

# On the Shoulders of Giants: John P Adams MD

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Intellectually, John Adams has one of the best recalls I have ever encountered. He has gained a position of leadership in American Orthopaedics in both teaching and administration, and he is respected throughout the specialty. During the coming years, he is destined to reap many honors. So, Dr Lenox Baker wrote about John Adams in May 30, 1965, in a reference letter. Dr Baker, our Duke Orthopaedic Chairman for more than 30 years (1937-1967), prided himself in judging character, and his appraisal of Dr Adams was certainly not an overstatement.

John P Adams, who completed his orthopaedic residence training at Duke in 1953, has truly been one of our bright shining stars by his contributions and accomplishments in academics, teaching, clinical practice and leadership. John's success has not been based on what he accomplished in 6 weeks or 6 years, but for more than 60 years of being at the forefront of orthopaedic surgery.

John Pletch Adams was born in Ashburn, Maryland, February 22, 1922, the son of John William Adams and Norm Emma Pletch Adams. He received his BS degree from the University of Missouri in 1943 and his MD degree from Washington University in St Louis (USA) in 1945, followed by a rotating internship at Wilmington General Hospital in Wilmington, Delaware. He then served as a Captain in the Medical Corps of the US Army from 1946 to 1949 (37 months in active duty) at the 155th Station Hospital in Yokohama and 49th General Hospital in Tokyo, Japan. Actually, Dr Lenox Baker first met John Adams in Tokyo in 1948 while he spent 4 days lecturing and performing surgery at the General Hospital and was so impressed with him that he encouraged him to come to Duke for his orthopaedic residency.

John began his residency at Duke in 1949, and his training overlapped the training periods of two of our previous 'Shoulders of Giants' honorees—Ralph Coonrad and Gene Bleck. These men remained very close friends for 65 years. Dr Adams' residency training was funded by a Fellowship of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. It is of interest that this period was at the height of poliomyelitis in the US with 43,000 acute cases reported in 1949. Dr Baker asked him to stay at Duke as an instructor in orthopaedic surgery after his Chief Residency. Again Dr Baker commented, 'John is destined to become an outstanding leader in orthopaedic surgery throughout his career. He is one of the finest residents we ever had on this service. I consider him one of, if not the, brightest young leader in the orthopaedic world.'

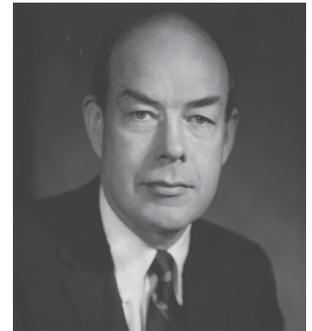
Dr Adams became Professor and Chairman of Orthopaedic Surgery at George Washington School of Medicine and Health Sciences in 1953, and served in that position until his retirement in 1987. During this period, he also served as Professor of Child Health and Development. He continues to serve as Professor Emeritus in both of these departments.

He had the greatest respect from his residents. One of his residents stated, 'The more I have come to know (Dr Adams), the more fascinated I am with him. He has an endless fund of knowledge and is an orthopaedic surgeon's role model.'

In addition to his many duties at George Washington University (GWU), he maintained numerous commitments and appointments to several children's public health programs and government organizations, such as District of Columbia, Department of Human Services (Maternal and Child Health, Handicapped Children's Unit, Hand Clinic, and Vocational Rehabilitation); United State Airforce (USAF) Hospital, Andrews Air Force Base; National Institutes of Health (NIH), US Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, and Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospitals. To add to all of this activity, he earned a Master of Public Health (MPH) from Harvard School of Public Health in 1978.

John has been a prolific writer on a variety of orthopaedic subjects, especially hand and forearm injuries in children, pathogenesis and treatment of Dupuytren's disease, vascular and nerve disorders of the hand, and various pediatric orthopaedic problems. He wrote the seminal articles on 'wringer injuries' in 1959 and 1961. However, he also published on foot problems and, in fact, was a founding member of the Orthopaedics Foot and Ankle Society.

Dr Adams initiated and served as Editor of the Bibliography of Surgery of the Hand, which was published annually by the American Society for Surgery of the Hand from 1967 until 1987. During the 20 years, he served as the Editor of this publication, hand surgeons throughout the world appreciated it as an extremely valuable resource until it was replaced by similar information on the internet. John was also the inaugural editor of the text current practice in orthopaedic surgery in 1963, which was annually published by CV Mosby for 6 years. These unique annual publications were valued by practicing orthopaedic surgeons and residents for their concise, timely and original material on orthopaedic surgery. I can personally state that, during my residency and early years of practice, I consistently relied upon these two publications for updated material, before the internet was available.



