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Built on the Shoulders of Veterinary Giants: Early Veterinary Education in the US

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Between 1852 and 1938, 41 mostly private institutions of veterinary medicine opened in the United States. The Veterinary College of Philadelphia was the first. Middlesex University SVM in Waltham, MA, was the last to close in 1947. The first two institutions, including the college in Philadelphia and the Boston Veterinary Institute (1854), did not list their graduates. For this reason, the NYC College of Veterinary Surgeons (1857) may have been the first institution to have graduates. Nonetheless, AVMA recognizes the Philadelphia facility as the first college or school of veterinary medicine in the US.

Veterinary College of Philadelphia

Early advocates for veterinary education were associated with the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, founded in 1785. Judge Richard Peters, described as a “patriot, lawyer and country gentleman”, was the first advocate to promote veterinary medicine as president of the Philadelphia Society in 1805. Later he was awarded a gold medal for his efforts. Dr. Benjamin Rush addressed medical students at the University of Pennsylvania in 1807 on “*The Duty and Advantages of Studying the Diseases of Domestic Animals and Remedies Proper to Remove Them*”. It’s interesting to note that Dr. Rush signed the Declaration of Independence. Dr. James Mease realized the need for veterinary education, presenting lectures to medical students in 1813 regarding comparative anatomy and diseases of domestic animals.

The Veterinary College of Philadelphia closed in 1866 after 14 years of operation. Why the college did not list their graduates is a mystery.

Other Early Private Colleges

The majority of these private institutions were located in the eastern half of the US.

Three of the 41 aforementioned institutions graduated more than 1,000 students. Between 1893 and 1920 the Chicago Veterinary College educated 2,320 veterinarians. Close behind was the Kansas City Veterinary College (KCVC) with 1,857 graduates. **In its day the KCVC (1891 – 1918) was considered the finest veterinary college in the world, and today is considered the foundation of the veterinary corridor between KSU and MU.** The McKillip Veterinary College, also in Chicago, graduated 1,223 veterinarians between 1894 and 1920.

In addition to KCVC, Missouri was home for four other veterinary institutions. In Kansas City, Western Veterinary College graduated 178 students between 1897 and 1908. University Veterinary College graduated 53 students during its four years of operation beginning in 1902. The St. Joseph Veterinary College had 421 graduates between 1905 and 1923. The St. Louis Veterinary College lasted one year in 1875.

Early Public Colleges

Public funding of veterinary education is cited as one reason for ending the role of the private institutions.

The earliest public institutions were Iowa State (1879), University of Pennsylvania (1883), Ohio State (1885), Cornell (1894), Washington State (1899) and KSU (1905). The UP SVM was the first accredited veterinary college in the US that had its origin in medicine rather than agriculture. The first dean was Rush Shippen Huidekoper, a descendent of the aforementioned Benjamin Rush. Dr. Huidekoper was president of the AVMA from 1887 to 1892.