

Alpha Omega Alpha

Honor Medical Society

1902 - 2012 — Celebrating 110 years

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Author's note: In this editorial I have incorporated many documents and other materials to summarize AΩA's history and programs. I especially want to thank Dr. David Dale, Past President of AΩA, and Dr. Ted Harris, the society's late executive director, who published an excellent article in *The Pharos*, "Alpha Omega Alpha: Encouraging excellence in medicine for more than a century," in Autumn 2002.

Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (AΩA) celebrates its 110th anniversary this year!

AΩA's story begins in 1902 at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Chicago, now the University of Illinois. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the pre-Flexner era, the practice of medicine relied on tradition and was mostly empirical. The sciences basic to medicine—biology, physiology, and chemistry—were rapidly growing, but only a few medical schools had faculty qualified to teach this new and evolving theory and science.

The number of students in medical schools had been increasing dramatically. In 1880, the United States had about 100 medical schools and 12,000 students; by 1903 the number of medical schools had risen to 160, and the number of medical students had doubled. However, medical education remained poorly structured and medical students were poorly prepared academically. Many students had never graduated from high school, and only a few had attended a university prior to

entering medical school.

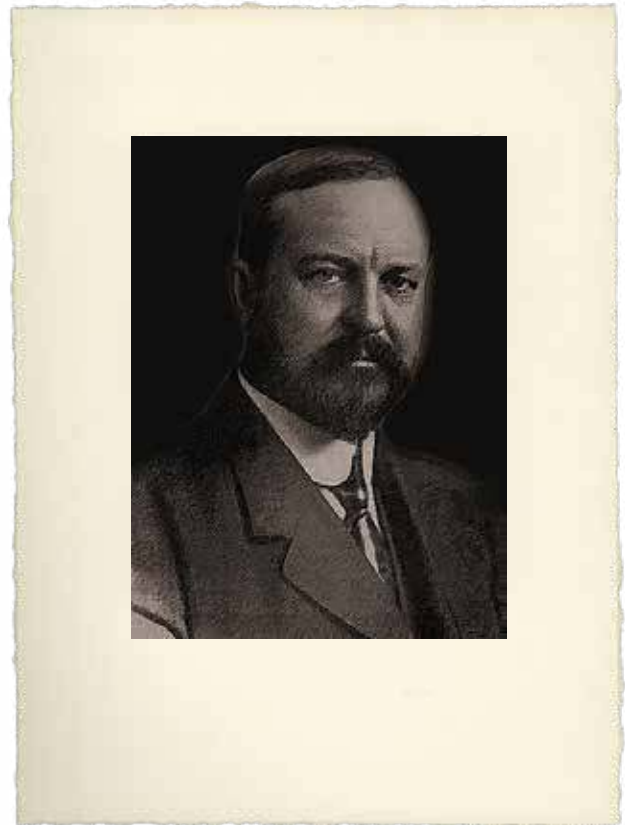
Medical school faculty were frequently unqualified and ill-equipped to teach a scientifically oriented curriculum, and many doctors questioned the value of research in medicine. Most medical schools were proprietary and not associated with a university. Standards were virtually nonexistent. Thus, some physicians found running a small independent medical school could be a profitable pursuit.

AΩA's founder was thirty-five-year-old medical student William Webster Root. He was galled by the lack of interest in academic achievement and professional values shown by most medical faculty and students, as well as by their immaturity, poor conduct, and dishonesty. Root wrote in 1909, "It was the lack of interest in scholarly attainment among medical students that led me to begin AΩA." He, and his like-minded classmates, decided to do something about it.

Root was more mature and better educated than most medical students of the time. He had graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry in 1890. He had then completed two years of graduate work at Cornell while teaching chemistry, physics, and biology. He entered the University of Chicago graduate school and obtained a Master's degree in chemistry. During that time he also taught sciences at the Chicago Manual Training School. He was married to a college classmate, Anna Bronson, and the father of three children.



Above, William Webster Root, founder of AΩA. Right, Winfield Scott Hall, first president of AΩA.



