

ALUMNI PROFILE

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John K. Lattimer:

Urologist,
Historian,
Collector, Sleuth
—A Medical Man
for All Seasons

By Peter Wortsman



John K. Lattimer '38

Throughout his long and fruitful career, John K. Lattimer '38 has often touched and been touched by history. Innovative academic urologist, record-setting athlete, veteran Army surgeon on hand at the Normandy Invasion and the Nuremberg trial, noted collector, eclectic author, ballistics expert and forensic authority on the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations, and recipient of more medals than a fine lapel can hold, his epic list of accomplishments fills a full 59 lines of "Who's Who in the World." His patients have included such key players in the course of events as the man who built the George Washington Bridge (Othar Ammann), Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler, actress Greta Garbo, U.S. President Warren Harding, aviator Charles Lindbergh, Reader's Digest co-founder DeWitt Wallace, the injured survivors of the Hindenburg explosion, and the notorious defendants at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. At 86 and counting, a hip replacement may have slowed his strut and tipped his statuesque 6-foot-4-inch frame a hair, but the verve and gusto still run at full tilt, keeping an interviewer on his toes.

From Maple Rapids, Mich., to Morningside Heights

"My theory is that people's capabilities in their given fields grow from a cluster of elements, all of which have to click," Dr. Lattimer reflected in a profile that appeared in AMERICANA



Future urologist with barnyard pet

in 1981. While he was referring specifically to the art of collecting, one of his many avocational interests, his own complex elemental cluster is difficult to dissect.

As a boy stalking pesky crows on the family farm near Maple Rapids, Mich., young Lattimer learned to lock onto his wily target and stick with it until the job was done, a skill that would come in handy years later—when he ran the U.S. government effort

to stalk and stamp out renal TB—and later still when he applied his ballistic talents to demystify the much-touted myth of conspiracy in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He inherited a healthy dose of curiosity and analytical skill from his father, an inventor-engineer and early pioneer in long distance communication for AT&T. His maternal grandfather, a successful Michigan physician who took him along on emergency calls, and a long line of doctors on his mother's side predisposed him to a medical career. Moving to New York with his family at age 2, he returned to the heartland every chance he got to cut loose on the lands the Lattimers homesteaded before the Civil War.

It was there on a Michigan country road one hot summer day that he first encountered living history in the person of a young pilot who stopped to give him and a friend a lift. "You know who that was, don't you?" said the friend, breathless with excitement.



Lattimer family Michigan homestead

teur Athletic Union 200 meter hurdler (a record unbroken for 12 years) and winning the 50-yard dash at the Millrose Games. During his military service, he won the 200-meter hurdles for the 7th U.S. Army at the GI Olympics in Germany.

“That was Charles Lindbergh!” All summer long, John Lattimer watched his hero hone the art of skip bombing on Lake Michigan, a practice put to effective use in World War II. Dr. Lattimer delights in recounting the hilarious and hair-raising tale of how he and his friend salvaged unexploded bombs as souvenirs, gingerly transporting them home via rowboat and bus, thus launching his career as a collector of the arcane. (Family heirlooms already included several early American

Young Lattimer competing for Columbia College



silver-hilted swords, including the one brandished by a notable ancestor, Ethan Allen, at the capture of Fort Ticonderoga.) Years later, when Lindbergh, then a patient, came for dinner, Dr. Lattimer amused his guest by hauling out a vintage bomb Lindbergh had dropped.

Back in New York, where the family settled down, Lattimer attended public schools then Columbia College. In addition to the traditional course of study, he shone as an athlete, setting a record as the Columbia decathlon champion and as an Ama-

Medicine Beckons, Urology Calls

Dr. Lattimer credits Nicholas “Miraculous” Butler, the illustrious president of Columbia University (and later a patient), for first conceiving the idea, in 1910, of a medical center comprising hospitals in various specialties as well as schools of medicine, dentistry, and nursing all located in the same vicinity.

Dr. Lattimer’s medical student days and years of training at the Squier Urological Clinic paralleled the golden age of P&S. With legends like Dean Willard Rappleye at the helm and the world-renowned team of Robert Loeb and Dana Atchley running the show in medicine, the patient population comprised captains of industry, international statesmen and royalty, movie stars, and star athletes. In the corridors and elevators of the medical center, Lattimer remembers bumping into the likes of the king of Siam, the prince of Wales, the prime minister of Canada, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, actor Clark Gable, and boxer Gene Tunney. Famous as he was, Dr. Loeb was not above ferrying the entire class of 1938 over to Seaview on Staten Island to study tuberculous lesions. Renowned (and feared) for his keenly observant eye, Dr. Loeb also taught students a fundamental human lesson: “The patient

wants a friend.” It was a message Dr. Lattimer took to heart and has passed on to generations of P&S students. Dr. Atchley taught the day-to-day rigors of quality care. “When you had one of Atchley’s patients in the hospital,” Dr. Lattimer remembers, “your phone would ring at 5 a.m. ‘What are you going to do with Greta Garbo today? I want to be there!’”

