When William Smith reprinted his *Discourses on public occasions in America* in 1762, he inscribed a copy and presented it to John Morgan whose “Genius and Application” he had observed while Morgan was a student at the College of Philadelphia. Only eight years younger than Smith, Morgan himself was to make a tremendous contribution to higher education, for it was through his efforts that a medical curriculum was established in the American colonies. At the time, it was customary for colonial doctors to be trained in the course of a protracted apprenticeship with an established physician. In his proposals, however, Morgan did more than merely advocate organized teaching of the theory and practice of medicine: according to his forceful argument, the instruction must be given at the College as an adjunct to the sound education in language and the liberal arts already being taught there.

It was at the College of Philadelphia where he had taken his A.B. and his A.M. that John Morgan persuaded the trustees to set up this program modeled after some of the great European universities. In fact, when the institution obtained formal university status, the new title could be justified primarily because of the medical department which had opened in 1765. In Morgan’s view, “the flourishing state of literature in this college, and the perfection in which the languages, mathematics, and polite arts are taught here, are strong inducements for such young men as propose engaging in the study of Medicine, to enter the college.” While there had been previous suggestions for setting up external courses or founding an independent medical school, Morgan insisted that his was “a scheme for transplanting Medical science into this seminary.” In the firm belief that medicine should be taught as a part of the college curriculum, he was influenced, naturally enough, by his own experience at the University of Edinburgh, where he and the two other professors in the early years of the medical department had received their training. The Scottish university was generally accepted as the model for this new departure in medical education in the colonies. A few years later, Franklin wrote to Morgan from England: “Thank you for the inaugural Dissertations, and am pleased to see our College begin to make some Figure as a school of Physic, and have no
doubt but in a few years, with good Management, it may acquire a Reputation similar and equal to that in Edinburgh."

In the course of his education, Morgan had himself shown considerable interest in the liberal arts, and he had never restricted his studies to medicine alone. It was during his apprenticeship to Dr. John Redman, the most prominent physician in Philadelphia, that the College of Philadelphia first opened its doors and Morgan enrolled in the baccalaureate program. After graduating with the first class, he continued to investigate many branches of humanistic and scientific knowledge during his travels in the true spirit of an eighteenth century philosopher. While in Scotland for the purpose of studying medicine, he attended lectures in belles-lettres with the Reverend Hugh Blair, the eloquent proponent of the fictitious Gaelic bard Ossian. On that occasion, he received an amused comment on his "Enterprising Genius" from a medical student friend in London: "Thou won't be satisfied without being a Psychologist, Chemist, Physician & Rhetorician. Mercy upon us, where will you end?"

The Grand Tour of Europe with which his five years of education abroad concluded further reflects the diversity of Morgan’s interests. It included visits to hospitals in Paris, discussions with doctors in Italy, and courses on art and architecture and the collection of antiquities. In Rome he came into contact with the painter Benjamin West and posed for a portrait by the young Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann. Not long before, he had been kindly received in Padua by the aged but active Giovanni Battista Morgagni who had established pathology as a branch of modern medicine by introducing post-mortem studies to supplement his clinical observations. Morgan’s visit to this eminent anatomist marked a high point in his experience abroad and, before it was over, Morgagni not only inscribed a fine copy of his most important work for Morgan, but “claimed kindred with him from the resemblance of their names.”

On their way through Switzerland, Morgan and his friend Samuel Powel were entertained cordially by Voltaire at his estate outside Geneva, and, while in the Alps, Morgan noted the splendors of the view and the prevalence of goiter among the inhabitants. When he returned to America in the spring of 1765, John Morgan was a “compleat Man” of learning and cultivation, in addition to being a proven investigator into the medical sciences and a member of the leading learned societies of eighteenth century Europe. His international acceptance further appears in references to him as the “Scots doctor,” by the Académie Royale de Chirurgie in Paris, while Voltaire introduced Morgan and Powel as “two English Gentlemen.” In a letter to an Italian lady, the Philadelphian did not hesitate to identify himself as “J. Morgan, Cavaliere Inglese.”

It was with a significant list of accomplishments and distinctions to his credit that young John Morgan pronounced his Discourse upon the Institution of Medical Schools in America, composed in large part during
Benjamin Rush (1745-1813)
attributed to John Neagle
First professor of chemistry (1769-1791)
at the College of Philadelphia and
University of Pennsylvania. Born in
Byberry near Philadelphia, he studied at
the College of New Jersey (Princeton)
and attended the first medical course at
the College of Philadelphia. He signed
the Declaration of Independence and
served as surgeon-general of the Armies
of the Middle Department during the
Revolution. As a member of the staff of
Pennsylvania Hospital, he reformed the
treatment of mental disease. President
of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting
the Abolition of Slavery (1803),
avocate of temperance, the abolition of
capital punishment, and the education of
women, he wrote many medical, political,
and moralizing works, including
America’s first text on chemistry (1770)
and an autobiography (1800 but published later). Rush succeeded John
Morgan as professor of theory and
practice of medicine (1789-1813).

his recent stay in Paris. Described as “a Magna Carta for American medical
education,” the address was given at the public anniversary commencement
held at the College of Philadelphia on May 30 and 31, 1765. In it, Morgan
enumerated the potent reasons why a medical department should be
immediately established at the College. Coming after years of the best
available training, his appeal represented the culmination of his own career.
The full significance of his ideals as he moved to establish medical education
in the colonies appears in the evaluation of one of Morgan’s twentieth
century successors at the medical school, Professor Francis Wood: “If,
during the succeeding 150 years, we in America had not deviated from the
principles and objectives which John Morgan outlined, we would not have
strayed from the road in medical education, and would not have needed the
flogging administered by Abraham Flexner in 1910 to bring us back to the
right path.” The proposals which he set forth were for the reform not
only of the teaching of Physic but also of the practice of medicine itself. At
the time, his lofty “discrimination” between true medicine and the trades of
surgeon and apothecary appeared extraordinary to practitioners and to the
general public alike. Despite the prophetic nature of his insights, it was
many years before his recommendations would become common practice.