In July 1902, Root first discussed with classmates his idea of forming an “honor medical fraternity.” They decided to model the new organization after Phi Beta Kappa, and decreed that membership in AΩA was to be based on both scholarly achievement and professional conduct. The duties of AΩA members were “to foster the scientific and philosophical features of the medical profession; to look beyond self to the welfare of the profession and of the public; to cultivate social mindedness, as well as an individualistic attitude toward responsibility; to show respect for colleagues, especially for elders and teachers; and to foster research and in all ways to ennoble the profession of medicine and advance it in the public opinion. It is equally a duty to avoid that which is unworthy, including the commercial spirit and all practices injurious to the welfare of patients, the public, or the profession.”

A classmate and one of the original members of AΩA,

Ernest S. Moore, later 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 Dr. 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 patterned after the likes of Phi Beta Kappa. I was convinced of Root’s ideas and Root provided a list of men to be invited to membership.”

Moore continued, “honesty was conspicuously absent,” and “behavior in the halls and classroom was rough and boorish,” “while articles of any value would be sure to remain where they were placed in the medical building only by nailing them securely.” He also noted that faculty were only interested in training new practitioners and “the heads of departments were selected by who could buy substantial blocks of stock.” Schools could thus receive income from students who were poorly prepared for medical school.



Walter B. Cannon, first Vice President of AΩA.

Root presented his proposal for the new society to his fellow students on August 25, 1902. Plans moved quickly, and on September 27, 1902, twenty-eight students met at the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago to ratify a constitution drafted by Root and to induct the society's original members. In 1903, the State of Illinois granted the charter and the articles of incorporation for the Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Fraternity. Remarkably, the original charter clearly stated that race, color, creed, gender, and social standing should never be barriers to membership.

AΩA has stayed true to its founding principles for the last 110 years. The society's mission statement, adopted in 2008, is:

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

- recognizing high educational achievement
- honoring gifted teaching
- encouraging the development of leaders in academia and the community
- supporting the ideals of humanism
- promoting service to others.

AΩA retains the motto proposed by Root in 1902: "Be worthy to serve the suffering."

Root transferred to the Rush Medical College and graduated in 1904. Upon graduation, he practiced medicine for four years in Parker, Indiana. He then conducted bacteriological research for three years at Parke-Davis Company in Detroit, Michigan, and then at the HKY Mulford laboratories in Philadelphia for three more years.

Following his years of research, Root moved and started a

medical practice in Slaterville Springs, New York, about nine miles from Ithaca. At the outbreak of World War I, he joined the Army as a First Lieutenant in the Medical Reserve Corps, serving from 1912 to 1917.

Root's wife, Anna Conant Bronson Root, graduated from Cornell University in 1893, and taught French and German in secondary schools and at the Women's College at Brown University. Her father was the founder and first president of Colby College. She too, with her strong academic background, was a staunch supporter of AΩA.

For thirty years Root served as the secretary-treasurer (the title is now Executive Director) of AΩA, working from his home with his wife's support to promote new chapters in the best medical schools in the country. Mrs. Root served as assistant secretary-treasurer and editor of *The Pharos*. One of their daughters wrote, "Indeed, Society work became so much a part of their family life that their children learned to say 'Alpha Omega Alpha' as soon as they learned to talk at all."

Root died in 1932. His tombstone is engraved "Founder of AΩA."

Between 1904 to 1913, under the leadership of Root and



AΩA's first president, Winfield Scott Hall, AΩA rapidly established new chapters in medical schools throughout the East Coast and Midwest. Hall was the head of the Department of Physiology of the School of Medicine at Northwestern University. Like Root, Hall was a crusader determined to bring scientifically minded teaching to Northwestern. He was a strong supporter of the ideals of the new medical honor fraternity.

Hall and Root recruited another physiologist from the Harvard faculty, Walter B. Cannon, to be the vice president of AΩA. Cannon was largely responsible for promoting and vetting new chapter applications, with one primary standard: that new chapters be from the best medical schools in the country. It was a difficult task, since no standardized criteria for medical school programs existed at the time. AΩA continued to establish many new chapters in the best medical schools, and often rejected applications from proprietary medical schools. The number of members grew rapidly.

