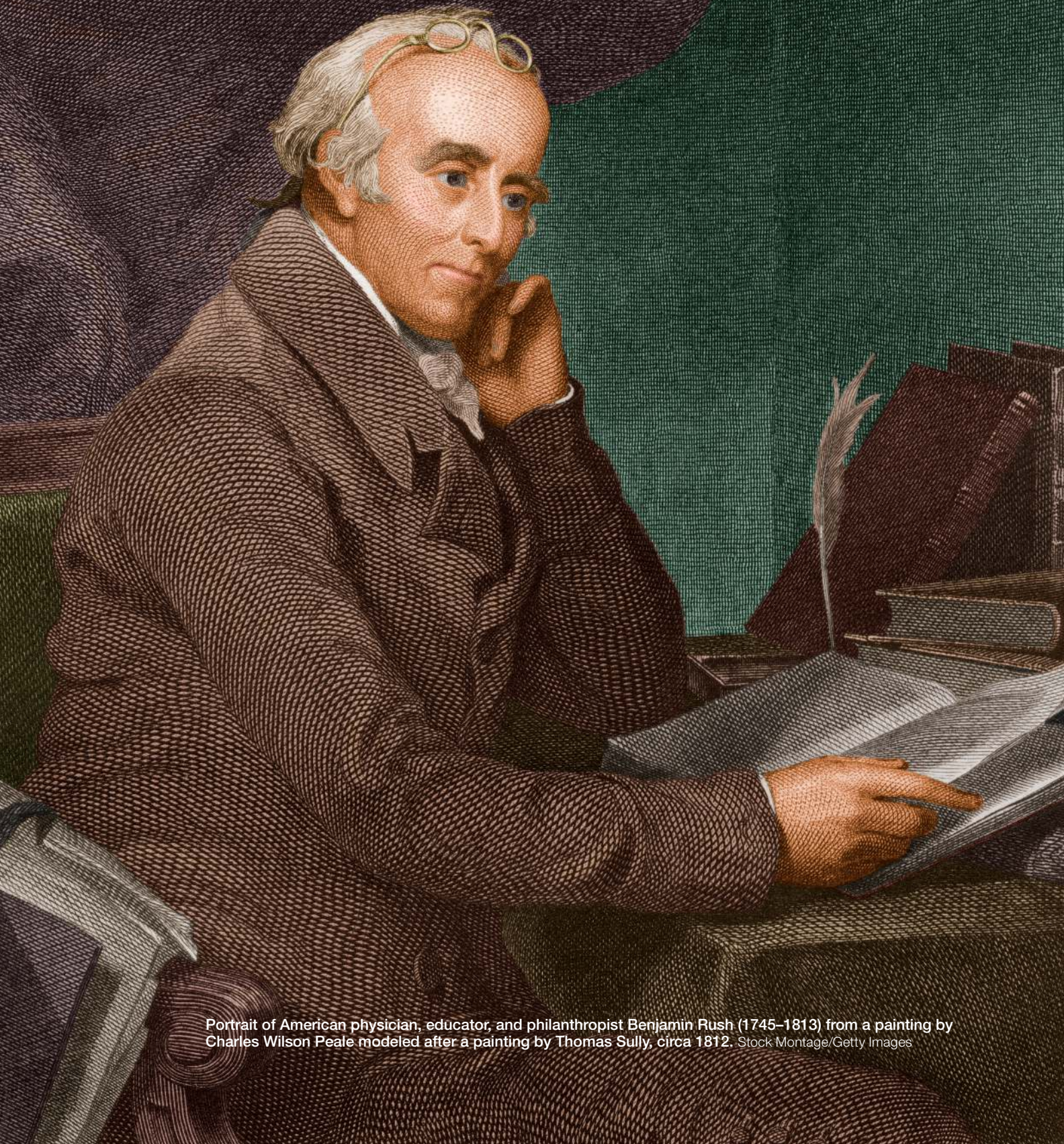


Benjamin Rush: Renaissance physician



Portrait of American physician, educator, and philanthropist Benjamin Rush (1745–1813) from a painting by Charles Wilson Peale modeled after a painting by Thomas Sully, circa 1812. Stock Montage/Getty Images

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Perhaps no physician in United States history has contributed more in more diverse fields of endeavor than Benjamin Rush (1746–1813). One of five physicians who signed the Declaration of Independence, Rush also participated actively in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Medicine and politics have changed a great deal since Rush's day, yet both his medical career and his life continue to serve as shining examples of the differences a single physician can make in service to his patients, community, profession, and society.