In broaching his subject, Morgan had first of all to acquaint those who
heard or later read his Discourse with “the various branches of knowledge
[which compose the science of medicine] Anatomy, Materia Medica,
Botany, Chymistry, the Theory of Medicine, and the Practice.” The Theory
of Physic, he explains, usually known as the Medical Institutions,
“comprehends the important doctrines of Physiology and Pathology. Of
the former he declares: “The study of it is most entertaining, and also
engages our closest attention from the many curious subjects with which
it abounds,” while the latter, by linking prognostication with indications of
treatment, “forms a system of precepts in the art of healing.”

In his reference to system, Morgan speaks from the conviction that
instruction must be based on a coherent medical theory rather than relying
on the necessarily limited experience of the individual practitioner. For this
reason, after having familiarized his listeners with the various branches of
the science, he notes the importance of a systematic philosophy such as the
one on which his own medical education at the University of Edinburgh
had been based. There must be an underlying plan as well as coherence
among the several courses of instruction, since the vastness and com-
plexity of the subject make it “impossible to learn it thoroughly without
we follow a certain order.” Describing the interconnection between the
various disciplines and the sequence in which they should be pursued, he
makes a point of emphasizing the importance to the student of previous
instruction, there being “no art yet known which may not contribute
somewhat to the improvement of Medicine.” In addition to the classical
languages and liberal arts curriculum, already “taught in such perfection
in this place," he singles out the value of learning the French language, as he himself had done, as well as of an acquaintance with mathematics and natural philosophy.¹⁰

Morgan now launches into the more controversial portion of his Discourse, after first repeating the opinion that the trades of surgeon and apothecary are beneath the dignity of the true physician. Earlier, a group of American students at the University of Edinburgh, most of them from Virginia, had vowed not to degrade their profession "by mingling the trade of apothecary and surgeon with it." Their conviction reflected a recent decision by the prestigious Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh to exclude members of the Corporation of Surgeons from their number.¹¹

For his part, Morgan initially complied with these precepts on his return to Philadelphia by distinguishing the fee for a medical consultation from the apothecary's charge for medicine. But his patients were too accustomed to doctors who did everything for a single payment, and there was considerable resistance to change from his colleagues as well. Colonial physicians saw no alternative to performing surgery or mixing drugs according to their patients' needs, and Morgan found himself compelled to elaborate on his Scottish purism with an "Apology for attempting to introduce the regular mode of practising physic in Philadelphia," which was printed along with his Discourse.¹²

More unwelcome to those already in medical practice was Morgan's lurid depiction of the state of colonial medicine. Although he took care in the Discourse to congratulate the population of certain American cities such as Philadelphia on the presence there of numbers of excellent physicians and surgeons "qualified by genius, education, and experience," many of these doctors had received no supplementary training after serving their apprenticeship. Morgan made it clear that he considered this course inadequate and pernicious, and he describes the nature of so restricted a foundation for medical practice:

A contracted view of Medicine naturally confines a man to a very narrow circle, and limits him to a few partial indications in the cure of diseases. He soon gets through his little stock of knowledge; he repeats over and over his round of prescriptions, the same almost in every case; and, although he is continually embarrassed, he has the vanity to believe that, from the few maxims which he has adopted, he has within himself all the principles of medical knowledge, and that he has exhausted all the resources of art. This is a notion subversive of all improvement.

From an unflattering account of the disadvantages of such limitations, Morgan goes on to express pure outrage at their effects. Over a century later, a doctor's son, Gustave Flaubert, described how the operation on a club foot by the well-intentioned ignoramus Charles Bovary resulted in gangrene and amputation. Morgan had only to consult his own experience
to evoke similar scenes, and he goes on to inveigh against the ignorance and incompetence of doctors: "Great is the havoc which his ignorance spreads on every side, robbing the affectionate husband of his darling spouse, or rendering the tender wife a helpless widow; increasing the number of orphans; mercilessly depriving them of their parents' support." One of nine children who had been bereaved of both parents by the time he was thirteen, Morgan did not use entirely empty rhetoric when he excoriates this "remorseless foe to mankind," finally exhorting the doctor with the words: "Hold, hold thy exterminating hand." At the end of the Discourse, there is a return to a more moderate tone as Morgan once again lauds the city and the College and reaffirms the positive advantages of his proposals. But after the preceding outburst, it must have appeared to his audience that medicine in the colonies was a threat to their health and that they should heed his words.

