

Dr. J. Francisco Martínez Aguirre (1850 - 1917)

(Article written by Ruben Rites Mariscal for El Telegrafo, January 6, 1951)

Today marks the first hundredth anniversary of the birth of one of the most notable surgeons of Ecuador.

On the 6th of January, 1850, in the flourishing town of Baba, a parish which in the colonial epoch was a regional capital belonging to the Department of Guayaquil, was born Señor Doctor Don Francisco Javier Martínez Aguirre. Baba was in those days the seat of Guayaquil aristocracy and a resort for the leading families of that city.

From documentary evidence it is known that the Spanish gentleman Don Manuel Martínez de la Paz came to America and took up residence in Santiago de Guayaquil, moving later to Baba where he married Doña Teresa Rodríguez Plaza, of that parish. One of their sons was Don Pedro Alcántara Martínez de la Paz y Rodríguez Plaza, born there in 1718.

Don Pedro Martínez de la Paz y Rodríguez Plaza was married to Doña Teresa Franco. Their sons were Don Ignacio Martínez Franco, who became a priest in Baba, and Don Ramón Martínez Franco, an official of the Inquisition ("Alcalde de la Santa Hermandad").

Don Ramón Martínez Franco married Doña Magdalena de Arzube y Erazo, daughter of Don José de Arzube y Zarate de Checón and Doña Juana Erazo y Guerrero. From this marriage was born Don Ignacio Martínez Arzube, in Baba; on March 10, 1842, he married Doña Josefa de Aguirre y Maximin, daughter of Don Manuel de Aguirre y Cepeda and Doña Juana Luisa Maximin y Vera.

The following is the baptismal entry:

Francisco Javier Martínez -- In this church on the 8th day of January, 1850, Sr. V. P. Francisco Calderon solemnly baptized and anointed with holy oil and chrism Francisco Javier, two days old, son of Señor Ignacio Martínez and Señora Josefa Aguirre; godparents were Ramón Martínez and Manuela Arzube. This entry is recorded in No. 7 of the baptismal books in the archives of the parish church of Baba.

The young Martínez Aguirre received his primary and secondary education in Guayaquil, at the Seminary College and San Vicente del Guayas, graduating with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree from the latter. He then travelled to Europe, where he remained for a time before going to the United States. At the already famous University of Pennsylvania he received the degree of Doctor of Medicine and Surgery on March 14, 1871. Upon graduating from this North American university, he won the post of Assistant Demonstrator in Anatomy, his favorite specialty; he also served as Professor of Obstetrics and Medicine at Children's Hospital, for which the director of that institution bestowed on him a vote of thanks for the important services rendered as well as for his outstanding scientific background, industriousness and love of science.

The surgeon Dr. Agnew, in a letter directed to the Minister of the United States to Ecuador Mr. Kumey Wing, says: "Dr. Martínez Aguirre was an outstanding student and skillful anatomist, obtaining a very high standing in his final examination at the University of Pennsylvania. I therefore have the pleasure of recommending him to you as worthy of all your confidence, not only as a doctor but as a gentleman."

Having completed his university career in the United States in so brilliant a manner, he returned to his native country, settling down in this city, travelling to Quito, and joining the medical faculty of the 100-year old Central University. The Medical School had recently been established on Nov. 7, 1877; the career of Dr. Martínez Aguirre was initiated on May 20, 1878, the date on which Sr. Wilfrido Venegas, afterward General of the Republic, presented and read his thesis on "Principal Diseases of the Liver in Tropical Countries" to obtain his title of Doctor of Medicine.

From the year 1878 until 1910 Dr. Martínez functioned as professor of our University. By virtue of the Law of Public Instruction which was in effect after October 10, 1897, the office of Dean and professor of physiology was filled by Dr. Pedro José Boloña and the office of Assistant Dean and professor of general and topographic anatomy by Dr. Francisco Martínez Aguirre. At the faculty meeting on November 29, 1899, Dr. Martínez was elected Dean. At the November 9, 1901, faculty meeting (at which Dr. Emilio G. Roca was elected Dean), Dean Martínez said:

"Before proceeding to the election of Dean for the new term, May I be permitted to call to your attention that in spite of my efforts during the period in which I had the honor of presiding over this faculty, I have not been able to achieve the improvements and advances which other faculties have achieved in methods of instruction. The establishment of laboratories of Anatomy, which would be the basis of teaching collections of abnormal and pathological anatomy, and of Natural History and Chemistry are considered as absolute necessities for instruction in these subjects, as well as in surgery. Actual clinical teaching also should be expanded by initiating the establishment of certain specialties under the direction of (among others) Dr. Julián Coronel (Dermatology), Dr. Falconi (Ophthalmology), and Dr. García Drouet, who enjoys a distinguished reputation in treating diseases of the Ears, Nose and Throat. Hopefully this council, better inspired than the previous one, will make an effort to carry out these indispensable improvements."

