GEORGE HUNTINGTON (1850–1916)

George Sumner Huntington was born in East Hampton, Long Island, New York. His grandfather, Dr. Abel Huntington, had settled in East Hampton in 1797, and his father, Dr. George Lee Huntington, spent many years in the practice of medicine in that locality.

After receiving preliminary training from his father, Huntington attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, graduating in 1871. He returned to East Hampton to assist his father in practice, and was able to observe further the cases of hereditary chorea which he had first seen with his grandfather and father. It was here that in all probability he began his paper on chorea, as his father's correctional marks have been found on the original manuscript. Later in the same year he moved to Pomeroy, Ohio, and on February 15, 1872, he read his paper, On chorea, before the Meigs and Mason Academy of Medicine in Middletown, Ohio. He was only twenty-two years old at the time. In 1874 he moved to New York, and aside from two years in North Carolina, spent the remainder of his life in the practice of medicine in Dutchess County. He retired in 1915.

Huntington's one major scientific contribution dealt with the subject of chorea in general, but it included his description of the hereditary form which he had observed in East Hampton. He stressed as marked peculiarities of the disease its hereditary nature, its occurrence only in adult life, and the tendency for patients so afflicted to become insane and sometimes suicidal. Speaking before the New York Neurological Society on December 7, 1909, he stated that without the facts and observations imparted to him by his grandfather and father he could never have formulated a picture of the salient characteristics of the disease. From personal memories he recounted: "Over fifty years ago, in riding with my father on his professional rounds, I saw my first case of 'that disorder,' which was the way in which the natives always referred to the dreaded disease. It made a most enduring impression upon my boyish mind, an impression every detail of which I recall today, an
impression which was the very first impulse to my choosing chorea as my virgin contribution to medical lore. We suddenly came upon two women, mother and daughter, both tall, thin, almost cadaverous, both bowing, twisting, grimacing. I stared in wonderment, almost fear. What could it mean? My father paused to speak with them and we passed on. Then my Gamaliel-like instruction began; my medical instruction had its inception. From this point on my interest in the disease has never wholly ceased."

Portrait, courtesy of Dr. Edwin G. Zabriskie, New York City.
GEORGE HUNTINGTON

Even though it has since been shown that previous workers had described the same condition, Huntington, by his lucid, concise and accurate account of the disease, deserves the credit of having been the discoverer of the disorder which bears his name. But the study of this family did not rest with Huntington's description of it. Jelliffe and Tilney took up the task of tracing the ancestry of the families concerned, a study concluded some years later by Vessey (1932), who found that they stemmed from two brothers and their families who left Bures (in Essex) for Suffolk, England, and then sailed to Boston Bay in 1630. During the intervening three centuries about 1,000 descendants of the original settlers were known to have come down with the disease. Not a few of these unfortunate persons were tried for witchcraft in the Colonial courts, and in other ways, too, they were persecuted because their involuntary movements were interpreted as "a derisive pantomime of the sufferings of the Saviour during crucifixion." Among the pioneers in the study of the pathological changes in the basal ganglia in this disease were Jelgersma, Alzheimer, Pfeiffer, Marie and Lhermitte, and C. and O. Vogt.

Huntington was a general practitioner of medicine; his major interests were his patients and their problems. No faculty appointments came his way, nor did he perform any significant research. Because of his attractive personality, keen intellect, ready wit, and sense of humor, he was widely admired and respected. He had a great fondness for music and often played the flute to his wife's accompaniment. Moreover, he was an ardent student of nature and a devotee of the rod and gun. Drawing was one of his lifetime interests and he often made sketches of game birds during his trips through the woods. Here, then, was a man who enjoyed life to the full, and who, because of his insight and imagination, gained a place in neurological history.

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References


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