

# *Eugene F. Cordell*

## *1843-1913*

By Richard Behles

*Dr. Cordell was a man of positive convictions, and was inclined to be rather intolerant of those who differed with him, but he always stood for righteousness, and for those things that were true and honest, and just and pure. We have sustained an irreparable loss. We may secure another librarian who shall be able to discharge the duties of the office efficiently; we may appoint another lecturer on the History of Medicine who shall be equally as satisfactory, but we cannot replace the loyalty, the enthusiasm, the altruism and the impelling personality that were combined in Professor Eugene Fauntleroy Cordell. 1*

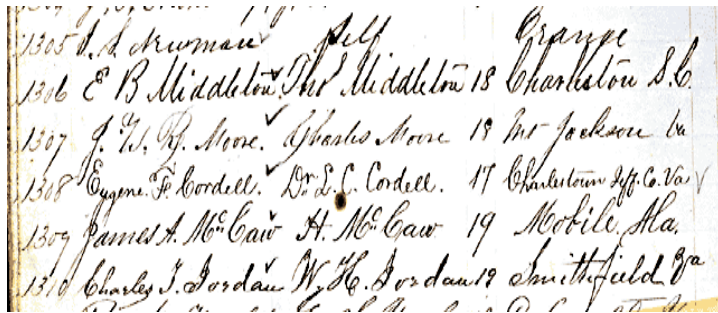
Patriotic citizen, physician, medical historiographer, teacher, public servant, Eugene Fauntleroy Cordell was born June 25, 1843, in Charlestown, West Virginia (then part of Virginia). The son of Rev. Dr. Levi O'Connor Cordell and Christine Turner Cordell, his early education began at Charlestown Academy and continued at the Episcopal High School of Alexandria, Virginia. His studies, however, became relegated to secondary importance due to the emerging drama being played out by a country tragically on the brink of division:

*I was at school near Alexandria when the rumors of approaching war reached me. They stirred up a martial spirit in our quiet little community, a meeting was called on the bandy field and a military company was formed for practice in drill and the manual of arms. Two of us had had some experience in tactics in a company of "cadets" that had been formed at Charlestown and had been commanded by Col. Lawson Botts, a lawyer of the town. 2*

This growing sentiment, at first a form of play-acting, became a very real and all-consuming fervor, fed by the common mind-set of the populace all around him:

*The town was noted during the war for its devotion to the Southern cause and there was practically but one sentiment among the people ... A young man who in those days did not join the army risked his reputation, he became the subject of constant and unfavorable comment, he was pointed out on the street and was even liable to insult by his companions. The girls*

would scarcely associate with him and he became almost a social outcast. 3

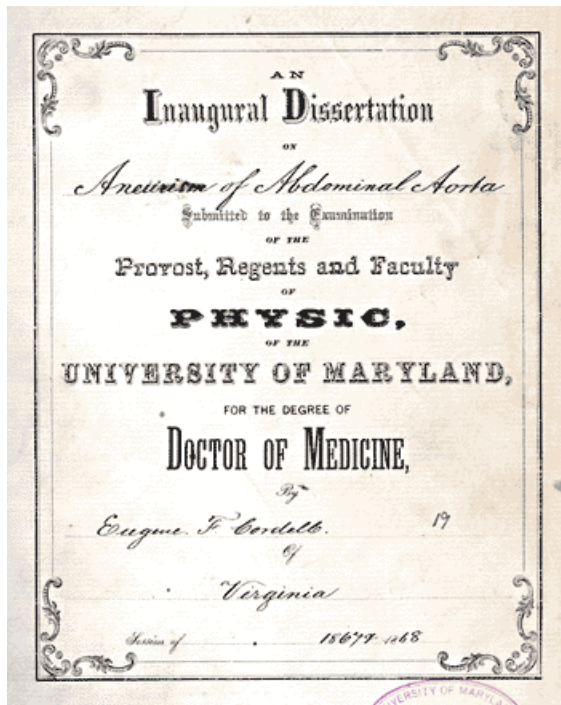


The fire of this civic responsibility inflamed the heart of Cordell's spirit. Much to his great disappointment, however, his father disapproved of the boy's intention to enlist in the service of his home state. Enraged by his son's disobedient attempt to enlist, Rev. Cordell arrived first at the