For all its idealism, Morgan's Discourse bore little relation to the medical course which was initiated that year at the College. Nonetheless, in putting forward these proposals, Morgan could draw on his own varied experience. When he criticized the teaching and practice of medicine in the colonies, he did not speak as an inexperienced graduate of a prestigious European university, for his own career before his departure for Britain had given him the right to speak out. If his European training had equipped him with the status necessary to voice his proposals and to become himself the first collegiate professor of medicine in the colonies, it was previous experiences in and around Philadelphia which enabled him to describe the state of American medicine with such feeling. It is therefore of some interest to return to his earlier activities and, at the same time, to see the way his horizons were widened and his ambition to found a medical school was fixed by his years abroad.

John Morgan's first contact with the medical profession as the apprentice of John Redman, had consisted of running errands and mixing drugs for his master and observing him at work. Redman, who became the first president of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, had trained in London and Edinburgh before receiving his medical degree from the University of Leyden, the most famous center of medicine in Europe for a half a century longer than Edinburgh. But his training was the exception at a time when most of the physicians in Philadelphia had gone straight from medical apprenticeship to practicing on their own account. Although a great deal could be learned during an apprenticeship with a good master, there were many shortcomings, not necessarily of a medical variety, inherent in the situation. Benjamin Rush, another of Redman's gifted apprentices whom Morgan encouraged to go to Edinburgh after he had attended the first medical lectures in Philadelphia, points out the gulf separating teachers interested in the academic progress of the young men they are instructing.
and doctors whose students are also their apprentices. A barrier of status inevitably separates the younger man from the practicing physician whom he pays for the privilege of serving. Comparing his professor in Edinburgh, Joseph Black, to his master in Philadelphia, Rush wrote: "There are teaching and ruling masters. I cannot say I ever received a single idea from Dr. Redman, whereas I have received some hundreds from Dr. Black. I owe Dr. Redman no obligations. . . . But to Dr. Black I owe most of the knowledge I possess. He has conferred a thousand favors and marks of friendship upon me, although I never pounded his mortar or posted his books six long years to deserve them."

If Morgan's longest exposure to an important aspect of colonial medicine was as an apprentice to a successful Philadelphia practitioner, he subsequently had the opportunity of seeing for himself just how bad medical treatment could be and experiencing the low esteem in which doctors were generally held in the colonies. Soon after he graduated from the College in 1757, he took a post as regimental surgeon, and it was only because a commission as ensign was procured for him by his friends that he was paid as an officer. Without a similar advantage, a simple surgeon might earn little more than a cook. Even so, Morgan frequently had to purchase supplies out of his own pocket. When, on one occasion, he asked for additional help, the response was to promote him to lieutenant after which he was expected to provide for his own assistant from the increase in his pay.15

The battlefield in the late fifties was the forest along the western frontier of Pennsylvania where war was intermittently waged against the French and the Indians. Further animosities involved the rival claims to land by the colonies of Pennsylvania and Virginia. In addition to the enemy who took their toll of men wounded in skirmishes, there were other potent foes to contend with: scurvy, dysentery, fevers, and the dreaded smallpox. With only one doctor covering a wide area and obliged to travel from post to post to tend to casualties, the sick and wounded were frequently left unattended or were cared for by others in their company. There was, moreover, little real understanding of how to prevent the havoc caused among the troops by infectious diseases and malnutrition. What Morgan experienced at the time was but a foretaste, mild in comparison with the medical horrors of the Revolutionary War when he found himself cast in the role of director general and chief physician of the Continental Army. For the moment, however, Morgan's internship with the military ended when the provincial forces disbanded in 1760 at the close of the French and Indian War. Faced with settling down to medical practice in the city, the twenty-five-year-old John Morgan elected instead to go abroad to continue his study of medicine in London and Edinburgh.

Morgan never surpassed the academic and social distinction which was his during the five years that he remained in Europe. Arriving in London
with letters of introduction to Franklin and Penn, he gained immediate access to the group of influential men most concerned with the American colonies. It was understood that, in selecting a program of study, he would let himself be guided by the eminent physician, John Fothergill, who, although he never visited America himself, was representative for several colonies in which both his father and a brother had traveled as Quaker preachers. Fothergill had a particularly lively interest in the development of medicine in the New World, and he kept himself informed about all manner of other scientific discoveries across the Atlantic. Having understood the implications of Franklin’s Observations on Electricity when it was communicated to the Royal Society in 1751, Fothergill had taken it upon himself to supervise its printing and had written a preface to the work. Another of his interests was botany, and he obtained plants from John Bartram in Philadelphia for cultivation at his country estate, later the largest private botanical garden in England. So many were the claims on his time that it had become his custom to invite visitors to breakfast with him. In the 1760s, he successively received William Shippen, John Morgan, and Benjamin Rush in this manner—the men who later occupied three of the four original chairs in the medical department of the College of Philadelphia.

On Fothergill’s advice, Morgan first became a student at St. Thomas’ Hospital, which entailed little more than the right to watch surgeons at their work and to ask them questions. More important for his training was his connection with William Hunter, one of the most important teachers of the time, with whom he studied anatomy. Departing from the usual didactic method of teaching the subject, Hunter procured cadavers for the practical instruction of his students. He freely imparted the secrets of preparing anatomical specimens through the method of injection and corrosion, with the result that, during Morgan’s later travels, he was able to demonstrate the technique to the doctors on whom he called in Paris and Padua, and he received considerable praise and attention for his skill from the great Morgagni.

