



# WHO WAS JOHNS HOPKINS?



JOHNS HOPKINS  
MEDICINE

F

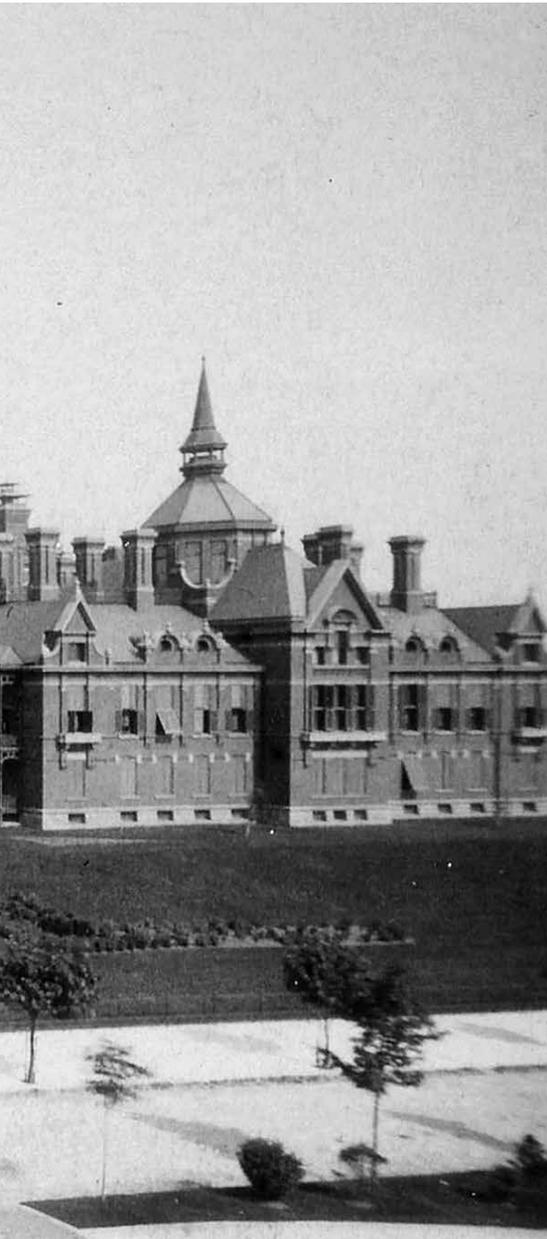
EW IN HIS LIFETIME would have called him a tragic figure. Johns Hopkins was known as an honest man, generous to a fault, a visionary, somewhat stubborn, and hard with a bargain—and unquestionably the most powerful financier in Victorian Baltimore. A Quaker, but not a churchgoer, the tall, craggy-featured merchant dressed “plain,” yet lived well as the richest man in town, splitting his time between his lavish country house, Clifton, and a colonial rowhouse at 18 West Saratoga Street, next to the rectory of Old St. Paul’s Protestant Episcopal Church. He had transformed himself from a lowly grocer’s helper to a millionaire banker, and he was Baltimore’s greatest philanthropist.

**Johns Hopkins**  
by **Thomas C. Corner**  
oil on canvas,  
100 by 58 inches, 1896





**The Johns Hopkins Hospital, shown here at the time of its completion in 1889, was considered a municipal and national marvel when it opened. It was believed to be the largest medical center in the country with 17 buildings, 330 beds, 25 physicians and 200 employees. As a *Baltimore American* headline put it on May 7, 1889, the Hospital's opening day, "Its Aim Is Noble," and its service would be "For the Good of All Who Suffer."**



---

Considering his wealth a trust, Johns Hopkins used it for the benefit of humanity. By 1873, the year of his death, Johns Hopkins had outlined his wishes: to create a university that was dedicated to advanced learning and scientific research, and to establish a hospital that would administer the finest patient care, train superior physicians and seek new knowledge for the advancement of medicine. In appointing a Board of Trustees to carry out his vision, Johns Hopkins selected the intellectuals of his town. They, in turn, created an environment that attracted top educators and medical professionals to direct the university and hospital.

Hopkins never married, never had children who might inherit his wealth, and some people with a taste for romantic tragedy suggest that if Hopkins' family and his religion had not pressured him out of marrying the one woman he truly loved, neither The Johns Hopkins Hospital nor The Johns Hopkins University would ever have been established. Their speculation could be right. But the facts are interesting enough.