camp to which Eugene was enroute, and directed the captain there not to accept his son into the company's muster. But after several subsequent days at home, and a brief stint by Eugene in the "home guard," a non-combatant unit scouting for prowlers, contraband, and such, Cordell's father eventually relented. This consent paved the way for Eugene to enter the Virginia Military Institute. There his name joined those of other "temporary cadets," a class of non-matriculants who completed the basic training program that marked their entrance into the Confederate Army as enlisted soldiers. He went on to serve honorably from 1861 until 1865, working his way up to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in 1863. At Winchester, Virginia, on September 19, 1864 he shed his blood in action:

*The sharpshooters were now near enough to make it decidedly unpleasant and it was only a few moments when a ball passed through my left boot, tearing the flesh from the leg. The limb was numbed but it was not very painful and I held my ground. A few minutes more and another ball buried itself in the left side of my abdomen. It must have been fired from a distance, else it would have gone through my body ... I became deathly sick and nauseated, and it was with difficulty that I maintained my position on my horse. I felt that my fighting days were over for that day at least, and most unwillingly rode off the field, clinging to my horse's neck. As I rode to the rear a third ball struck my left thigh, bruising it badly but not penetrating the flesh. 4*

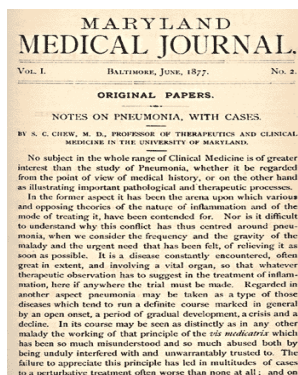
Eventually on March 2, 1865, his unit fell and surrendered, routed at the hands of superior Federal cavalry troops in action at Waynesboro. He and the rest of his fellow prisoners journeyed by railroad through Baltimore, where they spent two days at Fort McHenry, and thence by canal steamer to Fort Delaware in Delaware Bay, where they arrived on March 12. He remained imprisoned there for fifteen weeks, finally gaining his post-war release on June 19.



Maryland's unique border location, with its mixed sentiments devoted to each side, meant that its medical population, as well as its general citizenry, had contributed personnel to the ranks of both armies. While it is true that this duality certainly did prevail in the state, it also is interesting to observe from the college catalog of our medical school that in the years shortly after the war, the university considered itself a "Southern Institution," drawing most of its enrollment from the South. The catalog goes on to state that this geographic orientation very neatly correlated to the post-war emergence of Baltimore as a major Southern center, and the university had a right to consider itself the primary locale for Southern medical education. As further testimony, the catalog declares that the faculty all were natives of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. As a Southern military veteran,

then, Cordell would have been considered a most welcome, typical demographic subject when he entered our medical school in 1866. The program at that time was a two-year course of study, and he successfully received his M.D. at the Commencement held on March 5, 1868. His doctoral thesis is entitled "ANEURISM OF ABDOMINAL AORTA."

Following his graduation, Cordell held the position of "Clinical Clerk" in our University Hospital, for the period 1868-69, and subsequently went on to serve as attending physician in the Baltimore General Dispensary from 1869 until 1872. It was during this period that he served his first stint as Librarian at the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland, a position he held from 1870-71, and which he later would resume from 1880-87. From our standpoint, that post is significant in that it prefigured the comparable one he later held for us.

