

Boren SA, Diaz M, Neuhauser D (2006). James Burns Amberson (1890-1979).



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James Burns Amberson Jr was born in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, on 8 June 1890. He received his undergraduate degree from Lafayette College in 1913, and his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1917. Amberson did not complete an internship or residency (Christy 2002). While he was at medical school he contracted tuberculosis and became a patient in the Loomis Sanatorium in New York State. He was well enough to marry Rebecca Tillman Steen on 1 January 1919, and they subsequently had two children.



Cite as:

Boren SA, Diaz M, Neuhauser D (2006). James Burns Amberson (1890-1979). JLL Bulletin: Commentaries on the history of treatment evaluation (www.jameslindlibrary.org).

Amberson remained at the Loomis Sanatorium until 1926, when he went to Detroit to become a physician at Herman Kiefer Hospital (a general hospital) and at the William H Maybury Sanatorium in Northville, Michigan (also known as the Detroit Municipal Tuberculosis Sanatorium and later, Spring Hills Sanatorium, before being renamed in 1927). In Michigan, he directed the reorganization of the clinical work and assisted with the planning of a 500 bed tuberculosis unit. It was while working at the William H Maybury Sanatorium that Amberson and his colleagues McMahon and Pinner carried out their clinical trial of sanocrysin – a gold preparation – using a coin toss to decide which of two matched groups of patients should receive the drug, and which group should continue to receive usual care, without sanocrysin ([Amberson et al. 1931](#)).

In 1927, Amberson returned to the sanatorium where he had been a patient as physician-in-chief, and he remained there until 1929. In 1927, he was also appointed Assistant Professor of Clinical Medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. Early the following year, he was recruited by the Chest Service of the Bellevue Hospital Center in New York (<http://medicine.med.nyu.edu/pulmonary/>), where he was recognized as a brilliant clinician with remarkable insight into basic pathophysiologic mechanisms. From 1930 to 1934, Amberson also served as a Tuberculosis Consultant on the Bellevue-Yorkville Health Demonstration Project. In 1938, he became head of the Chest Service and a Full Professor of Medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, and he continued to hold these positions until his retirement in 1955. (<http://www.cumc.columbia.edu/psjournal/>).

During this time, Amberson was recognized by the honors that chest medicine could give him. He was the President of the American Thoracic Society in 1940, and President of the National Tuberculosis Association in 1942. He was a member of the editorial board of the American Review of Tuberculosis from 1922 to 1930 and from 1939 to 1946. Amberson was awarded honorary doctorate degrees by the University of Pennsylvania in 1933 and Lafayette College in 1944, and he was the 27th winner of the American Thoracic Society's Trudeau Medal in 1952 (Ayvazian 1980). On his retirement in 1955, he was praised as a “doctor of the old school,” and, the following year, a lectureship was created in his name, which continues to this day (Waring 1956).

Beyond his retirement in 1955, Amberson was appointed Professor Emeritus of Medicine by the College of Physician and Surgeons of Columbia University. Amberson continued to teach, consult, and publish, a total of more than 80 articles, which included review and analysis of his immense experience (Christy 2002). Amberson also became general director of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association in 1955, a post he held until 1965. This period coincided with great transformations in tuberculosis care: effective chemotherapy meant that lengthy rest cures in rural sanatoria, and thoracic surgery, were replaced by ambulatory medication. The 450 or so tuberculosis hospitals in the USA closed their doors during this time, eliminating medical staff positions and diminishing the size of Amberson's medical specialty. Indeed, it was hoped that tuberculosis could be eliminated (Amberson 1955; 1958; 1966). This optimism has faded more recently with multiple drug resistant tuberculosis and the spread of HIV and its associated deaths from tuberculosis. There is almost no archival material related to Amberson at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, or Bellevue Medical Center (the records of the Chest Department there were not kept). This is regrettable because the secondary sources of are in conflict on several points.

Amberson died on 3 December 1979, at the age of 90. Although he received fulsome praise from his later colleagues and former students for leading an excellent clinical service, for educating future medical leaders in his specialty, and for his research (Murray 1987), none of them made reference to his pioneering use of a coin toss, half a century earlier, to decide which of two matched groups of patients should be allocated drug treatment and which routine care ([Amberson et al. 1931](#)).

The land upon which the William H Maybury Sanatorium stood until 1969 became Maybury State Park in 1975. Many of Maybury State Park's paved walking trails are on the former walks and roadways of the sanatorium. Most of the other evidence that nearly 1000 acres of gently rolling terrain there once held more than 40 buildings for thousands of tuberculosis patients has disappeared. Most of the buildings were torn down before the land became a state park. Only four stone and brick doctors' residences remain, including one that serves as Maybury State Park headquarters. On September 30, 2006, a self-guided history trail (<http://www.friendsofmaybury.org/uploads/MaburyHistoryMap.pdf>) was dedicated to celebrate the people who lived and worked at the William H Maybury Sanatorium, and the work they did there to fight tuberculosis. Maybury State Park is located at 20145 Beck Road, with the main entrance located on Eight Mile Road, in Northville, Michigan.

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