



The history of dermatology at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania

Erika E. Reid ^{*}, William D. James

Department of Dermatology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 February 2015

Received in revised form 4 March 2015

Accepted 9 March 2015

ABSTRACT

There is little written about the history of women in dermatology. In this paper, we summarize the information obtained from archival records from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, one of the first medical schools for women, where several of the early prominent women in dermatology obtained their medical degrees and practiced. Among others, graduates include Rose Hirschler, MD, and Margaret Gray Wood, MD. The school and its graduates made important contributions to dermatology and to the advancement of women in the field. The history of women in dermatology is not well documented, and this historical research provides background in the biographies of pioneering women in an effort to preserve and honor their important work.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of Women's Dermatologic Society. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

For young women entering dermatology in the early 21st century, it is a gift that we are able to casually accept the normalcy of women in our profession. The work environment and career prospects that are now taken for granted are the result of the life's work of earlier women who imagined and fought for these rights. The current generation of doctors is still surrounded by women the age of our mothers, many of whom are responsible for enormous changes in the culture and its perception of female physicians, but we are already forgetting the magnitude of their achievements. Behind each of the names on the rosters of medical school admissions, residency match lists, and physician appointment letters is a brave and unusual story. Very few of these stories were recorded as they were taking place because it was not considered respectable for women to enter the medical field at the time. The longer we wait to record their work, the more difficult it becomes to locate and compile the information.

As a dermatology resident, I am particularly interested in the first women in dermatology. There is little written about this history. In fact, through recent efforts to research and celebrate the pioneering women in dermatology, some authors have uncovered discrepancies in beliefs about this history (Lowenstein, 2013). Not surprisingly, many of the first women in dermatology were associated with the first medical school that was established solely for women. The Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania (WMCP), founded in 1850, was the first medical institution in the world established to train women in medicine and offer them a doctorate of medicine. The Boston Female Medical College, a school for midwives, was expanded to include a full medical curriculum for women that same year. Within the next 15 years, similar institutions opened in New York and Chicago.

Institutions and organizations that promoted the development of women in medicine were especially important in the 19th and early 20th centuries as women attempted to be accepted into the profession.

WMCP played a critical role in creating an environment where women felt comfortable pursuing their education away from the suspicious gaze of men and bravely introduced the idea of medical training programs specifically for women into the national consciousness. This idea did not have an easy road to acceptance. Local medical societies, such as the Philadelphia County Medical Society and the Pennsylvania State Medical Society, refused WMCP graduates admission and banned their members from consulting with women physicians (Peitzman, 2000).

Philadelphia was a hotbed for medicine and dermatology in the 19th century, and WMCP benefited from the expertise and experience of the clinicians and academicians of the local universities and hospitals. The first teachers for the women, by default, were men, as there were no women in medicine at this time. WMCP was first housed in the back of 229 Arch Street, Philadelphia (address later changed to 627 Arch Street when Philadelphia renumbered the streets); in the 1870s, it relocated to North College Avenue. Today, the archives of WMCP are housed in Drexel University's archives and special collections. The history of dermatology at WMCP has not been explicitly documented and so required the piecemeal interpretation of assorted documents that remain in the school's archives. We undertook to describe this history by reviewing the remaining documents in the Drexel archives during the summer and fall of 2013. The history is limited by the documents that remain, but we hope that this effort facilitates future work to uncover and celebrate the history of women in medicine.

WMCP was always a slightly different creature than the medical schools and departments that we are familiar with today. Lawrence Parish, MD, who was chair of the department in the 1970s, described the very small department of dermatology at WMCP as something more akin to what we would understand as a section or division today (Parish, personal correspondence). The school often had only one instructor or professor, who held a clinic for the medical students one day a week. There was never a residency program associated with the school, and research was not an important element of the department's work. Most of the professors, throughout the

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: erika.reid@uphs.upenn.edu (E.E. Reid).

school's evolution, held appointments at other institutions in the city where they conducted research and were engaged in professional development and teaching programs.

Records from the school do not announce an official date of establishment for a department of dermatology, but the earliest mention of dermatology at WMCP occurred in the early 1880s, when, in 1883, Louis Duhring began a lecture series for the students ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)). Medical students could also choose to spend about 2 weeks on a rotating dermatology elective course, although it is not clear who the instructors of this course were.