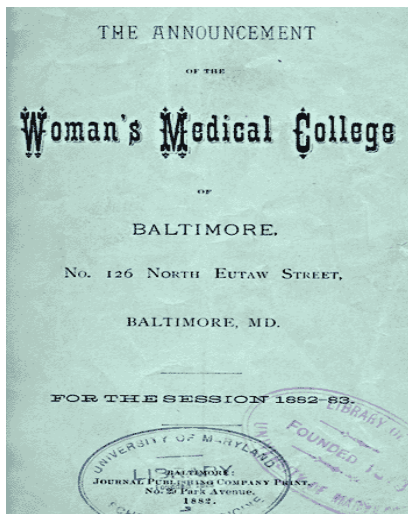


While practicing medicine in Baltimore during the 1870's, Cordell became the close friend of Dr. Thomas A. Ashby, a native of Virginia, who also graduated from our medical school in 1873. In the ensuing years, the two became great friends and colleagues, and they eventually engaged in an editorial partnership to produce the Maryland Medical Journal. Ashby started the journal in 1877 in collaboration with Dr. H. E. T. Manning, another Southerner and 1869 graduate. Cordell became very interested in the journal during its infancy, contributing to it often. When Manning decided to retire after the first two years, the heavy editorial and financial responsibilities fell on Ashby's shoulders,

and Cordell's aptitude and eagerness to step in as co-editor was indispensable in helping to salvage the journal's viability. Ashby wrote that Cordell:

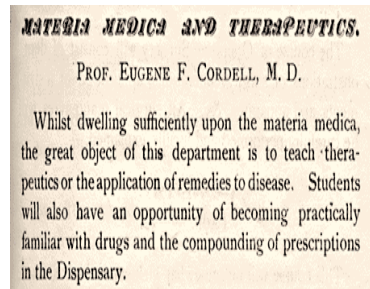
*Brought to the aid of the Maryland Medical Journal an invaluable assistance at that time. His work was painstaking and thorough. He was a ready writer and compiler, and had literary gifts of a high order. He attached the greatest importance to little details, and would worry more over a misplaced comma or small typographical error than over a poor article or indifferent society report. He was a most conscientious worker and always had at heart what he thought was for the best interests of the medical profession. His sole idea was to advance the standards of his profession, and to this end he was ever willing to sacrifice all of his personal interests. 5*

This commitment of Cordell to the high standards of the medical profession began with his attention to medical education. His efforts at lengthening the program of medical study from two to three years complemented his work in advocating an examination procedure for testing the preliminary education of entering medical students. Still further, his efforts at organizing meetings among our several local medical colleges to review and improve their programs led to similar regional and national sessions and ultimately, to the founding of the Association of American Medical Colleges in 1876.



In related endeavors, Cordell's sense of responsibility toward the betterment of society found expression in a variety of other professional and benevolent interests. He served as President of the

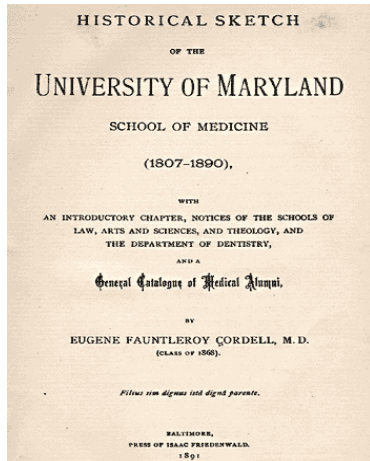
Hospital Relief Association for several years. Additionally, he founded the Home for Incurables, as well as the Home for Widows and Orphans of Physicians. Holding office in many of the local medical societies, he eventually rose to the position of President of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland, serving in that post from 1903-04.



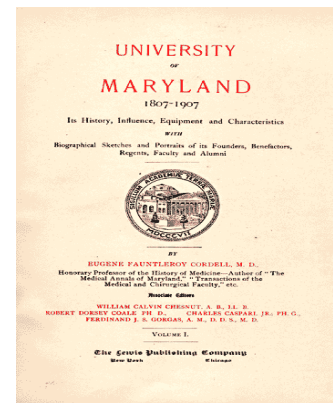
However, it is undeniably true that education, writing, and publishing truly were Cordell's most favorite outlets, remaining even more fulfilling pursuits than was his medical practice. In spite of the disruption in the structure of his own early education, he later pursued learning on his own. He acquired proficiency in German and Latin, and nurtured a deep love of the classics. Throughout his professional career, it was never enough for him merely to know his learned subjects just for the sake of the knowing, but to share and foster among the rest of society the same appreciation for the invaluable whole experience of education. In 1882, his commitment to education assumed a new



dimension when he co-founded the Woman's Medical College of Baltimore, where for several years he was Professor of Materia Medica and Therapeutics. In later years, he went on to edit the medical society bulletin at that same institution.

