

JOHN SPRAGUE

JOHN SPRAGUE, a physician of Boston and Dedham, was born in Cambridge on December 4, 1718, and baptized at the First Church three days later, the third son of Joseph and Sarah (Stedman) Sprague. Joseph, a saddler by trade, had a small but substantial estate. He paid one of John's quarter bills with a quarter of beef. The lad lived at home during his four college years, and for three of them enjoyed the Sprague Scholarship. He subscribed for the *Chronological History* of Thomas Prince (A.B. 1707), and was once fined by the Faculty for buying and selling books with other students. His goal was the practice of medicine, and when he returned for his M. A. in 1740 he was prepared to argue the affirmative of "An Stamina omnia, seu Vascula Corporum, et animalium, et vegetabilium, in illis sex Diebus primis, creata fuerint!"

Sprague kept the Medford school for about a year, but he settled in Boston where he studied medicine with the two most learned physicians, William Douglass and Louis Dalhonde. By 1743 he was in practice by himself, and on April 11, 1745, he married Elizabeth Dalhonde. From Edmund Quincy (A.B. 1722) they bought a house and land on the south side of Winter Street. Here, with two black slaves, they lived in a style appropriate to a physician with a rapidly growing practice.¹ The Doctor was particularly noted for the battle which he waged against smallpox, with which he had an early acquaintance, for during the epidemic of 1745 the Selectmen "Ordered, That Dr. John Sprague be Confined to his room and not Suffered to go abroad without Leave of the Select men, and that One or more of them visit him every Day."² During subsequent epidemics of the dread disease one or another of his houses was turned into a smallpox hospital. He was active at the quarantine station at Point Shirley, and inoculated gratis so many of the poor of the town that he was formally thanked by the Selectmen.³ Beginning in 1761 he was honored by appointment each year to the committee to visit the schools.

¹ There is a long list of medicinals imported by him in the Early Files in the Office of the Clerk of the Supreme Judicial Court, 70,913.

² *Selectmen's Minutes from 1742/3 to 1753* (Record Commissioners, XVII), p. 96.

³ *Boston News-Letter*, May 31, 1764, 2/2.

Elizabeth Sprague died early in 1757, leaving the Doctor with three young sons. He raised these boys successfully, although he did not remarry until December 27, 1770, when he united his considerable fortune with the very much larger one which Esther Harrison had received from her late husband, Charles. Several years before this Sprague had bought the mansion house of Peter Luce of Dedham and the adjoining Jonathan Fisher farm, on which he built a second elegant house. These both burned in March, 1765; but, undaunted, he immediately raised on the property a house "75 feet long 25 wide."⁴ When he came into the Harrison money he transferred his residence to the Dedham mansion where he intended to live the life of a country gentleman and take no more practice than he wished.

Dr. Sprague soon found that he was, like a good Yankee, too fond of making money to turn away patients, or to forgive entirely his many debtors in Boston. On one of his visits to the metropolis he met and dunned Captain Lewis Turner, who soon thereafter did away with himself. This caused such a great public clamor against the Doctor that he thought it necessary to publish in two newspapers a long defense in which he said:

I was very easy respecting my Debt when I know his Circumstances; yet I thought it was but reasonable, as my Debt was of so long standing, I should share some Part with his other Creditors; but never after had thought of sueing or any ways distressing him; and have no Reason to believe by his Behaviour to me, he had himself any Thought I should distress him, as I never to my Knowledge uttered to him an unfriendly Expression.⁵

This event is the origin of a large element in the tradition respecting Dr. Sprague which apparently does him an injustice, for his friends joked about his willingness to let his bills run for many years. His contemporaries and their children were in general agreement that he was singularly blunt in manner, ordinarily but not always amiable, very well read, shrewd, and penetrating.

Had the Doctor's politics been wrong, his reputation and manner would have been the ruin of him; but he was an active Son of

⁴ *Providence Gazette*, Mar. 16, 1765, 3/1; *New England Hist. Gen. Reg.*, LXIII, 263.

