

PRESLEY MARION RIXEY

By

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To become qualified as a Navy medical officer is an arduous task. To have done it as the son of a Virginia farmer during the Civil War is an astounding accomplishment.

Presley Marion Rixey, thirteenth Surgeon General of the Navy, was born in Culpeper, Virginia, in 1852. He was a high-spirited youngster, whose rugged health, never ceasing energy, and cleverness were typical of the Rixey siblings. He was the second son in a family of nine children — only five of whom lived to maturity. Rixey's father, Presley Morehead Rixey, was a prosperous farmer in Culpeper who was respected for the qualities which became so apparent in his son. From Rixey's earliest recollection his father was blind, but this condition did not keep him from leading a very active life, supervising his farm on horseback accompanied by his sons whom he used as his eyes and advisors.

During Rixey's boyhood, the Civil War broke out and several skirmishes were fought in and near Culpeper. The boys in the family were fond of stealing outside to watch the fighting from the safety of a clump of bushes in their yard until discovered by their mother, who would scold them soundly and banish them to the safety of the basement.

The Rixey home, always famous for its hospitality, was twice commandeered as headquarters by high officers of the contending armies — once by General Sigle and once by General Grant. Even though the household was Southern and opposed to the North, the Rixeys were not blind to the difference in the personalities of these two men and, in contrast to their feelings for the brusque, overbearing Sigle, learned to like the calm, generous, self-reliant Grant.

Because the family's sympathies *were* with the South during the war, their income was greatly reduced after the war, and they endured many hardships in order that their children might be properly educated and prepared for life. The young Rixey began reading medicine under Dr. Samuel Rixey, a cousin, as was the custom in those days for young medical aspirants who wished to fit themselves for college. In proper course, he entered the University of Virginia, completing his studies in June, 1873, at the age of twenty-one. He pursued his medical degree, receiving it in nine months, often working so energetically that he found it necessary to rest a book on the mantelpiece and read standing up in order not to fall asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Being a realistic young man, Rixey was determined to find a position as soon as possible after the completion of his studies. Following a month's rest and on the recommendation of a friend, Rixey applied for and received his commission as assistant surgeon in the U.S. Navy Medical Corps in 1874. His commission was signed, rather ironically, by President Grant.



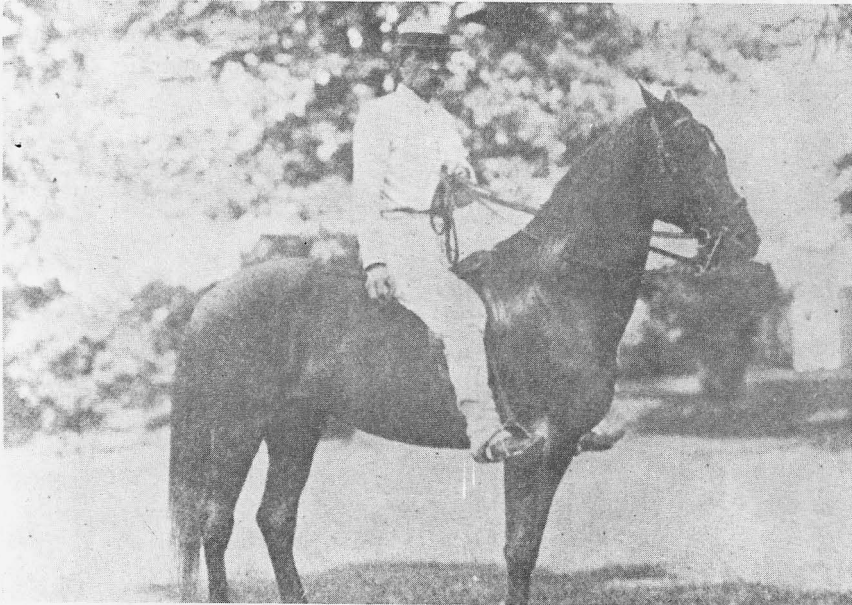
**Surgeon General Presley Marion Rixey, U.S. Navy,
Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 1902.**

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Dr. Rixey was first assigned to USS *Sabine*, which was at that time the receiving ship at the navy yard in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In later years he came to feel that this was the most important assignment of his career, for it was at a hop on board *Sabine* that he met the lovely Miss Earlena English, daughter of Earl English, captain of the yard. After pursuing a courtship which circled the globe, Rixey persuaded the young lady to be his wife.

