

Merritt, Hiram Houston, Jr. ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1991

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Hiram Houston Merritt, Jr., physician and educator, was born in Wilmington, the son of Hiram H. and Dessie Cline Merritt. After attending the local schools, he spent a year at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2] (1919) before transferring to Vanderbilt, where he received an A.B. degree in 1922. He was graduated from the medical school of [Johns Hopkins University](#) ^[3] in 1926 and pursued further training in New Haven, Boston, and Munich, Germany.

Merritt began his teaching and research career in Boston, where he was visiting neurologist at the Boston City Hospital (1934–42), consulting neurologist at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (1939–44), and assistant professor of neurology at Harvard University (1942–44). Moving to New York City, he became professor of clinical neurology at [Columbia University](#) ^[4] in 1944 and was promoted to chairman of the department in 1948, a position he held for twenty years. In 1958 he became acting dean of the medical school and vice-president of medical affairs for the university. At the time of his death, he was Moses Professor Emeritus of Neurology, dean emeritus, and vice-president emeritus of medical affairs.

The author of several widely used textbooks on neurology and of many articles published in scientific journals, Merritt is best known as the principal discoverer of phenytoin (dilantin), now commonly used as an anticonvulsant. He also helped build Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center as a major training facility for neurology. Thirty-eight of his former students became heads of neurology departments and other institutions.

Merritt was a member of numerous professional associations and the recipient of many honors, including an honorary A.M. from Harvard (1942), an Sc. D. from the [New York Medical College](#) ^[4] (1967), and an Sc. D. from Columbia (1971). He received the North Carolina Award from his native state in 1967, and after treating Antonio Salazar, the premier of Portugal, he was awarded a grand officership in the Portuguese Order of Santiago.

Houston Merritt married Mabel Carmichael in 1930; they had no children. At the time of his death, he resided in Bronxville, N. Y. Dr. Merritt endowed a distinguished professorship of neurology and the H. Houston Merritt Electron Microscopy Laboratory, for use by faculty and students, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

References:

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

[New Hanover County](#) ^[9]

[Wilmington](#) ^[10]

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