But of all his teachers, Lattimer was most dazzled by the competence and



Young Lattimer, far left, competing for Columbia College in the Sprint Relay Championship of America, 1934

John K. Lattimer'38 as a rotating (surgical) intern on the run for Methodist Episcopal Hospital in Brooklyn, circa 1938



style of the chairman of urology, J. Bentley Squier, who ran the famous clinic established in his name like a gold-plated temple of excellence for all, VIPs and indigent patients alike. Arriving on alternate days in a purple paneled Bugatti Royale and a pearl gray Rolls Royce, he sent his liveried footman ahead, hat in hand, to announce his arrival. This lavish manner did not keep him from personally inspecting the floors on Sundays. Dr. Squier was famous for his surgical skill and speed at a prostatectomy (eight minutes flat!) and other delicate operations, time often being a factor of life and death in the days before antibiotics and blood transfusions. Another famous member of the faculty, and chairman after Squier's retirement, George Francis Cahill, was a wizard at removing adrenal tumors. For a time, the department became involved in sex change operations. Christine Jorgensen, the world's first transsexual, consulted in later years with Dr. Lattimer. What particularly appealed to him about urology was its diverse challenge as a discipline, the fact that it combined medicine and surgery with superb diagnostic techniques. "Where else," as he said in a profile that appeared in Roche Medical Image in 1968, "can you, in a single morning, relieve one patient from the agony of urinary obstruction, change the sexual characteristics of another, and arrest cancer in a third?"

Summers were spent working as a ship's doctor on a Mississippi River steamboat, the Gordon C. Greene.

Following graduation, Dr. Lattimer entered the surgical trenches, treating every conceivable kind of wound and trauma as a rotating (surgical) intern at Methodist-Episcopal Hospital in Brooklyn. He returned to Columbia to join the faculty as an assistant in urology (and resident at the Squier Urological Clinic), earning an Sc.D. degree along with the prestigious Smith Prize in 1943. But trouble brewing overseas put a hold on his academic career and thrust him into history's path.

From Nottingham to Normandy

Joining the armed forces, he selected the Air Force until friends pointed out that Air Force personnel did not do any major surgery. He got himself transferred to the Army (thanks to the intercession of a helpful young medical officer at the Pentagon named Michael DeBakey, who later made something of a

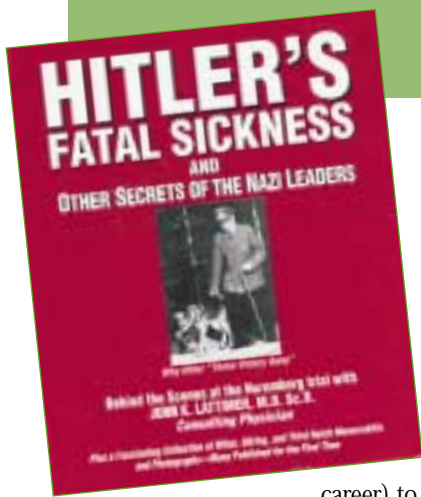
name for himself in cardiac surgery). His six weeks of training at Carlisle Barracks were anything but basic. Realizing that the vast majority of fledgling medical officers had no experience in treating gunshot wounds, he pitched in to help. An expert marksman, he also participated in Army wound ballistics experiments at the anatomy lab at P&S to establish what the Germans were doing to make their bullets tumble and tear into their human targets.



John K. Lattimer'38 with his mother and a classmate in front of Bard Hall at his P&S graduation



A young surgical specialist and hospital train commander, John K. Lattimer'38, during World War II



Dr. Lattimer with the president of Argentina, center



Sent overseas to Nottingham, England, he bided his time before the impending invasion by, among other endeavors, training a drill team of nurses, thereby attracting the attention of Winston Churchill, his picture making it (for the first of three times in his career) to the front page of the New York Times.

All fun and games came to a sudden and dramatic end on D-day. Dr. Lattimer recalls the experience of treating the enormous number of seriously wounded casualties of the Normandy Invasion at makeshift evac hospitals ashore and back in Great Britain as “a terrible, terrible time.” With hundreds of evacuees



Dr. Lattimer drilling Army nurses in preparation for the Normandy Invasion, 1944, in the photo that made the front page of the New York Times

suffering multiple life-threatening wounds to kidney, bladder, and genitals and limited blood plasma available, he and his colleagues had to perform triage, operating on those most likely to survive. He worked fast and furiously and, on occasion, had to confront a pistol in the trembling hand of a GI whose buddy hadn’t been picked.