The AΩA Constitution made it relatively easy for schools to organize chapters, and gave considerable latitude to each school in selecting a councilor, organizing chapter activities, and selecting students based on the criteria of academic achievement, leadership, professionalism, service, teaching, and research.

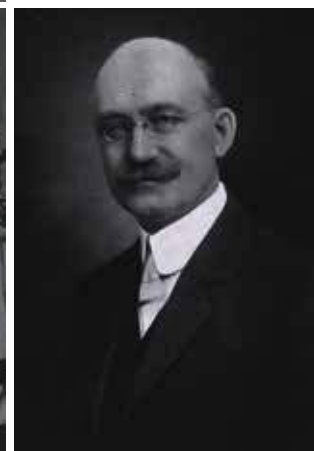
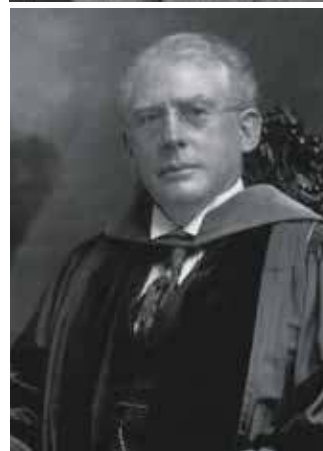
In 1909, the AΩA Constitution was revised to allow election of a limited number of house staff, faculty, and alumni, as well as honorary members "who have gained wide recognition through original research, or in an administration, and who conform to the requirements demanded for undergraduates."

Hall was followed as president by Russell Burton-Opitz of Columbia (1913–1918) and John L. Heffron, Dean of Syracuse University (1918–1924). In 1924, Walter L. Bierring, a distinguished physician and member of AΩA from the University of Iowa, began a thirty-five-year term as president. He served AΩA until his death in 1960. Under his leadership, AΩA grew to eighty-five chapters.

William Bean, MD, chairman of the University of Iowa Department of Medicine, wrote, "Dr. Bierring saw the unprecedented growth of American medicine with great improvement in quality of research, scholarship and practice. Members of Alpha Omega Alpha may be proud that through his wise statesman-like control this growth has been not only very