Even in the early days of the Navy Medical Corps, the controversy between the line and staff raged, but it was never to interfere with the fine relationship between Captain (later Admiral) English and his son-in-law. Indeed, Earlena's young sister, Frankie, was twice banished from the family dining table for even daring to broach the subject!

Dr. Rixey served in Europe and in the south Atlantic before being assigned to the navy hospital in Philadelphia. He was stationed there until August, 1877, and during this tour was not only promoted to passed assistant surgeon,¹ but was also married to Miss English. He was then transferred to the Norfolk Navy Yard. After a stay of a year and a half, Dr. Rixey was again on board ship for a short period of time before being assigned to the Naval Dispensary in Washington, D.C., in 1882. He remained in Washington in various capacities for the duration of his naval career, leaving only temporarily for tours at sea.



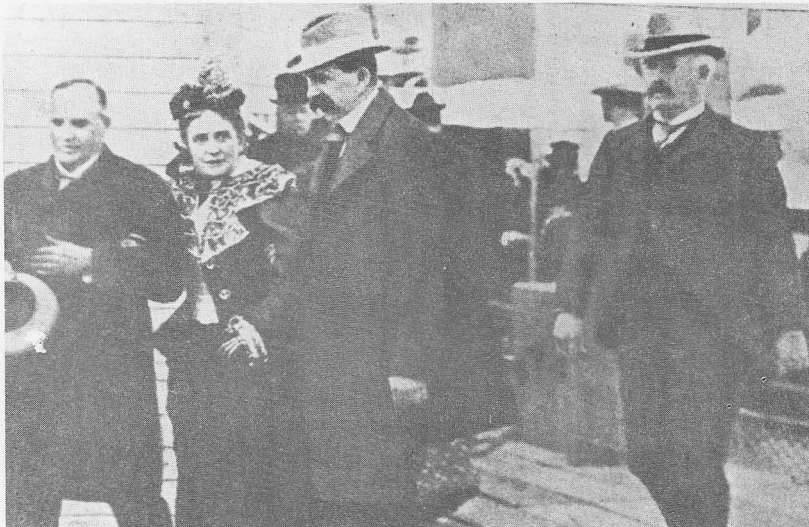
Medical Inspector Presley Marion Rixey, 1901, inspecting work on his farm.

¹ Rank structure in the Navy Medical Corps did not follow that of the Navy Line. Rixey was commissioned as assistant surgeon and progressed through the ranks of passed assistant surgeon, surgeon, lieutenant commander, Surgeon General, and as Surgeon General and Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in 1902, was given the rank of rear admiral.

Dr. Rixey was considered by all who knew him, both in the service and in the civilian community, and especially by those members of the upper strata of the government with whom he came in contact, as the epitome of an officer and a gentleman. He was particularly gracious to younger physicians who were coming into the service, perhaps remembering his own harrowing experience as a junior officer. One physician, Dr. Nash, recounted for the *Saturday Evening Post* in their October 19, 1901, issue:

I shall never forget the first time I saw the Doctor. It was in 1877, while he was stationed at the Norfolk Navy Yard. I was a beardless youth, and had never seen a ship nor met a naval officer. . . . I was lonesome and felt like whistling to keep my courage, and the future did not look very bright at that time. In a few moments, however, an officer approached me, introduced himself as Dr. Rixey, and asked me if I were not Dr. Nash. His genial, yet dignified manner put me at ease at once. . . . He kindly instructed me as to my duties, and his conduct made the deeper impression upon me as it was in contrast with that of some others.

While Dr. Rixey was stationed at the Naval Dispensary, President McKinley requested his services as physician to the White House. He became not only physician to the President, but also to Mrs. McKinley who was a semi-invalid and very frail. Dr. Rixey was with the President in Buffalo at the Pan American Exposition in 1901 on that fatal day when McKinley was struck down by an assassin's bullet. Rixey tended the President until his death nine days later. He remained with Mrs. McKinley until she was able to travel back to her home in Columbus, Ohio, and remained in constant communication with her doctors there until her death seven years later.



