THE STORY OF THE HISTORICAL MARKER HONORING THE MCALLISTER FAMILY OPHTHALMIC LEGACY

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ABSTRACT
On August 21, 2022, more than 100 individuals from at least nine different states gathered at Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia. Each of the three major eye care professions in the United States was amply represented. The occasion was to celebrate the contributions of John McAllister, Sr. and his descendants, whose early efforts led to the advancement of scientific knowledge, and to the evolution of eye care in the United States. John McAllister is widely regarded as the father (or grandfather) of optometry, since his work and the work of his progeny led to the beginning of optometry as an independent profession. The highlight of the event was the dedication of a historical marker honoring the ophthalmic legacy of the McAllister Family. The marker is situated in Old Town Philadelphia, very near where John's original optical shoppe was located. The three eye care professions—opticianry, ophthalmology, and optometry—worked hand in hand to make this remarkable achievement possible. This paper tells the story of how and why it all came about.

KEYWORDS
Eye care professions, Historical markers, Ophthalmic industry, Optometry history, Philadelphia history.

THE MCALLISTER LEGACY
What exactly did this remarkable family do to garner the respect and admiration of three different eye care professions over two centuries after their beginnings?

John McAllister, Sr.'s beginnings were rather inauspicious. He emigrated from Scotland at the age of 22, and shortly thereafter began a business which supplied mainly buggy whips and canes. He didn't get involved in the optical business until 1799, when he opened the first optical shoppe in the United States at 48 Chestnut Street in Philadelphia.1 He was so successful in this venture that he attracted as patrons the city's most elite citizens, among whom were Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe.1 His son John, Jr. delved even more deeply into optics. He became the first optician to serve in a hospital setting where he performed eye exams and made eyeglasses at Wills Eye Hospital.2

He eventually served as the manager of the optical department for several years.2 John Jr.'s son, William Y. McAllister, continued in his father's footsteps at Wills and is credited with being the first optician to teach refraction to the attending ophthalmologists.2 As the early generations of the family continued to experiment and perfect the art of examining eyes, it gradually became evident that the profession which came to be called optometry was evolving. Fourth generation Francis Ward McAllister was a founder of the American Optometric Association in 1898.2

THE IDEA OF A MCALLISTER FAMILY HISTORICAL MARKER
The inspiration behind the effort to recognize the McAllisters came from David Fleishman, M.D., a retired Massachusetts ophthalmologist who is also a world-renowned expert in optical historical artifacts. In April 2017, Dr. Fleishman established contact with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) with the intent of gaining their approval to establish a historical marker honoring the ophthalmic contributions of the McAllister family. Early on, David realized that the McAllister legacy cut across a wide swath which involved each of the three eye care professions—opticianry, ophthalmology, and optometry. Accordingly, he assembled a committee comprised of individuals representing each of the three O’s of eye care. During that time, as the president of the Optometric Historical Society (OHS), I came to know David and his work, and he asked me to be the optometry representative on the Committee. (See the copy of the brochure for the dedication of the McAllister marker included here for a list of the members of the original McAllister Committee)
In June 2018, Dr. Fleishman was the guest lecturer at the OHS “Blast from the Past” event at Optometry’s Meeting in Denver. All seemed well with the McAllister project, but shortly thereafter communications regarding the project went dark. The mystery was cleared up when David sent this email message to the committee on November 21, 2019: “During the past 1 1/2 years I have been ill and therefore the effort (i.e., McAllister marker project) has remained on the back burner. However, Dr. Ron Ferrucci has kindly agreed to pick up the baton for this effort to be completed.” Accordingly, David and I met at his residence in February 2020. At that time, he turned over all his notes and research on the McAllister’s as well as the long list of PHMC forms and documents that needed to be completed if the project was to go forward. We both hoped that the project could be completed sometime in 2020 and that a celebratory dedication could be held in Philadelphia at the unveiling of the marker. But two weeks later, America shut down due to the COVID pandemic!

A NEW BEGINNING

Nevertheless, as the newly appointed chair, I willingly took up the responsibility with the rest of the McAllister committee. There were many remaining challenges and hurdles to overcome, and we were determined to tackle them one by one.

The first order of business was to sign a “Dedication Holder Agreement” which the PHMC had developed due to the inevitable delays and uncertainties that the pandemic was sure to cause. In short, due to a decree from the Pennsylvania governor’s office, the PHMC itself was not authorized to hold public programs until further notice. This was fine with the McAllister committee because we decided not to set a date for the marker unveiling until it was safe for our members and guests to travel.