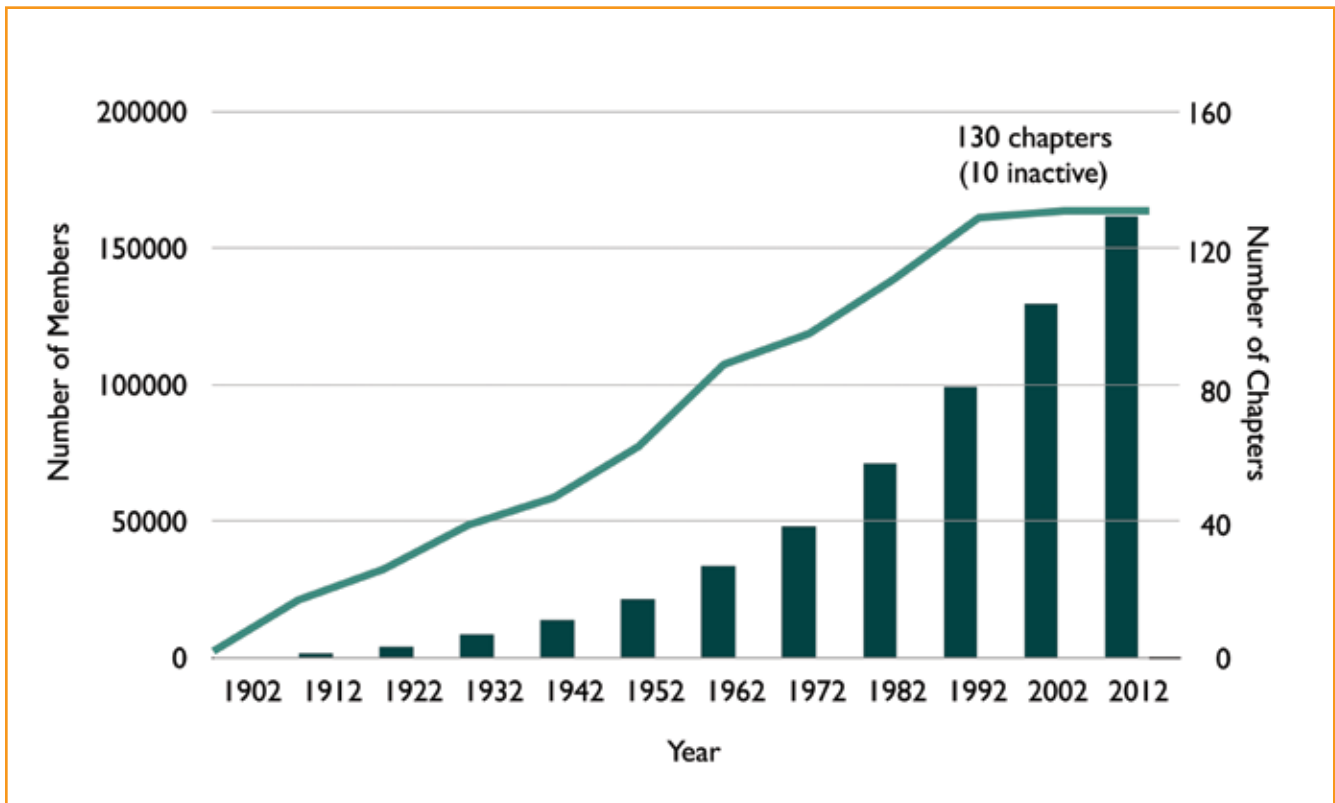
Past presidents of AΩA. Clockwise, from top, Dr. Russell Burton-Opitz, Dr. Walter L. Bierring, and Dr. John L. Heffron.



extensive in scope but very fruitful in encouraging excellence."

One among many of Bierring's noteworthy accomplishments was launching the AΩA quarterly journal, *The Pharos*, in 1938. It was distributed to all members in the then forty-one chapters. The semiannual journal initially served as a newsletter for the society and listed the board of directors, chapter names and schools, councilors, committees, and how schools could apply to create a chapter. The inaugural issue of January 1938 consisted of four pages of news, lists, an obituary, and the society's financial statement (total balance on August 31, 1937: \$17,374.15). Dr. Bierring wrote: "The Directors of Alpha Omega Alpha Society in presenting to members this first number of *The Pharos* bespeak for it a kindly reception and express the hope that it will serve as a 'Beacon' and worthy exponent of the aims and purposes of our society."

Following Dr. Bierring's death, Robert J. Glaser became secretary-treasurer, serving from 1962 to 1997. During his tenure, AΩA expanded to 130 chapters and added many national programs. Dr. Glaser, with his wife Dr. Helen H. Glaser, worked together as editor and managing editor of *The Pharos*. They developed the journal into a leading publication on social, economic, and professional issues of medicine, and included



new sections to enrich the experience of readers.

Following Dr. Glaser's retirement in 1997, Edward D. Harris, Jr., became executive secretary of the society, serving until his death in 2010. He further expanded national programs and developed *The Pharos* into what it is today: a unique nontechnical medical journal that sits at the intersection of the medical sciences and the humanities.

Beginning in 1982, AΩA's board of directors refocused the society to look to the future by developing a broader range of programs. This included the establishment of AΩA visiting professorships, the student essay award, and student research fellowships. The board further promoted national meetings of chapter councillors, the Leaders in American Medicine videotape series, and regular communication between the national office and AΩA chapters.

