

John W. Robertson, M.D.

1859-1928

Dr. John Robertson was an eminent physician who dedicated 35 years of service to the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow community. He treated everyone who needed his aid regardless of compensation. Through his devotion to the community, he enriched the lives of many families and left a legacy to be recognized by all.

Commemorative Essay by Elizabeth Silver, Sleepy Hollow

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John W. Robertson, MD

Dr. John W. Robertson was a physician whose contribution to Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow was felt by the entire community that directly experienced his selfless, dedicated nature. Despite being regarded as a physician and surgeon who could have risen to prominence in the medical world, Dr. Robertson chose to stay in Tarrytown and provide service for those who needed help, regardless of their ability to pay. His passions for journalism, music, and children also allowed him to have a close relationship with the people of the community. Thus, Dr. John W. Robertson deserves to become a member of the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame for his 35 years of devoted service to the community.

Dr. Robertson was born in Paisley, Scotland in 1859. He moved to Pittsburgh when he was eleven and learned about the printing trade and journalism, which led to his interest in medicine after covering a story on an eminent physician. In 1895, he graduated from the Medical School of NYU. He also was a licensed pharmacist, expert chemist, trained surgeon, and certified optometrist. At 34 years old, Dr. Robertson came to Tarrytown as an assistant to Dr. J. Henry Furman, who died shortly after. Although Dr. Robertson planned to stay in Tarrytown temporarily, he became so involved with his work and his personal relationships with patients in the community that he forgot about his initial dislike for the area's climate.

Dr. Robinson helped begin the Tarrytown Hospital, serving as a consultant or attendant physician in major cases. He was a staff member at Bellevue and Saint Luke's Hospital in New York City for which he received no remuneration. During the Spanish-American War, he worked with Helen Gould to treat soldiers suffering from "yellow jack," (yellow fever) though he never

accepted any compensation for his work in spite of it being offered to him. He became the personal physician to his friend William Rockefeller and John D. Archibold, a Standard Oil magnate. Because of his ability and qualifications, he could have become a wealthy and well-known physician; however, he decided to devote himself to the community of the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow area.

Dr. Robinson was best known for his service to the less fortunate and his dedication to his patients. During his 35 years of practice in the Tarrytowns, it was known that he had not received remuneration from more than half of the people he treated. He never kept records of bills and was often forced to accept payment. For instance, John J. Hughes, a contractor, described how Dr. Robertson tore up his 200 dollar check for an operation when Dr. Robinson insisted the fee was only \$17.50. Moreover, Dr. Robertson never discriminated against race, religion, or class. Dr. B.L. Sweet wrote, "He was a man of considerable ability who did more good for the poor people than any other doctor in the Tarrytowns." He came to know his patients on a personal level, understanding their family circumstances to offer the best care possible. If there was a heavy snow, he would dig his way through almost impassable roads in order to aid those who needed his help. He was willing to sacrifice his time, energy, and success so those normally refused care could be given the opportunity to live a healthy life.

His talents extended beyond the medical field. He was passionate about music and wrote many compositions. He played the piano, violin, and flute, often at two o'clock in the morning. He also had an affinity for children and always carried candy, specifically gumdrops, to give to them.

In spite of his humility as the old "Doc" who had "never wanted anyone to know the good he did," his patients had spread the word of his compassion and competence. The community demonstrated its affection and reverence toward the doctor when he fell ill in the later part of his life. Churches

of all denominations offered prayers for his speedy recovery. Additionally, people of different religions, races, and social classes joined together to pray that the doctor survive his illness so that his hard work and kindness could continue to be appreciated by the community. Remembered as a “light in the night to the sick and suffering humanity,” Dr. Robertson died on October 19, 1928; a day filled with flowers left for him and with women weeping on phones when hearing of his passing. Two monuments were later built for this “enlightened” doctor and unsung hero who had dedicated his life to the welfare of the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow community.

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