WMCP students were fortunate to have Duhring as their professor. He was one of the most prominent dermatologists of his era. An 1867 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, he trained in dermatology in Europe ([Friedman, 1955](#); [Shelley and Crissey, 2003](#)). Upon returning to the United States, he established the first specialty clinic for dermatology in Philadelphia, founding the Dispensary for Skin Disease in 1870 ([Friedman, 1955](#); [Shelley and Crissey, 2003](#)). In 1886, he was a founder and the first vice president, subsequently serving twice as president, of the American Dermatological Association ([Szymanski, 1976](#)). He was the author of several well-known textbooks and is remembered for his important descriptions of many conditions, including most famously the eponymous Duhring's disease, or dermatitis herpetiformis. Duhring taught his annual short-course at the WMCP for 2 years, where he likely used his extensive collection of lithographs to instruct the students ([Fig. 1](#)) ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867](#); [Friedman, 1955](#); [Shelley and Crissey, 2003](#)).

In 1885, Henry W. Stelwagon, MD, took over Duhring's work as Lecturer in Dermatology. Stelwagon was an 1875 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. He completed his residency at Philadelphia General Hospital and then went abroad to study dermatology under Hebra and Kaposi. After returning to Philadelphia from Europe, he became an instructor in dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1885, and served as chief of Duhring's Dispensary for Skin Diseases for 5 years. He did most of the teaching at the WMCP during this period, as Duhring's health was beginning to fail, thus affecting his ability to work and teach ([Friedman, 1955](#)). After working for 5 years as a lecturer at WMCP, in 1891 Stelwagon was appointed the first Clinical Professor of Dermatology (the same time at which he was appointed to Jefferson Medical School). This appointment established Stelwagon as the first full professor of dermatology at WMCP ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)).

Stelwagon made numerous contributions to the dermatologic literature throughout the years, including the labor-intensive work of translating and editing Mrazek's *Atlas of Skin Diseases*. He is probably best known for his textbook *Treatise on Diseases of the Skin* (1902), a staple

dermatology text of the time that went through nine editions. After 20 years of teaching at the college, Stelwagon left in 1910, to be replaced by Milton Hartzell, MD ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)). In a memoir to his predecessor, Hartzell describes Stelwagon as "indeed a gentle man... He was of that steadily disappearing type of physician to whom the practice of medicine was a profession and not a business... those who knew him best loved him most" ([Friedman, 1955](#)).

Hartzell graduated from Jefferson Medical School in 1877 and worked as a general practitioner before specializing in dermatology. His colleagues, when asked to describe him in a remembrance, wrote that he was "a forceful personality, was portly without being obese, and was active and decisive both in thought and movement... His obvious and downright honesty and his devotion to the welfare of dermatology were self-evident – almost fanatic" ([Friedman, 1955](#)). In step with his predecessors, this interesting character began his devotion to dermatology in 1884 with an assistantship under Duhring in the Skin Dispensary at the University Hospital. In 1911, he was granted full professorship at the University Hospital. He also worked as a pathologist at Presbyterian Hospital in Philadelphia between 1885 and 1890. His relationship with WMCP did not begin until later in his career, when he was appointed Clinical Professor of Dermatology at WMCP in 1910. He served part-time at WMCP for 4 years, from 1910 to 1914 ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)). Among his many accomplishments, Hartzell was a founder of the Philadelphia Dermatologic Society, published an important article entitled "Cancer in Arsenical Keratosis," and was a pioneer in histopathology in Philadelphia. Today, he is remembered with the Milton B. Hartzell Professor and Chair of Dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1914, Frank Crozer Knowles, MD, was selected to replace the retiring Hartzell at WMCP ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)). Knowles received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1902; he also served as an instructor at his alma mater and as a professor of dermatology and syphilology at Jefferson Medical College ([Wagner and Savacool, 1992](#)). He stayed at WMCP until 1919, when he joined the war effort ([Faculty meeting minutes, 1850-1967](#)). Upon his departure, an alumna of the school, Rose Hirschler, MD ([Fig. 2](#)), became Acting Clinical Professor of Dermatology for 1 year, from 1918 to 1919 ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)). It is due to her decision to specialize in dermatology and then teach it to other women at WMCP that the first instance of women teaching women—and women mentoring women—in dermatology finally arose from a man's world.