The last known photograph of President William McKinley. Left to right, President McKinley, Mrs. McKinley, Dr. Rixey, and Secret Service Detective Foster. This photo was taken at Niagara Falls as the President was leaving the Falls. A few hours later he was shot.

After the death of President McKinley, Rixey was asked to remain at his post as White House physician by President Theodore Roosevelt. Dr. Rixey in his autobiography speaks of the two men he served in the White House.

Yet physically so different from Mr. Roosevelt, Mr. McKinley appeared in good health when I became his family physician, his mentality perfect but his muscles were not exercised, and the consequences were a lowered vitality and little resistance to disease or injury. The man was not the cause of this, but an invalid wife whose whole life without children was tied up in her husband, and in his absence she was never really happy. He, recognizing this, reduced his absence from her side to a minimum and even then she was constantly on his mind. . . . When the emergency came, his enfeebled constitution could not stand the shock and gangrene around the wounds and caused death. On the other hand, Mr. Roosevelt, imbued with every attribute that goes to make good government, was an athlete, his vitality enormous, his charming wife and children equally devoted to the outdoor life. What a contrast for the family physician, for instead of building up methods I must endeavor to systematize and often reduce, as there was a disposition to take on too much flesh on account of the indoor work which took so much of the President's time. . . . I was very fond of shooting on the wing and loved my dogs and gun, but like most Virginians preferred to follow the dogs on horseback and even to shoot from the saddle. But I had all I could do to keep up with Mr. Roosevelt on his walks and horseback rides and hunting trips.²

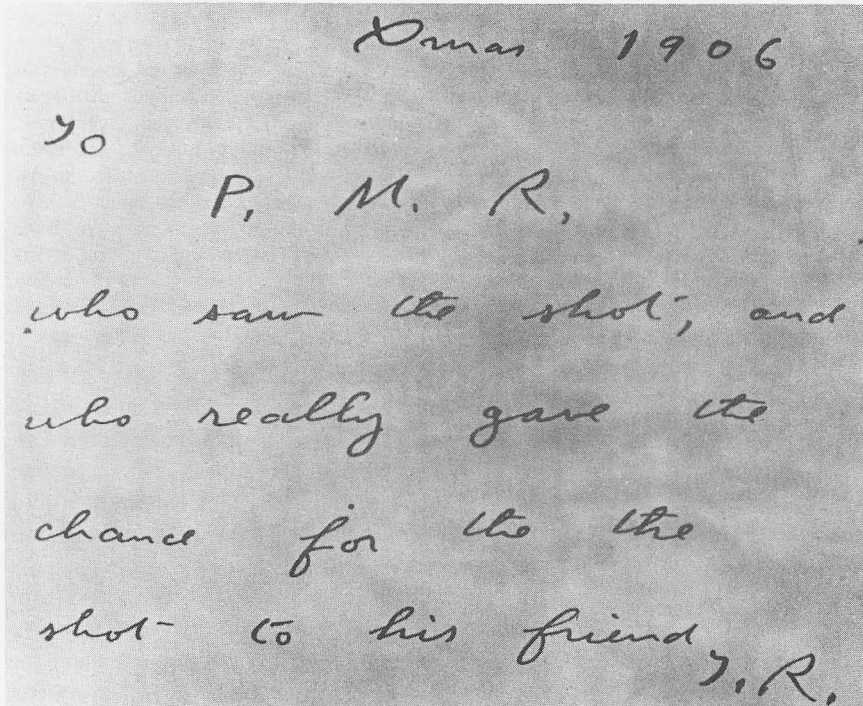
The Roosevelts and their children were fond of visiting the Rixeys at their Virginia home, nestled high above the Potomac. Rixey and the President would ride from the farm, then called Netherfauld and now known as Marymount College of Virginia, to one of Rixey's other farms in Falls Church, or perhaps take the four Roosevelt boys on a pony ride and for a picnic. Mrs. Roosevelt would lead ladies' walking tours from the White House out to Netherfauld for luncheon with Mrs. Rixey before returning to the city.