Johns Hopkins was born on May 19, 1795, in Anne Arundel County, Md., the second of 11 children of a tobacco farmer. Contrary to local legend, he was not born poor. He grew up in Whitehall, a sprawling plantation that the King of England had given his great-grandfather. But his family's fortunes changed when he was 12. His Quaker parents, in an attack of conscience spurred on by the new abolitionist stance of the Society of Friends, freed their hundreds of slaves; he was pulled out of school temporarily and sent out into the fields. At 17, knowing the plantation was not big enough to support his large family, young Johns (that had been his great-grandmother's maiden name) moved to Baltimore to help his father's brother, a wholesale grocer. His mother urged him to go: "Thee has business ability and thee must go where the money is."

The young man had a head for numbers and learned the business over

several years, proving himself sharp and skillful in trade. In the intimacy of his aunt and uncle's house, Johns Hopkins also fell in love with their daughter, Elizabeth Hopkins, then 16. For her part, "Elizabeth learned to care a great deal for her tall, handsome cousin," according to Hopkins' biographer and grandniece, Helen Hopkins Thom. "She saw how her father depended upon him, noticed his sympathy with children, his courteous way toward women ... and above all, his strong, compelling masculinity." The young man shocked and horrified Elizabeth's family by announcing they planned to marry. By Quaker standards, such a union would have been tantamount to incest; Johns Hopkins could not convince the girl's parents to give their consent, and the cousins gave up the idea, but held true to their promise never to marry another. Some historians have concluded that Hopkins healed his heartbreak by concentrating on amassing a fortune in commerce. George Peabody, another Baltimore philanthropist, was said to have claimed he knew of only one man more bent on making money than he himself was, and that was his friend Johns Hopkins. Johns Hopkins never courted another woman, and the cousins remained lifelong friends, Elizabeth living in a house near his that Johns had built for her at St. Paul and Franklin streets, where she lived until she died at 88.

Johns Hopkins, who moved out of his relatives' house immediately after his marriage plan failed, eventually became estranged from his uncle not over Elizabeth but over whiskey. Money was tight in those days, and some customers wanted to pay for their purchases in hard liquor. The nephew thought the solution was reasonable: his uncle Gerard, on the other hand, was outraged and refused to "sell souls into perdition." So Hopkins went into business for himself with a young partner, later with a few of his brothers, and became a highly successful supplier of tobacco and other provisions in the Shenandoah Valley. (The business, Hopkins Brothers, was operated out of

---

---

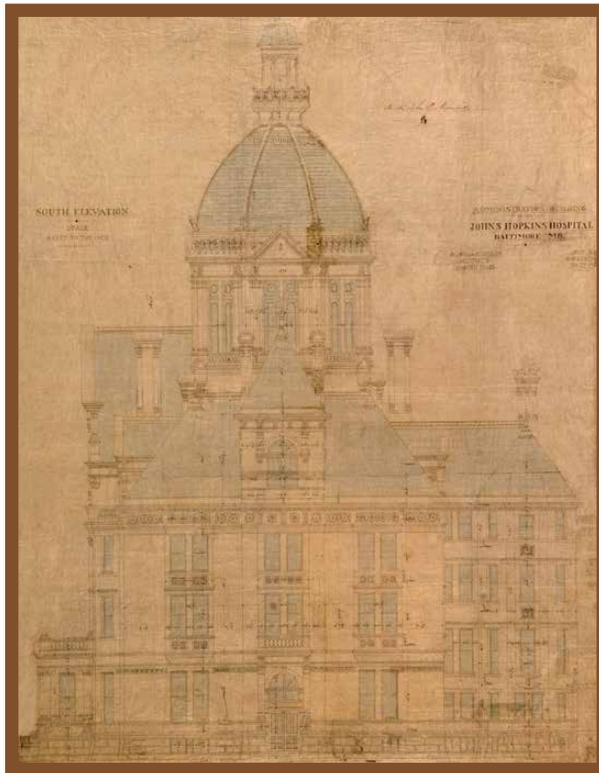
Conestoga wagons from a frame house on the corner of Pratt and Hollingsworth. For a while, the young men sold corn whiskey, under the label “Hopkins’ Best.” Tradition has it that the Society of Friends turned Johns Hopkins out as a result, though later took him back. He said later he regretted ever having sold hard liquor in his youth.)

With time, he began to lend money and slowly shifted his interests into banking. Hopkins was made president of the Merchants National Bank of Baltimore, and was a director in the First National, Mechanics’ Central, National Union, Citizens’ and the Farmers and Planters’ banks. He also was a director of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, in which he believed so much that he spent almost \$1 million to bail it out of deep financial trouble in 1857 and 1873. Hopkins’ many enemies and critics carped that he was only looking out for his investments. He owned at least 15,000 shares of the railroad stock; only the state of Maryland and the city of Baltimore had more.

