 1885, the Secretary of the Navy remarks that:

"No dishonest or corrupt act or motive involving any breach of personal integrity on the part of Medical Director Philip S. Wales as Chief of

the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery was alleged against him nor is there any evidence in the record which would have justified such a charge."

In other words he was the victim of the corrupt acts of subordinates when responsible for the supervision of their conduct. In effect it constituted an exoneration of any intentional breach of trust or honesty.

Dr. Wales had a particular interest in surgery and seems to have been for some time the leading surgeon in Washington. It was possible that his active practice, which he appears to have carried on even while Surgeon General, may have distracted his attention and led to his not being aware of the speculations taking place in the Bureau which led to his court martial. In addition to his practice, he published a manual of surgery which was for some time a popular and well-known textbook. His practice, together with suitable investments, made him comparatively affluent and he was said to have amassed a fortune of about \$100,000, a very considerable amount in the 70's and 80's of the last century. This fortune, he also was said to have transferred to relatives before or during his trial because of the fear of a heavy fine. The money was not returned and as he was placed on furlough pay, it resulted in real hardship. He is supposed to have been reduced to such poverty that it was a primary reason for his settling in France where living was cheaper.

Dr. Wales' death occurred on September 15, 1906, at Paris, France, where he had lived since 1900.