Before leaving London to enroll at the University of Edinburgh, Morgan was joined by William Shippen, his former classmate, who had just received his medical degree from the Scottish university. While they were together, it seems more than likely that the two Philadelphians discussed the subject of introducing the study of medicine at the College in their home city. Medical education in the colonies was a live issue among the American students who met in Edinburgh, and the project for a school is mentioned in a letter Fothergill wrote to one of the managers of the Pennsylvania Hospital on Shippen’s return home in 1762, and again three years later when Morgan arrived back in Philadelphia. While they were in London, Morgan and Shippen witnessed the coronation procession of George III from a vantage point opposite Westminster Hall. From that time
on, however, they seem to have been perpetually pitted against each other in situations of rivalry and acrimony. The royal celebrations of 1761 seem also to have marked the end of civil social relations between the first collegiate professors of medicine on the American continent, each a Philadelphian and both of them on the faculty of the College.

With the crowning of its first English-speaking monarch in a great many years, London was enjoying a heyday of power and wealth at the hub of the largest commercial empire in the world. In this period, Edinburgh was in the midst of an intellectual flowering unequalled anywhere else, with such giants as David Hume and Adam Smith identified with the city and the university. In the course of its forty years’ existence, the school of medicine had come to rival the University of Leyden where a number of eminent Scottish physicians had trained at the end of the seventeenth century before returning home to set up the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh. The medical school, founded in 1726, immediately attracted able and well-trained men and, by the time Morgan and other idealistic young Americans arrived on the scene, William Cullen was proposing a systematic theory of medicine which had a profound effect on Morgan and the subsequent systematization of medical science by John Brown in Scotland and Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia.

Much of the intellectual stimulation which Morgan enjoyed at Edinburgh was the result of his unanimous election to the prestigious student Medical Society, a membership so highly regarded that it gave him an entrée to the highest scientific circles on his later travels in Europe. A paper he prepared for this society on the formation of pus was the subject of the thesis that he defended with the customary formality in public and entirely in Latin, in order to qualify as an M.D. Soon after receiving his degree, Morgan departed for the continent on the Grand Tour without which no young gentleman’s education could be considered complete. Reflecting the paradoxical sentiments of many a tourist after him, Morgan wrote afterwards to William Smith: “I am glad ‘tis over. I would not have missed the scenes I have gone through within this twelve month for a good thousand, nor would I have to go through them again for as much more.”

In the same letter, he congratulates himself on the company he has kept: entertained as part of the retinue of the King’s brother, the Duke of York, in Leghorn, he had further received an audience with the King of Savoy in Turin. Despite a warning in the Bible of his mother’s Quaker family against priestcraft and holy water, John Morgan had even been received privately by the Pope.

At the same time, he had worked assiduously to gain admittance to the most eminent learned societies in Europe. In the course of his travels, he had been invited to join the Roman literary society of the Accademia degli Arti and been made correspondent by the French Académie Royale de Chirurgie. Back in London, he was elected to the Royal Society after being
sponsored by an eminent group of men, and he sought and gained membership in the Royal College of Physicians of both London and Edinburgh. Clearly, his success in the British Isles was sufficiently known for him to have remained in London and started a successful career there had he so desired. But his loyalties and his ambitions tied him to his homeland. Loaded with honors from the Old World, he returned to Philadelphia with the international prestige necessary for his aim of immediately founding a medical department at the College in that city.

Among the first medical students in the year 1765 was Benjamin Rush, a graduate of Princeton, known at the time as the College of New Jersey. That year, and for some time to come, the entire curriculum in medicine was taught by two professors who occupied, in the ancient wisecrack, not chairs, but settees. William Shippen, although slighted by Morgan’s brief and frosty mention of him in his Discourse, nonetheless applied for the professorship in anatomy and was duly elected to that position by the trustees. The Pennsylvania Gazette announced that Shippen would lecture on anatomy at the College, while Morgan would teach materia medica, a subject to which he appended a brief survey of chemistry. Students were admitted to the lectures on the purchase of a ticket of instruction, and, in the first years, these took the form of playing cards endorsed with the signature “John Morgan, M.D., FRS & Prof. of Medicine,” accompanied by his seal. Of the local apprentices who enrolled in the lectures, ten went on to become the first recipients of a medical degree in America. At the commencement of 1768, they were awarded the Bachelor of Medicine, the traditional British degree in the profession. The defense of a Latin thesis was considered an essential requirement for the doctorate.

The year that the first medical degrees were awarded in the colonies, Rush received his M.D. from the University of Edinburgh. He had followed in the footsteps of his two Philadelphia professors by studying in London and Edinburgh. Rush’s first school had been the West Nottingham Academy in Maryland, where both John Morgan and William Shippen had preceded him. In Travels Through Life, qualified as “an account of sundry incidents and events in the life of Benjamin Rush” and penned half a century later for the “Use of his Children,” Rush leaves a most favorable impression of the methods and principles of his teacher, the Reverend Samuel Finley, who was also his uncle by marriage. In addition to academic studies and training in manners and morals, Rush recalls with approval the instruction in “practical agriculture” at the Academy; hay-making time at West Nottingham was an introduction to an aspect of education which Franklin and others considered particularly important in the colonies. Rush writes that the activity “begat health and helped to implant more deeply in our minds the native passion for rural life.”

