

# The Shreveport Medical Society – A 170 Year Retrospective

## Part One – The Nineteenth Century

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*“The mission of the Shreveport Medical Society is to establish an organization of physicians in Caddo and other parishes in the 4th District of Louisiana for the purpose of assisting in the advancement of medical science and education, elevating the standards of medical practice; improving the health of the community it serves; and by all legitimate means to improve the social, economic, and professional status of its members.” Mission Statement of the Shreveport Medical Society.*

Consistent with the forward-looking nature of the professional association of physicians in Shreveport and the surrounding area, the membership of the Shreveport Medical Society voted in November 2019 to change the name of the organization to the Northwest Louisiana Medical Society. The organization now begins a new era, dedicated to a larger group of physicians but still firmly rooted in its mission and its professional ideals and goals. At such a time as this, it is appropriate to have a look back at the remarkable stories that comprise the history of our association. Their telling would require a volume unto itself, but for the moment I will highlight the works of the Shreveport Medical Society by decade over the course of its existence. We begin with the nineteenth century....



**1840 to 1849** – Fragmentary evidence holds that the physicians of North Louisiana begin to organize in 1849.

**1850 to 1859** – In November 1855 a group of physicians from Shreveport and the surrounding Parishes meet to organize the Medical Association of Northwest Louisiana. A constitution is adopted, and the Corresponding Secretary notifies the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* of the new organization.

**1860 to 1869** – In 1861 the Medical Association ceases to meet for the duration of the War. In 1866, the Medical Association of Northwest Louisiana is reorganized as the Shreveport Medical Society. A fee bill is adopted, setting office visits at \$2, consultation rates at \$20, and uncomplicated deliveries at \$50.

**1870 to 1879** – In 1870 the Louisiana Legislature authorizes \$100,000 in general obligation bonds for the construction of a new Charity Hospital in Shreveport, issuance contingent on site selection and construction contract issuance. The Shreveport Medical Society begins monthly meetings in 1872 “to discuss medical topics, interchange professional views and consider all questions, sanitary and hygienic, especially in relation to the community in which we live.” In that year the Society supports enactment of State legislation establishing and

empowering the Shreveport Board of Health to regulate the sanitary conditions of the city, to provide vaccinations, and to record and maintain vital records.

In 1873 yellow fever strikes Shreveport in a particularly virulent epidemic that the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* characterizes as

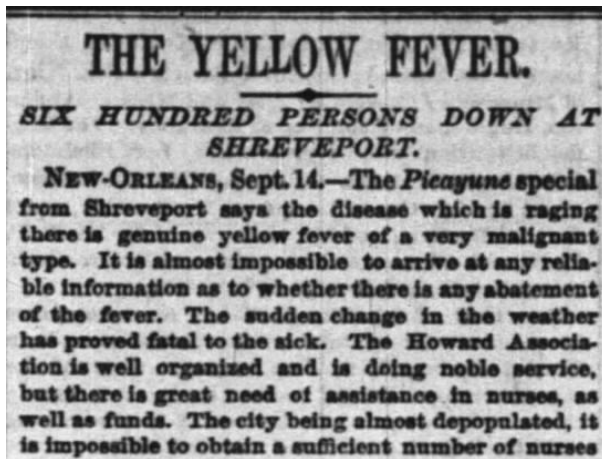


Figure 1. *New York Times*, September 15, 1873, p. 1.

four times worse than the dreaded New Orleans epidemic of 1853. Shreveport physicians remain at their duties, and three die of the disease. A number of physicians from New Orleans come to the city to provide medical aid until the first frost ends the suffering.

In the wake of the devastation, the Shreveport Medical Society forms a committee to examine the cause and impact of the outbreak. The *Report of the Committee on the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1873 at Shreveport, Louisiana* concludes

that the disease originated in steamboat traffic from New Orleans. The Committee finds that of the 10,000 local inhabitants, 5,500 fled the city during the outbreak. Among the remaining 4,500 persons, there were 3,000 cases of yellow fever with a case mortality rate of 25%, rivalling the worst on record.

In 1874 the State legislature authorizes creation of the Shreveport Board of Health, which is established by the City Council with Dr. A. R. Booth as Health Officer. In 1875 the City, citing a lack of funds, announces that it is not going to pay Dr. Booth. Dr. Booth sues the City for back wages with interest, which are awarded by the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1877.