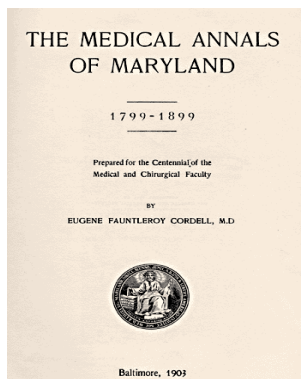


Yet in most things, certainly in publication endeavors, the warmest recesses of his heart cradled his profound love for his alma mater the University of Maryland. Even before his eventual appointment to the faculty of the University, he penned his HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND in



1891. This initial venture into historiography grew into a two-volume expanded version in 1907, his UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, 1807-1907, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the University's

founding. These served to document the great importance of our institution, defining its place in the medical history of our state. This portrait was his final brush-stroke to the earlier work that marked his greatest legacy to the University, the state, and the profession at large. His passionate interest in, and aptitude for, painstaking historical research were most profoundly apparent in his magnum opus, the MEDICAL ANNALS OF MARYLAND, published in 1903.



Appearing in conjunction with the Centennial Celebration of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland, the MEDICAL ANNALS is a huge, 889-page exhaustive compilation of the history of medicine in Maryland chronicling the period 1799-1899. It is the supreme testament to Cordell's competence as a historical researcher. The work begins with the history of Med-Chi, arranged as an annotated chronology. Included are narrative descriptions of major business transacted at the Society's annual meetings, and reports of official actions taken by their various Boards and Committees. Next comes a complete roster of members with detailed

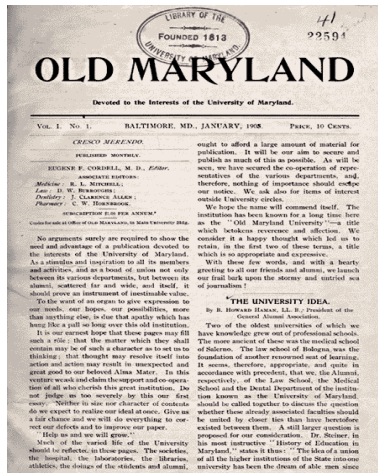
biographical entries including information about place of birth, educational background, professional positions, publications, and date of admission into the Society. This invaluable section affords the ideal snapshot of any given individual physician's professional career. Following this section, Cordell included another extensive chronology, this one featuring developments in Maryland medicine as they emerged parallel to the evolution of Med-Chi itself. Finally, the last principal section is a series of more detailed biographies, or "Memoirs," of selected major figures.

It was at the time of this publication that he formally joined the Faculty of the University of Maryland. Fresh from his accomplishment as Maryland's preeminent medical historiographer, it was all too fitting that he assume the position of Professor of the

History of Medicine in 1903. Even more important for us, he simultaneously became Librarian as well. As an impeccable researcher, writer, and lover of the classics, this proved to be an especially poignant vocation:

*The Library was the child of his old age and he regarded it with almost parental affection. He nursed and nourished it, treated its ailments and healed its bruises, set its fractures and sutured its wounds. He had an affectionate interest in each book and held many of them as beloved friends and companions. 6*

He began with a collection of only a few hundred books, and worked diligently to increase its size and pertinence until the time of his death ten years later. Though not formally trained for the library profession, his appreciation and care for the collection set an unsurpassed standard for all who would follow. In this, as in all aspects of his career, the same determination and zeal for his adopted cause remained with Cordell throughout his life, and punctuated the boundless productivity of his accomplishments.



