Delawareans have become accustomed to being first. We have bragging rights. Caesar Rodney made certain of that when he rode through the night, signed his name and established Delaware as the First State. In fact, for five or so celebratory days, Delaware basked in the glory of being the only state. Pennsylvania was second, and New Jersey third, to ratify and claim statehood.

Since the time of ratification and setting the standard of firsts, Delaware has had a series of them. Delaware’s first permanent doctor was Tyman Stidham, a Swede who came over with Governor Risingh, landing at Fort Casimir (New Castle) on May 21, 1654.1 On June 21, 1768 medical honors were conferred for the first time in America. Ten gentlemen received their Bachelor of Medicine degrees on this occasion and three of the men were from (what would become) Delaware. Not even a country yet, or a state for that matter, and we had three doctors in the first graduating class in the first medical school; John Archer of New Castle, James Tilton of Kent County and Nicholas Way of Wilmington.2

One of those three men went on to achieve a lion’s share of firsts. It’s a name familiar to the medical community in the First State: Dr. James Tilton. Tilton was a founder and first President of the Medical Society of Delaware, incorporated in 1789.3 In a letter to George Washington (you know, the first President of the recently established United States) dated February 15, 1787, Tilton shared the news with his friend, announcing to him that he had been elected the first President of the Medical Society of Delaware:4 “…..contrary to my opinion & inclination, the state society have hitherto continued to elect me their President.”

Tilton was born on a farm in Duck Creek in Kent County, Delaware, which at the time was still one of the three lower counties of Pennslyvania. He studied medicine under Dr. Ridgely, a prominent physician in Dover, until he entered the newly established medical department of the College of Philadelphia, now the University of Pennsylvania. After graduating in 1768, he established a practice in Dover, but returned to earn his MD in 1771.5

When the First Delaware Regiment, commanded by Colonel John Haslet, was organized in December of 1775, Dr. Tilton was appointed regimental surgeon. He served with the regiment
through that year in the battle of Long Island, at White Plains. During the infamous Battle of Trenton, between 1777 and 1778, typhus cut down the Continental Army by nearly half. It was in Trenton that Tilton was able to test his theory that overcrowding was responsible for the high mortality rate in Army hospitals.

Tilton was able to give trial, with considerable success, to his pet scheme of building small, well-ventilated log huts capable of each holding but six to eight patients. The huts had clay floors, crevices to bring in fresh air and fireplaces to expel bad air.6

Dr. Thomas C. Stellwagen, an authority on medical history, wrote: “Probably without Tilton’s devises for cleaning up hospitals, Washington’s army would have been defeated; and we know only too well what great strits the country had been reduced by fever and epidemics. We believe that there would have been no hope of success if this scourge of typhus had not been arrested.”7

On April 3, 1777, Tilton was appointed hospital physician; on April 23, Congress passed the following resolution: “Resolved, that Dr. James Tilton be authorized to report to Dumfries in Virginia, there to take charge of all Continental soldiers that are or shall be inoculated against smallpox, and that he shall be furnished with the necessary medicines.”8

While inoculations for smallpox had been largely practiced since the beginning of the war, this resolution and others following, which called for the assembling of troops for inoculation, were the first actions taken by Congress on this matter.

During the medical department’s reorganization of 1780, Tilton’s name was, you guessed it, first on the list of hospital physicians and surgeons. In this capacity, he conducted a hospital at Williamsburg during the Yorktown campaign. Tilton was largely instrumental in securing an action of Congress on September 20, 1781 that provided for promotion by seniority of medical officers. This legislation placed hospital surgeons above regimental surgeons, who were given the same rank as hospital mates.9

After Yorktown, the Delaware troops were brought back from duty in the Carolinas and went into camp at New Castle, awaiting discharge. The officers of this camp, with others, met at Wilmington, and following the example set by officers in other states, they formed the Delaware State Society of the Cincinnati on July 4, 1783. Tilton had fought with them on the battlefields and dressed their wounds; the soldiers elected him as the first president. He held this office until 1795 and was delegate to the general meetings of the Society of the Cincinnati from 1784 to 1793.10

The College of Philadelphia reorganized in 1791 as the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania. As an alumnus of its first graduating class, Tilton was offered and declined the Chair of Materia Medica. He thought it more important to finish the work he was doing for his country.11

Tilton was elected to the Continental Congress in 1783 along with Gunning Bedford, Jr. Known for never taking “no” for any answer he thought should be “yes,” Tilton first gained national recognition when he refused to leave the Continental Congress after his term expired. The measure of Tilton’s passion for his newly formed country was evident in his continued attendance at meetings of Congress, even after he was no longer a delegate. Congress finally had to pass a formal resolution barring him from the chamber.12