On several occasions Dr. Rixey took the President and his party to his brother's farm, Beauregarde, near Brandy, Virginia. His brother, Representative from the Eighth District of Virginia, John Franklin Rixey, expected them for one such hunting trip just after dark. Dr. Rixey, in giving his brother instructions about the preparation, laid particular stress on the need of a good team and a reliable driver who was familiar with the country. The train did not arrive until late evening at Brandy Station, so the drive was in the dark. After they had gone a short distance, the doctor's keen eye observed a lack of familiarity with the landmarks, and leaning forward, asked, "Jim, do you know whether we are on the right road or not?" To his surprise and to the amusement of his guests came back the reply, "Lor' Boss, I dun'no! I ain't trabled dis here road since 'fo' de war." It was a long time before he heard the last of that!

Turkey hunting took place just before Thanksgiving, and the doctor took a special pleasure in securing as many shots as possible for the President. On one occasion they had gone down to southern Virginia and had hunted without a kill for three days. There were plenty of turkey to be seen, but they were very shy and the President had not been able to get within range. Finally, about sunset of the last day, a fine turkey flew toward the hunters. Dr. Rixey, standing

¹ William C. Braisted and William H. Bell, *The Life Story of Presley Marion Rixey* (Strasburg, Virginia: Shenandoah Publishing House, Inc., 1930), pp. 245-46.

on a knoll, saw him start and was in a position to shoot him, but withheld his fire and sang out a warning to the President, who was in this way able to bring down the only prize of the outing. It proved to be a magnificent bird and the President was so appreciative of Dr. Rixey's deference to his gun that he had the wings handsomely mounted and decorated with a silver plate bearing the date and sent them to Rixey.



Damas 1906
yo
P. M. R.,
who saw the shot, and
who really gave the
chance for the the
shot to his friend, J. R.

The above note accompanied the wings of the turkey which were mounted and bore a silver plate with the date of the hunt.

With his duty as Surgeon General, his duties in connection with his appointment as White House physician, not to mention his large private practice, Dr. Rixey was a busy man. He and Mrs. Rixey had lived at 909 Sixteenth Street, Northwest, a convenient location to the White House and to the Naval Dispensary, located at Twenty-third and C Streets. He later moved around the corner and bought his father-in-law's house at 1518 K Street, which he remodeled to suit his needs. He turned the front rooms of the basement into an ideal physician's suite fitted with the most modern equipment and conveniences. To this office his many distinguished patients came, including members of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the diplomatic corps.



Netherfauld Farm, the original farmhouse which was located on the Rixey Property.

The year the Aqueduct Bridge was finished, 1888, the Rixeys bought the farm at Netherfauld. He spent as much of his spare time as there as he could and found soon after the purchase that it was advisable to have communication between the farm and his offices in town. He undertook to string what he cites as being the first private telephone line across the Aqueduct Bridge into Arlington.

Dr. Rixey acquired three other farms in Virginia in addition to Netherfauld. He invested in the farm of his deceased brother, John, which was two thousand acres located on both sides of Bull Run near Manassas. This farm was called Ben Lomond. He also owned a three hundred-acre dairy farm and a smaller piece of property which adjoined it in Falls Church not far from Netherfauld. After his retirement from the Navy, he considered himself a dirt farmer and nothing delighted him more than managing these farms. He attributed his success with his farms to the fact that he always put more into them than he took out — a staple of his life as well. In his dealings with real estate over the years in Arlington — seventy-five different transactions are recorded in the county records — Rixey was able to reconstruct the original land grant made in 1724 to James Robertson.

The farm at Netherfauld was his first love. The old farmhouse which was on the property when the Rixey family bought it and which probably was built shortly after the Civil War burned about 1907 and the family moved into a cottage which had been adjacent to the house. This cottage was said by all who visited to have "hospitality written on every inch of it." The new home, which is now Marymount College's Main House, was built between 1920 and 1921. Dr. Rixey supervised the building very closely, as was his custom with everything. In reading the original specifications for the house, one is struck by the fact that the details are so minute as to specify what type of soap dishes were to be used in the baths and to state that medicine cabinets would not be provided by the builder, presumably because Rixey had an ample supply of cabinets of a higher quality from his many offices. The house was to be entirely self-sufficient and have its own heating and power plant. There is an elevator and an inter-communicating telephone system. The plaster work was extremely unique. The most outstanding feature is the central staircase of North Carolina pine and quartered oak. It was entrusted to "expert stair builders" and all work was to be done with the best practices of the time. The floors are all quartered oak and each room is outlined by what is called an introductory strip of a darker wood.