His early life

Rush was born in Pennsylvania in the Township of Byberry in Philadelphia County in 1746, the son of a gunsmith.¹ His father died when he was six years old, and his mother supported the family by running a country store.

Rush was a precocious young man, graduating from what is now Princeton University at the age of 14, the institution's youngest graduate ever. By the age of 17, he was translating the Hippocratic writings. His first fiancée died during their engagement, but he later married Julia Stockton, the daughter of another signer of the Declaration of Independence, Richard Stockton. They had 13 children.

Rush began his study of medicine at the College of Philadelphia, the first medical school in North America, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. He then went to Scotland and earned his MD from the University of Edinburgh. While Rush was in the British Isles, Benjamin Franklin introduced him to London society, where he met the chemist Joseph Priestly.

Upon his return, Rush became a professor at the College of Philadelphia and shortly thereafter authored America's first chemistry textbook.²

Those who knew Rush described him as unusually energetic and an enthusiastic reader, writer, and conversationalist. In addition to his considerable intellectual talents and dedication, he was also adept at what today might be called networking. While he was in Edinburgh he helped to persuade the philosopher John Witherspoon to come to America to assume the presidency of Princeton. And while in London, he became acquainted with the portraitist

Joshua Reynolds, the physician-author Oliver Goldsmith, and the essayist Samuel Johnson.

However, Rush's life was marked by travails. During his military service he opposed George Washington, a blunder he recanted and regretted the rest of his life. Four of his children died in their first year of life. After a tour of military service his son, John, fell into a depression and remained institutionalized for the remainder of his life. Rush's medical theories, particularly regarding bleeding, were often the object of fierce opposition, fomenting considerable professional acrimony.

Rush fell ill and died of typhus at the age of 67 years. He is buried in Philadelphia in Christ Church Burial Ground. Julia died 35 years later.

Exceptional dedication to patients

As a physician, Rush was legendary for his exceptional dedication to his patients. He founded the Philadelphia Dispensary for the relief of the poor, the first such institution in the U.S., where he labored for many years without pay.

His heroic efforts to combat the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia earned him wide respect and admiration, particularly since many of his colleagues chose to leave the city to escape the contagion.³ In addition to authoring the first chemistry textbook, he was also the author of the U.S.'s first textbook on mental illness, which led many to call him the Father of American Psychiatry.

He also wrote eloquently on the privileges and pleasures of practicing medicine:

To snatch the chief magistrate of a country, on whose life a whole nation depends for the continuance of its safety and repose, from an untimely grave; to arrest a malignant fever in its progress to death, in the father, and a consumption in the mother of a numerous family of children; to restore the deranged faculties of the mind in an only daughter; to resuscitate, from apparent death, by drowning, an only son; to behold the tears of joy in the relations of the persons who have been the subjects of these cures, and to receive from them their almost idolatrous expressions of gratitude and attachment! How exquisite the pleasure to a physician!⁴

Rush believed that many mental afflictions could be traced to physical causes. This theory led him to argue for improving the conditions under which mental patients lived. He thought that the widespread use of dungeons and chains only exacerbated mental illness, and he argued that daily participation in labor helped to relieve mental distress, promoting a forerunner of today's occupational

therapy. Moving patients from prison-like to more human conditions enabled many to leave mental hospitals for good and return to their communities.

Rush is sometimes portrayed as a curse to patients, because he also strongly advocated the aggressive use of bleeding and purging. In doing so, he was following the widely accepted practice of his day. Some have even suggested that Rush's enthusiasm for phlebotomy hastened the deaths of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. However, Rush was consistent in his recommendations. He insisted on undergoing the procedure himself shortly before his own death. Until the end of his days, he credited phlebotomy with saving many lives—including his own—during the yellow fever epidemic.

