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# Bradford Cannon



Bradford Cannon, a caring, talented, imaginative plastic surgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) was an acknowledged surgical pioneer for much of the twentieth century. He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1907, to Walter Bradford Cannon born in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin and Cornelia James Cannon of Cambridge, MA. A year later his father became the Higginson Professor of Physiology at HMS. Brad Cannon graduated from Harvard College in 1929 and Harvard Medical School in 1933.

Following his family's midwestern roots, he trained in surgery at the Barnes Hospital in St. Louis. There he met Dr. Vilray Papin Blair (1871-1955) and Dr. James Barrett Brown (1899-1971), leaders of a major center of plastic surgery in the United States. After seven years in St. Louis, he returned to the MGH in 1940 where he became a catalyst in the development of plastic surgery in Boston.

Dr. Cannon is credited for his lifesaving innovations in treating victims of the devastating fire at the Coconut Grove nightclub in 1942 that took the lives of 492 persons and injured hundreds more. He along with Dr. Oliver Cope changed conventional management of patients with serious

burn injuries. Instead of using tissue coagulating tannic acid and dyes on the burned areas, the team applied sterile dressings and pressure bandages to stabilize the wounds, excise the most damaged areas of skin, and replacement of skin grafts. Early excision and skin grafting subsequently became the standard for burn treatment. They advocated the use of protective coverings for wound management throughout the healing process, intravenous therapy for patients in anticipation of shock, control of infection, proper nutritional management and assistance with psychological adjustment to injury.

In 1943 Dr. Cannon went on active duty as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Medical Corps of the United States Army and established the plastic surgical unit at the Valley Forge General Hospital (VFGH) in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. He was a caring and skillful surgeon; a perfect role model for young

physicians. He set the highest standards for patient care. He was humble, approachable, and fairminded. The staff at VFGH cared for battle casualties from Africa, Europe and the Pacific. He kept a daily record of every operation performed; these records are now kept at the National Archives of Plastic Surgery at the Francis Countway Library. Dr. Cannon achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel and continued as a consultant to the U.S. Army Medical Corp until late in the 1970's.

After retirement, Dr. Cannon and his wife Ellen traveled around the country to visit numerous VFGH patients. He reported this inspiring experience in his Presidential Address to the Boston Surgical Society in 1977. He reminisced about Valley Forge patients to the end of his life. He had an extraordinary capacity to remember details of patients, even those who never required surgery. A few years ago, he described with uncanny accuracy a blind VFGH patient with no facial deformity who had become blind because of a shrapnel injury to his posterior visual cortex.

Dr. Cannon always considered general surgery to be the core of plastic surgery. He always remembered the many MGH surgical residents whose careers he has influenced even when they became specialists in other fields such as orthopedics, neurosurgery, and pediatrics. Many an unwary surgical resident would pass by his OR in the Baker Memorial and dutifully ask, "Do you need any help Dr. Cannon?" Cannon would gruffly reply, "I don't need any help, but if you want to learn something, you're welcome to join me."

Dr. Cannon began the first plastic surgical training program at the MGH as an apprentice system in the early 1960's. This was ultimately integrated with the Department of Surgery as a formal Division of Plastic Surgery in 1971. Dr. Cannon was the first chairman of the Plastic Surgery Residency Program at the MGH. Dr. John Remensnyder succeeded him in 1973. "When I (JEM) completed my residency at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, he graciously allowed me the use of his office at 330 Dartmouth Street to begin my private practice. He urged me to continue my work at the Brigham and Children's Hospitals and remain involved in the (HMS) Surgical Research Laboratory. On one day early in my career, when I was scheduled to work in the laboratory. I was called to consult on a serious burn patient in Lowell. I was uncertain what to do. I was just starting to build a practice and I asked Dr. Cannon's advice. I had a family to support and a mortgage to pay. His reply immediately established my priority: "Go to the lab.""

Brad Cannon's family life was a great source of satisfaction to him. He was married to the late Ellen DeNormandie for 65 years and is survived by four children, Walter Bradford Cannon (HMS '68), Robert Laurent Cannon, Sarah Cannon Holden (JD '89), and Woodward Cannon (HMS '70). Phillip Yardley Cannon, Laurent's twin brother had died in 1986. Brad and Ellen Cannon had 14 grandchildren and 8 great grandchildren.

Dr. Cannon's frugality was legendary. He would steam stamps from envelopes or travel miles to collect refunds on bottles. But it was a Yankee personal frugality. When it came to charitable endeavors, he was very generous. Instead of buying too many toys for his children at Christmas, he gave them tools to use. At a dinner in his honor some thirty years ago his brotherinlaw, Chinese scholar John Fairbank, acknowledged Dr. Cannon's surgical skills, but noted that his family most appreciated his expertise in repairing everything around the house.

Bradford Cannon, our mentor and teacher, died at the age of 98 at his daughter's home in Lincoln, MA peacefully, and contentedly, surrounded by his family on December 20, 2005.

We are establishing an Endowment Fund for the Countway Library's Surgical Archives, which includes the National Archives of Plastic Surgery, as a most appropriate way to honor Dr. Cannon's remarkable life.

Respectfully submitted,

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