"My own religion has been to do all the good I could to my fellow men, and as little harm as possible."
-W.W. Mayo

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Did you know?
W.W. Mayo shares the same birth date (May 31, 1819) as another famous W.W., the American poet Walt Whitman. Both would be 200 this month.

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W.W. MAYO AT 200

To commemorate 200 years since the birth of this Rochester icon, we set out to explore the larger-than-life legacy of the man they once called the 'Little Doctor.'

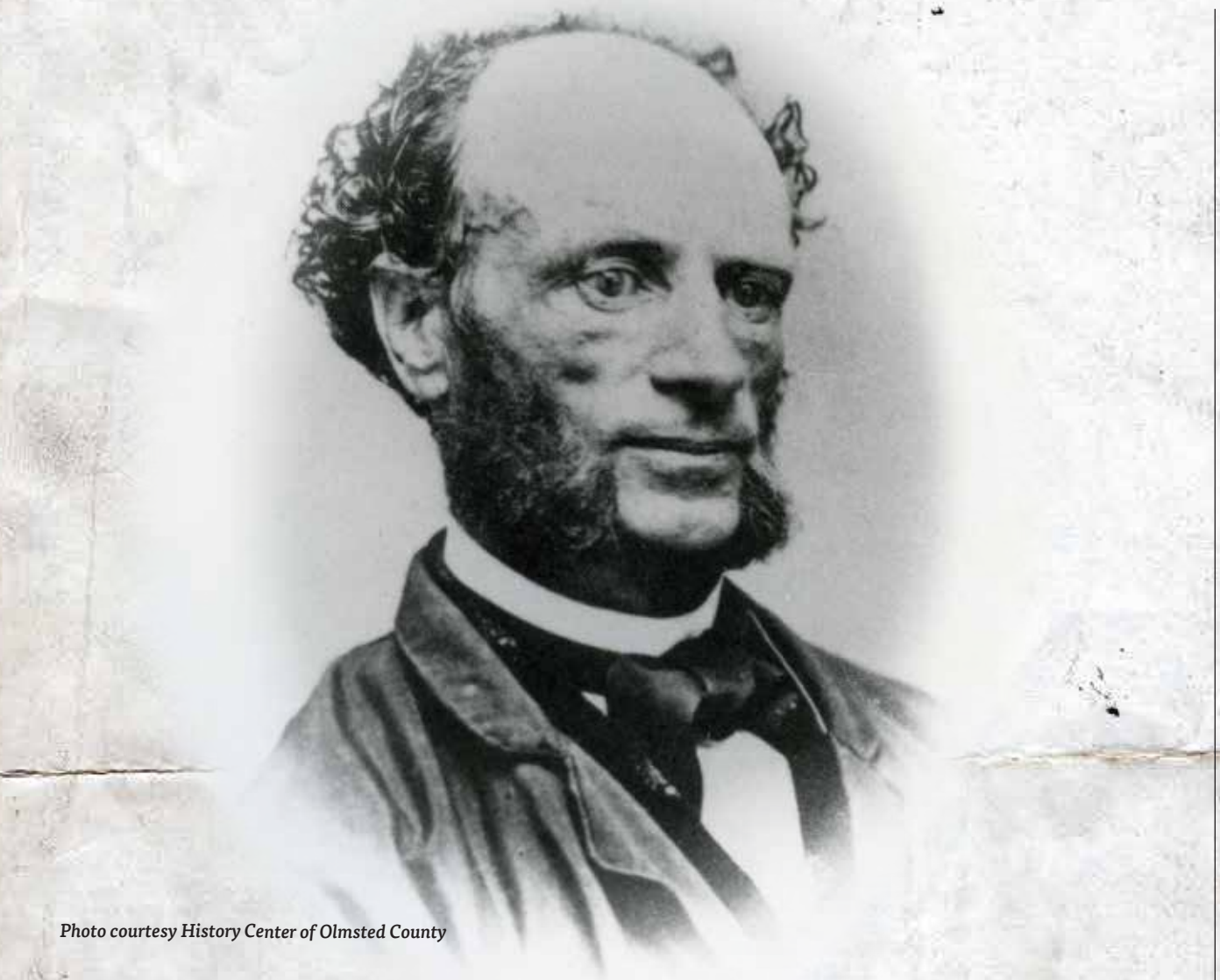

Photo courtesy History Center of Olmsted County

Mayo (center) and his two sons, Will (left) and Charlie (Right)
Photo courtesy History Center of Olmsted County

Early years shaped Mayo's ideals

William Worrall Mayo developed a strong respect for science and education early in his life, putting him on a path of constant curiosity and exploration. W.W. was born on May 31, 1819 to a middle class family near Manchester, England. The Industrial Revolution was picking up, and the agrarian system that was a significant part of the countryside was rapidly turning over to an industrial economy.