Cottage adjacent to Netherfauld, added to and lived in as a summer home until 1921.

A long-time Arlington resident, Mr. Jensen, recalled a story his father told him about lunch with Dr. Rixey during the construction of the house. Mr. Jensen, Sr., had been employed to do all the plaster work on Rixey Mansion. He lived about twenty minutes from Dr. Rixey and would normally bring his lunch with him and eat outdoors. This particular day he had forgotten his lunch and Dr. Rixey persuaded him to stay and dine with the family rather than walking all the way home and back again in the summer heat. Mr. Jensen, with visions of lunch on a grand scale in the dining room, served by maids and butlers, was much surprised when the fare turned out to be hot dogs and spinach served by Mrs. Rixey. It was also learned from Mr. Jensen, Jr., that the walls of the Rixey Mansion are plaster on plaster board rather than the customary lathing. Mr. Jensen feels that Rixey Mansion is perhaps the first house in Arlington so constructed and remembers his father saying that the local plasterers would not work on the plaster board for they felt they could not make the plaster stick. Plasterers were therefore imported from Baltimore to do the basic work.

During Dr. Rixey's tenure as Surgeon General, from 1902-1906, many changes took place in Navy medicine. Indeed, Rixey is referred to as the father of Navy medicine. He is credited with the establishment of the Navy Nurse Corps, the Navy School of Medicine, and the first Hospital Corps School. He was also instrumental in the creation of the Dental Corps. In 1907, as Medical Director, he inaugurated the fingerprint file for all naval personnel. Dr. Rixey established the practice of sending medical officers to civilian institutions for training in the medical specialties in an effort to upgrade the caliber of physicians in the Navy.

Dr. Rixey was also interested in upgrading the physical condition of the corps and in 1909 instituted the practice of requiring annual physical tests for medical officers as a prerequisite for promotion. This test included the ability to either walk a distance of 50 miles in three consecutive days, ride on horseback for 90 miles in three consecutive days, or ride a bicycle a distance of 100 miles during three consecutive days. To prove that the tests were feasible, Dr. Rixey and President Roosevelt made a 100-mile ride on horseback from Washington to Warrenton and back, the last 30 miles in a driving rain, all in one day!

Admiral Rixey was also responsible for the change in policy that enabled a medical officer to be considered "in command" of a shore medical facility, such as a hospital or a dispensary. Feeling that the Navy could attract better physicians if they were allowed to hold command, Dr. Rixey was willing to pursue this problem through the Navy as far as the President if necessary. The rift between the line and staff corps had been festering since the birth of the Navy and the situation came to a head in 1903 when the commanding officer of the receiving ship *Franklin* objected to the signature of the senior medical officer at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital who signed himself "in command." In a letter resolving the entire matter, President Roosevelt wrote to Secretary of the Navy William Moody in his usual cryptic manner, "It seems to me that Rixey is entitled to use the word 'command' in regard to the hospitals under his control. The Line of the Navy must not make themselves ridiculous by being overzealous in unimportant technical matters. What do you think of this?"³

³ Ltr., President Theodore Roosevelt to Secretary of the Navy Moody, July 18, 1903, Roosevelt Papers, National Archives.



Rear Admiral Presley Marion Rixey and two of his dogs, Tobias and Puff, on the lawn at Rixey.

In 1910 Dr. Rixey retired from the Navy with the rank of rear admiral, but was back on active duty at his own request during World War I as a member and later president of the Naval Examining Board of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery until 1918 when, at the end of the war, he returned to his beloved Virginia. In looking back over his naval career, another member of the Navy Medical Department once said, "Roosevelt was for a great Navy, Rixey was for a fine Medical Department; they were both successful."