Hirschler did not obtain an undergraduate degree but became a certified masseuse prior to attending medical school ([Fig. 3](#)) ([Lowenstein, 2013](#); [Rose Hirschler alumna file, n.d.](#)). She received her medical degree from the WMCP in 1899; she then traveled to Europe to learn dermatology, studying with Paul Unna. On returning to Philadelphia, she also worked closely with Jay F. Schamberg, MD, an important and influential mentor ([Lowenstein, 2013](#)). Schamberg was an 1893 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. He was recognized locally and nationally, serving as President of the Philadelphia County Medical Society in 1931 and President of the American Dermatological Association in 1920 ([Szymanski, 1976](#)). In addition, Schamberg was, at different times, the chair of dermatology of three medical schools in Philadelphia: Temple, Jefferson, and the University of Pennsylvania. He was also involved in developing dermatology research laboratories and, in 1901, was the first to describe progressive pigmentary dermatosis ([Shelley and Crissey, 2003](#)). He published several papers with Hirschler and helped her to develop a reputation in the field.

Hirschler began teaching at WMCP in 1900 as a clinical instructor in another area of her interest, gynecology; until 1919, she practiced general medicine intermixed with dermatology ([Annual announcements, 1850-1867, 1868-1970](#)). Interestingly, records from the faculty minutes of WMCP indicate that Hirschler first applied to be Clinical Professor of Dermatology in May 1913, but did not receive support at that time; instead, Knowles was appointed ([Faculty meeting minutes, 1850-1967](#)).



Fig. 1. The Louis Duhring Lithograph Collection, University of Pennsylvania Archives.



Fig. 2. Rose Hirschler, President of the Alumnae Association of WMCP 1921–1923 (Rose Hirschler alumna file, n.d.).

No records remain to explain why Knowles was favored over Hirschler. However, the College did call on her dermatologic skills during World War I, when Knowles was called away for military service toward the end of the war; Hirschler was appointed at a special meeting of the faculty on July 27, 1917, and served from 1918 to 1919 as an “acting professor” in his absence ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#); [Faculty meeting minutes, 1850–1967](#)). Hirschler left WMCP after her acting professorship concluded in 1919, when Knowles returned from war to serve as professor again from 1920 to 1921 ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)).

During this period, dermatology was a small service at WMCP and most of the professors had dual appointments at the University of Pennsylvania or Jefferson. Early models of dermatologic postgraduate residency training programs were evolving at larger hospitals around the country as well as in Philadelphia. Faculty at WMCP gave medical student lectures and saw patients in clinic, but were not affiliated with a postgraduate program. The purview of dermatology as a field was also maturing. Venereal disease, a related and overlapping field, gained a presence at WMCP in the early 1900s ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)). Another woman, Jeanette Scherman, MD, was WMCP's first Professor of Venereal Disease ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)).

Subsequent to Knowles' departure in 1920, the Department of Dermatology was led by Henry Gaskill, MD (1922 to 1923) ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)). Gaskill was a 1906 graduate of Jefferson Medical School and subsequently studied in Vienna ([Szymanski, 1976](#)). He was followed by Joseph V. Klauder, MD, (1923 to 1932) ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)). Klauder, a syphilology expert, had trained with Hartzell ([Szymanski, 1976](#)). In 1932, the department acquired a second faculty position with the addition of Robert Gilman, MD, as Assistant Professor of Dermatology ([Annual announcements,](#)

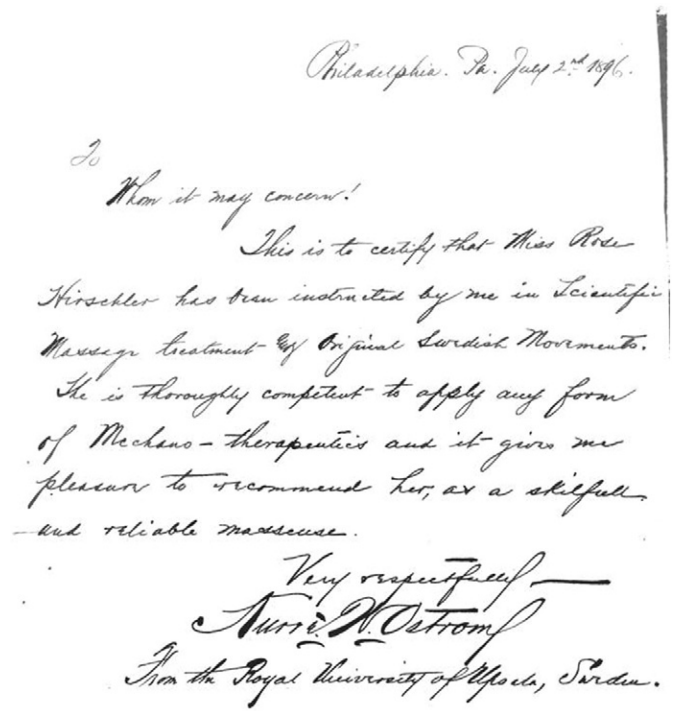


Fig. 3. Massage certificate (Rose Hirschler alumna file, n.d.).

