

Jesse Bennett (1769–1842)

Jesse Bennett, sometimes spelled Bennet, practiced medicine in the US during the late eighteenth century and performed one of the first successful cesarean operations, later called cesarean sections, in 1794. Following complications during his wife's childbirth, Bennett made an incision through her lower abdomen and uterus to deliver their infant. Bennett's biographers report that his operation was the first cesarean section where both the pregnant woman and the infant survived. Previously, physicians used cesarean sections to save the fetus from a pregnant woman who had already died during childbirth. Bennett successfully performed a cesarean section, a procedure used worldwide in the twenty-first century when a vaginal delivery is not possible or would pose a risk to the woman or fetus.

Bennett was born to British colonists in Frankford, Pennsylvania, on 10 July 1769. Bennett was the eldest of three siblings and had a younger brother and sister. Although Bennett's father was killed when Bennett was very young, his family was left in what his biographers referred to as a healthy financial situation. Bennett's family wealth enabled each child to pursue formal education. When Bennett was six years old, the British colonies in North America declared their independence from the British Empire, starting the Revolutionary War. According to historians, because of his level of education and social status, Bennett was excused from fighting so that he could continue his studies.

After finishing his early education, Bennett attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where, according to Bennett's neighbor, Aquilla Leighton Knight, he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree. After graduation, Bennett began working with Benjamin Rush, a physician. Rush was also the chair of the Institute of Medicine and Clinical Practices department of the University of Pennsylvania, and one of the men who signed the Constitution of the US in 1787. Bennett received both his Master of Arts degree and Doctorate of Medicine degree in 1791. In 1791, Bennett moved away from Philadelphia and settled in a small town in Rockingham County, Virginia, where he established his business in a log cabin in the woods.

Historians argue about Bennett's early life. While Knight recounts that Bennett attended medical school, worked under Rush, and completed a successful cesarean section, not all historians agree. Historian Arthur G. King states that Bennett never attended the University of Pennsylvania, nor did he study with Rush. Another historian, Dorothy Poling, asserts that Bennett was a shopkeeper and apothecary who practiced medicine in his small town.

On 8 April 1793, Bennett married Elizabeth Hogg. She was the daughter of Peter Hogg, an attorney from Rockingham County, Virginia. Within a year of marriage, Bennett's wife became pregnant. According to the report of historian Joseph Miller, Bennett enlisted physician Alexander Humphreys, a man from Staunton, Virginia, to tend to his wife during childbirth. When her labor began on 14 January 1794, Humphreys and Nancy Hawkins, Bennett's sister-in-law, came to their cabin. Bennett's wife had a difficult labor and after an unsuccessful attempt to deliver the infant vaginally with forceps, Humphreys and Bennett discussed their options.

According to Knight, the two options remaining for delivery were a craniotomy or a caesarean operation. A craniotomy is a medical procedure in which the fetal skull is crushed so that the laboring woman is able to deliver the fetus. A craniotomy results in fetal death, but provides a chance for the laboring woman to survive. A cesarean section is a procedure in which a physician makes an incision through the pregnant woman's lower abdomen and uterus to deliver the fetus surgically. That procedure was typically used to help the infant survive when the pregnant woman was likely to die from childbirth. Knight claims Humphreys insisted that there was nothing they

could do to save Bennett's wife and refused to participate in any additional attempts for delivery. Bennett continued with the cesarean section without Humphreys. Knight published the primary account of Bennett's operation after an interview with Hawkins and a slave who was present that night.

To perform the cesarean section, Bennett and his slaves fashioned an operating table out of two barrels with boards laid across the top. He gave his wife laudanum, an opiate drug that put her to sleep, while two of Bennett's slaves held her to the table. Hawkins, his sister-in-law, held a candle over the table, providing the only light. It was reported that Bennett used a knife to open his wife's abdomen. The first incision only partially cut her uterus, but the next incision enlarged the opening in her uterus and allowed Bennett to remove the infant. Before closing the incision, Bennett removed the placenta and both ovaries, ensuring that his wife would not get pregnant again. He sutured his wife's abdomen closed with heavy linen thread used for clothing.

Biographers claim that both Bennett's wife and his child, Maria, survived the operation and lived to old ages. Bennett became one of the first physicians in the US to successfully complete a cesarean section after which both the woman and infant survived. Poling reports that Bennett made notes in the margins of one of his personal textbooks on cesarean sections detailing his wife's healing progress. He wrote that she was out of bed by 9 February, walking by the 15 February, and cured by 1 March. He did not report the operation to any medical publication.

In 1797, Bennett moved his family to western Mason County, West Virginia. They moved onto his father-in-law's land. There, he established a large medical practice. Along with running his business, Bennett also helped to establish Mason County's government. He further influenced the new county by serving as their representative in the Virginia Assembly. After participating in the government of Mason County and acting as their representative, Bennett was appointed major of the Mason County Militia in 1804. While serving as major, the US and Great Britain began the War of 1812, where they fought for trade rights. Knight reports that Bennett's rank as major and skill as a physician qualified him for a position as army surgeon during the War of 1812.

Historians have contested the claim that Bennett's operation was the first successful cesarean operation in the US. In 1827, John Lambert Richmond performed a cesarean operation in Newton, Ohio, just ten miles from Bennett's business. Richmond reported his success to the *Western Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences* and claimed to have performed the first successful caesarean operation in the US. Although Bennett's procedure reportedly occurred years before Richmond's, many medical journals, including the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, give Richmond credit for the first successful operation on account of publishing dates. Members of Bennett's family have publicized that Bennett commented on the injustice of Richmond's claim, but it was many years before anyone sought to alter the historical records.

The first record of Bennett's cesarean section was published in 1892 when Knight, his neighbor, wrote a detailed account of Bennett's operation. In the account, Knight records interviews with Bennett's slaves and sister-in-law who were present during the cesarean section. Knight published his account and biography, "The Life and Times of Dr. Jesse Bennett, M.D.," in *The Southern Historical Magazine* in 1892. Though multiple versions of the narrative have been published, Richmond is still credited with the first successful cesarean operation by many medical societies.

Bennett spent the remainder of his life in his home in Mason County. According to historians, he continued to practice medicine and act as an influential member of Mason County. Bennett's wife died in 1836 and he married Harriet Fowler in 1839. Bennett died on 13 July 1842.

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