Dr. Rixey's retirement was a delight, for not only did he have his farms to manage, but for this childless couple who loved young people, there were children across the road from the farm at Netherfauld. The children were grand-nephews and nieces and lived in what is now the Campbell house. Mr. E. Willey Stearns, who was only about seven at the time, remembers well what a strict disciplinarian and good businessman the admiral was. He worked for his "Uncle Pres" for ten cents an hour, saddling up his horse in Arlington to ride out to the wheat fields on the Falls Church farm, a ride of nearly an hour's duration. When he and Dr. Rixey arrived one morning in Falls Church, he said, "Uncle Pres, how about if you pay me from the time I leave Arlington, rather than from the time I start to work out here?" "Boy," retorted Rixey, "everyone knows it's pure pleasure to ride from Arlington to Falls Church on a summer morning. No need to get paid for that!" Mr. Stearns also remembers how warm-hearted his uncle was, too. The day Rixey died, Mr. Stearns was playing a championship ball game and was torn between close family ties and the desire to help his team win. His father told him, "I think Uncle Pres would have wanted you to win that ball game."

The Rixeyes were staunch pillars of the young county of Arlington. When a group of men decided to found a golf and country club in 1908, Rixey became their chief creditor, selling slightly more than seventy acres of Netherfauld farm. It was discovered later that sufficient acreage was lacking for completion of the swimming pool. A member of the board of trustees of the club challenged Rixey to a golf match, the stakes being the desired property. Rixey lost, and graciously signed over the required land for what is now the Washington Golf and Country Club.

Rixey was blessed by the services of a wonderful man as his valet, Richard Wallace. Richard, along with several other men who worked for Rixey, were responsible for assisting in the laying out of the golf course at the Washington Golf and Country Club. Richard is also responsible for the discovery of what is now one of Arlington's historic sites. While cutting through the undergrowth at the back of Dr. Rixey's property, Richard Wallace came upon a log cabin which was being devoured by the brush and the Virginia creeper. He asked the doctor if he might fix it up and live there and the doctor, respecting his wish for privacy, said yes. The log cabin is known to all in the area as Birchwood. In the days when President Roosevelt visited at the Rixey home, Richard Wallace would churn homemade ice cream for the family dinners. Knowing this, Roosevelt would stride the half mile down the lane to Richard's cabin and lean on the door jamb, patiently waiting until the magic of the churn was completed so he might lick the paddles.

In 1925 when Rixey was undergoing a serious operation from which he felt he might not recover, he once again assisted the residents of Arlington in a building project. He deeded the triangle of land at the intersection of what is now Glebe Road and Old Dominion Drive to Bishop William Cabell Brown of the Protestant Episcopal Church for the purpose of building a church. St. Mary's Episcopal Church now stands on the property where Rixey Station, a whistle stop on the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad between Georgetown and Great Falls, had been. Rixey's grandnephew, Mr. Stearns, describes the station as the "flossiest one on the line. Uncle Pres had a sign in foot-high letters of brass saying RIXEY STATION."

On April 25, 1927, the Rixeys celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary and the celebration was the grandest the mansion had ever seen. Over five hundred people including the widows of two presidents, Roosevelt and Wilson, came for the festivities.

Slightly more than a year later, on June 17, 1928, Dr. Rixey was dead at the age of seventy-six. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. His death came as a shock to his many friends, for although he had been in frail health, he was still very active about his farm. The morning of his death he supervised the building of what was known in later years as The Lodge, and in the afternoon went for an outing.

That day he also applied the finishing touches to his autobiography: "In regard to my long life," he wrote, "I believe I have achieved success, have lived well, laughed often and loved much; I have gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; I have filled my niche and accomplished my task. I hope I will leave the world better than I found it, and that it will never be said that I have lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it. I have tried to look for the best in others and have given the best I had."

Since the Rixeys had no children the farm was bequeathed to three executors after Mrs. Rixey's death several years later. It was bought by Mrs. Ida K. Polen who used "Rixey" as a tea house. When the Washington Golf and Country Club burned in 1937, patrons dined at "Rixey" until a new building could be constructed.

In 1948 the estate was purchased by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary at the request of Bishop Peter L. Ireton of Richmond. Marymount-on-the-Potomac was founded in 1950, and in those days the whole campus community of nuns and thirteen college freshmen lived in the mansion, or Main House as it came to be known.