The following items are taken from the interesting recent historical work: "Centenarios de 1950" by Sr. Dr. Carlos A. Rolando:

Dr. Alejo Lascano, founder of the School of Medicine, in reference to the role of Dr. Martínez Aguirre in the establishment of this school, stated in a speech published in *La Nación* on August 9, 1879, and reproduced 71 years later in the same paper: "One of the obstacles believed insuperable in the presentation of these subjects was the climate, especially for the students of anatomy. This obstacle no longer exists. Dr. Francisco J. Martínez Aguirre, with painstaking dedication, has solved this important problem and has developed a preparation superior to any of my knowledge; easily used and low in cost, it prevents the disastrous effects of putrefaction so unfortunate for the assistants in a course of anatomy. I am delighted to say that Dr. Martínez Aguirre has performed a service of the utmost importance for young students and professors as well as for the entire city."

The contributions of the eminent Dr. Martínez Aguirre in the rise of medical and surgical studies in the Medical School of the University of Guayaquil, to which Dr. Lascano referred, were truly distinguished, as was the dedication with which Dr. Martínez Aguirre, in 1878, took charge of the course of topographic and descriptive anatomy. He himself, even at some risk to his life, prepared anatomical dissections (so important for these studies), using cadavers for the first time in Guayaquil and making illustrations (in oils) for use in his classroom demonstrations.

It is fitting to mention here the important work which, in his double role as man of science and Governor of the province of Guayas, Dr. Martínez Aguirre was obliged to perform on the occasion of the epidemic of bubonic plague in 1908. In this emergency, as well as during the threat of yellow fever, he was able to inspire confidence, and with patient work establish basic public health measures, the basis of what was to become the Department of Health of Guayaquil.

In addition to all this, Dr. Martínez Aguirre contributed generously to the public service of Guayaquil, being an outstanding member, at various times, of the city council and of many charitable and civic organizations.

In the conflict with Peru in 1910 Dr. Martínez Aguirre served as Minister of War and the Navy (today Minister of Defense) and presented a confidential and highly detailed and exact report in which were spelled out all the war materiel which the country commanded at that moment for its defense. Such was the precision of the report that a senator full of enthusiasm for the work of the Minister said: "For these last fifteen years Dr. Martínez Aguirre has been Minister of War and Navy. A committee presented to the President of the Republic a petition for a generalship for Dr. Martínez Aguirre. Since for certain reasons of a political nature no move was made to acknowledge the rank of Colonel acquired in campaigns in which he took part, Congress was petitioned for the rank of Colonel of Cavalry, which was granted him in 1910. Let me mention also that Dr. Martínez took part, as did so many others, in the famous battle of Galte, and has served since then as Surgeon Major of the Army in the liberal campaign initiated by General Eloy Alfaro to establish the principles of the triumph of '95 with the peoples of the interior of the Republic."

Dr. Martínez was designated "combat author", since he took part in the historic Liberal Party and was also editor and owner of the satirical liberal weekly El Perico, the first issue of which was published November 7, 1885..

Exiled to Peru for his progressive ideas, he settled in the city of Trujillo, where he published a newspaper in opposition to the government of President Don Jose M. Plácido Caamaño.

He was Minister of Public Instruction in the years 1906, '07, '08 and '09; Minister of the Interior in 1907; Minister of War and Navy in 1910 and '11; Governor of Guayas in 1907 and '08; Councillor of Guayaquil Canton; member of the Protective Society of Firemen (1890-91); member of the Philanthropic Society of Guayas; political chief of the Canton (1896-97); Minister of the Department of Health; member of the Department of Welfare (1891-92). When the Liberal Democratic Society was founded in Guayaquil, Don Pedro Carbo was named as president and Dr. Martínez as vice-president.

Dr. Rolando writes: "Dr. Martínez had the great honor of receiving 54 votes from his native town of Baba, naming him for Senator from Rios, a duty he discharged in the years 1901, '02 and '03.

An honored member of the faculty of the Medical School, he was president of the second section of the First National Medical Congress which met in this city October 9 - 14, 1915. In exile from the country, he returned on the 12th and on the 13th presented himself in the assembly hall where he occupied the place of honor in conducting the Congress.

This notable public figure and city father, a prominent member of Ecuadorian medicine, died in Guayaquil on February 8, 1917, aged 67 years, one month, and two days.

At a faculty meeting on February 12, 1917, the death was announced of former Dean Dr. Martínez Aguirre. A motion was made by Professor Juan Modesto Carbo Noboa, seconded by Professor Isquieta Pérez, and the following resolution drawn up:

The Faculty of Medicine, Surgery and Pharmacy of the University of Guayaquil --

WHEREAS:

--has died Professor Emeritus Dr. Francisco J. Martínez Aguirre:

--Dr. Martínez Aguirre was one of its old and distinguished members, who shared with us his valuable knowledge for many years:

--it is the duty of the entire college body to honor the memory of those who contribute to its luster:

BE IT RESOLVED

-- To mourn so regrettable a death, to suspend the session in token of sorrow, and to communicate this resolution to the widow and children of the deceased as well as the regret of the faculty for their irreparable loss.

Given in the meeting of the Faculty of Medicine, February 12, 1917.

The burial was with fitting ceremony, the army rendering him military honors corresponding to his rank as Colonel of Cavalry of the Ecuadorian Army.

References:

"Genealogia de la familia Martínez de la Pas" (Geneology of the family Martínez de la Pas)  
Sr. Pedro Robles y Chambres

"Los Centenarios de 1950"  
Dr. Carlos A. Rolando

Archivo de la Facultad de Ciencias Médicas de la Universidad de Guayaquil  
(Archives of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Guayaquil)