

## Memoir of James G. Bassett, M.D. (1919-2019)

James Guernsey Bassett could be characterized as loyal:

Loyal to his wife of 75 years, Eleanor;

Loyal to the Women's Medical College / Medical College of Pennsylvania, his academic home for 32 years, from 1955 until 1987, when he retired after serving as chair of the department;

Loyal to the medical profession, maintaining a subscription to JAMA until his death a few months shy of 100.

Loyal to the Philadelphia Academy of Surgery for 58 years, where he faithfully responded to every meeting notice from the time he signed the historic book in 1961 until 2019, when he died, and where he gave the Rhoads Oration, served on Council, and dressed formally as Secretary until illness intervened.

Jim Bassett was born September 9, 1919 in Cleveland, Ohio, but grew up in Port Huron, Michigan. He attended the University of Michigan, where he met his future wife, Eleanor ("El"), while dissecting a shark in comparative anatomy. He received his AB in 1942 and they married in December of 1943.

After graduating from Michigan, he attended the Duke University School of Medicine. According to his daughter, Sarah, "The full story is actually quite funny. Apparently, he applied to Duke and to Harvard. Harvard rejected him for medical school, but said it would be happy to have him join the Dental School! Needless to say, this was not what he had in mind."

After receiving his MD in 1946, he returned to the University of Michigan Hospital to begin his surgical training. This was interrupted by two years of deferred military service from 1948 to 1950 at the Hill Air Force Base in Ogden, Utah, where he served as a physician and, "when the assignment required, as a meat inspector." He then returned to the University of Michigan Hospital, completing his residency in 1953 and joining the staff.

In 1955, Jim was recruited by Donald Cooper, a fellow Michigander who had known Jim when they were in training at the University of Michigan Hospital. The Bassetts moved to Philadelphia, their infant daughter in tow, and Jim joined Don and L. Kraeer Ferguson in practice at Graduate Hospital, where Dr. Ferguson headed one of the two surgical services, and at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, where Dr. Ferguson also served as Chairman of Surgery.



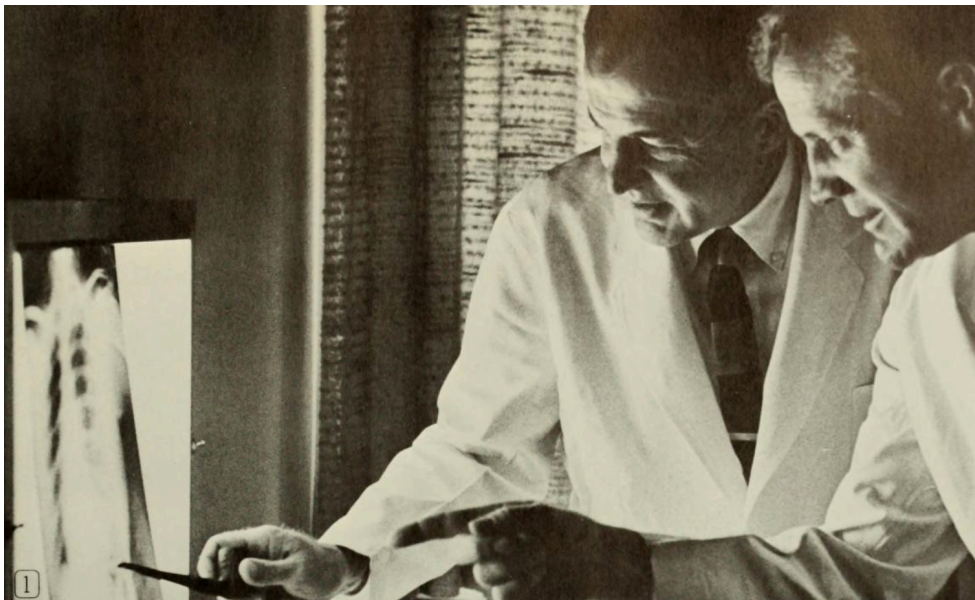
Donald R. Cooper

L. Kraeer Ferguson

James G. Bassett

The Faculty in Surgery at the Woman's Medical College, from their 1956 yearbook, *Iatrian* (also one of two surgical services at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate Hospital)

In 1960, after Dr. Ferguson retired as Chairman of Surgery at the Woman's Medical College, Dr. Cooper became the first full-time chair in the history of the Woman's Medical College and his partner, Jim Bassett, became the second full-time member of the surgical faculty.



Donald R. Cooper

James G. Bassett

First Full-time Faculty in Surgery, Woman's Medical College (*Iatrian*)

Jim remained a stalwart in the department for a total of 32 years. During that time, he saw the College become coeducational in 1970, becoming the Medical College of Pennsylvania, and he took over as chair from the retiring Donald Copper, in 1982. After his own retirement in 1987, the Medical College of Pennsylvania evolved into the Drexel University College of Medicine.

Jim collected Lindback and Golden Apple awards to complement his outstanding clinical expertise. He also took a sabbatical in England during the 1970-71 academic year to study wound healing with Dr. Theodore Gillman in the Department of Experimental Pathology at the Agricultural Research Council's Institute of Animal Physiology, now called the Babraham Institute, partnering with the University of Cambridge. He presented his research during his Rhoads Oration to the Philadelphia Academy of Surgery in 1972.



In addition to being the Rhoads Orator, Jim served as a Councilor-at-large for the Academy during 1981 and 1982 and then served as Secretary during 1983 and 1984, after which a serious illness, fortunately temporary, forced him to step aside. Jim was a very loyal member of the Academy, responding to every meeting notice and dues request from the time he signed the historic book in 1961 until he died in 2019 - 58 years later!



Jim's interests extended far beyond the operating theater. He had training as a vocalist and was a member of the Men's Glee Club at the University of Michigan. He had a particular fondness for German Lieder. Later in life, he sang with the Haverford/Bryn Mawr Chorale. Opera, however, remained his preferred genre. Among the great compositions, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, was his favorite. According to his daughter, Sarah, "He sometimes could be heard singing the role of its protagonist, Hans Sachs, around the house. It was, he said, 'Wagner without the pain.'"

Jim was an outstanding clinical surgeon. He was well liked by patients, staff, students, residents, and colleagues. At his retirement in 1987, he was honored by his colleagues in the Department of Surgery with a Distinguished Service award.



Eleanor and Jim Bassett looking at the Distinguished Service Award he received at his retirement in 1987

This tribute of Dr. Bassett from one of the many residents he trained is representative of his legacy:

"He was a great mentor and a very special person who will be missed. The legacy Don Cooper and Jim Bassett have left lives on through the generations of surgeons they trained who have gone on to make valuable contributions to surgery and the profession."

Ajit K. Sachdeva, MD, FACS, FRCS  
Director, Division of Education  
American College of Surgeons



After retirement, Jim and El traveled extensively while they could. In December 2018, they celebrated their 75<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Three months later, in March 2019, Eleanor died at the age of 98. In June 27, 2019, Jim died at the age of 99, a few months from his centennial. He is survived by their daughter, Sarah Bassett, Associate Professor of Art History at Indiana University.