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Stamping Out Pain with Brandy Anesthesia: McDowell's Cystolithotomy of Polk



A 32-cent commemorative U.S. postage stamp was released (*right*) in 1995 on the 200th anniversary of the birth of Tennessee politician James K. Polk (1795 to 1849). As a sickly 12-yr-old, Polk had drunk the brandy prescribed him as his only anesthetic for bladder stone removal. This cystolithotomy likely required that the boy be secured for surgery by leather straps and strong assistants—brandy was an impotent anesthetic. And impotence likely precluded future children for the young patient after his scarring from the rapid perineal dissection of his famous surgeon, Ephraim McDowell (1771 to 1830). A 4-cent commemorative U.S. postage stamp was released (*left*) in 1959 to commemorate McDowell on the 150th anniversary of ovarian surgery, which he pioneered. Ironically, Polk's surgeon, McDowell, hailed as the "Father of Abdominal Surgery," would die from appendicitis and never live to see Polk reject brandy and all alcohol in adulthood as the teetotaling eleventh president of the United States. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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