

Dr. Felix Randolph Robertson (1781-1865)

by Jill Meese, NCCA Board Member

Felix Randolph Robertson, a man of diverse talents, contributed much to the development of Nashville from its beginnings through the Civil War. Born January 11, 1781, to Nashville founders James and Charlotte Robertson, he was the first Caucasian child born in the new settlement.

Although the son of a pioneer, Robertson earned a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He studied under Dr. Benjamin Rush (a signer of the Declaration of Independence) and graduated in 1806, specializing in children's diseases.

Robertson courted Lydia Waters in Maryland, but, uneasy about asking Lydia to abandon her comfortable surroundings for a frontier town, returned alone to Nashville to build his home and practice. He erected a two-story building at 129 Cherry Street (near today's 4th Avenue N. and Church Street) that served him as both office and home, and he became Nashville's first pediatrician.

Eighteen months later Robertson returned to propose to Lydia, who not only accepted but also arranged to bring her mother and siblings to Nashville. The couple married on October 8, 1808.

Lydia and Felix Robertson had eight children before Lydia's 1832 death at 44. Felix never remarried, remaining a widower for 33 years.

Dr. Robertson made many contributions to the field of medicine but is probably best known for advocating the use of quinine to treat malarial fevers. Founder and first president of The Nashville Medical Society, he served as president of the Medical Society of Tennessee from 1834-1840. He was a Professor of Medicine in the University of Nashville's Medical Department, served briefly as president of the Bank of Tennessee, and was twice elected mayor of Nashville.

In 1826 Robertson, as President of the Texas Association, led thirty men to



Portrait by Washington Cooper, courtesy of the Tennessee State Museum.

Texas to survey land and start a settlement in what is now Robertson County, Texas. Though he did not stay in Texas, his cousin, Sterling Clack Robertson did. After winning a legal battle with Stephen F. Austin over the land, Sterling surveyed and established Nashville, Texas, on the Brazos River.

Felix Robertson lived alone in his later years after all six surviving children married and settled outside of Nashville. He died in 1865, at the age of 84, from injuries sustained in a buggy accident caused by a runaway horse. The first-born Nashvillian had lived through the War of 1812, the growth and development of "the Athens of the South," and the devastating Civil War, where family members fought on both sides. His positive impact on Nashville is reflected in his tombstone inscription in City Cemetery: "First white child born in Settlement now called Nashville. Distinguished as a physician. Foremost as citizen."

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