

William Root's granddaughters remind us of the past and inspire us for the future



William Webster Root, Ithaca, circa 1890.



Anna Conant Bronson Root, Boston, 1887



Three of William and Anna Root's granddaughters, from left, Hilda Lounsbery English, Ann Lounsbery Owens, and Lois Lounsbery.

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The history of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (AQA) and its founder William Root emphasizes a distinguished heritage in medicine that inspires members to be “advocates to safeguard excellence,

the stimulation of unselfishness, the guardian of the self-dedication of the physician, and the guarantor of truth, goodness, and high ideals.”¹ These are moral standards representing high values and worthiness in defining the society’s and its members’ purpose and worthiness in the care of patients, the prevention of disease, medical education, social well-being, research and scholarship, and social responsibility. It instructs AQA and its members to

embody the characteristics of truthfulness, morality, virtue, purity, and complete dedication to caring for people, improving health, and serving society. Above all it is the obligation of worthiness to practice excellent medicine with humility, self-effacement, charity, and with the objective to achieve high moral professional stature.

As most know, AQA was founded in 1902 by medical student William Root and colleagues, at the Chicago College of Physician and Surgeons. Root wrote in 1909, that “it was the lack of interest in scholarly attainment among medical students that led him to begin AQA.”¹ He and other students noted that “honesty was conspicuously absent, and behavior in the halls and classroom was rough and boorish.”¹ They were very concerned that so many of their fellow students who sought to become doctors “seemed crude and chaotic. Cheating on examinations was repugnant, rough housing was distasteful.”¹ Root conceived of the idea of AQA to encourage among the students “personal honesty and the spirit of medical research.”¹

This was before Flexner who, in 1910, did his report on medical education when there was no accrediting body for medical schools. When AQA was established medical schools were for-profit and proprietary. Medical students were selected based on their ability to pay the tuition, and the faculty were largely interested in enrolling paying students. Department heads were chosen by who could buy a substantial block of stock.

William Root's granddaughters deliver newly discovered historical information

On June 21, the national AQA office was honored to have three very special guests—Hilda Lounsbery English, Ann Lounsbery Owens, and Lois Lounsbery—three of William Root's granddaughters. The sisters shared their stories and artifacts from Dr. William Root, his wife Anna, and the history of AQA. The sisters—84-years-old, 81-years-old, and 77-years-old, respectively—brought with them newly-found treasures from Root's early education years, the first days of AQA, and documents and belongings long thought lost.

In March, Hilda, who lives just a short distance from the Roots' home and medical office in Slaterville Springs, NY, was notified that some of her grandparents' belongings had been found in the home of a cousin who had recently died. She was asked if she or her sisters might like to sort through the “dusty old stuff” to see if there might be any items they would like to have for posterity and memories.

Hilda found her grandfather's medical bag, the leather

exterior crumbling from age and containing cork-stopped vials, the contents of the vials long dried, leaving residue of medication from a bygone era; his lab coat with his name embroidered in red on the left breast; his Mason's apron; the original shingle that hung on the family home from where he also practiced medicine and ran AQA; and a slew of original documents. Hilda notified her sisters of the find, and together they began to develop a plan for the best place to house these priceless items.

Ann knew that AQA still existed and thought she might reach out to see if the organization had any interest in the newly discovered items. Upon realizing that the national office was now located in Aurora, CO, Ann mentioned a distant cousin's upcoming wedding in Ft. Collins, CO, and wondered if she and her sisters might be able to drop the items off at the office as they passed through the Denver area. Plans were made and confirmed and the national office staff anxiously awaited the upcoming meeting with the three sisters.

The sisters spent more than three hours with the staff sharing stories of their grandparents, handing off historical relics, and reviewing historical documents.

William and Anna Root

William Webster Root and Anna Conant Bronson met as young adults in Ithaca, NY, in 1888. They came from very different backgrounds but attended the same church and were fellow students at Cornell University.

William was born in 1867 in Niagara Falls, NY, to E. Volney Root, born in 1819 in Port Byron, Cayuga County, NY, and Amelia E. Root (also her maiden name), born in 1825 in Peru, Huron County, OH. Volney was a farmer and marble tombstone carver. In 1880 he moved his family to a new farm in Trumansburg, a town north of Ithaca, in Tompkins County. There, besides farming, he also worked in a hotel near Taughannock Falls.