Rush left for Princeton at the age of fifteen and graduated the year
The House of Dr. Philip Syng Physick (1768–1837)
Maintained by The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks

The finest surviving house of an early faculty member is the Federal period mansion at South Fourth Street occupied from 1815 by Dr. Philip Syng Physick (A.B. 1785), a member of the medical faculty for thirty years and known as "the Father of American Surgery." Here are displayed gifts from grateful patients including Joseph Bonaparte and Chief Justice John Marshall (L.L.D. 1815). Restoration was made possible through the generosity of another alumnus, University trustee, the Honorable Walter H. Annenberg.

before Finley was elected its president. In other associations with the College of New Jersey, he was happily married to the daughter of an influential trustee and, while studying in Scotland, he was instrumental in persuading John Witherspoon (and particularly Mrs. Witherspoon) to leave Paisley and take up the presidency of the college.26 Many years afterwards, Rush’s principles obliged him to withdraw his oldest son from the college after the “poor deluded boy” had been caught gambling on the sabbath.21 On his own graduation, the opinion was expressed that he was well suited for the law and would “make a better figure at the bar, than in the walks of a hospital.” Samuel Finley, however, advised him to fast and pray before coming to any decision, and soon afterwards, Rush became the apprentice of John Redman, the Philadelphia physician.22

In his autobiography, Rush goes on to describe his life as a medical apprentice and his years of study abroad. A little advertised aspect of journeying to the Old World in the pursuit of education emerges from his account of the voyage across the Atlantic. Although he allayed Mrs. Witherspoon's fears about the crossing, Rush “suffered much from seasickness” himself and took laudanum as an antidote. Describing the discomforts of both the outward journey and the voyage home, he quotes Franklin as saying that "'there were three classes of people who did not care how little they got for their money, viz. school boys, sermon hearers, and sea passengers.'"23 The Travels give little account of the sights of Europe, descriptions he gladly left to others. His early observations as well as the remarks in the commonplace books he kept in later life indicate that Rush was mainly concerned with the personalities of the men of learning and position with whom he became acquainted.

If the son of Lord Auchinleck, James Boswell, had disagreeably characterized John Morgan as a humorless coxcomb after traveling with him through Holland, Rush redresses the balance by quoting remarks made by Samuel Johnson about his biographer at a dinner party given by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Johnson described Boswell on this occasion as “much given to asking questions . . . not always of the most interesting nature,” an example being a query about the difference between apples and pears. On the same occasion, Rush records that Johnson himself was given to speaking in a commanding manner and treated the “gentle and unoffending” Oliver Goldsmith with great rudeness.24

One celebrity Rush frequented in London is of particular interest to Pennsylvanians. The somewhat tenuous association between the Reverend George Whitefield and the University of Pennsylvania is impossible to overlook on account of the lively statue of the renowned evangelist which stands in the Quadrangles. As a boy, Rush had heard him preach in Philadelphia, possibly in the New Building itself. He had personal connections with Whitefield since his uncle, Samuel Finley, was one of the leaders of the “New Lights” branch of the Presbyterian Church started by
Whitefield after he diverged from the Methodist Revival of John Wesley. Referring to the latter as “Mr. Westley,” Rush declares that he was the more learned of the two, although he describes Whitefield as being more eloquent. Franklin attests to this characteristic when he recalls the effect of Whitefield’s oratory on a firm and rational intention on his part not to contribute to a charity “preach’d up” by Whitefield. “... I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my Pocket a Handful of Copper money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles in Gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers.” But in the end “he finished so admirably, that I empty’d my Pocket wholly into the Collector’s Dish, Gold and all.” By all account a good man as well as an eloquent one, Whitefield informed his young visitor that he owed his continued existence to the prayers of twelve widows maintained at his expense near his church in the Tottenham Court Road. Rush was greatly struck by this remark. He also noticed the biblical verses concerning food and drink inscribed on the preacher’s crockery, and years later he remembered the words written on the cup from which he had formerly taken his tea in Whitefield’s parlor.

When Rush left the College of Philadelphia for Edinburgh, John Morgan had suggested that he should make a particular study of chemistry in order to qualify himself for the position of professor of chemistry on his return. Rush corresponded with Morgan on the vicissitudes of his proposed election and describes himself as following “the plan you proposed to me when I left Philadelphia.” His letters are full of “the great Dr. Cullen... who daily exhibits such surprising efforts of genius and learning that I am no longer surprised that you used to call him the Boerhaave of his age.” Rush returned from Edinburgh an enthusiastic follower of Cullen’s System, and he attributed his later unpopularity to the fact that he had rejected the more practical teachings of Boerhaave, the great Dutch physician, on which the colonial doctors had been raised. In actual fact, most of the opposition he encountered centered on his heroic treatment of yellow fever during the epidemics which raged in Philadelphia towards the end of the eighteenth century.