AΩA today provides more than half a million dollars each year to support its national programs. Dues and contributions fund all of these:

- Four Robert J. Glaser Distinguished Teacher Awards
- Visiting professorships
- Up to fifty Carolyn L. Kuckein Medical Student Research Fellowships
- As many as twenty Medical Student Service Leadership Awards

- Up to \$50,000 for the Edward D. Harris Professionalism Award
- The Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Awards and *Pharos* Poetry Competition Awards
- Volunteer Clinical Faculty Awards
- Chapter Administrative Awards.
- Publication of *The Pharos*.

As it has since the beginning, AΩA has an active and distinguished board of directors that includes nine at-large directors, three councilor directors, three student directors, and a medical organization director. (See the list of directors on the inside front cover.) The board meets annually to develop AΩA policies and programs and chart the society's direction.

On this 110th anniversary, AΩA counts more than 160,000 members in 130 chapters.

Membership continues to grow. Each year, the top twenty-five percent of students, based on academic achievement, are eligible for nomination. Of those eligible, only sixteen percent of a class can be nominated. Election to the society is based on scholarship, leadership, character, professionalism, service, teaching, and research. Members may also be elected later in their careers to honor their achievements and contributions to medicine and the medical sciences. Members are nominated by AΩA chapters that are comprised of all AΩA members,

and are based on member input, deliberation, and decisions based on the established criteria.

Fifty-four Nobel Prize winners in physiology, medicine and chemistry are AΩA members, and nearly seventy-five percent of medical school deans are members.

AΩA continues to elect members based on its core values and criteria; it supports important programs for our profession, and strongly advocates for academic excellence, leadership, professionalism, service, teaching, and research in patient care and medicine.

As those who have gone before us so eloquently put it, it is our charge to “in all ways to ennoble the profession of medicine and advance it in the public opinion.”

I am proud to serve as the current Executive Director of AΩA, and I am quite certain that you are equally proud to have been elected to membership. In facing the challenges to medicine in the twenty-first century, we all now need to reaffirm our dedication to the AΩA ideals and work to continually “Be Worthy to Serve the Suffering.”

Richard L. Byyny, MD, FACP
Executive Director, Alpha Omega Alpha
Editor, The Pharos

AΩA Members who have received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine

John J. R. Macleod	1923	Renato Dulbecco	1975
Frederick G. Banting	1923	David Baltimore	1975
George R. Minot	1934	Roger C. Guillemin	1977
George H. Whipple	1934	Hamilton O. Smith	1978
Otto Loewi	1936	Daniel Nathans	1978
Edward A. Doisy	1943	Baruj Benacerraf	1980
Herbert S. Gasser	1944	Torsten N. Wiesel	1981
Joseph Erlanger	1944	Sir John R. Vane	1982
Carl F. Cori	1947	Joseph L. Goldstein	1985
Philip S. Hench	1950	Michael S. Brown	1985
Fritz A. Lipmann	1953	Rita Levi Montalcini	1986
Frederick C. Robbins	1954	Stanley Cohen	1986
Thomas H. Weller	1954	Harold E. Varmus	1989
Axel H. Theorell	1955	Edwin G. Krebs	1992
Dickinson W. Richard	1956	Alfred G. Gilman	1994
Joshua Lederberg	1958	Stanley B. Prusiner	1997
Arthur Kornberg	1959	Ferid Murad	1998
Severo Ochoa	1959	Louis J. Ignarro	1998
Sir Frank M. Burnet	1960	Robert F. Furchgott	1967
James D. Watson	1962	Eric R. Kandel	2000
Charles B. Huggins	1966	Paul Greengard	2000
Salvadore E. Luria	1969	Sir Paul Maxime Nurse	2001
Earl W. Sutherland, Jr.	1971	Sydney Brenner	2002
Gerald M. Edelman	1972	Ralph M. Steinman	2011
George E. Palade	1974		

AΩA members who have received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry

Wendell M. Stanley	1946	Roderick MacKinnon	2003
Paul Berg	1980	Peter Agre	2003
Thomas Chech	1989		



Nobel Prize winners and AΩA members John J. R. Macleod, Arthur Kornberg, Edward Doisy, Renato Dulbecco, David Baltimore, and Baruj Benacerraf. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.