During this interim, the committee proceeded with the task of settling on what size marker would be chosen to honor the McAllister’s. Fortunately, the seed money for the marker had been generously pledged in advance by the Opticians Association of Massachusetts (OAM) and the Opticians Association of America (OAA). The marker we selected was the largest allowed. It was a substantial, 7 foot tall “Roadside Marker” with a large, mounted plate and flange. As huge as it was, it could only accommodate up to 70 words, and indeed, we would soon learn how carefully these words had to be selected. The PHMC’s executive office demanded that every claim on the marker be vetted for historical accuracy. After several weeks of discussions and consultations between the McAllister committee and the PHMC, an agreement was reached on the precise 70 words that would appear. During this time the committee and the PHMC worked through seven different iterations. As committee chair, as part of the process, I received two requests from PHMC committee members to provide formal documentation supporting parts of the narrative. Fortunately, David Fleishman had armed me with ample historical material to meet the challenge.

As we delved into the project more deeply, the committee quickly learned of a myriad of new tasks and responsibilities that lay before us:

Could we find an exact GPS location for the marker that was close to the original McAllister Optical Shoppe in Philadelphia and in an attractive and safe location for tourists?
Could we find a suitable nearby location for the dedication event and the celebration that would precede the unveiling? Could we be certain that anyone other than the committee and PHMC officials would be interested in attending? Could we find sufficient members of the three “O” professions who would want to be a part of the event? Could we find a representative(s) of the McAllister family to attend? Could we find a McAllister historian who could substitute for Dr. Fleishman in providing a lecture on the McAllister story? Could we somehow tape the McAllister lecture, the program event, and the unveiling of the marker for those who could not attend in person and for posterity? And finally, how would we raise the necessary funds to carry out these ambitious plans?

THE SECOND MCALLISTER COMMITTEE

It soon became clear that the McAllister committee had to be expanded. Ironically, there was no one from Pennsylvania on the original committee. It was crystal clear that if this project was to go forward, we would need “boots on the ground” in Philadelphia. The first new member of the reconstituted McAllister committee was Linda Casser, O.D., professor emerita of optometry, Salus University. Dr. Casser is well-connected in Pennsylvania optometry, and she quickly put the committee in touch with the optometric leaders in the state. Next to join were two members of the prestigious Ocular Heritage Society: Richard Whitney, executive director of the Optical Heritage Museum, and Charles Letocha, a retired Pennsylvania ophthalmologist, an optical historian, and an expert on the McAllister family. As a former ophthalmology resident at Wills, Dr. Letocha was able to bring onto the committee the very able services of Rebecca Elias, executive assistant to the Ophthalmologist-in-Chief of Wills Eye Hospital. With the blessing of Salus University President, Michael Mittelman, O.D., the committee was able to add Alexis Abate, Salus University director of communications. In addition to her own considerable skills, Alexis brought along the services of a remarkable team at Salus University—Jacqueline Patterson, Hope Daleusio and Beth Lochner. Optician Blair Wong, executive director of the Opticians Association of Massachusetts, remained on the committee as the vice-chair. It was now May 2022. Many individuals were still concerned about traveling during the Covid pandemic, but the governor of Pennsylvania had long ago lifted any restrictions on the assembly of large groups. With the approval of CEO Joseph Bilson, it was determined that Wills Eye Hospital would be the venue for the McAllister program. The date was set for Sunday, August 21, 2022. On July 18, Allie Davis confirmed that the marker arrival date had been pushed back. It was now scheduled to arrive at the city of Philadelphia traffic department on July 29, where it would be stored under the aegis of traffic engineer Thomas Buck until its installation on the weekend before the event. There was still plenty of time to get everything in place.

THE PACE ACCELERATES

Toward the end of 2021, our original contact at the PHMC, Karen Galle, retired. She was replaced by Allie Davis, who became the new PHMC historical marker coordinator. Davis’ knowledge of Old Town Philadelphia proved invaluable. She had recently lived only two blocks from the original McAllister Shoppe on 48 Chestnut Street. She quickly identified that in front of the U.S. Custom House on 200 Chestnut Street would be an ideal location. Of course, securing permission to use this site came with new challenges. Since the U.S. Custom House was a federally owned historical structure, we would need the written authorization of the regional historic preservation Officer of the General Service Administration (GSA). It was unclear if the authorities in charge of the Custom House would allow a large street marker to occupy space on its frontage. Donna Andrews, Regional Fine Arts Officer of the GSA, was extremely helpful in allowing us to achieve our goal. She worked with the GSA legal counsel, the U.S. Custom House building manager and operations manager, as well as Thomas Buck, Assistant Chief Traffic Engineer, Department of Streets, Philadelphia. Ms. Andrews conveyed her enthusiasm for the McAllister marker and arranged for the GSA to waive its authority to object to the marker placement. Permission was now in the hands of Thomas Buck, since the city of Philadelphia owned the sidewalks. Mr. Buck was very accommodating and offered to help in any way possible. He was to be a key player in the ultimate success of this project.

