

George Washington Corner

As the third director of the Carnegie Institution of Washington's Department of Embryology, George Washington Corner made a number of contributions to the life sciences as well as to administration. Corner was born on 12 December 1889 in Baltimore, Maryland, near the newly established Johns Hopkins University. Although Corner was not exposed to science much in school at a young age, he developed an early appreciation for science through conversations with his father about geography and by looking through the family's National Geographic magazines.

In 1906 Corner entered Johns Hopkins University, initially intending to study the classics. After spending time on his relatives' farm observing veterinary medicine, however, his interest in biology began to grow and caused him to change his degree program his sophomore year. After completing his undergraduate studies at Johns Hopkins, Corner spent the summer at the US Fisheries Laboratory in Beaufort, North Carolina, where Johns Hopkins biological labs had special privileges. Here he studied protozoa, particularly Cothurnia. His research was then published in 1909 in Notes from the Johns Hopkins Biological Laboratory. Although his interest in protozoology first swayed him toward joining the department of zoology, Corner chose a path in medicine after encouragement from his surgeon cousin, William S. Baer. Soon after his publication Corner enrolled in Johns Hopkins Medical School, where he quickly took advantage of the Medical History Club to feed his interest in the subject. During his studies in the department of anatomy, led by Franklin P. Mall, Corner received instruction from a number of notable professors including Florence R. Sabin (Corner would later assist Sabin in her histology course), Warren H. Lewis, Herbert Evans, and Eliot R. Clark. While still a new medical student Corner sought to pursue independent research under the direction of Mall on the vasculature of the pancreas. During the summers of 1912 and 1913 Corner volunteered at the Grenfell Medical Mission in Battle Harbor, Labrador, as a medical assistant. During one of his summers at the mission Corner met a fellow volunteer Betsy Lyon Copping, whom he eventually married.

As his graduation from medical school approached, Corner chose to accept a research and teaching assistantship in the department of anatomy after encouragement from Mall. Corner had considered a clinical internship in gynecology under Howard Kelly. However, after Mall recommended that he build a stronger knowledge base before pursuing a clinical career, Corner was convinced that research was his best path. While under Mall's supervision, Corner undertook an investigation of the ovary's corpus luteum using sows from a local slaughterhouse. During 1915 Corner began the gynecology internship offered earlier by Kelly. He became discouraged with the lack of physiological foundations in the field, however, and instead sought a career that included both research and clinical experiences. After unsuccessful searches for such a path at Johns Hopkins and other women's clinics, Corner joined Herbert Evans at the University of California at Berkeley. Evans was recognized as an outstanding anatomist and gave Corner an assistant professorship in anatomy with the opportunity to study rabbit and rat gynecology to increase his knowledge of reproductive physiology.

In 1919 Lewis Weed, who had succeeded the late Mall as professor of anatomy at Johns Hopkins, invited Corner to join the department as associate professor. Corner continued his studies on the corpus luteum and uterine changes during the reproductive cycle, and in 1921 he published his classic article on the subject in the Carnegie Contributions to Embryology.

In 1923 Corner received an invitation to join the faculty at Rochester Medical School in New York as a professor of anatomy. Although Corner remained at Rochester for eighteen years, he traveled occasionally and spent most of 1923-1924 in England working in Ernest Starling's laboratory.

Although hesitant to leave the intellectual community at Rochester, in 1940 Corner accepted an invitation from Vannevar Bush, president of the Carnegie Institute of Washington, to succeed George L. Streeter as head of the department of embryology established by Mall, Corner's first research mentor. The same year, Corner was elected to both the National Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society. In 1955 he became a member of the Royal Society of London, and in 1958 he published his first autobiography, *Anatomist at Large*. After years of dedicated research, influential publications, and successful leadership, Corner retired in 1977. He completed a second autobiography, *The Seven Ages of a Medical Scientist*, just a few months before he died on 21 September 1981 in Huntsville, Alabama.

Sources

1. Corner, George W. *Anatomist at Large: An Autobiography and Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1958.
2. Corner, George W. *The Seven Ages of a Medical Scientist: An Autobiography*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.
3. Ramsey, Elizabeth M. "George Corner (1889-1981)." *Biographical Memoirs National Academy of Sciences* 65 (1994): 56-93.