Anna was born in 1865 in Boston. Her parents, Rev. Benjamin Franklin Bronson, born in 1821 in New Salem, NY, and Annie Hasseltine Chaplin, born in 1827 in Waterville, ME, were intellectuals and well educated. The Reverend was a well-known Baptist minister, and Annie was a writer and activist.

The sisters shared the family story of how as a teenager William was so bored in high school in Trumansburg that one day he walked 12 miles south along Cayuga Lake to Ithaca where he found the office of the dean of admissions at Cornell University and pleaded to be admitted as a student. William never finished high school, was allowed to start classes at Cornell, and graduated in 1890, at age 23, with a degree in chemistry.

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Anna graduated from Abbot Academy, a preparatory girls' school in Andover, MA, in 1887, and then moved to Minnesota with her family. While in Minnesota, Anna taught high school for one year after which the family moved to Ithaca to be with her brothers Frank and Walter. At that time, Anna entered Cornell, and was one of only a few women attending the school. She graduated in 1893 with a degree in philosophy.

Following graduation, William accepted a job at Peddie Institute, a high school in New Jersey where he taught natural sciences, chemistry, physics, and biology from 1890 to 1892. In 1892, he returned to Ithaca to do graduate work in chemistry and physics at Cornell, receiving a Master's degree in chemistry in 1894. He then secured a position at the Chicago Manual Training School to teach physics, chemistry, and French.

William and Anna knew each other for about seven years before getting married. In August 1890, William wrote a letter of proposal to Anna:

Please read this and answer as quickly as possible.

Forgive and forget if possible the manner of expression—I have sometimes thought that ideas were of more importance than the vehicles in which they travel—that a noble thought was valuable of itself however lamely and unfashionable it may be expressed. I don't mean to infer that my thoughts are valuable or that I have any at all worth considering, but I have some faint reactions from cerebral activity which must find expression so here goes.

We have been rather intimate for some time. I hardly know who is most to blame for it. I, I guess, and as has been the custom under such circumstances—a mere hereditary habit if such an expression is admissible—It is proper I suppose to begin to take a serious view of the question. I there ("Rats" How I hate this form) ask you if you not think that we had better associate together for good. [*In the margin Anna writes: "Yes thank you, dear boy, and thank God!"*]

William goes on to outline the reasons he has written the marriage proposal rather than say what he wants to in person:

Reason should be used in such matters.
No chance of getting rattled.
Certain things can be written more properly than said.
Perhaps the most important with me, in case it goes against

me. I awfully hate to have anyone present and watch me twist and writhe. I had rather fight it out in my room than on the street. If suffering is necessary, I want to stand it alone. I don't want to be gazed at or be consoled with and told "she is sorry" or "it's unfortunate." [*Anna writes in the margin, "You dear boy, you needn't. I love you."*]

Anna and William were married July 15, 1895, in Buttonwoods, RI.

In matters of the heart, William was insecure and felt himself not worthy of Anna as a wife. The sisters shared stories of how intelligent their grandmother had been, and how there are possibly 100 or more love letters from William to Anna, there are no letters written in her hand, however, she made notations in the margins of the letters written to her by her husband.

William died of stomach cancer in April 1932 at the age of 65, and Anna died in February 1947 at the age of 81 following a fall at home that fractured her femur. She was hospitalized in Ithaca for a month, and developed pneumonia, the official cause of her death.

New beginnings



William and Anna Root in the medical office in their home in Slaterville Springs, NY, circa, 1928.

The Roots set up a household and began a family as William continued to teach at the Chicago Manual Training School. They had six children, Manly Bronson Root, born March 1896; George Kennan Root, born March 1897, died August 1897; Georgianna Root, born June 1898; Hasseltine Chaplin Root, born January 1901; Anna Conant Root, born June 1906, the sisters' mother; and William Webster Root, Jr., born November 1908—died in infancy.

While still teaching at the Chicago Manual Training School, William decided he wanted to be a physician and began to take classes at the National Medical School in Chicago in 1899 and then transferred to College of

Physicians and Surgeons in Chicago in 1901 (later named the College of Medicine of the University of Illinois).

