

**Biographical tributes to Caspar Wistar, 1918**  
**1918**  
**Mss.B.W76a**

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	American Philosophical Society
<b>Creator</b>	Hays , I. Minis, (Isaac Minis), 1847-1925
<b>Title</b>	Biographical tributes to Caspar Wistar, 1918
<b>Date</b>	1918
<b>Call number</b>	Mss.B.W76a
<b>Extent</b>	1.0 Volume(s) 1 volume, 55 p., typescript.
<b>Extent</b>	1 volume, 55 p., typescript.
<b>Location</b>	LH-MV-E-7
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Container</b>	1
<b>Abstract</b>	These tributes were read at the American Philosophical Society on the centenary of Wistar's death. Included are tributes by Isaac M. Hays, "Caspar Wistar as a Citizen and Philosopher," and George A. Piersol, "Dr. Caspar Wistar as a Human Anatomist."

## Background note

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Caspar Wistar (1761-1818, APS 1787) was a Philadelphia physician and paleontologist. He was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania for three decades, and he served the American Philosophical Society in various offices, including that of president. He was the host of the popular weekly gatherings of local and visiting learned men that became known as the Wistar Parties.

He was born in Philadelphia, the son of Richard Wistar (1727-1781), a glass manufacturer, and Sarah Wyatt Wistar (1733-1771). His seven siblings included his younger sister Catharine, who was married to Benjamin Franklin's grandson William Bache. Wistar is sometimes called Caspar Wistar, Jr., to distinguish him from his grandfather, also named Caspar Wistar (1696-1752). The elder Caspar was a merchant and glassmaker who had moved from Wald-Hilspach, Germany, to Philadelphia in 1717.

Born a Quaker, Wistar was educated at the Friends School at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Philadelphia. At age sixteen he volunteered as a nurse at the Battle of Germantown in 1777. It is said that this experience inspired him to become a physician. He commenced his medical studies that year, under the physician John Redman and later also with John Jones, a New York physician who had fled to Philadelphia. In 1779 Wistar enrolled in the medical department of what was then called the University of the State of Pennsylvania. In 1782, after receipt of his Bachelor of Medicine, he set out for a three year tour of study in England and Scotland. (Wistar was a practicing Friend throughout his life; however, prior to his departure he had trouble securing a certificate that testified to his diligent adherence to conduct becoming to a Friend for he had fallen "into Scandalous & alarming temptation of being engaged in a duel.") While still a student he was elected one of the presidents of the Royal Medical Society and also president of the Society for the Further Investigation of Natural History. During his stay in England and Scotland he made the acquaintance of several notable figures, including James Boswell, Sir James McIntosh and William Cullen (1710-1790, APS 1768). In 1786 he graduated from the University of Edinburgh with a Doctorate of Medicine.

Back in Philadelphia, Wistar established a private medical practice that soon grew into one of the largest in the city. He was also elected to the College of Physicians and served as a physician to the Philadelphia Dispensary. In 1788 he became a professor of chemistry at the medical school of the College of Philadelphia in 1788. After the merger of the College with the University of the State of Pennsylvania in 1791, Wistar became an adjunct professor of anatomy, midwifery and surgery. In 1793 he joined the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital. He nearly lost his life during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 after being stricken by the disease while assisting his friend Benjamin Rush (1745-1813, APS 1768) in fighting the epidemic. Differences of opinion regarding treatment of this disease, including the drastic use of bleeding and purging, eventually caused a breach in their friendship. Nevertheless, Wistar remained Rush's colleague at the Pennsylvania Hospital until 1810. In 1808 he was appointed to the chair in anatomy which had formerly been occupied by William Shippen. Wistar remained on the Penn faculty until his death in 1818.

Wistar was a popular teacher who enlivened his presentations with drawings and models that made it easier for students to follow his lectures and demonstrations. He developed a number of unique teaching aids, some of which were life-sized anatomical models made of dried and wax-injected human limbs

and organs. Others were fashioned of wood, carved by America's first professional sculptor, William Rush. Two years before his death, Wistar appointed Dr. William Edmonds Horner (1793-1853, APS 1819), his long-time assistant in anatomy, as caretaker of these valuable models. Horner later enlarged the collection and opened the first anatomical museum in the United States, the Wistar and Horner Museum. The collection eventually passed to the Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, the first independent medical research facility established in the United States. The Institute, which was founded in 1892 by Wistar's great-nephew, Isaac J. Wistar (1827-1905, APS 1893), was named in honor of Caspar Wistar.

