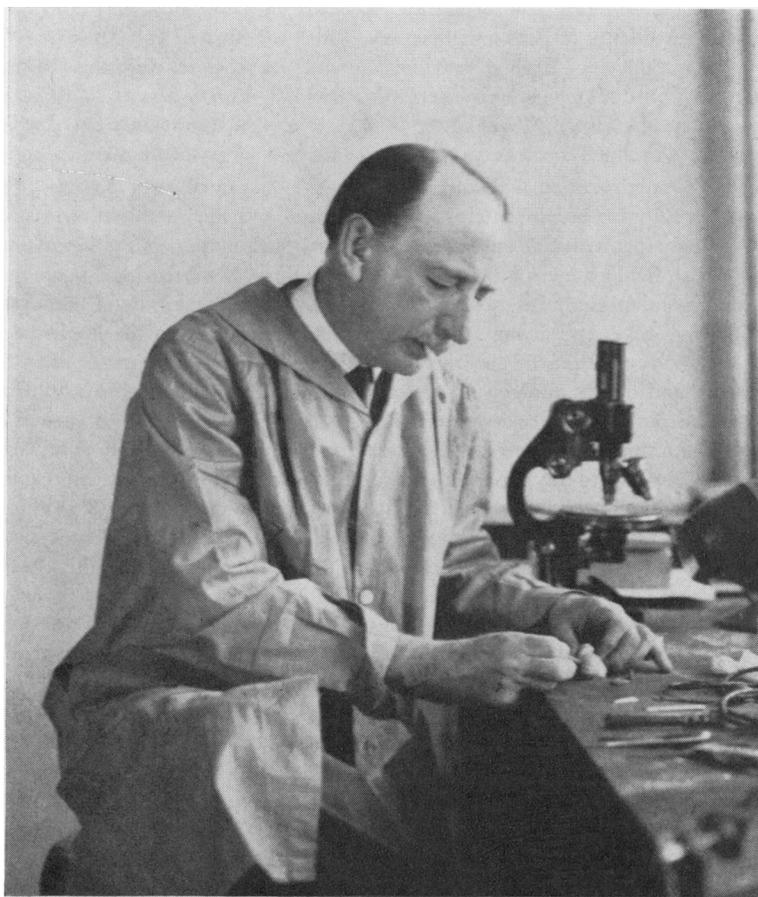


Obituary

Frederick Herman Verhoeff, 1874-1968

Frederick Herman Verhoeff, who was famous as an outstanding eye pathologist and at various times was Professor of Ophthalmic Research at the Harvard Medical School, Director of the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology, and Consulting Chief of Ophthalmology at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, died after a short illness at Hartford, Connecticut, on October 22, 1968, at the age of 94 years.



Obituary notices of nonagenarians commonly come as an echo from the past and even as a surprising reminder that the deceased had so long survived his contemporaries, but vitality and agelessness were such basic qualities in Dr. Verhoeff's character that the announcement of his death brings to us all in ophthalmology, irrespective of our age group, a very deep sense of loss. He was born on July 9, 1874, in Louisville, Kentucky, the son of Herman Verhoeff, a Dutchman whose father had settled in America in 1836, and Mary Jane (Parker) Verhoeff, whose family was of English descent.

After graduating with a Ph.B. degree from the Yale Sheffield Scientific School in 1895, he received his medical education at Johns Hopkins Medical School, Baltimore, and qualified M.D. in 1899. As an extern at Johns Hopkins Hospital and assistant surgeon at the Baltimore Eye and Ear Hospital, he developed a special interest in ophthalmic pathology and in 1900 went to Boston as resident pathologist at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, and as assistant in general pathology at the Harvard Medical School, working under the famous pathologists Drs. Council and Mallory. It is of especial interest to us to recall that in 1902, after attaining an M.A. degree at Harvard, he came to study with Parsons at the Royal London Ophthalmic Hospital (Moorfields), and also visited other