In all of that productivity, one constant characteristic was Cordell's dedication to the pursuit of the highest ideals. His earlier publishing efforts with T.A. Ashby found a new outlet here on our campus. In 1905, he gave birth to a new publication entitled OLD MARYLAND, a periodical he started as a forum to celebrate the many merits of his home institution. Through this new medium, he sought to elevate the University before his readership, to instill his same sense of pride, respect, and admiration in the hearts of all members of the institutional community. One very basic purpose he intended was for the journal to become a true unifier of the campus, and his commitment was to see to it that the separate schools,

with their separate former identities and priorities, finally might evolve into one unified institution. Toward this end, he featured regular side-by-side contributions from members of all the schools, drawing on the themes which brought them together, and not which separated them.

*The question of the organization of the Branch Alumni Associations is now engaging the attention of the authorities of the General Alumni Association, and it seems opportune to impress upon all the importance of keeping ever in view, in dealing with it, the University idea. We no longer can consent to be regarded as mere schools of medicine, law, dentistry, etc.; we have passed that period of swaddling clothes, and it is not only expedient that these associations shall be universal in their scope, but we think the alumni have a right to demand it. 7*

But certainly, ideals alone cannot guarantee a solvent institution, and Cordell understood that as well. In spite of not being money-driven in his own personal

temperament, he still hungered for the financial well-being of the University. As early as the mid-1890's, he joined with a handful of others in the Medical Alumni Association to establish a permanent endowment fund to benefit the School of Medicine. Later, in a 1909 address to the medical alumni, he victoriously congratulated their foresight which had begun as a separate school endeavor, but which by then had defined a new collaboration:

*It was in 1893 that you resolved to enter upon this work and selected nine gentlemen to form a board of trustees of the Endowment Fund of the Faculty of Physic of the University of Maryland ... the year 1893 is therefore to be looked upon as the great year of your career -- the year in which you did something -- in which you took the first step towards university life. However, the project met with no immediate success ... We waited four long and anxious years before a cent was contributed. Then in a fit of desperation, you remember, we appealed to you directly, urging every plea that was likely to move your feelings and unlock your pursestrings. We thus succeeded in securing a small amount of cash and a few subscriptions. Insignificant though the results of our efforts were, the work had been started; we had founded the Fund! Five years later the little fund had grown to \$2,463. By that time our thoughts had soared aloft and we had begun to think of a university; before that we had thought of ourselves only as a medical school; we were always the "doctors," never the "Varsity." A general alumni association was founded and as the School of Medicine had merged into a University so, by your action, the Board of Trustees became a University Board and obtained a new charter and the Fund became a University Fund. 8*

With those words of acknowledgement just two years after the University's great Centennial Celebration, Cordell proclaimed the realization of his own personal and professional dream. As the voice of his beloved alma mater, OLD MARYLAND gave him the venue in which to publicize these jubilant stirrings of his own heart and soul, which he felt not merely for himself, but in the name of the University, a University which he now could applaud as whole and united.

But true to his never-wavering sense of the vital importance of history, he simultaneously enjoyed the chance to use OLD MARYLAND to share the merits of his own life experiences, again, hopefully to the betterment of all. As a nod to the tradition of the "Southern Institution" which the University earlier had declared itself to be, Cordell took advantage of the opportunity to offer a series of his own personal reminiscences, "Recollections of Slave Days and War Times," serialized over several of the volumes. He also included his "The Latin Classics" series, in which he extolled the merits of various ancient poets and playwrights. But while he assumed the leadership in its voice, he managed never to let OLD MARYLAND descend into his own personal self-serving soapbox. Much of its regular content was thanks to consistent input from the various Departments of Medicine, Law, Dentistry, and Pharmacy. Joining these as well were updates from St. John's College Department of Arts and Sciences, the institution which

had absorbed those curricula from our University. He shaped the journal with his own particular touch, but in doing so, he made it a universal voice for the entire institution. In truth, the journal was his, because his life was the University's.

While still in service to the University, Cordell surrendered his life on August 27, 1913, when he succumbed to a cerebral embolism.

*No man connected with the University of Maryland has done more for its advancement, and no man connected with its work in the past will live longer in its future life. 9*

Search for Eugene F. Cordell's military record maintained at the [THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE ARCHIVES](#)

#### REFERENCES

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