When, at last, the Allies took the blood-soaked beachhead, Dr. Lattimer’s unit went on to Antwerp, Kassel, Frankfurt, and, finally, Munich, where a large German civilian hospital was re-tooled as the U.S. Army’s 98th General Hospital and Dr. Lattimer took over as chief of urology/surgery.



John K. Lattimer ’38, new chairman of the Department of Urology, circa 1955

The Lattimer family



“Boy, You Got to See This! This is History!”

Pastor Henry Gerecke, the Lutheran chaplain of the 98th General Hospital and a friend of Dr. Lattimer’s, was transferred to see to the spiritual needs of high ranking Nazi prisoners pending trial and later to walk the condemned to the gallows. Held at first at an old resort hotel in Mondorf-Les-Bains in Luxembourg (American code name, “Ashcan”), the defendants were later sent to a prison in Nuremberg to face the tribunal. Chaplain Gerecke urged his friend to accompany him: “Boy, you got to see this! This is history!”

While pursuing his duties at the hospital, Dr. Lattimer was one of several physicians who tended to the prisoners’ medical needs throughout the trial. In his compelling book, “Hitler’s Fatal Sickness and Other Secrets of the Nazi Leaders,” published in 1999, the author taps his firsthand experience, as well as medical scholarship and speculation on the historical ramifications of Hitler’s Parkinson’s disease, which, he believes, ultimately led Hitler to make the rash military judgments that cost Germany the war. Much of the book is devoted to Dr. Lattimer’s impressions of the defendants from the point of view of a physician. While most elicited his unqualified contempt, Albert Speer, the only defendant to admit his guilt and take responsibility for the crimes committed under his watch, earned Dr. Lattimer’s respect. Impressed by Speer’s obvious intelligence and a willingness to face the truth, the author paraphrases the observation of a colleague on the

American medical team, prison psychiatrist Douglas Kelley (who trained at the New York State Psychiatric Institute), who compared Speer “to a young race horse of great capability who was wearing blinders. He could see straight ahead and all he did was to run to his greatest capacity without realizing the

consequences.” The highest ranking and most notorious defendant, Reich Marshal Hermann Goering, earned Lattimer’s grudging avowal of a keen and wily intelligence. His wife served Goering well in his final hour, managing to cheat the hangman with a hidden ampoule of cyanide. The ampoule container itself is now a part of Dr. Lattimer’s large collection of memorabilia from the trial.

Winning the War Against Renal TB and Other Victories

Returning to the United States, Dr. Lattimer rejoined the urology faculty at P&S and the staff at Presbyterian and Babies hospitals. Likewise serving as an attending consultant in urology at the Veterans Administration hospital in the Bronx, he headed the research unit for genitourinary tuberculosis. Among the notable medical accomplishments of the post-War period, his team applied a new drug, streptomycin, later adding PAS and isoniazid, to help stamp out renal TB.

At P&S, meanwhile, Dr. Lattimer, whose busy urological practice included both adults and children, began to gather and study the considerable body of data his pediatric service had amassed over the years. Pediatric urology was “a sleeping giant waiting to be awakened,” he recalled in a videotaped interview conducted in 1982 by Emory Medical School Dean James Glenn, in the AOA series, “Leaders in American Medicine.” Dr. Glenn acknowledges Dr. Lattimer as one of the field’s founding fathers. Combining his diverse talents at scholarship, administration, and spreading the word, Dr. Lattimer stunned the old guard of the American Urological Association by filling a 2,500-seat auditorium at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics with urologists and other practitioners from around the country eager to hear his findings. And so, almost overnight, the pediatric urology subspecialty was born, first at P&S, then nationwide and worldwide.

Rapidly rising in academic ranks, he was named professor and chairman of the Department of Urology and director of the Squier Urological Clinic in 1955 at age 39. In the course of his tenure, which lasted until his formal retirement in 1980, Dr. Lattimer increased the number of medical students who opted for what had previously been, in his words, “an underappreciated field” and raised millions in endowments (including substantial personal contributions) to support departmental research. Stressing more imaginative teaching methods, he urged urologists to think of themselves as “watchmakers, rather than plumbers.”

He helped awaken public awareness of the fact that prostate cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in men over 65, thus helping urology to come into its own. The then newly created Office of Urology at the National Institutes of Health awarded his department its first training grant. As governor of the American College of Surgeons, he ran that distinguished body’s educational and urological programs.

Dr. Lattimer likewise attracted national and international spotlight in the field. He was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson as a consultant to the World Health Organization in 1968 and rose to the presidency of the International Society of Urology and the American Urological Association, the first person ever to hold both high offices. He later served as president of the Clinical Society of Genitourinary Surgeons and the Society of University Urologists.