During the summer of 1793, Rush’s letters are full of the dreaded disease. He labored unstintingly for the sick and lost three of his dedicated apprentices at a time when most Philadelphia physicians were more interested in leaving town. Philip Syng Physick, the father of American surgery, attributed his recovery to Rush’s treatment during which he lost “176 ounces of blood by 22 bleedings in 10 days.” Not surprisingly, some people balked at these measures; even Ebenezer Hazard, one of Rush’s oldest friends, comments: “He is a perfect Sangrado, and would order blood enough drawn to fill Manbrino’s helmet, with as little ceremony as a mosquito would fill himself up on your leg.” When one of Rush’s patients, having felt his own pulse, objected to further bleeding, Hazard reports:
"The Dr. pronounced ‘this opinion as one of the most dangerous symptoms in the case; the disorder extremely critical; not a moment to be lost; send for the bleeder directly—if you are not bled today, I shall not be surprised to hear that you are dead tomorrow.’ The patient declared he would lose no more blood; the Dr. declared he would no longer consider him as his patient, left him to die and the man got well."29

Rush was further involved in a dispute over the origins of the yellow fever: was it imported from the West Indies or, as he believed, of local origin, generated by the unsanitary conditions of the harbor and the sewage of the city itself? Rush bitterly describes his opponents as intent on "destroying the influence of a man who had aimed to destroy the credit of their city by ascribing to it a power of generating the yellow fever."30 William Cobbett, the English essayist, never known for the moderation of his prose, made Rush the target of a damaging attack in his Porcupine’s Gazette. After a successful libel suit had been brought against him, Cobbett used the final issue of his paper to report how Washington’s attending physicians “took 9 pounds of blood from General Washington, who was sixty-eight years of age, while, during the same space, they gave him three doses of calomel, or mercury in powder.”31 The President died on the "fatal day" on which Cobbett was also convicted for slandering Rush whose methods he considered very similar to those responsible for the President’s death. Smarting under a $5,000 fine for his "squibs, puns, epigrams and quotations from Gil Blas," Cobbett set out to earn the judgment against him in good earnest by publishing several volumes of personal invective from the safety of New York in a journal expressly entitled The Rush-light.

Some of the opposition to Rush could, nonetheless, be ascribed to the "new" theories he had brought back with him from Edinburgh. Although he denied authorship of newspaper articles ridiculing Boerhaave and proclaims that the toast ascribed to him, “Speedy interment of the System of Dr. Boerhaave, and may it never rise again,” was a calumny, he considered it indisputable that “Dr. Cullen’s System . . . was built upon the ruins of Dr. Boerhaave’s which was then the only prevailing system of medical principles and practice in America.” Rush claims to have been introduced to republican sentiments during his student days at Edinburgh, and he came to see some relation between his politics and his medical views: “To the activity induced in my faculties by the evolution of my republican principles by the part I took in the American Revolution, I ascribe in a great measure the disorganization of my old principles of medicine.”32 When in turn he rejected Cullen’s System, it was in line with his renunciation of all authoritarian systems in science and his profession as in politics.

One of the most interesting chapters in Rush’s Travels is certainly his account of “political and military events in the years of the Revolution.”
Rush gained prominence as a member of the Provincial Conference, and this body in turn elected him to the second Continental Congress. In this way, he ultimately came to be one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He had come to public attention, however, as a result of what he describes as “the frequent use I have made of pen and ink.”\textsuperscript{33} After being appointed to the first chair of chemistry in the colonies in 1769, Rush had composed \textit{A Syllabus of a Course of Lectures in Chemistry}, the earliest American work on the subject. The beginning of a career in public affairs in Philadelphia was also marked, as he informs us, by numerous articles under a variety of pseudonyms, few of which have been identified. In one that was, the subject of patriotism—about which he wrote with deep feeling in private letters from abroad—is the occasion for an exhortation to his countrymen which appeared under the pseudonym of “Hamden” in the \textit{Pennsylvania Journal} in 1773.\textsuperscript{34} In this article, he inveighs against the enslavement threatened by the East India Company and the approaching chests of taxed tea. Rush also made notes for a tract on the separation of the colonies. When he met with Tom Paine, newly arrived from England, he played an important part in persuading the radical pamphleteer to write \textit{Common Sense}, a work for which Rush himself chose the title.\textsuperscript{35} In 1780, Paine received an honorary A.M., the first to be granted to an outsider, from the newly constituted University. Until this time, the degree had been reserved for faculty and trustees, the only other recipients being a few members of the clergy.

By the time the first Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia, Rush had gained access to most of its members. He rode to Frankford to meet the Massachusetts delegates, and conversed with John Adams. Using a technique he had learned in London, he inoculated Patrick Henry, whom he describes as “amiable in his manners,” against smallpox. By the following year, when Rush became a member of the Congress, he had become an ardent believer in the inevitability of separation.

In an entry in Washington’s diary before his new responsibilities as commander-in-chief of the American armies put an end to such writing for the duration of the war, there is a habitually terse note for the date June 18, 1775: “Dined at Mullen’s upon Schoolkill.”\textsuperscript{36} Rush elaborates on the events of the night when Washington was toasted in his military capacity for the first time since his appointment three days earlier. The tableau is no less powerful for the quarter century which had elapsed since Rush witnessed the event on the banks of the Schuylkill:

\begin{quote}
The whole company instantly rose, and drank the toast standing. This scene, so unexpected, was a solemn one. A silence followed it, as if every heart was penetrated with the awful, but great events which were to follow the use of the sword of liberty which had just been put into General Washington’s hands by the unanimous voice of his country.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}
This is but one example of Rush's masterful use of his pen, which he did not employ exclusively in the service of medicine or politics. Salient personal detail for the purpose of heightening the dramatic quality of the events he records appears again in his account of the circumstances surrounding the Battle of Princeton. He makes only brief allusion to Washington's success in crossing the Delaware, choosing instead to elaborate on a minor incident which he had observed while in the company of Washington that Christmas day of 1776: "While I was talking to him, I observed him to play with his pen and ink upon several small pieces of paper. One of them by accident fell upon the floor near my feet. I was struck with the inscription upon it. It was 'Victory or Death.' " It was only later, after Washington's successful venture against the Hessians, that Rush discovered that these very words had been the password at the surprise attack on Trenton. During the engagement, Rush was impressed by the quality of the leadership around him, General St. Clair smiling calmly in the expectation of battle, General Mifflin in a blanket coat appearing to be "all soul." But, with his physician's eye for relevant detail, he was also profoundly afflicted by the horrible wounds of the soldiers, and all too aware of the tragic circumstances of the war.  

