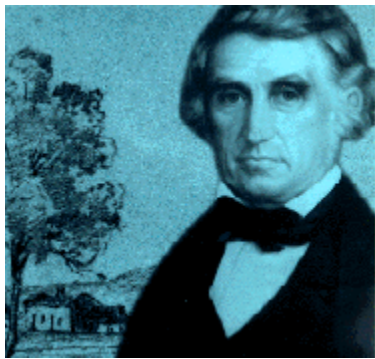


NEWS AND VIEWS

Frontier Doctor

William Beaumont, America's First Great Medical Scientist

Compiled by Chris Sails, ND



William Beaumont, America's First Great Medical Scientist

William Beaumont is recognized as an early nineteenth-century American physician who studied gastric juices. He was also an army surgeon and community practitioner.

Beaumont was born in 1785, received his medical training as an apprentice in a small town in Vermont and served as a surgeon's assistant in the War of 1812. After the war, he practiced in Plattsburgh, New York. He became an army surgeon in 1819.

He was permitted to maintain a profitable private practice throughout his army service. Like most of his contemporaries, Beaumont employed heroic therapy with its armamentarium of bloodletting,

purgatives, emetics, and blisters. He was a dedicated and conscientious surgeon.

His chance for fame came in 1822, when he was serving at the lonely post of Fort Mackinac in Michigan Territory. A Canadian voyager—Alexis St. Martin—was accidentally shot in the stomach at close range, and his wound healed in such a way as to leave a permanent opening. This enabled Beaumont to insert food directly into the stomach, to siphon gastric juice, and to experiment on the process of digestion both inside and outside the stomach.

Because Beaumont had considerable difficulty in persuading St. Martin to stay with him so he could continue his research, his study was carried out sporadically over a number of years. In the early 1830s, with the support of Joseph Lovell, the surgeon general of the army, Beaumont and St. Martin went to the East Coast, where additional experiments were carried out.

In 1833, Beaumont published *Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juice and the Physiology of Digestion*, a book based upon his research on St. Martin and the work upon which his reputation primarily rested. His observations revealed more about digestion in the human stomach than had ever before been known, and his work was immediately praised in both the United States and Europe.

After he left the army, Beaumont established a successful private practice in St. Louis, Missouri, where he spent the latter part of his life. Beaumont, a fascinating, argumentative character, was often engaged in public controversy.

Beaumont published his findings in a book in 1833. His subsequent research on St Martin was sporadic and inconsequential but his scientific reputation grew steadily. Beaumont left the army in 1840 and was a prominent practitioner in St Louis, Missouri, until his death in 1853. St Martin died in 1880.

Frontier Doctor shed new light on the state of medicine both inside and outside the army in the early nineteenth century and provided absorbing information on the early experiments that set research into human digestion irrevocably on the right course.

This author expresses his heartfelt thanks to

Reginald Horsman, the Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who made the information about this great pioneer scientist available on line. If it was not for his great enthusiasm in collecting all valuable information and biography none of us will ever hear about this America's First Great Medical Scientist.

REFERENCE

Reginald Horsman, Frontier doctor: William Beaumont, America's First Great Medical Scientist, Missouri Biography series, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1996, pp. xv, 320, illus., (0-8262-1052-X).