His publications in peer-reviewed journals number more than 350, and he is a former medical consultant to Time Magazine, guest editor for the Medical Examiners Gazette, and contributor to Encyclopedia Britannica. His professional encomia have included the P&S Alumni Gold Medal and the Dean’s Distinguished Achievement Award, the Morgenstern Foundation Freedom Award for his role at Nuremberg, the Great Medal of the City of Paris, and a medal honoring his role in the liberation of Paris personally given to him by the mayor of Paris (and now French president) Jacques Chirac. In 1987 he was the first recipient of the National Kidney Foundation’s award for outstanding achievement in urology and in 1996 he received the Keyes Medal, the top honor of the American Association of Genitourinary Surgeons. Named lectureships were established in his honor at five learned societies.

Lattimer, the Collector

While pursuing his multiple medical activities, Dr. Lattimer always found time to keep up his vast and diverse collection of historical objects—things, as he puts it, that “perpetuate your contact with the moment.” An avid history buff, he made the front page of the New



Dr. Lattimer with wife and son, Jon '77, at his inauguration as president of the International Society of Urologists, Versailles, France, 1973



John K. Lattimer '38 shaking hands with Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac (now president of France) when he received a medal commemorating his role in the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Paris



John K. Lattimer '38 accepting the Gold Medal from the Alumni Association, 1971

York Times a second time when, dressed up as his ancestor Ethan Allen, he led a re-enactment of the taking of Fort Ticonderoga. Dr. Lattimer has for many years helped coordinate the Metropolitan Museum of Art-sponsored Medieval Festival at New York's Fort Tryon Park as a public event, complete with jousting and tilting.

His collection includes the early-American swords, now on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Portrait Gallery; such World War II trinkets as German lugers, Goering's car armor, and original Hitler drawings; and memorabilia pertaining to the two assassinations that rocked American history, those of presidents Lincoln and Kennedy.

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Lattimer, the Assassination Sleuth

Dr. Lattimer's extensive holdings relating to the Lincoln assassination (including a blood-stained collar, a glove, and a cuff of the shirt Lincoln wore to Ford's Theater the night he died) and his research and writing on the subject increased his interest of the events of Nov. 22, 1963, the day President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas. The parallels between the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations were astounding, as were the parallel legends of conspiracy. Tapping his own experience in ballistic research and his knowledge of firearms, Dr. Lattimer immediately got to work on a scientific forensic study of the circumstances of President Kennedy's death. Recognized for his knowledge in the field, he was the first non-government investigator granted access to the Kennedy autopsy materials, including X-rays, photographs, and bloodied clothing. On Jan. 9, 1972, Dr. Lattimer once again made the front page of the New York Times, with a photograph in which he demonstrates on his own head the location where the bullets struck the president. Based on his tests of the rifle used by Lee Harvey Oswald

John K. Lattimer '38 testing a rifle like the one used by Lee Harvey Oswald as part of his ballistics study of the Kennedy assassination



and other findings, Dr. Lattimer backed the report of the Warren Commission and completely discounted the elaborate tales of conspiracy theorists. His book, "Kennedy and Lincoln, Medical and Ballistic Comparisons of Their Assassinations," became a best seller when it was published in 1980.

In 1990, Dr. Lattimer published a third book, "This Was Early Englewood: From the Big Bang to the George Washington Bridge," detailing the history of his longtime home. He is currently working on a book on his silver swords.

Although one of his ancestors, Bishop Hugh Latimer (the family spelled its name differently then), was burned alive by Bloody Mary in 1550 (just outside what would later be Dr. Lattimer's window at Balliol College at Oxford) for refusing to recant his Protestantism and another fell at the Battle of Lexington, kicking off the American Revolution, he and his wife, Jamie, live peaceably in Englewood, N.J. in a grand old home that Dr. Lattimer laughingly labels "a urologist's paradise," complete with nine bathrooms. His daughter, Evan, followed in her

mother's footsteps as an artist. His two sons, Jon K. '77 and Douglas G. '84, have taken after their dad: Both are academic urologists.

A devoted alumnus and dedicated educator, Dr. Lattimer has guided the generosity of his patients toward upholding his legacy at P&S, where an endowed professorship-chairmanship in urology and two research funds bear his name. Having graciously declined a salary back in 1955 when he took over the reins of the Department of Urology, he discovered

to his dismay upon his retirement that he had also, albeit unknowingly, forfeited a pension. Should push come to shove, he could always work the old family farm (all 400 acres) or sell off choice holdings like his massive mastadon molar tooth or objects from his Napoleonic collection, including a little item of urological and historical interest that attracted an Italian television news team to interview him in 1992—the emperor's penis, allegedly excised by the Corsican pathologist who did the autopsy. "Urologists are vital," Dr. Lattimer quipped to the visiting Italians, "but pathologists always have the final word."



Associate Dean Anke Nolting with John K. Lattimer '38 at his 80th birthday party