"The Manchester area was the Silicon Valley of its day. This was the booming, dynamic, innovative area of the western world economy," said Matt Dacy, a Mayo Clinic historian.

Although Mayo's family could not afford more than the basics of an education (his father, a cabinetmaker died when he was just seven), his astute study led him to the doorstep of the now-famed chemist John Dalton. At the time, Dalton ran an informal learning center. That is because, while you may know Dalton now for his work on atomic theory, he was a Quaker and thus shunned from being a university professor.

"So, here is an out-of-work teacher and a student who couldn't afford tuition for school, and they came together," said Dacy.

In this "improvisational classroom," as Dacy described it, Mayo received a more modern education than he would have at any of the finest academies of his day.

Counter to the times, Dalton taught both boys and girls together. He also exposed W.W. to the scientific method. It was in this context that Mayo learned the merits of critical thinking, gender equity, and egalitarianism.

"He grew up with a very strong social conscience and the Mayo family to this day refer to it informally as the, 'give back' philosophy," said Dacy. "He had this conviction that anyone who has something to offer — be it financial resources, physical strength, intellectual capacity — has been given that in trust for others."

Good with his hands, Mayo went on to become a tailor. But by his early 20s, he began to see opportunity beyond the confines of English society and decided to set out for America.

After several weeks sailing across the Atlantic, W.W. landed in New York, where he worked as a chemist at Bellevue Hospital. At the time, only the poorest and most destitute were dumped into hospitals, and Mayo saw up-close the shortcomings of healthcare as it existed.

Mayo left the hospital right before a typhoid epidemic swept in, and spent years moving about the country, expanding his knowledge. He wound up at the Indiana Medical College, which while no means an Ivy League school, had a microscope 20 years before Harvard.

Upon arriving in Minnesota, W.W. embraced the life of a rolling stone, working as a chemist in a pharmacy, as a tailor, surveyor and newspaper publisher. He and h is young family would later settle in Le Sueur, a town about 100 miles northwest of Rochester. It was in a small room in the upstairs of the house they built there in 1859 that W.W. started his first formal medical practice.

W.W. valued education, civic involvement

W.W. was not only a master of medicine, he was also a civic minded person who during his life served on the school board, as mayor, and eventually as a state legislator.

"He would switch parties because no single political party could satisfy him," said Dacy. "He was not a liberal or radical, in the way we would think of it today, but he would seek out people doing good work."

Throughout his life, Mayo would take bold stands, calling for civic improvements in newspapers and inviting the likes of Frederick Douglass, a former slave, and Anna Dickinson, a feminist, to lecture in Rochester. "He was not afraid to bring thing these opinions into town," said Dacy.

Schooling was always a priority for the Mayo family. W.W. and his wife, Louise Abigail Wright, whom he married in 1851, were committed to providing the best education they could for their children. (Together, they raised four kids: Will, Phoebe, Charlie and Gertrude. As was not uncommon in that day, the Mayos did lose two children in infancy: Horace, their first, and Sarah.)

For the two brothers, that meant joining their father on home visits to learn how to diagnose and treat patients. By the time they were teenagers, Will and Charlie were assisting in surgical operations, anatomical dissections, and postmortems.

"The brothers grew up in medicine like farm boys on a farm," said Dacy.

In one story that goes down in Mayo lore, "They were in a farmhouse and another local doctor had come to assist, and to learn, while they were giving anesthesia to this patient," explained Dacy. "Well, the assistant doctor fainted — whether it was because the blood or something else — he just dropped during the operation. Charlie Mayo, at about 10 years old, climbed onto a box — literally stepped up to the situation — and delivered the anesthetic that carried forward the operation and saved the patient's life."

Experiences like this would later prove beneficial for the brothers, who after returning from medical school joined their father's practice. As Dr. Charles Horace Mayo once said, "the biggest thing Will and I ever did was to pick the father and mother we had."

Civil War brought Mayo to Rochester

While the storyline typically picks up in 1883, when a devastating tornado hit Rochester and magnified the need for a hospital, what is less known is how W.W. Mayo wound up in this small Midwestern town.

Twenty years earlier, at the height of the Civil War, W.W. renounced his British citizenship and began providing check-ups for Union soldiers before sending them off to battle. In May 1863, President Abraham Lincoln appointed Mayo to serve as an examining surgeon for the Union Army.

Within months of the appointment, Mayo was on the move again — this time to Rochester.

The city, in large part because of its connection to the railway system, was beginning to flourish in the 1860s. (It would grow in population from 1,424 to 3,953 in that decade.)

In 1864, Mayo set up a medical practice downtown. He also moved his family here, and by that time his wife, Louise, who had been working to support the family, wanted to settle down.

"The two reasons why we are here is Abraham Lincoln appointed William Worrall Mayo to come to Rochester and Louise said, 'we are not moving again,'" said Dacy. "It was her grounding that kept them here. And that's why we're in Rochester, Minnesota."