Tilton went on to serve repeated terms as a member of the Delaware State House of Representatives. And as if there weren’t enough firsts for him, he was Delaware’s first Commissioner of Loans under Alexander Hamilton from 1785 to 1801 when the U.S. Treasury Department was created.13

Tilton’s brother Nehemiah had become the Burgess, or Mayor, of Wilmington in 1799 and Tilton joined him by moving to Wilmington. In 1802, he built a house that recently received its official Delaware Historical Marker: The Tilton Mansion, which is home to The University and Whist Club at Ninth and Broom streets. The original property was 63 acres and was considered hillside.

In February of 1813, while the country was yet again at war with Britain, Tilton published a small treatise entitled, Economic Observations on Military Hospitals and the Prevention and Cure of Diseases Incident to an Army. It was dedicated to General John Armstrong, Secretary of War, and embodied his observations during the Revolutionary War. It also repeated his former recommendations regarding the construction and administration

The Original surgery slab of Dr. Tilton. It is located in the basement of the Tilton Mansion, now home to the University and Whist Club.
of military hospitals. Under an act of March 3, 1813 (2 Stat. 819), President Madison offered Tilton the position of the first Army Surgeon General of The United States. His appointment was confirmed by the Senate on June 11, 1813. In the meantime, under date of May 1, 1813, President Madison caused to be issued Rules and Regulations for the Army, and therein were prescribed the duties of the chief medical officer as follows: "It shall be the duty of the Physician and Surgeon General to prescribe rules for the government of the hospitals of the army, to see these enforced, to appoint stewards and nurses, to call for and receive returns of medicine, surgical instruments and hospital stores, to authorize and regulate the supply of regimental medical chests, to make out general half year returns of these and of the sick in hospital to the War Department, and yearly estimates of what may be wanted for the supply of the army."

One of the newly appointed Surgeon General's first acts after assuming office was to make a tour of inspection of the hospitals and camps along the northern frontier. Here, Tilton found that all of the lessons of sanitation learned from the last war had been forgotten. In both camp and hospitals, he found such utter contempt for sanitary measures and dire results of this neglect that immediate action was necessary. Tilton dismantled and moved the bad hospitals, establishing new ones, and by the elimination of incompetent personnel, he was able to do much in improving these unsatisfactory conditions. His efforts to improve hospital conditions and to rehabilitate the medical and hygienic service of the army resulted in the publication of his Regulations for the Medical Department issued in general orders of December 1814.

Soon after the publication, on December 7, 1814, it became necessary to perform a thigh amputation in order to prolong Tilton's life. He withstood the pre-anesthetic era agonies of the amputation, even instructed the surgeon and his assistants regarding the details of his operation and how he wanted it performed. Tilton's original surgery slab remains in the basement of the Tilton Mansion to this day.

So, you can see what is meant by "lions' share of firsts" regarding Dr. James Tilton, and this isn't even all of his story. His firsts are far-reaching and extend into agricultural firsts and meteorological firsts, all recorded in the likes of the Library of Congress. While this might be in fact be the first time that you have heard about Tilton, it is our hope that it is not the last.

Dr. Alfred R. Shands, an orthopedic surgeon who helped found the Alfred I. du Pont Institute and is its medical director emeritus, wrote in 1975, "Dr. Tilton undoubtedly was the greatest physician Delaware ever had."

Several hundred years ago, it might be thought to be easier to compile such an impressive list of firsts than it would be today in 2018. The annual Tilton Award for Medical Achievement in Delaware challenges that assumption by recognizing Delaware doctors and their contributions to medical advancements, some of which might indeed be firsts.

The annual dinner for the Tilton Award takes place on September 28 in the Tilton Mansion itself from 6-9 p.m. Stephen Permut, M.D., J.D. is the 2018 recipient being honored at the dinner. The award will be passed to him by G. Dean MacEwen, M.D. of Nemours Surgery-Orthopedics, the 2017 recipient.

The historic Tilton Mansion is situated at 805 N. Broom St. in Wilmington, Delaware. The mansion is presently home to the University and Whist Club. History tours and dining are available to be scheduled for groups of six or more. Call (302) 658-5125 for additional information.
CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

STACEY INGLIS is the Director of Sales & Marketing for the Tilton Mansion, home to The University and Whist Club in Wilmington, Delaware. She is certified in non-profit management.

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Dr. Samsel announces his retirement from medical practice. His office will be closed effective November 1, 2018.

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