

Beckwith, John ^[1]

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by Gertrude S. Carraway and James S. Brawley, 1979

31 July 1785–8 May 1870

John Beckwith, physician and surgeon, was born in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., the son of Elizabeth Dart and John Beckwith, a Revolutionary War ^[2] veteran of New York. The younger Beckwith was admitted to the practice of medicine at New London, Conn. He went south for his health and while in North Carolina visited a friend at New Bern. There he attended a "large entertainment" and met Margaret Cogdell Stanly (26 May 1787–7 Jan. 1864), daughter of Ann Cogdell and John Wright Stanly ^[3]. Tradition relates that Miss Stanly was ashamed of her party dress because of its cut, but Beckwith asked to be introduced to the young lady in the white silk dress with high neck and long lace sleeves. He fell in love with her, and they were married in New Bern, 3 Dec. 1807.

Beckwith served as a surgeon with New York forces during the War of 1812 ^[4] and afterwards moved to North Carolina. The exact sequence of his moves within the state is not clear, and he apparently lived in several places more than once. He probably lived first in New Bern, then in Salisbury, and finally in Raleigh ^[5]. He was also in Hillsborough and Fayetteville ^[6] for some time. His skill in medicine and surgery, particularly in eye operations, was widely known and highly praised. One of the earliest cataract operations is reported to have been performed by him. A Rowan County ^[7] farmer felt compelled to bring the surgeon's work to the attention of the public in a letter to the editor of the Western Carolinian ^[8] in Salisbury in January 1822. Isaac Wiseman wrote that Dr. Beckwith performed an operation on his wife's right eye that did not give her more pain than bleeding, and in a week she could see well enough to walk. The same operation was performed on her left eye with equal success.

In March 1823, Beckwith operated successfully on a nineteen-year-old youth who had been blind from birth. After the operation the patient's eyes were able to distinguish minute objects and were reported to be "daily acquiring strength. The operation was performed with little pain and succeeded by no inflammation." The Western Carolinian concluded that the "success which has attended the various cases operated on by Dr. Beckwith, [is] we believe, unparalleled; and the spirit of kindness and benevolence he has manifested toward those who were laboring under the complicated evils of poverty and blindness, we trust, will bring upon him the blessings of those who were ready to perish." The Raleigh Register ^[9] referred with pride to his operations for the relief of blindness, declaring that he had as few instances of failure as the more famed doctors in the North. In Salem ^[10], the Moravian ^[11] journal for 1 June 1823 recorded: "Our Br. Kramsch went to Salisbury on the 19th of last month at the invitation of Dr. Beckwith, a well-known eye doctor there. He returned today after a successful operation on the eye on which no previous operation had been performed, and had the joy of again being able to see his family and friends."

Beckwith was the author of "A Memoir on the Natural Walls, or Solid Dykes in the State of North-Carolina, about which there have been debates, whether they were basaltic, or of some other formation," ^[12] published in the American Journal of Science and Arts 5 (1822): 1–7. This natural formation in Rowan County ^[7], believed to have been of prehistoric construction, long attracted the attention of scientists.

Beckwith moved to Raleigh in 1823, where he remained until moving in January 1845 to Petersburg, Va.; there Mrs. Beckwith died. The Beckwiths were the parents of John Watrus ^[13], who became the Episcopal Bishop of Georgia; Thomas Stanly, who practiced medicine in Petersburg; James, who died when a student at the Salisbury Academy ^[14] in 1821; Cornelia; Nancy; and Katherine. Thomas Stanly married Agnes, daughter of Edmund Ruffin of Virginia; their son, Charles Minnigerode (1851–1928), at one time an instructor at the University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn., was consecrated Bishop of Alabama in 1902.

After his wife's death, Beckwith moved to Riverdale (now in the Bronx), N.Y., to live with his daughter, Katherine (Mrs. Henry F. Spaulding), and it was there that he died.

References:

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Additional Resources:

Search results for John Beckwith in WorldCat: https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3ABeckwith%2C+John.&qt=hot_author [15]

Edmund Ruffin Beckwith Papers, 1753-1949 (collection no. 03365). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Beckwith,Edmund_Ruffin.html [16] (accessed April 3, 2013).

Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, Under the Editorial Supervision of Lyon Gardiner Tyler, Volume 5 [Google eBook](#) [17].

North Carolina Archives, Newspaper Digitization
Project: <http://ncecho.cdmhost.com/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15016coll1> [18]

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