In 1877, the Shreveport Medical Society joins with the Plaquemines Parish Medical Society in calling for a meeting of delegates of medical societies throughout the state to be held in New Orleans with the purpose of establishing a State Medical Society. The Society then appoints three delegates to travel to New Orleans to attend the exploratory meeting. At an organizational meeting in 1878, with eleven Shreveport physicians in attendance, the Louisiana State Medical Society is organized on motion made by Dr. A. A. Lyon of Shreveport. Dr. James C. Egan of Shreveport is elected by acclamation as the first President of the Louisiana State Medical Society. During that same year the Shreveport Medical Society also selects two local delegates to attend the meeting of the American Medical Association in Chicago, requiring a two week leave of practice for each. In 1878 the Shreveport Medical Society drafts a legislative bill reforming and re-empowering the Shreveport Board of Health, styled to that of New York City, which is subsequently enacted. Also in 1878, the Shreveport Medical Society notes the poor condition of the existing Charity Hospital and forms a committee to urge municipal and parish authorities to cease delay and to immediately seek the \$100,000 authorized by the State in 1870 to build a new Charity Hospital in Shreveport.

**1880 to 1889** – In 1882 the Shreveport Medical Society declines to endorse a bill in the State legislature establishing qualifications and registration of physicians, finding its provisions

inadequate. The bill is enacted and becomes effective in 1883. In 1883 at the call of the Shreveport Medical Society, the physicians of Shreveport and Caddo Parish form the Caddo Parish Medical Society in order to formally affiliate with the Louisiana State Medical Society. This Society remains active from 1883 to 1885, meeting concurrently with the Shreveport Medical Society. In 1883 the Parish Society forms a Committee on Registration to examine the compliance to the registration law of practitioners entering the community. In 1884 the Shreveport Medical Society is asked to choose among the proposed architectural plans for the new Charity Hospital, and a contract is then let. The State appropriates two \$20,000 General Fund payments, for 1885 and 1886, for a Charity Hospital in Shreveport. The new Charity Hospital is then constructed on a four-acre site at Texas and Murphy Streets, opening in 1889.

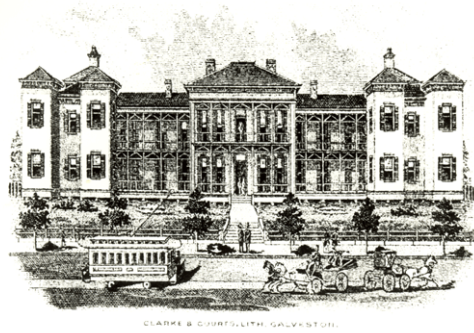


Figure 2. Shreveport Charity Hospital, c. 1890

**1890-1899** – In 1890, the State legislature considers a Louisiana State Medical Society-drafted medical practice bill that proposes establishment of a Louisiana State Board of Medical Examiners. A divided Shreveport Medical Society narrowly endorses the bill, but with recommended amendments. The bill stalls until 1894, and is then enacted. No Shreveport physician is placed on the initial Board. In 1893 the Mayor appoints a Committee on Waterworks comprised principally of members of the Shreveport Medical Society to examine the plant owned by the Shreveport Waterworks Company and to report its condition to the City Council in anticipation of its purchase by the City. A government acquisition proves highly controversial, and the City decides to continue a contractual relationship with the Company, which in 1899 is then sold to the American Waterworks and Guaranty Company headquartered in New Jersey. In 1898 the Shreveport Medical Society publicly supports a legislative bill re-creating the State Board of Health with statewide geographic representation, noting that its location in New Orleans could be objectionable to some locally. This bill proves highly controversial in the legislature, with particular objections from the physicians of New Orleans, but is eventually enacted as amended with a provision crafted by Orleans giving the President of the Board sweeping powers.



Throughout the nineteenth century the physicians of the Shreveport Medical Society proved themselves to be skillful practitioners as well as dedicated community leaders. As the new twentieth century dawned, the Louisiana State Medical Society roster listed sixteen Shreveport physicians. The *Shreveport Times* in January 1900 described the Shreveport Medical Society “as bright, brainy, and capable body of medical practitioners as can be found in any city or state in this broad land.” And that was just the beginning....