Rush gives an insight into the nonheroic aspect of the fighting through a personal anecdote. One of the enemy was a Scottish nobleman whom Rush had known in Edinburgh. His friend died in action, and his body was ignominiously thrown on a baggage wagon. It was only after a letter was found on him in which Rush had recommended a safe-conduct to Philadelphia from Generals Washington or Lee if he should be captured by the Americans that the young lord was buried with the full honors of war. The following year, Rush erected a stone over his friend's grave in Pluckemin, and he later retells his feelings as he picked a blade of grass from it. The poignancy of the episode is revived six years later in a letter to the fallen man's sister, in which Rush alludes to a love affair with her dating from his student days in Scotland.  

Although Rush was an ardent Whig and bitterly opposed to the Tories, he did not approve of the radical constitution adopted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1776. He became a member of the Republican society which was made up of the moderate "anti-constitutionalists" who ultimately regained control in the state. Unlike many of the men of his day, Rush did not allow his judgment to be clouded by the emotions of Revolutionary politics. For this reason, his influence declined after Independence. While a member of a committee of inspection reporting to Congress, he opposed the intolerance he saw displayed by his party towards opponents of the war. In his autobiography, he ridicules the die-hard or "furious Tory," but he is equally critical of their irresponsible fire-brand counterparts whom he derides as "furious Whigs."
associate, Provost Smith, whose “insolence and villainy” could no longer find party protection. But he expressed opposition to the arbitrary treatment of the College of Philadelphia by the Commonwealth, and he initially refused to accept a position at the reorganized University of the State of Pennsylvania. In 1783, he relented and resumed his post as professor of chemistry; but he supported Smith’s battle with the legislature, and shifted from the University to take up his old position when the College was reinstated in 1789. With Smith’s position on the property rights of the former trustees Rush appears to have been in full accord: he remarks in passing on the fact that “the College of Philadelphia was finally thro’ the industry and perseverance of its former Provost restored to its just owners.”

Rush suspected sectarian motives behind the reconstitution of the College on the part of the predominantly Presbyterian members of the legislature. Their move affected his own behavior in two ways: he suggested that a Presbyterian institution should be established in Carlisle, and this came about with the establishment of Dickinson College in 1783, named for the president of the Supreme Executive Council of the State of Pennsylvania. At the same time, Rush quit the First Presbyterian Church where the Reverend John Ewing was pastor in protest against the clergyman’s appointment as provost of the newly organized University of the State of Pennsylvania.

After the Revolution, Rush continued to play a part in other affairs of public concern. Ever since his return from abroad, he had been an ardent
abolitionist, a fact which had initially brought him into contact with Tom Paine. If his opposition to capital punishment originally had the support of but three persons in Philadelphia, he had the satisfaction of seeing it become the prevailing view, particularly of the Society of Friends.44 Throughout his life, however, Rush dedicated himself first and foremost to the practice and improvement of medicine.

One of his most original contributions was his approach to mental illness. For thirty years, while on the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital, Rush kept careful records of the “lunatiks” among the patients. From the start, he protested against the inhuman conditions in which the insane were housed, in opinions expressed first to the managers of the hospital, then in public. In 1792, he was responsible for an appropriation in the state legislature for $15,000 for the construction of a special wing at the hospital which, for the first time, included bathing facilities. Rush ascribed mental illness to physiological causes and among the remedies he prescribed were purges and bleeding. Along with these, however, he advocated “acts of kindness” and the provision of useful occupations. On the subject of enforced idleness he wrote: “Man was made to be active. Even in paradise he was employed in the healthy and pleasant exercise of cultivating a garden. Happiness consisting in folded arms, and in pensive contemplation, beneath rural shades, and by the side of purling brooks, never had any existence, except in the brains of mad poets and lovesick girls and boys.”45 A year before his death in 1813, Rush published his last work, Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind, which remained the only comprehensive treatise on the subject for seventy years.

