

# An Important John Shaw Billings Find

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## ABSTRACT

The autograph of John Shaw Billings, dated 1855, was recently found in an 1855 edition of George B. Wood's *A Treatise on the Practice of Medicine*. This may be the earliest Billings autograph extant, and it is certainly the earliest association of John Shaw Billings with the study of medicine.

JOHN SHAW BILLINGS' extraordinary contributions to librarianship and medical bibliography, to public health, and to medical education have secured his place in library history and the history of medicine. He spent three decades, from 1865 to 1895, as director of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office creating a "National Medical Library," developing its collections, compiling its *Index-Catalogue*, and planning its *Index Medicus* (Figure 1). He was a member and vice-president of the 1879 National Board of Health, and he helped to reorganize the Marine Hospital Service, the forerunner of the U.S. Public Health Service. From 1880 to 1912, he was consultant for the 10th, 11th, and 12th U.S. census. And in 1883, after the Army Medical Museum came under his charge, Billings built the largest historical collection of microscopes in the world.

Doctor Billings also contributed significantly to the field of medical education. He was instrumental in bringing Drs. William Welch and William Osler to the Johns Hopkins University, and he designed the Johns Hopkins Hospital and the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston. He taught courses in the history of medicine, planned the Laboratory of Hygiene at the University of Pennsylvania, and, for a short period in 1895, was professor of hygiene at that institution. Billings was also an influential member of the Carnegie Institute of Washington for many years. Finally, Billings helped organize the New York Public Library; he designed its central building, became its first director, and he induced Andrew Carnegie to support the institution, which Billings then developed into the most prestigious public library system in

the country. It is of great interest, therefore, when we discover what may well be the earliest Billings autograph extant, and what is certainly the earliest association of John Shaw Billings with the study of medicine.

Included among a gift of books recently given to the National Library of Medicine were volumes I and II of the fourth edition of *A Treatise on the Practice of Medicine*, by George B. Wood, M.D., published in Philadelphia in 1855. (The books were given to the library by Washington physician Theodore Abernathy in September 1982, when Dr. Abernathy was retiring from medical practice. Subsequent inquiry about the provenance of the volumes revealed only that they were "purchased in New England many years ago.") On the flyleaf of each volume, inscribed in ink, is the autograph and date: "Billings. 1855." (Figures 2, 3). Comparison with other early Billings autographs verifies that this is Billings' signature. Because John Shaw Billings was born on April 12, 1838, he probably—although we cannot, of course, be certain—had already passed his seventeenth birthday when he acquired this medical text. How did young Billings obtain this two-volume work, and why?

Young Billings was determined to attend college and he therefore made an agreement with his father that "if he would help me through college in the least expensive way, all of his [i.e., his father's] property should go to my sister." Billings then prepared himself for the entrance examination for the sub-freshman class at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio, and after passing the examination in the fall of 1852, at the age of fifteen years, he entered Miami. For the first two years he kept "bachelor's hall, living on . . . such things as I could cook for myself." "Most of the time," Billings later recalled, "was spent in reading the books in the College Library" [1].

When Billings entered college his parents lived in a little crossroads village called Allensville, in Indiana. Sometime thereafter, probably between John's second and third year in college, perhaps in 1853 or 1854, his parents moved to Oxford, Ohio.



FIG. 1—John Shaw Billings in 1865, age 27 years, when he assumed charge of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office.

Harry M. Lydenberg, a former chief reference librarian of the New York Public Library and one of Billings' biographers, has suggested that Billings may have lived at home while he was attending his last two years of college [2]. In that event, he probably would have joined his parents during the summer of 1855.

Although the Billings family was certainly not wealthy, it was financially independent and books were an integral part of the family's daily life. In fact, the Billings family, wrote Lydenberg, "counted books . . . as necessary as household equipment as tables, chairs, or clothing. The mother [whom Lydenberg became acquainted with in Dayton, Ohio] was a persistent reader . . . and one of the most regular patrons of the Dayton Library, reading constantly and widely" [3].

As for Dr. George B. Wood's *Treatise on the Practice of Medicine*, there can be no doubt that it was one of the most popular American medical textbooks of the mid-nineteenth century. First published in 1847, the work appeared in four editions within eight years; a fifth edition was published in 1858. Although the author hoped that "old and experienced [physicians] might find something in it to aid them in the clearer understanding and treatment of diseases," it is plain from the author's preface that his primary objective was to provide "a