1850–1867, 1868–1970). These two worked together at WMCP until 1936, when Hirschler, who was still teaching dermatology and gynecology at WMCP during this time, was appointed Professor of Dermatology and led the department ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)).

Hirschler's career is impressive for both her academic contributions to the field and her pioneering role for women in dermatology. Hirschler became a diplomat of the American Board of Dermatology in 1933 as well as the second woman certified in dermatology in America, after Loretta Joy Cummins ([Lowenstein, 2013](#)). She published a number of articles with Schamberg on lichen planus, lichen sclerosis, and syphilis; she also authored articles independently, including an article on acne vulgaris that was published in WMCP's monthly publication. She was the only female founder of the American Academy of 241 Dermatology, and she was the first female professor of dermatology and chair of a department of dermatology. When she took over as chair, the dermatology department at WMCP underwent a significant expansion. Hirschler was joined by Mary Taylor Nelson, MD, Instructor in Dermatology; Yelta E. Deitch, MD, Assistant Professor in Clinical Dermatology; and Alice E Sheppard, MD, Assistant Professor in Clinical Dermatology ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)). She led the growing department for 4 years, until illness forced her into an early retirement. As recorded in the faculty minutes from September 6, 1940, “on June 21st Dr Rose Hirschler, Professor of Dermatology, then seriously ill, requested that her Associate in Clinical Dermatology, Dr Yetta E Deitch, be made Acting Head of the Department of Dermatology.” Hirschler died only a few months later of “lymphatic leukemia” ([Faculty meeting minutes, 1850–1967](#)).

After Hirschler's death in 1940, Carmen C. Thomas, MD, was chosen to formally replace her as Professor and Chair of the Department of Dermatology ([Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970](#)). She was a 1932 graduate of WMCP and studied dermatology under John H. Stokes, MD, while he was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Stokes had a long and varied career, but was especially important in Philadelphia for founding the Institute for the Study of Venereal Disease



Fig. 4. Commencement photo from WMCP in 1948. Wood is on the left in glasses. Across from her is her anatomy professor, Prof. Hefherjung (Anatomy) (Margaret Gray Wood alumna file, n.d.).

in association with the University of Pennsylvania in 1936. He was a well-known national and international expert on syphilology after publishing *Modern Clinical Syphilology*, a work of nearly 1,200 pages (Friedman, 1955; Szymanski, 1976). Little information survives to elaborate the details of Thomas's career at WMCP; however, she was clearly an important force in the department's development and oversaw additional expansion (Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970). During her time as head of the department, she brought on several new faculty members, including Marjory K. Hardy, MD, Louise E. Tavs, MD, Badona L. Levinson, MD, Margaret Gerlach, MD, and Virgene Scherer Wammock, MD. Thomas left WMPC's department in 1944 (Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970).

There are very few records and little indication of significant activity in dermatology at WMCP after Thomas's departure in 1944, until 1951, when Margaret Gray Wood, MD, was appointed to the position of Clinical Instructor (Annual announcements, 1850–1867, 1868–1970). Wood graduated from WMCP in 1948 (Fig. 4). In a video interview with WMCP library archivists on May 15, 2003, she said that it was Carmen Thomas who helped her secure her first positions after residency, at WMCP and the University of Pennsylvania Department of Dermatology (Wood, 2003). Wood became a well-respected pioneer in academic medicine and dermatology and practiced and taught at WMCP until, in 1969, the school began admitting men and changed its name to the Medical College of Pennsylvania (Peitzman, 2000).

Wood's career was marked by many accomplishments. She was the first to use the electron microscope as a diagnostic tool in dermatology. Her dermatopathology studies were particularly well known, including her work on molluscum contagiosum and other viruses. She authored over 70 publications, and served as editorial staff of the *Journal of Cutaneous Pathology*. She was elected president of the Alumnae Association of WMCP in 1973 and 1975, and was a founding member of WMPC's Board of Directors. She was also active in the American Medical Women's Association and the American Women's Hospital Service. Wood received WMCP's Commonwealth Board Citation for professional accomplishments and commitment to the institution in 1978 (Margaret Gray Wood alumna file, n.d.). Wood also received the annual Rose Hirschler award from the Women's Dermatological Society (WDS) in 1990.

