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Caring, cobblestones and a young boy *Start of The Medical Society of South Carolina*

By Anc Clarkson

They say that the best stories are the ones that make you smile. With that in mind, let me tell you a story – a true story.

We are blessed to live among those who value the history of the places where we live and work. Many advocate an historical mind's eye, that effort of working to imagine the goings-on of a particular period as you walk about our city. When you find yourself negotiating the cobblestones of Chalmers Street off of South Meeting, I hope a little string of history from that area might come to mind and bring a smile.

Before we were yet the "United States" of America, in 1747 a little boy was born in our Charleston to a Scottish father and Bermudan mother. His years as a youth found his parents impressed with his intellect and disposition, and he showed an interest in science and medicine. He loved to learn, and he cared. Like most parents still today, they wanted the best for him and as such his mother took him down one of Charleston's many cobblestone streets to the door of one of the most respected and learned men of the city: Dr. Lionel Chalmers.



A portrait of Tucker Harris.

IMAGE PROVIDED BY AUTHOR

Dr. Chalmers was one of, if not the most, respected physician-scientists in the city. He was well known beyond the city and a friend of the eminent Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia. He was also one of our nation's earliest colonial meteorologists. His weather observations and notes on disease, particularly fevers, were published internationally in multiple languages and were presented to the Medical Society of London. He had a thriving medical practice in the city and communicated regularly with other prominent physicians in both Europe and the colonies.

It was then no doubt an honor when Dr. Chalmers agreed to this mother's request for an apprenticeship for her son. Dr. Chalmers was impressed with the boy's attention to detail,

pleasant manner and quick intellect. The boy excelled under Chalmers' tutelage and gained skill in pharmacy and medicine. It was under Chalmers' recommendations and urgings that the boy, now a young man, departed Charleston in 1768 for the University of Edinburgh, Scotland for his medical degree. The young man's name was Tucker Harris.

Harris returned to our city with a doctorate in medicine, a young Scottish wife, and a heart deeply thankful for all those persons who had supported him. There were rumors of the coming revolution, and the young man's mentor, the good Dr. Chalmers, soon began to decline in health.

Dr. Chalmers ceded his own practice to his former apprentice, who took over, grew it into his own, and took on the reputation as one of the most caring and competent physicians in the city. During our conflict with Great Britain, he served as a surgeon to the Continental Forces. He took leadership positions with The Mount Zion Society, The South Carolina Society and The Orphan House of Charleston. Like his mentor Dr. Chalmers, Harris's reputation spread throughout the colonies. He was awarded membership in the Philadelphia Medical Society.

There soon came calls in South Carolina to organize, regulate and collaborate better among medical practitioners. And so it was, then, that the now middle-aged Dr. Tucker Harris gathered with other learned physicians on Christmas Eve 1789 and formed the core of The Medical Society of South Carolina. Still active to this day, The Medical Society of South Carolina was the founding organization and builder of Roper Hospital, using funds from Col. Thomas Roper. Roper Hospital has now been caring for the sick and injured of this city for well over 150 years.

Dr. Harris's life was a deeply fulfilled one, serving his city of Charleston with great skill. He was beloved by his colleagues and patients alike. But more than that,

he was a man who was thankful. The two remaining earthly pieces of

his life speak of that thanks: a small portrait here in the Waring Library with the inscription "friendship and maternal love" and his thesis, still archived 3,800 miles away in Scotland, which he prefaced with a dedication in Latin to his mentor Dr. Chalmers. Both of these speak of a seemingly inauspicious day when a loving parent took her young son down a cobblestoned Charleston street to a caring teacher; from this was born a life of great service.

Dr. Tucker Harris passed away in 1821. His death was announced in newspapers in Charleston, New York and Boston. In its formal published remembrance of him, The Medical Society of South Carolina noted that this kind-hearted physician, who had attended to so

many other births and deaths, palpated his own dwindling pulse at his wrist as he passed into eternity. This was a man thankful for a full life, and for all those who made it so.

So the next time you are walking down South Meeting Street, turn at Hibernian Hall and stroll down the cobblestones of Chalmers Street. Smile and think of the little boy who loved to learn and care. And remember that the smallest of days can lead to the greatest of lives.

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