By the time the tornado hit, Mayo had become a prominent physician in town. He had developed a specialty for treating ovarian tumors and was publishing articles in the Minnesota Medical Journal.

"He was the natural leader of the medical community," explained Dacy.

Still, Mayo had to be persuaded to join the Sisters of St. Francis in what would eventually become St. Marys Hospital. But he told Mother Mary Alfred Moes if they could raise the money, then he would run the hospital. As it turned out, the Sisters were up for the challenge.

"[Mother Alfred] had a vision," said Dr. Virginia Wright-Peterson, a professor at the University of Minnesota Rochester. "W. W. Mayo did not initially believe that a hospital would thrive in, seemingly, the middle of nowhere. It was Alfred and his wife, Louise, that convinced him to settle down and try."

With an agreement in place between Mayo and the Sisters, St. Marys Hospital opened in 1889 with 27 beds. Mayo ran the medical practice and the Sisters, who as teachers had little medical experience, served as the nurses. Despite the well-intended effort, there were challenges at first.

"They struggled financially, I mean they really did, until St. Marys took off," said Dr. Wright-Peterson.

Meantime, in the community, there were concerns about Mayo's decision to partner with Catholics.

Rochester, at that time, was made up of mostly Protestants. Catholics were the newcomers, and centuries of bad blood between the two religions had spilled out into the New World.

For both Mother Alfred and Mayo, the collaboration was a leap of faith. One was a nun, the other a Darwinist. There was no formal contract. No rules set in stone. What did exist, though, was a similar drive, a similar focus, and similar commitment to serving the patient.

"[Mayo] was able to look at the heart or intention of the person, not to the label," said Dacy. "If you had a quality that is meaningful and helpful, he would connect with you."

St. Marys Hospital in 1894
Photo courtesy Mayo Clinic

Louise Wright Mayo
Photo courtesy History Center of Olmsted County

Mayo surrounded himself with strong women

Growing up without many advantages, Mayo developed a belief that an individual's merits should count for more than the advantages of birth. "He didn't seem to care if you somebody was a man, a woman; if you had the skills and were dedicated to the cause, you're in," said Virginia Wright-Peterson, author of the book, *Women of Mayo Clinic: The Founding Generation*. Counterintuitive to the norms of the time, Mayo intentionally surrounded himself with strong, independent women. This egalitarian philosophy was also demonstrated in his deep empathy for the common person. Mayo believed in the importance of using whatever skill you may have for the betterment of others. "Part of medicine is serving, and it doesn't matter what level of medicine you've chosen," said Lilli (Mayo) Weivoda, the great granddaughter of Charlie Mayo. "It doesn't matter if you're the janitor, the groundskeeper, you're a physician, you're a nurse. You are doing your job to serve someone else."

Marriage served as prototype for modern day Mayo Clinic

As the adage goes: behind every great man, there is a great woman. And that could have not been more true for W.W. and his wife, Louise. A self-educated woman, Louise supported the family as W.W. continued to advance his career as a physician. "She was a business owner for a millinery shop, and she was really good at it," said Dr. Wright-Peterson. "And W.W. Mayo allowed her to sort of be the breadwinner, bringing in money consistently." As Matt Dacy, a historian for Mayo, tells it: the two were the perfect pair. "Mayo was passionate, visionary, idealistic. Louise was grounded, practical, and sensible." The dynamic of their marriage, with one focused on the business or administrative side and the other with the medical practice, would serve as a prototype for how Mayo Clinic operates today.

Mortgaging their home for a microscope

W.W. and his wife, Louise, once mortgaged their home to buy a microscope that they believed would help improve the quality of care they could provide to their patients. Mayo used this microscope to not only further his knowledge in pathology, but also teach his sons how to properly take care of tissue. Today, the microscope symbolizes Mayo Clinic's commitment to devoting significant financial resources toward advancing medicine through education and research.

An apology, 155 years later

In 1862, under orders from President Lincoln, 38 Native Americans were executed in Mankato in what remains the largest mass execution in U.S. history. After the hanging, a group of doctors, including Mayo, went to their burial grounds and dug up the remains of Marpiya te najin, or "Cut Nose." After dissecting the body, Mayo held onto the skull of Cut Nose for study and display. The skull was not returned to the Santee Dakota people until 1998. In 2017, Mayo Clinic formally apologized to the tribe and established a scholarship named for Marpiya te najin that allows one Native American student a year to go to medical school for free.

Photo courtesy Mayo Clinic

'What are you doing next?'

Mayo died in 1911, just as the practice he formed was beginning to gain international recognition. "He saw in his own lifetime, going from the leather bag [used on house calls], to his sons attracting leaders in medicine not only in the country, but also abroad," said Dacy. Asked what he would have thought of the modern day Mayo Clinic, Dacy said, "I think he would be very happy, but I think he would probably say, 'what are you doing next?'"

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