

Obituary - SYLVESTER D. WILLARD, M.D., LL. D.

June 19, 1825 April 2, 1865

“Dr. Sylvester David Willard was born in Wilton, Conn., June 19, 1825, and died in Albany, April 2, 1865. He came of the family as those eminent divines, the Rev. Samuel Willard and the Rev. Dr. Joseph Willard, the former of whom was a Vice-President and the latter President of Harvard College. His father was a respectable physician and an honored citizen; his mother, who was of a much esteemed family Albany, was a lady of great moral and Christian worth. Young Willard received his literary training at an academy in his native place. In the fall of 1845 he came to Albany, upon invitation of his relative, Dr. Wing, with whom he became student. He entered the Albany Medical College, graduating therefrom in the winter of 1848.

After serving for some time as an assistant to Dr. Wing, he began practice on his own responsibility, and very early attracted the attention and the confidence of that eminent citizen, the late Dr. T. Romeyn Beck, to whom, perhaps, more than to any other individual, he was indebted for the earliest expressions of public respect and confidence that were awarded to him. Shortly after he began practice he became connected with the Albany County Medical Society, and served successively as its secretary, vice-president, and president. In 1858 he was a delegate to the State Medical Society, and was appointed its permanent secretary, an office which he signally honored, especially by preparing each successive year, with great ability, a volume of the Society's transactions.

From the opening of the Rebellion, in 1861, his whole heart went into every movement connected therewith; and in the spring of 1862, he went, with two other prominent physicians of Albany, to act as a volunteer surgeon to the Army of the Potomac. From Fortress Monroe he proceeded to White House, where he was invested with an important agency in establishing a large field hospital, which brought immediate relief to many hundreds of our wounded soldiers. During a brief sojourn there, he suffered the severest hardships of labor and exposure, and contracted a disease which developed itself more fully after his return, and which there is some reason to believe was never entirely dislodged from his constitution. He made one or two attempts afterward to return to this field of labor, but was obliged to abandon his object.

But the most important public enterprise in which Dr. Willard engaged was the establishment of an institution for the relief of the chronic insane. His mind had been directed to this subject for a

considerable time, and he had collected a vast amount of information bearing upon it, which he had embodied in a luminous and elaborate report. That report had met with a most respectful attention from the Legislature, and everything indicated the speedy carrying out of the plan which he had proposed, when Dr. Willard found that his days of activity on earth were numbered. The Willard Asylum for the Insane, so named as a memorial of him, has been established since his decease. At the time of his death he was holding the positions of Secretary of the State Medical Society, Examining Surgeon for the Pension Office, and Surgeon-General of the State, all of which were to him posts of arduous labor and unceasing fidelity. But the duties of these offices, in addition to his more private professional engagements and other diversified claims upon his time, imposed upon him a burden greater than his physical constitution was able to bear. A sudden attack of disease, superinduced by excessive exertion, accomplished its fatal work within a very few days. The solemnities of his funeral, as well as the warm memorial tributes of different bodies, including the Legislature of the State, furnished the most unquestionable evidence that his death was regarded as a public calamity.

Dr. Willard's intellectual character was marked by quick perception, sound judgment, retentive memory, and much more than the ordinary power of analysis and investigation. A diligent student of books and a close observer of men and things, he acquired a very large amount of general as well as professional knowledge, and he devoted much time to the local history and biography of the medical profession, the results of which appear in 'Albany Medical Annals,' Vol. I. He possessed large executive ability, and power of readily bringing other minds into harmony with his own. He had, moreover, an exquisite taste, an eye to discern whatever is beautiful in nature or art, and the delicacy of his perceptions, especially in regard to architectural proportions, was well-nigh unrivaled. His moral qualities were akin to his intellectual ones. He had great simplicity and directness of character. With him the question, 'what is right?' was all absorbing, and he sought to settle it by light from above and from within, without listening to the pleas of expediency or of imagined self-interest. His spirit was eminently genial and cheerful, and, with his fine intellectual qualities and more than ordinarily attractive manners, rendered him a most agreeable companion. He was, withal, a man of great benevolence. There was a chord strung in his heart that vibrated quickly to every form of human suffering.

But the intellectual and moral qualities with which Dr. Willard was originally endowed were essentially modified in their action by the influences of Christianity. When about sixteen years old, during an extensive revival of religion in his native place, he entered upon the Christian life, and shortly after he joined the Congregational Church at Wilton, and on his becoming a resident of Albany transferred his membership to the Second Presbyterian Church of this city, which was unbroken during the remainder of his life. For several years he superintended the mission school in Lydius street with great fidelity and success, though it must have been at no small inconvenience, in view of his daily professional engagements. In his medical practice he often prescribed for the spiritual as well as the physical man. The grand enterprise for the relief of one of the most terrible forms of human woe, which he had so much at heart in his last days, was evidently prosecuted not merely from considerations of public expediency, nor yet merely or chiefly from the influences of a naturally benevolent spirit, but from those higher principles and feelings which it is the province of Christianity alone to inspire.”

SOURCE: Reprinted from *Bi-Centennial History of Albany. History of The County of Albany, N.Y., From 1609 to 1886*, Volume 4, edited by George Rogers Howell, Jonathan Tenney, Assisted by Local Writers, New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., Publishers, 1886, Pages 240, 241.