In July 1902, William and a group of his scientifically-minded friends met to think about the problem they viewed as inadequate preparation for becoming a medical doctor. Fellow student Ernest S. Moore (AΩA, University of Illinois, 1902) wrote, “in the summer of 1902, I was sitting on the steps of the old College building. It was almost time to start the grind when Root came out of the building and sat down beside me to tell me about a plan he had in mind to organize a medical honor fraternity (society) patterned after the lines of Phi Beta Kappa.”¹

Moore, convinced by Root’s ideas, provided a list of fellow students he believed thought the same way and should be invited to membership. Root presented his proposed society to these students August 25, 1902, and on September 27, 1902, 28 medical students met at the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago to ratify a constitution drafted by Root and to induct the society’s first members. At that same time, Root proposed the Society’s motto, “Be Worthy to Serve the Suffering.”

Selection for membership emphasized scholarship and appropriate professional demeanor. All agreed that race, color, creed, gender, and social standing should never be barriers to membership, and stated so in the society’s first Constitution.

AΩA was Chartered in the State of Illinois in 1903 with Articles of Incorporation. The founders of AΩA were able to rapidly persuade leaders at medical schools aspiring to high standards to become part of the organization and establish AΩA Chapters in their schools.

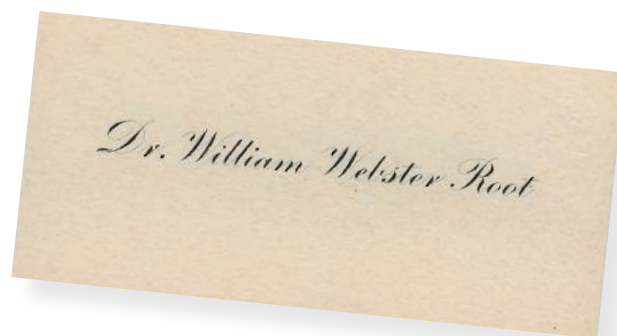
The Charter Constitution

Two original AΩA Constitutions were part of the packet of documents brought to the national office by the Lounsbury sisters. One of the constitutions was a draft written in long-hand, depicting writing that matches William’s love letters to Anna. The document dated August 25, 1902, shows edits and revisions in another hand, possibly that of Moore.

There was also included, a typed version of the original Constitution which starts:

While recognizing that the laborer is worthy of his hire we shall aim to avoid a commercial spirit and although not neglecting the business aspect shall try to cultivate the purely scientific, the philosophical and the poetical features of our noble profession.

Also included with these documents was a paper entitled “The Early Days of Alpha Omega Alpha,” by Moore.¹ In the paper he rails against the status quo of the medical school system:



William Root’s calling card.

Educational standards were low. The usual premedical requirement was a high school diploma. The better schools were departments of universities or were affiliated with a university. University pressure was being exerted to raise the standards of their medical departments to general university levels.

The medical students of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Medical Department of the University of Illinois in the years immediately preceding and following 1900 were a primitive group. They were emotionally hair trigger men, quick to resent an affront, and prompt to avenge an injury. Their behavior in halls and classrooms was rough and boorish. They were loyal to their friends and each other. Class spirit ran high and class clashes often of riotous proportions, were of weekly occurrence. They respected neither authority nor property. Wherever a class was lined up for supplies for a class period more or less rough-housing was present.

Moore goes on to describe specific accounts of pranks and “crudity of behavior.” In describing one of the first meetings held to discuss the formation of AΩA, Moore writes:

Dr. Root was a serious, earnest man with a soft persuasive voice. His eyes had a direct, assured, but disarming gaze. His sincerity of purpose and confidence in the righteousness [sic] of his cause were manifest. In July of 1902 he approached several class-mates and told them of his plan. They were interested and they suggested the names of others. Eight or ten were selected who approved the proposed organization. Frequent meetings were held, some at Root’s home. Dr. Root supplied a name, a motto, the watch charm emblem, and the basic ideas. Many suggestions were made. A secretary was appointed, who recorded and assembled the various ideas. The secretary was instructed to make out a draft of a Constitution embodying the various suggestions. This was done and after some amendments were made, it was adopted.¹

Alpha Omega Alpha was now a growing organization and had something real to offer.

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Medicine vials and paperwork from Root's medical practice.

A busy time

Between 1901 and 1903, William taught high school classes, attended medical school, organized and established the country's first and only honor medical society, and was a husband and father to three young children. In June 1903, William resigned his position at the Chicago Manual Training School in order to complete his course in medicine at Rush Medical College, graduating in March 1904 with his medical degree.

The Root family moved in May 1904 to Parker, Indiana, where William set up a medical practice. The sisters told of family stories of how money was a constant problem for William and Anna. While teaching at the Chicago Manual Training School, William's annual salary was \$1,500, and the practice of medicine in a small rural America town did not bring in enough money to support their family.