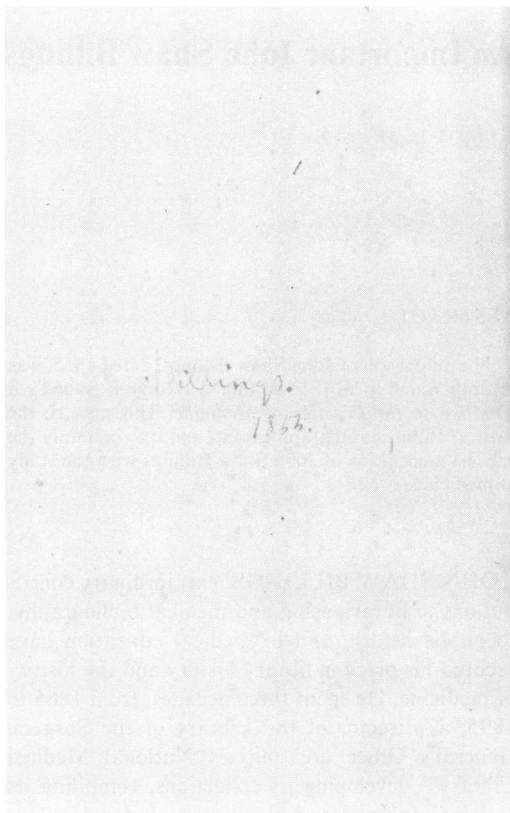


FIG. 2—John Shaw Billings' signature in 1855, at age 17 years.

safe and useful guide to the student and young practitioner" [4]. It is also of no little significance that the Medical College of Ohio's annual "Announcement of Lectures and Catalogue" for students "recommended" the Wood *Treatise* as a student textbook for the school's "practice of medicine" course as early as 1847. A recommendation that also appeared in their 1855 "Announcement" [5].

By the time John Shaw Billings graduated from Miami University in 1857, ranking second in his class, he had already decided that he wanted to study medicine. A decision of this nature is generally not made hastily and without deliberation—and, with hindsight, we know that this would have been particularly true with Billings. It is very doubtful whether young Billings had the financial resources to buy this two-volume medical text while he was attending school, and it would not be unreasonable to assume that the work containing Billings' signature and 1855 date was given to him by his parents sometime before the autumn 1855

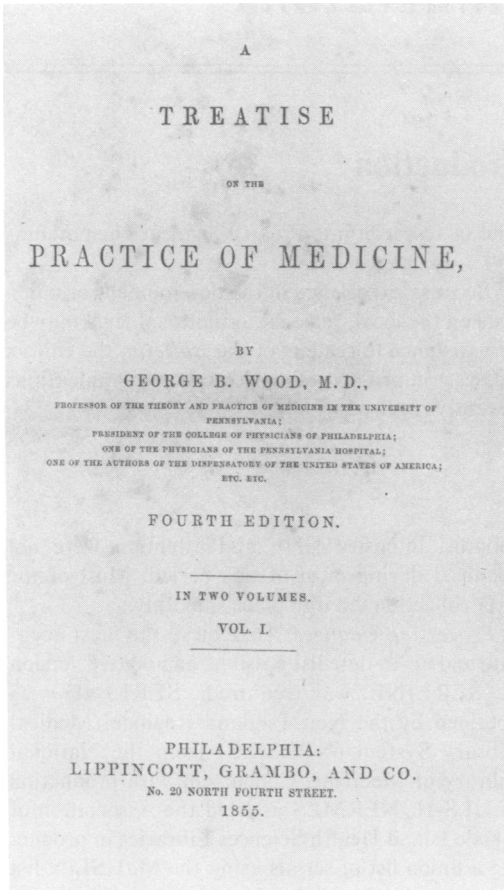


FIG. 3—Title page of Dr. George B. Wood's two-volume 1855 edition of *A Treatise on the Practice of Medicine*, acquired by Billings in 1855.

school term began. Whether it was given to Billings to interest him in the field of medicine or because he already was interested in the subject we cannot know.

After graduating from Miami University, Billings worked for a year to save some money and then entered the Medical College of Ohio, in Cincinnati, in the fall of 1858. It is worth noting that the

college continued to recommend Wood's book for their lectures on the "theory and practice of medicine." Billings had no problems with his medical studies, but his limited funds caused some hardships. By becoming custodian of the dissecting room he was able to live rent-free in the hospital. In 1860, after completing his thesis on the "Surgical Treatment of Epilepsy," Billings received his medical degree. He had plans to enter medical practice with his instructor, Dr. George C. Blackman, but on April 12, 1861 (which also happened to be Billings twenty-third birthday), Fort Sumter was shelled and the Civil War began.

Billings went to Washington in September of that year, took a three-day examination for admission to the United States Army Medical Corps—in which he was ranked first in the list of candidates—and was appointed assistant surgeon. Soon thereafter he saw duty at various Union hospitals, and at the battles of Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and the Wilderness. In August 1864, he was relieved from field duty and four months later he was transferred to the Office of the Surgeon General in Washington. He was twenty-six years old at this time, and Lieutenant Colonel Billings would remain with the Surgeon General's Office for the next thirty years. Here his work and leadership would be instrumental in creating a great medical library [6].

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3. *Ibid.*: p. 5.
4. Wood GB. A treatise on the practice of medicine. 4th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1855:viii.
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