John was an effective leader at multiple levels. He served as President of the Washington Orthopaedic Society in 1958 and Washington Hand Society in 1975. He was elected as President of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand in 1971. He served as President of the Hand Society, when the meeting was hosted in his hometown of Washington, DC. He was responsible for several important initiatives during his tenure as President. Three of these are listed as follows:

1. A membership committee was established—prior to then, the Council acted as a committee of the whole and there was never a formal body to review all applications.
2. An ad hoc committee was established for *The Journal of Hand Surgery*; the first issue was published 4 years later in 1976 with Joseph Boyes as the Founding Editor.
3. Eleven continuing medical educational programs were planned and marked the start of a series of successful educational efforts by the American Society for Surgery of the Hand (ASSH).

Some of the honors John earned including being elected to Alpha Omega Alpha in medical school, the Citation Merit from the University of Missouri School of Medicine and Alumni in 1978, and the distinguished American Orthopaedic Association, American-British-Canadian (ABC) Traveling Fellowship in 1959.

Dr Adams developed and maintained many friendships during his illustrious career. Bob Neviasser, who succeeded him as the Chairman, expressed that ‘John has always been thoughtful, inquisitive, kind and courteous. He has been a superb teacher with the highest integrity and everyone trusts him. He has never believed in micromanaging and appropriately delegated important responsibilities.’ He was close friends with Leonard Goldner, Gene Bleck and Ralph Coonrad, as they shared a common interest in pediatric orthopaedics. In 1972, John and Gene Bleck led an important national committee that produced an ‘Orthopaedic Manpower Study.’ His warm relationship with J Leonard Goldner was apparent when John selected him to be his first Visiting Professor for the Metropolitan Washington DC Hand Society when he was president. In addition, J Leonard Goldner (JHG) was a Principal Speaker to honor Dr Adams upon his retirement from the Chair in 1978.

Dr James Nunley remembers this about Dr Adams: ‘As a young Duke attending, I found myself in the enviable position of being able to attend meeting in Washington, DC. At that time, Dr John Adams was still in the practice of orthopaedic surgery in Washington. He was also a member of the very famous Cosmos club. I had read about this club in several novels and historical books and knew how difficult it was to obtain membership. Imagine my surprise when Dr Adams invited me and all of the other Duke attendings to a luncheon there! I think I still have the matchbook with the name Cosmos club on it as a reminder of this eventful day some 35 years later. John was a very gracious host and this made a memorable experience for me.’

Although John conceded that he was thrown into contact with many prominent government leaders and politicians, he was never much enamored with the high social lifestyle of Washington. However, he did become close friends with a few of them, such as Katherine Graham, the former CEO, Publisher and President of the Washington Post. She came to the forefront with the Post’s revelations on the ‘Pentagon Papers—the secret documents of the US. Involvement in the Vietnam War’ and the Watergate coverage in the early 70s. He also had a warm relationship with Senator John Chafee of Rhode Island, who was also Former Governor of Rhode Island and Secretary of the Navy.

John was so respected as a trusting friend and leader that he was elected as Mayor of Lewes, Delaware, a seaside resort town in Delaware from 1992 to 1994. He had acquired the most out of his 92 years of life by engaging in various nonacademic or nonorthopaedic activities. He was an avid bridge player. He loved to play tennis and challenged Len Goldner and Ralph Coonrad to matches in their earlier years at various orthopaedic meetings. His opponents were often stressed and frustrated by trying to get the ball pass him because of his extremely long arms. He belongs to at least three tennis clubs. He has also been an avid sailor and is a member of three yacht or sailing clubs.

Muff and I always enjoyed being in the company of John and his beloved wife, Nancy. She was very knowledgeable and a vibrant conversationalist, and we always felt refreshed after being with them. Nancy died in March 10, 2010. He has one son, John Pletch Adams Jr and three grandchildren.

‘It is not the brilliance but judgment that separates the great leaders from the routine.’<sup>1</sup> John Adams has been endowed with both.

## REFERENCES

1. Winik J. April 1865: The month that saved America. 1st ed. New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 2001.

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