Wistar's reputation drew medical students to Philadelphia from around the world. His anatomy courses became so large that they eventually had to be divided into sections. Wistar wrote the first and very successful treatise on anatomy published in the United States, titled *A System of Anatomy* (2 vols., 1811, 1814). However, he was widely respected not only for his medical knowledge, but also for his general breadth of knowledge, which included the humanities as well as the sciences. In fact, while Wistar made few contributions to medical literature – his only medical article, a description of the sphenoid sinuses, was published the year he died – , he contributed several papers on scientific subjects outside of medicine, including paleontology and botany. His reputation as an authority on fossil bones was established as early as 1787, when he and Timothy Matlack (1730-1823, APS 1780) presented a paper on what may have been the first dinosaur bone examined by American scientists. In 1799 he published an article on the bones of the giant “megalonix” that Thomas Jefferson had deposited with the American Philosophical Society two years earlier. The essay, which appeared in the Society's *Transactions*, is regarded as the first technical study of professional quality to be published by an American or in America in the field of vertebrate paleontology. One historian has called the achievement “almost incredible in view of the paleontological naïveté of his associates and of the lack of comparative materials.” Wistar also collaborated in Jefferson's efforts to obtain the bones of the mastodon and associated animals, and he studied specimens returned from the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Some of his observations on the latter were published posthumously in the *Transactions*.

Wistar was as popular with his professional colleagues as he was with Philadelphia's literati. He was particularly known for his hospitality, and his home was the weekly meeting place of students and scientists, including locals and distinguished foreign visitors. The physician Charles Caldwell (1772-1853, APS 1796) recalled later that “The company met, without ceremony, on a stated evening, where in the midst of a succession of suitable refreshments, the time passed away, oftentimes until a late hour, in agreeable, varied, and instructive discourse.” The “company” included, for example, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859, APS 1804), who was a guest of honor when he visited Philadelphia in 1800, as well as the French botanist François Andre Michaux (1749-1802). A frequent attendant after his arrival in the United States in 1812 was the Abbé Corrêa da Serra (1750–1823, APS 1812), the Portuguese diplomat and naturalist. Wistar, who shared with the Abbé a serious interest in botany, became his close friend and accompanied him on several expeditions. The Wistar Parties were so popular that several leading members of the American Philosophical Society, including Stephen DuPonceau (1760-1844, APS 1791), continued to host them regularly after Wistar's death.

Wistar was active in numerous scientific and learned organizations. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1787. He served as its curator in 1793 and vice-president in 1795, before succeeding Thomas Jefferson as president in 1815, a position he held until his death. Wistar was especially supportive of the Historical and Literary Committee that was established in 1815 to serve as the collection, research, and publishing arm of the Society. He was elected a Fellow of the College of

Physicians in 1788, and he served as a trustee of the College of Philadelphia from 1789 to 1791. In 1815 he was elected an honorary member of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York. The botanist Thomas Nuttall (1786-1859, APS 1817) honored Wistar by naming the plant genus *Wisteria* after him.

Wistar's support of many progressive causes is reflected in his affiliation with a number of reform organizations. He was a founder of the Society for Circulating the Benefit of Vaccination, and he belonged to the Pennsylvania Prison Society, the Humane Society, and the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, of which he became president in 1813. In 1791 Wistar bought and then freed a slave "to extricate him from that degraded Situation."

Caspar Wistar died in 1818 after a period of declining health. He was married twice, first in 1788 to Isabella Marshall, who died childless two years later. In 1798 he married Elizabeth Mifflin, with whom he had three children: Dr. Richard Mifflin Wistar, Dr. Mifflin Wistar, and Elizabeth Wistar. There were no grandchildren.

## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

## Provenance

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### Acquisition Information

Received and accessioned, 1921 (57212).

## Indexing Terms

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### Corporate Name(s)

- American Philosophical Society.

### Genre(s)

- Manuscript Essays
- Testimonials.

### Personal Name(s)

- Piersol, George A., (George Arthur)
- Wistar, Caspar, 1761-1818

### Subject(s)

- Medicine

## Other Descriptive Information

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This volume contains a series of essays and papers that were read at the APS to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of Caspar Wistar's death. The essays contain information on Wistar's life and some include transcriptions of letters.



## Collection Inventory

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### Tributes

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<b>Piersol, George A., (George Arthur)</b>	Feb. 1, 1918	10-1/2x8
Dr. Caspar Wistar as a human anatomist;		
read, Typed D. 13p. (see: Wistar. Centenary of the death of...; pp. 43-55.) Cf. Proceedings, 57, "Minutes" p.iv.		

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<b>American Philosophical Society</b>	Feb. 1, 1918	10-1/2x8
Centenary of the death of Caspar Wistar;		
Typed D. 2 items bound in 1 volume: speeches by I.M.Hays and G.A.Piersol. These items were read before the APS on Feb.1,1918. Cf.: Proceedings,57, "Minutes", p.iv.		

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<b>Hays , I. Minis, (Isaac Minis), 1847-1925</b>	Feb. 1, 1918	10-1/2x8
Caspar Wistar as a citizen and philosopher;		
read, Typed D. 42p. (see: Wistar. Centenary of the death of...; pp. 1-42.) Cf. Proceedings, 57, "Minutes" p.iv.		

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