centres in Europe. On returning to America he subsequently became Assistant Ophthalmic Surgeon, Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, 1905–1913, Ophthalmic Surgeon, 1913–1932, the first Chief of Ophthalmic Research in 1925 and Consulting Chief of Ophthalmology in 1932. He was Instructor in Ophthalmic Pathology, Harvard, 1907; Assistant Professor of Ophthalmic Research, 1916; Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology, 1921; Professor of Ophthalmic Research, 1924–1941, since then Emeritus; Scientific Director of the Howe Laboratory, 1931–1932 and Director of the Howe Laboratory, 1932–1940. During the World War (1918–1919) he served in France as Major in the United States Army Medical Corps.

He was a distinguished member of numerous medical societies; in 1905 he was elected to the American Ophthalmological Society, eventually becoming President and finally an Honorary Member. He also became President of the New England Ophthalmological Society and Chairman of the Section of Ophthalmology of the American Medical Association. He was a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Among the many honours he received were the Knapp Gold Medal of the Section of Ophthalmology and the Ophthalmic Research Medal, both of the American Medical Association; the Howe Medal of the American Ophthalmological Society; and the Leslie Dana Medal. The Verhoeff Lecture to perpetuate his memory was founded in 1961.

Dr. Verhoeff's appointment as Director of the Howe Laboratory gave him the opportunity and material to exploit fully his intense interest in eye disease, and the combination of his skill, mental agility and seemingly inexhaustible energy resulted in an enormous output of original and important contributions in the field of eye pathology. Many of these became classical works, as those on phacoanaphylactic endophthalmitis, scleromalacia perforans and tumours of the optic nerve, but even his pathological case reports were often the first such accounts in the literature. Indeed, no single man has done more than he to base the study of eye disease upon the twin foundations of general pathology and ophthalmology, in which two disciplines he was uniquely trained, and so to develop its study beyond the purely descriptive approach of his early days and to set it on its modern scientific course. All this was achieved with a breadth of scholarship unlikely to be surpassed in the highly specialized world of to-day, and with such élan, gaiety, and pungent wit—often discomfiting to his embarrassed targets—that his teaching is remembered not only with profit but also with amusement and affection by his many known and unknown friends. It was a most appropriate honour when the American Ophthalmic Pathology Club changed its name to the "Verhoeff Society" in 1964 when he was 90. Nor were his other contributions to ophthalmology of less calibre, for he published many valuable studies on optics, vision, ocular bacteriology, eye injuries, and ocular surgery to which he introduced new operative techniques and developed new instruments. In fact the word "new" throughout his bibliography testifies not only to his originality, but also to the remarkable way it persisted throughout his life. His first paper published in 1899 was entitled "A New Instrument for Measuring Heterophoria" and thereafter it appears in at least ten titles—"A New Operation for Removing Cataracts"—"A New Test for Visual Acuity"—"A New Theory of Binocular Vision"—"A New Conjunctival Flap for Trephining Operations"—"A New Needle holder . . ." etc., until in his 90th year we find some of his last papers entitled "A New Kinetic Test for Binocular Stereopsis" and "New Concepts Concerning Ocular Motility". And if Dr. Verhoeff used this adjective we could be sure it was justified, but lesser men would have been unwise to apply it to their own work in his presence, for he was very likely to challenge such a claim, frequently quoting his own previous work, all too often unhappily overlooked. He was, however, very willing to acknowledge his own errors of interpretation, as shown by the free confessions in his remarkable paper entitled "My Major Mistakes" (1964), but even this is held to be "unique in its title and subject". In discussing this paper Dr. Derrick Vail spoke for all of us in quoting a Spanish proverb: "He who loves not the loved one's faults does not truly love".

We have undoubtedly lost a great man, a colourful character, and a fine ophthalmologist, but we can be thankful that this able and exceptionally gifted person lived so many active and undiminished years to enrich ophthalmology not only abundantly, but with memorable sparkle and great sincerity.