⁵ *Boston News-Letter*, Apr. 23, 1772, 2/2; *Boston Gazette*, Apr. 27, 1772, 2/2.

Liberty.⁶ He engaged in political plotting with Robert Treat Paine (A.B. 1749),⁷ and John Adams (A.B. 1755) found his hospitality at Dedham irresistible.⁸ In September, 1779, that town sent him to the Massachusetts constitutional convention. During the War he earned a great name as a consultant, younger physicians flocked to him for advice, and his reputation spread among laymen:

Dr. Sprague . . . was endowed with more than a common share of "natural acumen"; and being a very careful observer of morbid phenomena became eminent among his brethren for his skill in diagnosis. He possessed the unbounded confidence of his patients. . . . He was eminently successful in acquiring and retaining business; and, it has been said, not over-scrupulous in exacting a substantial remuneration for his services. He acquired a princely fortune; but it is proper to add, that one of his relatives has assured me, that this wealth was obtained more from the rise of soldiers' claims, which he largely purchased, than from the emoluments of his profession.⁹

Among the tales which were told about him was one concerning a woman who came from a distance seeking advice about her husband, who had suffered a fall, but determined to test the famous Doctor's skill at diagnosis before trusting him. However, he overheard her plan and was forewarned:

"Doctor, I have brought some of my husband's water, and I want you to tell me what is the matter with him; and if you can do that, I shall believe you can cure him." The doctor, after due examination, replied, "Madam, I should think that your husband has received an injury by falling down stairs." "I never!" — exclaimed the woman. "But — doctor — how many flights of stairs?" This question had not been anticipated, and he answered at random, "Two, madam." "Ah, doctor," she said, "it was three — from garret to cellar." — "But, madam," responded the doctor, "did you bring all the water?" "I confess I did not." "Then, madam, you have left one flight of stairs at home." She was perfectly satisfied, and went away astonished at a manifestation of wisdom quite beyond her power of comprehension.¹⁰

In view of his fame it seems quite certain that it was he who was the "Dr. John Sprague, Sr." who was named as an original mem-

⁶ Mass. Hist. Soc., *Proceedings*, 1st Ser., XI, 141.

⁷ R. T. Paine Mss. (Mass. Hist. Soc.), XI, 77.

⁸ *Familiar Letters of John . . . and . . . Abigail Adams During the Revolution* (Boston, n. d.), p. 233.

⁹ Ebenezer Alden, *Early History of the Medical Profession in the County of Norfolk* (Boston, 1853), pp. 23-24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24 n.

ber of the Massachusetts Medical Society in its charter of 1781; but his namesake of the Class of 1730 publicly protested that he was senior and the man intended.

In 1788 the Doctor advertised his Dedham property for sale and rent,¹¹ and it is a temptation to connect this with his speculation in Ohio lands;¹² but the truth is that he remained quietly in Dedham, serving his generation and two or three subsequent. In the community of Harvard graduates he was well known, and he had been one of the more generous donors to the campaign to replace the books and apparatus lost in the fire of 1764. At the Commencement of 1792 he was awarded an M. D., which was then at Harvard purely an honorary degree.

Dr. Sprague died at Dedham of a fever on May 29, 1797, and was buried from his house in Winter Street, in Boston.¹³ His widow, Esther, died on October 5, 1811. By his first wife he had three sons: (1) Lawrence, b. Sept. 10, 1748; A.B. 1768; lost. (2) Edward, b. May 19, 1749; A.B. 1770; m. 1st Martha Hill, 2nd Hannah Fitch; d. Dec. 16, 1817; (3) John, b. Sept. 10, 1752; A.B. 1772; m. Rebecca Chambers, Nov. 17, 1773; d. June 1, 1800.

¹¹ *Independent Chronicle*, Feb. 28, 1788.

¹² *New England Hist. Gen. Reg.*, LXV, 224.

¹³ *Columbian Centinel*, May 31, 1797.