In addition to his fame as a teacher and writer on medical subjects, Rush was also recognized as the most distinguished physician in Philadelphia, and probably the country. He complains in his autobiography about opposition from his colleagues which, on more than one occasion, almost caused him to move to New York, and he also remarks on the ingratitude of poor patients whom he tended gratis and who afterwards deserted him on gaining a measure of wealth. Nonetheless, just after his confrontation with Cobbett had been concluded in his favor, he wrote:

With all the folly and indiscretions in my life, with all the odium to which my opinions in medicine, politicks and religion have exposed me, . . . I believe I did more business, and with more profit, between the years 1769 and 1800 than any contemporary physician in Philadelphia. Thus it is the providence of God often blesses men in spite of themselves, and finally protects them from the evils to which an adherence to the dictates of their judgments, and well meant endeavors to promote knowledge and public happiness expose them.46

In acknowledging the rightness of his own judgment while admitting to a rather exaggerated tenacity, his evaluation throws light on the brief yet enigmatic appraisal of himself included among his Characters of the
Thomas Jefferson's Letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 1808
The author of the Declaration of Independence sent his grandson to the department of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania because of his conviction that it was unsurpassed in America.
Revolutionary Patriots. Along with a careful characterization of each of those men who signed the Declaration of Independence, he remarks for his own part: "BENJAMIN RUSH. He aimed well." If John Morgan's ambition on his return to Philadelphia had been to institute medical instruction at the College, Rush was more interested in the treatment of patients although, as he notes, his academic position served to bring him to the attention of the public. Despite the benefactions of William Allen and his association with prominent men, including Franklin who had insisted on a loan to prevent him from running short of money on the Continent, Rush adamantly maintains that he started out without the benefit of name or connections in the city. As a result he began a practice among the poor, often working without payment. Many were the "risques" he took in making his calls, climbing up ladders and sitting on beds which threatened him with vermin as well as infectious disease. In acknowledging an obligation to tend the lowly as a part of his Christian duty, he gives an interesting account of a dream he had after recovering from a fever:

... I dreamed that a poor woman came to me just as I was getting into my chair in Penn Street, and begged me to visit her husband. I told her hastily, that I was worn out in attending poor people, and requested her to apply to another Doctor. "O! Sir (said she, lifting up her hands), you don't know how much you owe to your poor patients. It was decreed you should die by the fever which lately attacked you, but the prayers of your poor patients ascended to heaven in your behalf, and your life is prolonged only upon their account." This answer affected me so much that I awoke in tears.

Unconsciously or not, Rush perhaps recalled Whitefield's observation about the effect on his life and health of the grateful prayers of the widows he supported.

At the same time, Rush was certainly well aware of the enormous value to a student of medicine of the accompanying opportunities for observing disease along with the effect of prescribed remedies. But there is nothing coldly calculating about his heartfelt testimony on the subject: "If I have rendered any services to my fellow citizens or added any facts or principles to that part of the science of medicine which relates to Epidemics, I owe both to the knowledge I acquired by my familiarity with diseases among the poor, in whom they appear early, and in a simple state. To my unfettered prescriptions in their diseases I owe likewise much of my knowledge of the doses and effects of medicines." In his appreciation of the advantages of such a practice for the advancement of medical knowledge, Rush was no different from Boerhaave, Fothergill, and Cullen himself, all of whom had treated the poor in the cities where they were later to make their mark. Rush's relation to the College of Philadelphia was also similar to that of Boerhaave in Leyden and Cullen in Edinburgh. In 1805, a
doctoral thesis was defended at the University of Pennsylvania entitled “Remarks on the Medical Theories of Brown, Cullen, Darwin and Rush” (some indication of the regard in which Rush’s own system was held at the time). His ideas had been crystallized under the obligation of composing a new set of lectures when he succeeded to the professorship of the theory and practice on the death of John Morgan in 1789.

Rush brought distinction to this new position by formulating a system based on his own critical evaluation of his former tenets and influenced, as he claims, by his conversation with students. Although it cost him sleepless nights, he accomplished the task through the dedication which he brought to every new challenge in his life. Students flocked to hear him from all over the country, increasing from less than 50 in 1790 to 369 in 1810. His lectures were described as “uncommonly eloquent, correct and interesting,” and more students registered in his classes than in those of any contemporary. James Rush calculated that almost three thousand attended his father’s lectures in the years after his election to the senior chair.

On succeeding to the chair previously occupied by John Morgan, Rush had paid suitable tribute to the founder of the medical school. The events gave him pause, however, for, as Morgan’s fortunes and health deteriorated, he had given up teaching and, widowed and childless, had progressively withdrawn from the world and from his medical practice. Rush also recorded Morgan’s tragic end, at the age of fifty-four, in his commonplace book where he writes:

October 15. This afternoon I was called to visit Dr. Morgan, but found him dead in a small hovel, surrounded with books and papers, and on a light dirty bed. He was attended only by a washerwoman, one of his tenants. His niece, Polly Gordon, came in time enough to see him draw his last breath. His disorder was the Influenza, but he had been previously debilitated by many other disorders. What a change from his former rank and prospects in Life! The man who once filled half the world with his name, had now scarcely friends enough to bury him.

The tributes to Rush when he died were very different in tone, and bear witness to a life which more than fulfilled its early promise. They came from his contemporaries who had helped shape the nation’s history. On hearing of his death, Thomas Jefferson chronicled his qualities of mind and spirit in a letter to John Adams: “Another of our friends of seventy-six is gone, my dear Sir, another of the co-signers of the Independence of our country. And a better man than Rush could not have left us, more benevolent, more learned, of finer genius, or more honest.” A year after Rush had been laid to rest in the churchyard of Christ Church, fifty yards east of the grave of Benjamin Franklin, Adams in turn reflected on the life of Benjamin Rush: “As a man of science, letters, taste, sense, philosophy, patriotism, religion, morality, merit, usefulness, taken all together, Rush has not left his equal in America; nor that I know in the world.”