With the means in hand to pay for the marker, and official permission to place it in a strategic location, the committee instructed our PHMC Coordinator to place the order for the fabrication of the historical marker. Allie Davis reported that she placed the order on April 4 with an expected delivery date of June 24. Now that the necessary prerequisites for a successful event were in place, the committee could turn its attention to the task of raising additional funding for a formal celebration, complete with a public unveiling. Attempts were made to secure a sponsor in the ophthalmic industry, but there were no takers, since the McAllister committee was essentially a private group, and not part of a charitable organization. Therefore, it became clear that the three eye care professions themselves would need to step forward. Opticianry had already done its part by pledging to pay for the fabrication and installation of the marker. I contacted Harvey Hanlen, O.D., a longtime colleague and friend, and told him of the project. Dr. Hanlen is in the unique position of being a past president of both the Pennsylvania Optometric Association (POA) and the American Optometric Association (AOA). He is still very active and influential in optometric affairs, and quickly secured the support of the AOA, the POA and Salus University. Dr. Letocha and Rebecca Elias of our committee were instrumental in gaining the support of Wills Eye Hospital. All three eye care professions were now invested in seeing the ophthalmic legacy of the McAllister family officially acknowledged!

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he discovered that at least 30 members of the McAllister family wanted to be present and to be an active part of the celebration. Many McAllisters had remained in Pennsylvania, but a large segment had resettled in West Virginia. The West Virginian McAllisters were in no way deterred by a trip to Philadelphia. In view of the enthusiastic response of the McAllister family, the committee decided to make them an integral part of the marker unveiling ceremony. It was determined that the youngest McAllister present would help with the unveiling and that the eldest McAllister would then read the marker inscription.

**FINAL PREPARATIONS**

With the help of the team at Salus University (courtesy of Salus President Dr. Michael Mittelman) and the assistance of Jen Keeler, Executive Director of the POA (with our thanks to POA President Tracy Sepich, O.D. and President-elect Jesse Jones, O.D.) formal invitations were sent out to all alumni of PCO Salus and all members of the POA, the members of the McAllister family, as well as members of the PHMC leadership and other dignitaries. Wills’ representative Rebecca Elias oversaw the invitations to the Wills family of ophthalmologists as well as the Wills librarian, who offered to bring several rare first edition books for the guests’ edification and enjoyment.

The committee developed a program (see marker dedication brochure) which listed the time and place of the event, the speakers, the McAllister lecturer, the details of the unveiling part of the program, as well as the event’s generous sponsors.

With at least one hundred responses to our invitation, the committee proceeded with the preparations for the food and other logistical details.

**THE MCALLISTER EVENT DAY**

The speakers’ program and the McAllister lecture were held in the Wills Eye Hospital at 840 Walnut Street on the morning of Sunday, August 21. It took place on the 8th floor which housed the lecture hall and the library. A complimentary breakfast area was set up in the library, and guests were welcome to eat either at tables set up in the library or on a beautiful outdoor patio. Many participants of the event took advantage of optional tours of the Wills surgical suites offered by McAllister committee member Rebecca Elias.

As McAllister committee chair, I served as the emcee of the event. Nancy Moses, PHMC chair, gave a welcoming address on behalf of the historical group. The speakers included leading dignitaries from the eye professions. Joseph Bilson, CEO of Wills Eye, represented ophthalmology. Dr. Harvey Hanlen represented the AOA leadership and Board of Trustees. Dr. Linda Casser represented PCO at Salus University, and Dr. Jesse Jones, president-elect of the POA, represented Pennsylvania optometry. Blair Wong, executive director of the OAM was to be a featured speaker for opticianry but was unable to attend due to illness. However, opticianry was well-represented by several national leaders who were in attendance: Curt Duff, chair, American Board of Opticianry, and his wife Brenda; Cari Rivera, chair, National CL Examiners; Jim Morris, executive director, ABO/NCLE; and Tom Hicks, a member of the original McAllister committee.

The highlight of the morning event was the lecture on the McAllister family legacy delivered by ophthalmologist and historian Dr. Letocha. Dr. Letocha brought historical artifacts of the McAllister family from his personal collection.

At the conclusion of the morning event, the entire group undertook the 20-minute walk to the U.S. Custom House at 200 Chestnut Street, where the unveiling of the historical marker took place.

**THE UNVEILING OF THE MARKER**

Dr. William Lewis, chair of the PHMC Historical Marker Panel, officiated at the unveiling of the marker. Dr. Lewis gave a brief history of the significance of historical plaques as reminders of the important people and events which helped to shape our culture. Dr. Lewis said he was especially proud to be at this particular dedication because as the husband of an optometrist for over 30 years, this event had double meaning for him.