Hirschler lived and died during an era that was not prepared to celebrate her pioneering work for women. Fifty years after Hirschler's death, Wood was among the first women in dermatology able to see her achievements honored within her lifetime. In addition to the Rose Hirschler award from WDS, she was recognized by WMCP for her

contributions. It is easier to piece together a biography of Wood, in part because she lived so recently (she died in 2006) and is survived by her family, and in part because the significance of her role in history was recognized before the evidence and sources of that history disappeared. An image emerges of a woman with a rich personal and family life in addition to her successful career. At an awards ceremony at WMCP, given in her honor, her introduction noted that she enjoyed riding horses, reading, and gardening. She was the mother of three daughters, all of whom attended WMCP for their medical degrees (Margaret Gray Wood alumna file, n.d.).

In the late 1960s, the majority of Wood's work was done at the University of Pennsylvania, and her role at WMCP transitioned to that of a visiting assistant professor. She was affiliated with WMCP until the school found that there was no longer a need for a school that prioritized the medical education of women. The numbers of women in the medical field and their acceptance among their peers was steadily increasing, and there was no longer the same need to offer a protected place for their education. In 1970, WMCP became the Medical College of Philadelphia and began admitting men. In 2002, the Medical College of Philadelphia formally became part of Drexel under its new name, Drexel University College of Medicine, as it is known today.

The number of women in dermatology continues to increase. Our field is enriched by a greater diversity of perspectives, and we are all indebted to the difficult work of prior generations which has made these achievements possible. But the work is not done. Although there are now more women than men graduating from dermatology training programs in the United States, women remain underrepresented in top academic and professional organizations' administrative positions (Center for Workforce Studies 2012). There is still a 13% pay gap between full-time female and full-time male dermatologists (Chesanow, 2013). These statistics suggest that factors may continue to impose a glass ceiling on the levels of success for and involvement of women in dermatology. We need women's voices in leadership, and we need women's experiences to better understand what types of support are needed to ensure that women are able to attain their career goals. It is the work of our generation to sustain the momentum of our predecessors as we move forward for women and equality. We hope that by remembering the stories of the first women in dermatology, young dermatologists today may uncover a similar capacity for vision and the motivation to enact change.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the generous help and support of the staff at the Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections.

References

- Annual announcements of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. Records of W/MCP Publications 1850–present (ACC-076). Philadelphia, PA: The Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections; 1850–1867.
- Annual announcements of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. Annual announcements of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. Records of W/MCP Publications 1850–present (ACC-076). Philadelphia: The Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections; 1868–1970.
- Chesanow N. Dermatologist compensation report 2013 [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.medscape.com/features/slideshow/compensation/2013/dermatology>; 2013. [Accessed 5/11/13].
- Faculty meeting minutes. Records of WMC/MCP Dean's Office. Philadelphia, PA: The Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections; 1850–1967 (ACC 92).
- Friedman R. A history of dermatology in Philadelphia. Fort Pierce Beach, FL: Froben Press; 1955.
- Lowenstein E. Roses and daisies: flowers of inspiration. *Womens Dermatol Assoc Newsl* 2013;17(2):11.
- Margaret Gray Wood alumna file, undated. In: Records of WMC/MCP Registrar, 1921–1975 (ACC 266). Philadelphia, PA: The Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections.
- Peitzman SJ. A new and untried course: Woman's Medical College and Medical College of Pennsylvania, 1850–1998. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; 2000.

- Physician specialty data book. Washington DC: Association of American Medical Colleges, Center for Workforce Studies; 2012.
- Rose Hirschler alumna file, undated. In: Records of WMC/MCP Registrar, 1921-1975 (ACC 266). Philadelphia, PA: The Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections.
- Shelley WB, Crissey JT. Classics in clinical dermatology—with biographical sketches. 50th anniversary. New York, NY: Parthenon Publishing Group; 2003.
- Szymanski FJ. Centennial History of the American Dermatological Association—1876 to 1976. *Arch Dermatol* 1976;112:1651.
- Jefferson University: a chronological history and alumni directory, annotated and illustrated, 1824-1990. In: Wagner FB, Savacool JW, editors. Part III, Paper 27. Philadelphia, PA: Thomas Jefferson University; 1992.
- Wood MG (WMC 1948). Oral history collection on Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania (ACC 2003.3). Philadelphia, PA: The Legacy Center, Drexel University College of Medicine Archives & Special Collections; 2003.