

America's First Surgeon General: John M. Woodworth, MD

John M. Woodworth, MD, 1837-1879

By Emma Florio, Special Collections Library Assistant

John Maynard Woodworth was born on August 15, 1837, in Big Flats, a small town in western New York. As a child his family moved to Kane County, Illinois, and Woodworth received his early education at Warrenville Seminary, a coeducational preparatory school in DuPage County. He studied pharmacy at the University of Chicago and worked as a pharmacist in Chicago for several years.

During his time in Chicago, Woodworth became involved in the wider scientific community. In 1857 he helped to found the Chicago Academy of Sciences and the next year he became the curator of the Academy's museum. He made several trips West to collect natural history specimens for the collection.¹ As word of his work spread, the University of Chicago asked him to establish a natural history museum, appointing him as a naturalist at the school. He spent the winters of 1859-61 working for the newly organized Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, helping to expand and catalog its natural history collections.

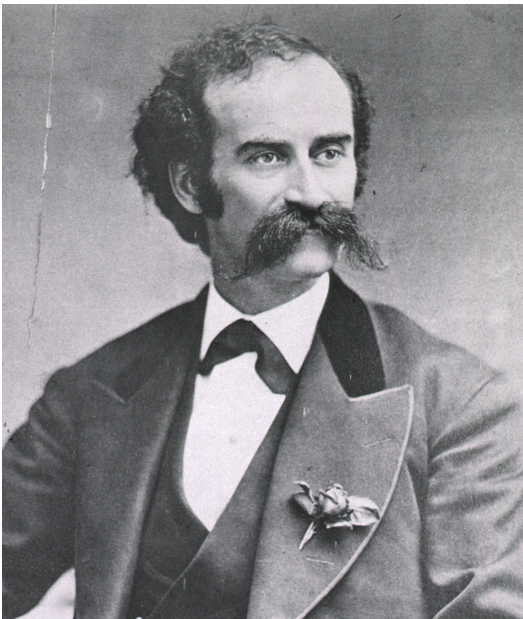
While working as a pharmacist in the 1850s, Woodworth had attended lectures on medicine and chemistry at Rush Medical College. In the early 1860s he decided to continue his medical studies and enrolled in the medical department of Lind University (the earliest incarnation of Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine). He earned his MD in 1862 as part of the medical school's third graduating class. His thesis was titled "Eligible Pharmaceutical Forms for the Administration of Medicine," clearly drawing on his previous work experience.

The first years of the medical school's existence coincided with the American Civil War and many students joined the military as surgeons shortly after graduating. Woodworth was no different; he enlisted in May 1862 and was appointed Assistant Surgeon in the 1st Illinois Light Artillery. He quickly rose through the ranks, being promoted to Surgeon in 1863, and eventually becoming Medical Director of the Army of the Tennessee. In this capacity he commanded the ambulance train that brought the sick and wounded to Savannah, Georgia, during the brutal campaign known as Sherman's March to the Sea. Woodworth was mustered out in July 1865, a few months after the end of the war.



Woodworth in the costume of a Russian fur trapper, worn on an expedition for the Smithsonian, ca. 1860, from the [Wisconsin Historical Society](#)

Woodworth spent the next year in Europe, attending lectures and receiving clinical instruction in the hospitals of major cities like Berlin and Vienna, as European hospitals offered more advanced education in many medical fields. Woodworth once again settled in Chicago upon his return to the United States in 1866 and worked as a demonstrator of anatomy at his alma mater, then called Chicago Medical College. He was also a surgeon at the Chicago Soldier's Home and served as Sanitary Inspector for the



Portrait of Woodworth, from [Images from the National Library of Medicine](#)

Chicago Board of Health.

In 1871, acknowledging both his military and public health experience, Woodworth was appointed the first Supervising Surgeon of the Marine Hospital Service in Washington, DC. Established in 1870, the Marine Hospital Service brought together under centralized federal control a loose network of locally controlled hospitals that cared for ill and disabled seamen in port cities. Under his leadership, physicians did not have permanent positions at a particular location but instead served the general Hospital Service, creating a group of mobile, career service physicians.

Woodworth further reformed the Hospital Service by initiating the publication of annual reports, as well as issuing publications on cholera, yellow fever, and other public health crises. In 1872 he co-founded the American Public Health Association. These activities helped to expand the Hospital Service beyond tending to seamen to focusing on larger public health efforts. To that end, in 1873 Woodworth's title was changed from Supervising Surgeon to Surgeon General, making him the first Surgeon General of the United States. He continued to reform and expand the Marine Hospital Service through the 1870s, including laying the foundation for the passage of the 1878 National Quarantine Act and authorizing the publication of the *Bulletins of Public Health*, which are still published today

as *Public Health Reports*. During this time, he also returned to Chicago to marry Maggie Hannahs, the daughter of a Chicago businessman.

John M. Woodworth died from erysipelas (a bacterial skin infection) and pneumonia on March 14, 1879, at age 41. Despite his short life, he made a significant and lasting impact on the country through his leadership of the Marine Hospital Service. His guidance of the Service toward a more general focus on public health led to its eventual evolution into the Public Health Service, which had fully moved away from "marine" hospital work by 1912. Woodworth is buried in Washington, DC, under a monument that bears the seal of the Marine Hospital Service, which Woodworth himself designed and which is still used by the Public Health Service today.



Seal of the Marine Hospital Service, designed by Woodworth, from [Wikipedia](#)

Endnotes

1. Woodworth's collections laid the foundation for the Chicago Academy of Sciences' museum but were later destroyed during the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Selected References

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