As planned, the youngest McAllister child present was given the honor of unveiling the marker. This was lovely 7-year-old Juniper McAllister. Juniper was assisted in her efforts by her dad, Elliot, who helped her to manage the unwieldy marker cover. There was tremendous applause when little Juniper managed to balance the cover on the seven-foot pole that was used to extract it.

Next, Juniper’s grandfather, William McAllister, the senior representative of the family, read aloud the 70 words on the marker that would forever immortalize the contributions of his ancestors.
The youngest McAllister family member, Juniper McAllister, unveils the marker with the help of her father. The wording on the marker reads as follows:

THE McALLISTER FAMILY OPHTHALMIC LEGACY

Near this site in 1796, John McAllister Sr. opened America’s first optical shop and began a family tradition of innovation in optics and eye care. John Sr. was a pioneer of opticianry. His son John Jr. became the first American hospital optician. Third generation William, working at Wills Eye Hospital, was the first to teach refraction to ophthalmologists, and his son Francis was a founder of the American Optometric Association in 1898. (Image courtesy Salus University)

The senior representative of the McAllister family, William McAllister, reads the words that appear on the marker. (Image courtesy Salus University)

The next few minutes were occupied with the McAllisters and various groups and individuals gathering at the newly dedicated marker for pictures, comments, and congratulations.

Two TV stations were present to capture the event for the Philadelphia evening news.

The marker is in an ideal location. It sits on the outskirts of Philadelphia’s Old Town section, a beautifully preserved area where dozens of historical sites are visited by more than one million tourists each year. The McAllister marker now resides in an honored spot no more than two blocks from the Liberty Bell.

After the ceremony, a small group of committee members lingered near the marker site and marveled at the number of tourists who were already randomly walking up to read about the McAllister family ophthalmic legacy.

Happily, the entire event from the morning program and lecture to the unveiling ceremony at 200 Chestnut Street was taped for posterity. The stewardship of the edited result was turned over to the Optometric Historical Society which will be responsible for its future distribution. The entire event can be viewed on the following website:

aoafoundation.org/ohs/the-mcallister-legacy/

THOUGHTS IN CONCLUSION

For the reasons discussed in this narrative, the effort to establish a historical marker in honor of the McAllister legacy took a full five years to accomplish. None of us at the time really knew what was involved in advocating for a formal historical marker. And little did I know that I would become the chair of the McAllister committee over the final 32 months of the project. I can attest that
the process of achieving approval for a historical marker is arduous and meticulous. Nevertheless, the experience of working through the challenges with an interdisciplinary eye care committee has given me new and valuable insights into the current state of eye care in the US. These insights make me optimistic about the future of eye care delivery in the United States.

It is easy to understand why optometrists are proud of the McAllister legacy. Indeed, it was the McAllisters’ continuous refinement of their examination and diagnostic techniques that allowed them to enhance their skills to the point where optometry gained recognition as a profession. This was a huge leap forward for eye care, and optometry continues to advance as a profession based on their example. Similarly, we can see how opticians can be proud of their early efforts to advance the science of refraction with such innovations as the introduction of spherocylindrical lenses for the correction of astigmatism. Opticianry can also be proud of its collaborative efforts with the ophthalmologists at Wills Eye Hospital. This was especially noteworthy at a time when the art and science of eye examinations was in its infancy, and there was much less trust about practitioners who performed refractions.

Wills Eye Hospital can also look back with pride at being the oldest continuously operating eye hospital in the United States and the first to employ opticians. That one or more of their attending ophthalmologists agreed to learn refraction from William McAllister is testimony to their humility, to their open-mindedness, and to their dedication to the welfare of their patients. After working closely with ophthalmologists Dr. David Fleishman and Dr. Letocha, as well as the management and others at Wills Eye Hospital, I was never at any time given the impression that these prominent individuals in ophthalmology expressed any ill will whatsoever regarding the advancement of optometry.

Dr. Jesse Jones, president-elect of the POA, expressed the current state of eye care brilliantly in his remarks at the McAllister morning program, “So here we have opticians, optometrists, and ophthalmologists together. These essential practices are interrelated with some overlap of disciplines. It is more than a two-dimensional structure with a positive and negative feedback loop. If you step back and picture it, it is beautifully complex. It is a multi-dimensional structure that when used efficiently creates access to quality eye care, health care and well-being.”

Indeed, the history of the three eye care professions is deeply intertwined. Each of us has evolved to become better and more proficient at what we do. The more that our three eye professions understand and respect our commonality and our mutual interdependence, the better we can each progress in our respective fields. The example of the McAllister family has taught that lesson well.

REFERENCES