Rush also worked hard to improve medical education. He fought for higher standards in the training of physicians and argued that too many schools were providing a superficial education that, to many students, seemed so useless that they frequently chose not to attend classes. The key to training physicians, he believed, was to give them regular opportunities to relieve the distress of their patients. The best physicians would prove themselves not only knowledgeable and skilled but also compassionate, the kind of people who felt their patients' suffering.

Rush was an early advocate of life-long learning. He urged his professional colleagues to stay abreast of new discoveries and innovations and to help move medicine forward. He wrote:

If a physician should rely exclusively upon the stock of knowledge he acquired at the university in which he was educated, and neglect to study after he enters into practice—if he should pass a long life without adding a single discovery or improvement to any branch of our science—if he has flattered the rich, oppressed the middle ranks of life, and neglected the poor—if he has neither sympathized with the sorrows, nor partaken of the joys of his patients—if in his intercourse with them, and with his brother physicians, he has formed no social connexions, nor friendships and, if in a word he has practised medicine as a trade, instead of profession—then his pains greatly predominate over his pleasures. Such a man it is true often derives pleasure from his wealth, but the wealth thus acquired is the product of the labour of the limbs, and not of the mind: and the pleasure derived from it is that of a mechanic, and not of a physician.⁴

An important political figure

Like Plato before him, Rush perceived a strong resemblance between the physiology of the human body and the operations of the state, reasoning analogically from medicine to politics. He judged that confinement's toll on patients was paralleled by the ill effects of indolence and compulsory service on those held in slavery. He postulated that just as unrestrained passions often take a toll on a patient, so politicians should favor forms of government that help to insulate the affairs of state from the passions of legislators, judges, and the people.

Rush was such an important political figure that he was often mentioned with Franklin as one of the "two Benjamins" who towered above Pennsylvania politics. He believed that natural law governs human affairs as surely as scientific laws govern the behavior of inanimate objects. Emboldened by such confidence, he helped to refashion the government of Pennsylvania, and fought for American independence. He believed that all citizens have a duty to question the political order of their day and to speak out and take action when they recognize flaws.

Rush thought that government could not create human welfare but had an important role to play in regulating its pursuit. He believed that human beings have an innate drive to realize their potential, and governments could wreak great harm by interfering with this process. Hence he favored limits on government, and supported innovations such as multipartite government in which each division would act as a check on the others.

Rush was a humanitarian, who opposed the death penalty, argued against public punishments, and vigorously denounced the view that blacks were inherently inferior to whites.

Rush believed that America had a special place in the annals of history. While he did not argue that the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution were divinely inspired, he did argue that the U.S. was "as much the work of a divine providence as any of the miracles recorded in the Old and New testaments."⁵ In Rush's view, the U.S. stood a better chance of serving as the site of humanity's full flowering than any nation that had ever existed on the face of the earth, a view that undoubtedly helped to fuel his deep engagement in the public affairs of his day.

A religious man

Rush was also a person of deep faith. He believed that the affairs of men—particularly the course of the new nation—possessed a cosmic significance. In a sense, creation itself was flowering through the course of events on the North American continent.

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, in such manner, as to secure them these rights, is the object of all Political Institutions. Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence in the long run will dictate to a People the necessity of amending their Constitutions, rather than to change them wholly. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Tyranny, it is their Right, it is their Duty, it is their Honor, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. Such has been the patient Sufferance of these Colonies, and such has been the necessity which compels them to alter their former System of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. It is now the Duty of the Colonies to declare their mutual Consent to separate from him, and to provide for themselves a separate and equal Station in the World. We therefore the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress assembled, do hereby declare that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, free and Independent States, that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political Connections between them and that King, are and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, enter into Commercials, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of Right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Confidence we rely upon the Protection of the Divine Providence of our Heavenly Father, the Lord Almighty.

