

JOHN COCHRAN – Surgeon General

By: John Whiteside

John Cochran was born in Sadsbury, Chester County, Pennsylvania, to Irish or Scots-Irish immigrants. He lived the early part of his life in rural Chester County, eventually being tutored by Francis Alison, a Presbyterian minister who served in Philadelphia and New London, Chester County. Following his classical studies, he apprenticed at a hospital in Lancaster, Pa., under Doctor Robert Thompson. Cochran's early skills in medicine would come into practice rather quickly with the onset of the French and Indian War, as a surgeon's mate in the British army.

Cochran would serve under the British Colonel John Bradstreet in the Province of Ontario, Canada, where Cochran would face the first battlefield injuries of his medical career. For two days in July 1758, the British troops would attack Fort Frontenac, a fort held by the French that also served as a trading post, today located in Kingston, Ontario. During the fighting the British troops suffered 11 wounded men, and the French, two deaths, before their surrender. While serving in the army, Cochran would become acquainted with then Major Philip Schuyler, who would later become a general in Washington's army. Major Schuyler had a widowed sister named Gertrude, who had two children. Cochran would soon meet her and subsequently marry her after the war in December 1760.

Cochran and his new family resided in the Albany, N.Y. area for several years before moving to New Brunswick, N.J. While there and practicing medicine, he helped found the New Jersey Medical Society and served as its president. He became noted for his interest in and treatment for smallpox as the disease began to spread through the colonies during the early 1770s. As the Revolutionary War began, Cochran, still living in New Jersey, was involved with other local doctors in

obtaining used linen to prepare bandaging material for the fledgling army. He offered his free medical services to the Continental Army as it began to form, and sent his family to safety in Philadelphia. In early December, he helped evacuate and transport injured soldiers from a hospital in Trenton, N.J. to Bethlehem, Pa., prior to Washington's attack on Trenton on December 25, 1777.

On January 20, 1777, while at Morristown, N.J., at the winter camp, General Washington ordered Cochran to "proceed hence to New Town (Newtown, Pa.) to morrow & there inquire into the state of smallpox & use every possible means in your power to prevent that disease from spreading in the army & among the inhabitants, which may otherwise prove fatal to the service." He also ordered Cochran to proceed to Philadelphia and meet up with Doctor William Shippen to see about forming a hospital for the upcoming campaign, to include medical supplies to handle some 10,000 men.

On April 10, 1777, Cochran was promoted to the position of physician and surgeon general of the Middle Department of the Medical Department of the Continental Army, a position similar to those of Shippen and Doctor Benjamin Rush. When the Philadelphia Campaign began in September 1777 with the Battle of Brandywine, Dr. Cochran was reportedly sent to tend to Lafayette's wounded body at the request of Washington himself. During the following winter camp at Valley Forge, Cochran was responsible for the hospitals at the encampment and in the greater Philadelphia area. He was also responsible for smallpox inoculations for the troops encamped there, saving the army for the next campaign.

In January 1781, Cochran was appointed Director General of the Hospitals of the United States, serving in that position until the end of the Revolutionary War. Shortly after the war, Cochran moved his family to New York City where he continued his practice of medicine. In 1790, now President of the United States, George Washington appointed John Cochran as Commissioner of Loans. Cochran

would later suffer a stroke that would prevent further employment. He retired and relocated to Palatine, N.Y., where he would pass away on April 6, 1807, at the age of 76. He was buried at Potter Cemetery but later reinterred at Forest Hill Cemetery.

Sources:

<https://ushistory.org/historic-personages/valleyforge/served/cochran>

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cochran_\(physician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cochran_(physician))

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<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/59806086/john-cochran>

<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nimuid-101412466-img>



Original painted miniature by Charles Willson Peale at Valley Forge 1778.

Above sketch made from that miniature at National Library of Medicine.

<http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101412466>