Scharf’s Chronicle of Baltimore carried this account of his efforts to save the B&O from collapse, just a few months before his death at 78:

“On the receipt of the news of the great panic of 1873 at his office in the Commercial Building, corner of Lombard and Gay streets, he became somewhat excited as he saw at once the serious character of the financial trouble, and exclaimed, ‘This is a tornado!’ ... He said that he could put his shoulder to the wheel, that he held \$2 million of commercial paper, and had large investments, all of which were affected by the unexpected crisis, but he would devote his money and his influence to avert the panic from the business community of Baltimore. This he was able to do...”

Young men starting in business learned they could turn to Hopkins for low-interest loans; wealthy men who needed a boost had to pay a much higher rate, which did not always endear Hopkins to the business community. When Hopkins died of pneumonia on Christ-



The original Queen Anne-style Hopkins Hospital was designed by the Boston architectural firm of Cabot and Chandler, which completed the initial plans prepared by architect John Niernsee, who had followed John Shaw Billings’ meticulous instructions for what he wanted the Hospital to feature. It was the first hospital in the nation to be equipped with central heating; most inside corners were curved to avoid the buildup of dust and dirt; and precisely calculated ventilation systems sought to guard patients from contaminated air. The Hospital was wired for electricity and telephones—even though no electrical service was yet available in that part of Baltimore.



**Mr. Johns Hopkins lived in downtown Baltimore at 81 West Saratoga Street (on a site where a parking garage later was built), but he also had a “country” home in a then-rural area northeast of the downtown. In 1838, Hopkins purchased a mansion in what now is the city’s Clifton Park Golf Course, at 2107 St. Lo Drive. His**

**former home, named Clifton, once was a showplace where Hopkins hosted such visitors as the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII). Clifton was sold to the city in 1895 and Hopkins’ mansion long served as the golf course’s club house. Clifton, seen above, now is leased to Civic Works, a nonprofit youth training corps.**

---

---

mas Eve, 1873, the less charitable in town spread rumors that he had died because he was too cheap to buy himself a winter overcoat. Others attributed his last illness to winter walks without one.

As he grew older, Johns Hopkins referred to his wealth as a “gift,” and looked for ways to dispose of it “for the good of humanity.” Much of his money and property, such as rental houses, warehouses and stores, went to surviving relatives and three of his servants. No one knows how he came up with the idea to found a university linked to a hospital, though there is ample evidence he turned to friends for advice. The hospital was to be linked with a medical school, which in turn was to be part of a university, a radical idea that later became the model for all academic institutions. By 1867, he had arranged for \$7 million, then the largest philanthropic bequest in the country, to be split evenly between the two institutions. He told his doctor, Alan P. Smith, that he felt like “the watchdog guarding the treasure.”

About nine months before he died,

Hopkins laid out clearly what he had in mind for his hospital. Parts of that explanatory letter to his trustees are as follows:

*It is my wish that the plan...shall provide for a hospital, which shall, in construction and arrangement, compare favorably with any institution of like character in this country or in Europe...*

*The indigent sick of this city and its environs, without regard to sex, age, or color, who may require surgical or medical treatment, and who can be received into the hospital without peril to the other inmates, and the poor of this city and state, of all races, who are stricken down by any casualty, shall be received into the hospital, without charge ... You will also provide for the reception of a limited number of patients who are able to make compensation for the room and attention they may require...you will thus be enabled to afford to strangers, and to those of our own people who have no friends or relatives to care for them in sickness, and who are not objects of*

*charity, the advantage of careful and skillful treatment.*

*It will be your especial duty to secure for the service of the hospital, surgeons and physicians of the highest character and of the greatest skills...*

*I wish the large grounds surrounding the hospital buildings...to be so laid out with trees and flowers as to afford solace to the sick and be an ornament to the section of the city in which the grounds are located...*

*It is my special request that the influences of religion should be felt in and impressed upon the whole management of the hospital; but I desire, nevertheless, that the administration of the charity shall be undisturbed by sectarian influences, discipline, or control. In all your arrangements in relation to the hospital, you will bear constantly in mind that it is my wish and purpose that the institution should ultimately form a part of the medical school of that university for which I have made ample provision by my will ...*



Johns Hopkins Medicine  
Marketing & Communications Office  
901 S. Bond Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21231

[hopkinsmedicine.org](http://hopkinsmedicine.org)

