Historical Perspectives of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery: John Alexander (1891-1954)

John Alexander, the 17th president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery, was born in Philadelphia on February 24, 1891. He received his BS, MA, and MD degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, where he was an outstanding student athlete, achieving multiple academic honors and serving as captain of the varsity crew. After an internship at the Pennsylvania Hospital, he enlisted with an American unit in the French Army transferring to the United States Army Medical Corps when the United States entered World War I. At the end of the war, he studied at the University of Lyon with Leon Berard, where he first became acquainted with the surgical treatment of tuberculosis, a disease that consumed much of his career, both as a patient and as an innovator and advocate of surgical treatment. During his lifetime, Dr Alexander was hospitalized multiple times for treatment of tuberculosis and its complications.

After his return to the United States, he served a short period at the University of Pennsylvania and in 1920 joined the staff of the Department of Surgery at the University of Michigan. Shortly thereafter, complications of tuberculosis required a protracted period at Saranac Lake. Despite the need for a plaster body cast and the support of a Bradford frame, he persevered in writing the first English text on the surgical treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis, for which he received the Samuel D. Gross Prize of the Philadelphia Academy of Surgery.

In 1926 Dr Alexander returned to the University of Michigan, and within a short time his interest and attention were devoted entirely to thoracic surgery. In 1928, he established a thoracic service and the first surgical residency program in thoracic surgery. Dr Alexander took great pride in the many thoracic surgeons completing his program, many of whom became leaders in the field.

In addition to employing the then accepted operations for pulmonary tuberculosis, Dr Alexander was innovative in proposing new procedures. He popularized anterior thoracoplasty and resection of the transverse processes of the vertebrae to improve the thoracoplastic collapse. He early recognized the advantages of resection for pulmonary tuberculosis, but not to the exclusion of collapse therapy, a measure that he considered advantageous in many cases. He was an early advocate of 2-stage lobectomy for bronchiectasis and early recognized the effectiveness of pulmonary metastases in selected cases.

In 1932, Dr Alexander was named professor of surgery. Shortly thereafter, a recurrence of his own disease required hospitalization, which afforded the opportunity to complete the authoritative classic text, "The Collapse Therapy of Pulmonary Tuberculosis."

A man of his accomplishments accrued many well deserved honors including the honorary degree of Doctor of Science from the University of Pennsylvania, the Trudeau Medal by the National Tuberculosis Association, the Bruce H. Douglas Award from the Michigan Trudeau Society, and the Henry Russell Award and Lectureship from the University of Michigan, given to a member of the faculty who

From the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.

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Address for reprints: Robert B. Wallace, MD, AATS, 1322 Darnall Dr, McLean VA 22101 (E-mail: rbwallace@cox.net).

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has attained the highest distinction in the field of scholarship. Dr Alexander was president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery from 1934-1935 and president elect of the Trudeau Society, an honor he had to relinquish because of recurrence of his illness. He was a founding member of the American Board of Surgery and the Board of Thoracic Surgery. He was a member of the American Surgical Association, the Central Surgical Association, the International Society of Surgery, the Society for Clinical Surgery, the American Medical Association, the Michigan State Medical Society, and the National Tuberculosis Association. He was an honorary member of the Society of Thoracic Surgery of Great Britain and Ireland, Detroit Academy of Surgery, Sociedad de Argentina de Cirujanos, Societe Belge de Chiurgie, Societe Francaise de la Tuberculose, Sociedad Paraguaya de Tisiologia, and the Sociedad Ecutoriana de Tisiologia. He was also a member of Alpha Omega Alpha, Sigma Xi, Phi Kappa Phi, Alpha Mu Pi Omega, and Delta Tau Delta and an honorary member of Nu Sigma Nu.

In his later years, he enjoyed gardening with his wife, the former Emma Ward Woolfolk, whom he married in 1936.

He also enjoyed duck hunting, but former residents were concerned that the risk was as great for his hunting partner as for the ducks. His contributions to thoracic surgery and especially the inauguration of resident training in thoracic surgery and the many surgeons he trained assured him of a place in the annals of thoracic surgery. His legacy unquestionably is the surgeons he trained, whose fondness for him and memories of him are legendary. Thanksgiving dinners for staff and family with turkey carved expertly by Dr Alexander, the weekly trips to the Michigan State Sanatorium with the resident driving the antique black Buick while Dr Alexander worked in the back seat, and the undaunted courage Dr Alexander demonstrated in coping with multiple recurrences of his illness, necessitating multiple hospitalizations and daily rest periods, have left indelible memories with those who knew him. Dr Alexander has been described as a brilliant scholar and inspiring teacher. As Dr John Strieder, one of his earliest residents, wrote about his first meeting with Dr Alexander, "I had come on a man—as so many did—with not just a talent, but a genius for that rarest and most sensitive of all arts, friendship.

Herbert Sloan, MD