By 1908, the Roots moved to Detroit where William took a job working for Parke, Davis & Company as a research bacteriologist in charge of emergency hospitals in the area. Root published the article, "Serum Sickness and Sudden Death Following the Hypodermic Administration of Antitoxin," in 1910.²

In 1910, the Root family moved to Philadelphia where William took a job at the H.K. Mulford Laboratories as a research scientist. He worked on vaccines for the company that was an early leader in the field.

In 1914, William and Anna moved their family to the small village of Slaterville Springs, a few miles east of Ithaca as William had heard of a rural medical practice that was for sale. They were able to purchase the house and medical practice from Dr. Charles H. Gallagher. The deed, dated September 4, 1914, reads in part:

We, William W. Root and Anna B. Root formerly of Philadelphia, but now of Slaterville Springs, N.Y. are held and firmly bound unto Charles H. Gallagher of the city of Ithaca, N.Y., and Estella L. Gallagher his wife in the sum of \$2,230 to be paid to the said Charles H. Gallagher and Estella L. Gallagher the full sum of \$1,115.00 as follows: \$200.00 with interest on October 2, 1916 and \$100.00 on October 2 each year thereafter until the entire sum shall have been paid.

William hung his shingle on the house and began his career as a community practice physician. He and Anna also ran AQA from a small room in the back of the house. The house is still in Slaterville Springs, though no longer owned by the family.

The business of AQA

While running the AQA national office from their home, William served in the executive role while Anna was the society's bookkeeper. An early accounting ledger with entries in Anna's handwriting includes a note she included explaining that a stationary supplier has overcharged AQA 35 cents for office supplies, but she was going to go ahead and pay the invoice in full in order to "keep the peace." The sisters remarked, "Yup, that was our grandmother," in unison, "always the peace keeper."

Hilda and Ann also told the story of how as teenagers they were "required" to work in the AQA office keeping track of member records. "There was a giant rolodex with a card for each member," explained Ann. "My job was to take phone calls and review letters from members and update their contact information on their card in the rolodex. It was a never-ending job, but it definitely taught me the importance of AQA and its members. My favorite part was talking with members."

"After grandpa [William] died, grandma [Anna] ran AQA for about 15 years. She was very smart and very good at the business of running AQA," commented Hilda.

A plethora of documents and information

The Lounsbery sisters also brought myriad forms, certificates and documents, both personal and AQA related. These included Root's original physicians certificate, and his application for appointment in the Medical Reserve Corps, U.S. Army, from World War I. The document

indicates that he is 5'8" tall, weighs 175 pounds; that his father died of "acute indigestion" at the age of 85 years, his mother died of "dropsy—perhaps cardiac in origin" at the age of 82 years, his brother died of diphtheria at age 24, and that he had two brothers who died in infancy. In addition, on the document, Root states that he is able to teach French and German "more particularly along Chemical and Biologic lines," and that he can speak French, German and Latin, "German better than French."

He also indicates that he is a member of the New York, Indiana, and Michigan medical societies, and that he holds the rank of First Lieutenant Medical Reserve Corp USA. Another document dated September 16, 1913, shows that Root was a member of the Association of Military Surgeons of the United States.

The sisters also brought an original year book page depicting the Rush Medical College Alpha Omega Alpha Class of 1904.

A family tradition

William and Anna had one son survive to adulthood, Manly Bronson Root, who became a member of AΩA at Syracuse Medical School in 1919. Manly Bronson Root was a psychiatrist who lived in Texas. Upon William's death in 1932, Manly inherited his father's pocket watch given to William by members of AΩA in 1928.

The middle Lounsbery sister, Ann, is mother to James W.M. Owens, William's great-grandson. Dr. Owens was elected to AΩA as a third year medical student at the University of Washington in 1997. Root's granddaughter Hazel, who with her husband G. Meredith Brill, ran AΩA from 1947 until the early 1960s, was in possession of the watch and sent it to James as a remembrance of his great-grandfather. James proudly keeps the watch at his home in Seattle with the understanding that if no other family members are elected to membership in AΩA, it will eventually be donated to the national office for safekeeping with the other historical organizational documents.

Final wishes

William Root was a humble man, dedicated to the care of others. When he died in April 1932, his only wish for his burial was that his headstone state that he had founded AΩA. He is interred at East Lawn Cemetery, Ithaca, NY, with his wife Anna at his side. His headstone reads simply, "Root, William W., Founder of AΩA, 1867–1932."

