Julian John Chisholm M.D.: Confederate surgeon, ophthalmologist and hospital founder *

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Key words: Baltimore, chloroform, Confederacy, Helen Keller, military surgery, Presbyterian Hospital, South Carolina

Julian John Chisolm was born in Charleston, South Carolina on April 16, 1830, the second son of Robert Trail Chisolm and Harriett Emily Schutt. It is said that the name originated in the 11th century at the time of William the Conquerer when a Norman bearing the name de Chesé married a Saxon heiress whose estate name was ‘Holme’. The joining of the names created de Cheséholme which eventually evolved to Chisholm [1]. The family’s more recent ancestry however originated in Inverness-shire Scotland which was the home of Alexander Chisolm Jr who emigrated to South Carolina with his mother in 1746. From his later marriage to Christina Chisolm in 1766 [1] a prominent Charleston family evolved with extensive land holdings and plantations where abundant crops of rice and indigo flourished [2]. It is of interest that the spelling of this family’s name without the ‘h’ (Chisolm rather than Chisholm) identifies them as originating in Charleston rather than from Savannah or other localities [2]. Although little is known of his early education, young Chisolm was the ‘office assistant’ of a prominent Charleston physician Elias Horlbeck [3] prior to his formal education at the Medical College of the State of South Carolina where he graduated in March 1850 at the age of 19. His graduation thesis entitled On Ligatures foreshadowed his career in surgery.

Following the custom of the day for young men to broaden their medical knowledge, Chisolm travelled to Europe following his graduation and spent the remainder of 1850 and most of 1851 studying in Paris. Here he visited various hospitals, attended lectures by Claude Bernard and studied diseases of the eye with Louis-Auguste Desmarres. On his return to Charleston his first publication in 1852 was on ‘Extracts from Bernard’s lectures on experimental physiology’ [4].

* This paper was read at The Cogan Ophthalmic Historical Society June 19 and 20, 1999 Montreal, Canada.
On February 3, 1852 Chisolm married his cousin Miss Mary Edings Chisolm and began his prominent role in the community with his private practice of surgery. Strongly dedicated to medicine and teaching he and a friend Francis T. Miles organized a preparatory school for medicine and in 1857 he and another friend Joseph Cain opened a free hospital for Negro slaves. Chisolm was soon recognized for his clinical and surgical acumen and was appointed Professor of Surgery at his alma mater in 1858. At the age of 28, he was the youngest Professor of Surgery in the United States (Figure 1). In 1859 Dr. Chisolm again visited Europe. It was at the time of the Austro-Italian War and he had a chance to study military hospitals in Italy and observe the condition and treatment of the wounded brought back to Milan following the bloody battles at Magenta and Salfereno. It was a preparation for the role he would assume in a span of less than two years, when his own country would find itself in the throes of a civil war. Upon his return home he devoted his time to practice and his duties as Chairman of the Department of Surgery. His desire for the medical school curriculum to provide personal influence on the students led him to establish weekly conferences with members of the graduating class [5]. The next phase of Julian Chisolm’s life began on April 12, 1861 when Fort Sumter was fired upon, thus marking the beginning of the conflict between the States. It is remarkable that despite the intense shelling from both sides there were no battle casualties [6]. Yet an accidental musket wound to the shoulder of a soldier provided Chisolm an opportunity