God Morris
Benjamin Rush
et al

Given Rush's deep religious convictions, it is no surprise that he advocated for all children to receive religious instruction, and that every family should own and make regular use of a Bible. If the young were reared to recognize the true nature of their responsibility, they would see that it is not enough just to pray and await the second coming. Instead, every person could play a role in helping to improve the community. Because the universe was made by God, everything in it has the potential to fit together and achieve harmony, if only people would understand the true meaning of their lives.

While the government exists to secure liberty, it can only do so if people are lovers and defenders of liberty. Because the government itself could not instill such virtues without falling into the hands of a tyrant, the people needed to be schooled in their responsibilities by religion. Without robust virtues in the lives of the citizenship, Rush saw that "there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and the life of all republican governments."⁷ Rush believed that every person could play this role, including blacks emerging from slavery. He worked with Richard Allen to help found the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

For guidance in most matters, Rush turned to the Bible, which he regarded as the quintessence of the republican spirit; the belief that men could rise above the depravity of greed and hatred and erect a better government for the benefit of all. He saw God's will being played out in the affairs of his day.

Rush combined highly progressive ideas, such as a forgiving government policy on crime, with the highest possible regard for the importance of ancient teachings. He wrote:

But passing by all other considerations, and contemplating merely the political institutions of the United States, I lament that we waste so much time and money in punishing crimes and take so little pains to prevent them. We profess to be republicans, and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government; that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible; for this divine book, above all others, favors that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues which constitute the soul of republicanism.⁶

A physician ahead of his day

Though Rush was a deeply religious man, he was also part of the age of enlightenment and operated with the strong conviction that the application of reason could improve the lot of human beings. As a physician, he was ahead of his day in grounding the dignity of the human being in the well-being of the human body. He argued that capital punishment should be abolished, and that restrictions should be placed on alcohol and tobacco. In addition, he campaigned against the use of corporal punishment in schools.

Rush was a staunch advocate for the cultivation of human potential. He believed that at least elementary education should be universal, free, and tax-supported. To promote the quality of learning, he argued for improved teacher training programs. The schools, he thought, were important nurseries for good and wise human beings, who are essential to the welfare of the republic.

Radical in his day, he called for the education of girls and blacks, believing that the former would become the first teachers of the next generation, and that the latter were as naturally capable as whites.

Rush was also very active in shaping the history of the U.S. When Thomas Jefferson was preparing Lewis and Clark for



The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777, by John Trumbull. Dr. Benjamin Rush and General George Washington enter from the background.

their great expedition, he asked Rush to outfit them for the health challenges they would face. Rush provided them with his Thunderbolts, a laxative high in mercury, traces of which have helped subsequent generations of investigators trace the expedition's path.

Rush also played an important role in bringing to publication perhaps the most influential political tract of his day, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, for which he suggested the title.

A legacy of multiple contributions

Rush's influence on his family was great. Three of his sons followed their father into the medical profession, and one son, Richard, became both attorney general in the administration of President James Monroe and Secretary of the Treasury under President John Quincy Adams. When Adams ran for re-election, he named Richard as his running mate. Richard Rush also served as ambassador to both England and France.

Rush is remembered today in a number of ways. As an advocate of education, he is recognized as one of the key figures in the early history of what is now Franklin and Marshall College, and he is regarded as the founder of what is now Dickinson College.

In 1837, Daniel Brainard, who had studied medicine in Philadelphia prior to his arrival in Chicago, founded Rush Medical College in Rush's honor.

One of Rush's most enduring contributions to the history of the U.S. was his effort to broker a reconciliation between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who had become estranged as a result of their rivalry in the vicious presidential campaign of 1800. After Jefferson's retirement,

Rush successfully reached out to both men, recounting in letters a dream he had in which the two became friends again, producing a correspondence that, as Rush predicted, would serve as an important source of historical understanding and inspiration for the new nation.

Today, Rush serves as America's preeminent example of the depth and breadth of the contributions a single physician can make. One of the great medical educators of his day, author of the first American textbook of chemistry, founding father and signer of the Declaration of Independence, leader in humane approaches to mental illness, humanitarian and key figure in the founding of a church with more than three million

members, and staunch advocate for education, Rush's life and career serve as a beacon of light for contemporary physicians who aspire to make a difference for their patients, the profession of medicine, and society at large.

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