The AΩA national office now safely houses these documents and keepsakes so that for generations to come AΩA members will have the opportunity to know of their founder, his character, beliefs, and commitment to the profession of medicine. They are available for viewing, and members are encouraged to stop by the national office when they are in the Denver area so the staff can continue to share the story of William Root, his family, and his commitment to "being worthy to serving the suffering."

Securing the tradition

AΩA has stayed true to its founding principles, especially the AΩA motto: "Be worthy to serve the suffering." An interdisciplinary membership organization with a distinguished history of service to medicine, the profession, society, and patients, AΩA's mission statement is as it was originally written in 1902:

Alpha Omega Alpha—dedicated to the belief that in the profession of medicine we will improve care for all by:



The Root gravestone in Slaterville Springs, NY.

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- Recognizing high educational achievement;
- Honoring gifted teaching;
- Encouraging the development of leaders in academia and the community;
- Supporting the ideals of humanism; and
- Promoting service to others.

There are currently 132 AΩA Chapters in accredited medical schools with a Councilor, medical student members, student officers, residents, faculty and alumni members who select students for nomination to membership based on scholastic achievement, demonstrated professionalism, leadership capabilities, adherence to ethical standards, fairness in dealing with colleagues, achievement in medicine and/or research, and a record of service to school and community.

Chapters annually nominate and elect residents, fellows, faculty, and alumni who have excelled in the criteria for nomination to AΩA membership—scholastic achievement, professionalism, leadership, community service, and research. Scholastic achievement refers to the qualities of becoming, and being, an excellent doctor—trustworthiness, character, caring, knowledge, skills, demeanor, proficiency of the doctor-patient relationship, promise of future leadership, decision-making, compassion, empathy, altruism, values of the profession, teamwork, life-long learning, and servant leadership. All medical students on entry to medical school, residents, fellows, and all physicians throughout their career are eligible for nomination and election for AΩA membership.

In 1938, AΩA began publishing the one-of-a-kind, peer-reviewed, medical humanities journal *The Pharos*. The journal, a non-technical medical journal for letters, humanities, and the arts related to medicine, science, education, and the care of the patient is a leading publication on social, historical, economic, and professional issues of medicine.

Today, AΩA provides nearly \$2 million annually to support 13 national programs, awards, fellowships, and grants. Made possible through members' annual and lifetime dues, AΩA funds:

- Four Robert J. Glaser AAMC Distinguished Teacher Awards;
- More than 70 AΩA Visiting Professorships;
- More than 60 Carolyn L. Kuckein Medical Student Research Fellowships;
- The AΩA Award for Excellence in Inclusion,

Diversity, and Equity in Medical Education and Patient Care;

- Medical Student Service Leadership Project Grants;
- Ten Postgraduate, Resident, and Fellow, Research Awards;
- AΩA Medical Professionalism Awards;
- AΩA Fellows in Leadership;
- The Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Awards;
- The Pharos Poetry Competition Awards;
- The Robert H. Moser Essay Award;
- Volunteer Clinical Faculty Awards; and
- Chapter Administrator Recognition Awards

In addition, AΩA conducts several conferences for Chapter Councilors and national conferences on leadership and professionalism, as well as publishes a biennial AΩA monograph on medical professionalism best practices.

As it has since the beginning, AΩA has an active and distinguished board of directors that includes nine at-large members, three Councilor directors, three student directors, a medical organization member, and a coordinator of faculty and residency initiatives member. The Board meets annually to provide leadership and stewardship and to develop AΩA policies, programs, and chart the society's work for the future.

Today, AΩA has nearly 200,000 members, including 54 Nobel Prize winners in physiology, medicine, and chemistry, and 75 percent of medical school deans.

As those who have gone before us so eloquently put it, it is our charge to “foster the scientific and philosophical features of the medical profession; look beyond self to the welfare of the profession and of the public; cultivate social mindedness, as well as an individualistic attitude toward responsibility; show respect for colleagues, especially for elders and teachers; and foster research and in all ways to ennoble the profession of medicine and advance it in the public opinion.”¹

References

1. Moore ES. The Early Days of Alpha Omega Alpha. *Pharos Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Med Soc.* May 1944; 7(2): 3-4.
2. Root, WW. Serum Sickness and Sudden Death Following Hypodermic Administration of Anti-Toxin, *New York State J. Med.* 20: 264(Aug); 1920.