

Charles Huggins' Road Not Taken at the Brady Urological Institute

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Introduction: Twenty years before Charles Huggins became one of two urologists to win a Nobel Prize, he earned a different prestigious title: Hugh Hampton Young's successor at the Brady Urological Institute. This article seeks to better understand Huggins' relationship with the 'Brady' and why he accepted the position, only to repudiate the offer months later.

Sources and Methods: Archival research was conducted at the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives at Johns Hopkins and at the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at The University of Chicago. Secondary sources were accessed as cited.


Results: Letters between Charles Huggins and Alfred Blalock, the Director of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH), reveal that Huggins' relationship with the Brady began earlier than previously reported. When Hugh Hampton Young retired in 1941, Blalock wanted Huggins to become the Chair, but socio-political factors interfered with his appointment. When Huggins was finally offered the position in 1945, he accepted the post but he resigned shortly thereafter.

Conclusions: The presented research provides insight into a turbulent period of transition at Hopkins. However, several archival gaps remain. Nevertheless, findings reveal that Huggins' decision kept the Brady on the original trajectory set by Hugh Hampton Young. Huggins' decision to relinquish the offered Chair position was motivated by something quite personal, his professional goals, and his sense of self.

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n the official annals of the Brady Urological Institute at Johns Hopkins, Charles B. Huggins receives only a brief mention.(1,2) Yet it is a well-known fact that, in 1946, Huggins accepted an appointment as Chair and then relinquished the post.(1,2) Archival evidence from the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives at Johns Hopkins and The Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at The University of Chicago reveal that, contrary to published accounts, 1946 was not the beginning of Huggins' relationship with the Brady. The author conducted research using primary archival materials in order to better understand the nature and extent of Huggins' relationship with the Brady and why, only a few months after accepting the appointment at Hopkins, he reneged on the decision.

SOURCES AND METHODS

Primary documents, archival records, and correspondences were accessed at the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives at Johns Hopkins University and The Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at The University of Chicago. Multiple in-person visits were made in May, August, and October of 2024,

The Chesney Medical Archives began informally in the 1930s when Alan Mason Chesney, the dean of Johns Hopkins Medicine, discovered a treasure trove of documents relating to the founding of Johns Hopkins Hospital and the School of Medicine. Chesney was inspired to continue collecting materials on Hopkins history and his personal passion set in motion a tradition of archival research at the institution. In 1974,



Figure 1. The Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at The University of Chicago (UC) which holds the largest collection of archives related to Charles Huggins during his tenure at UC over a remarkable 70 year career from 1927-1990 (Author's Personal Photo, AJG).

A. McGehee Harvey was appointed the institution's first Associate Archivist; by 1978, the Hopkins archives were named in honor of Alan Mason Chesney for his contributions to preserving Hopkins history.³ Today, the Chesney Archives houses photographs, artifacts and medical instruments, personal papers, audio recordings, institutional records, and biographical files. The entire collection is massive; the personal records of Hugh Hampton Young, for example, occupy 35 linear feet.⁴ The Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center houses a portion of The University of Chicago Library's collection, including various manuscripts, University materials, rare books, and the Chicago Jazz Archives. The Department of Special Collections, as it was known, was created in 1953. In 2020, it was named for Hanna Holborn Gray who served as the tenth President of the University from 1978 to 1993. The Center houses 350,000 rare books, 13,216 linear feet of manuscripts and other documents, and 60,234 linear feet of University material (Figure 1).⁵ Charles Huggins had a longstanding relationship with The University of Chicago beginning as a research fellow in 1927 and ending as a retired Professor Emeritus in 1990.

Requests to access materials at both archives can be submitted online using institution-specific forms. After approval, researchers can select a date to visit the archives and view the materials. For this study, multiple visits were made to each archive to comprehensively assess the relevant materials.

RESULTS

The Inter-Regnum: Finding the Brady's 2nd Chair

In 1941, when Hugh Hampton Young stepped down as the Brady's first Chair, the search for his successor began.⁽²⁾ Many thought it would be difficult to find someone of Young's stature to fill the position. Alfred Blalock, who was Director of Surgery at Johns Hopkins and charged with selecting Young's successor, wanted to appoint a full-time faculty member as part of a larger move away from faculty with private practices to faculty devoted to research and patient care.⁽⁶⁾ Blalock was inspired by The University of Chicago where such a transition had already occurred.ⁱ

At that time, Charles Huggins, a professor of surgery at The University of Chicago, had recently published a series of papers detailing the androgen-dependent nature of prostatic tissue, a finding that would later win him the 1966 Nobel Prize in Medicine.⁽⁷⁾ Shortly after that publication, around February 1942, Huggins and Blalock began a robust correspondence, some of which can be found at The University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins.^(8,9) Seemingly uncharacteristic of professional correspondence during this era but suggestive of a warm personal relationship, "Charlie" wrote to "Al" and vice versa.^(8,9)

Early in their correspondence, Blalock suggested he wanted Huggins to lead the Brady but that other factors complicated the decision. "Dr. Hugh Young would like to have the men who have been trained by



Figure 2. (Left) Alfred Blalock (1899-1964), the Chair of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital at the time of Hugh H. Young's retirement in 1941. (Courtesy, The Alan Mason Chesney Archives Johns Hopkins University) Blalock was in charge for the search for Young's successor and his first order of business was to try and recruit the young Charles Huggins (Right) away from his busy research post at the University of Chicago. (Courtesy, William P. Didusch Center for Urological History, Linthicum, Md)

him considered very carefully as his successor," Blalock explained.⁹ Blalock reassured Huggins of the desired outcome: "I want you to know that I feel just as I did when I talked to you in Chicago...[and] I hope you will appreciate the spirit in which this letter is written, and it is because of my friendship for you that I am describing the situation as I see it."⁽⁸⁾

By March 1942, Blalock wrote to Huggins that "nothing...[could] be done about the appointment of a permanent Professor of Urology."⁽⁸⁾ Huggins responded, expressing he was "greatly honored... by being considered," but that he was disappointed because he had already arranged for his family "to consider an offer seriously."⁽⁸⁾ Huggins knew that the position would have "meant a widened scope for my work" and allowed him to focus on "the primary functions of the clinical teacher...the advancement of knowledge by investigative techniques."⁽⁸⁾ Despite Huggins' disappointment, he told Blalock, "[I]f I may be of any assistance to you in the future, please feel free to call upon me."ⁱⁱⁱ This was an offer Blalock did not forget.

Without an official hire in the wake of Young's retirement, J.A. Campbell Colston served as the interim Chief of the Brady. Colston was already an established

Brady staff member and had trained under Young, making him a fitting leader while the search for Young's successor continued.⁽²⁾ Although the Brady's future may have seemed uncertain, Huggins' future was less so: without a forthcoming offer from Hopkins, other institutions attempted to lure him away from Chicago. By Fall 1945, Huggins had been invited to join the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, which reignited Blalock's initial desire to attract Huggins to Hopkins. Blalock took matters into his own hands, writing in September 1945 to an unnamed correspondent at Hopkins to recommend the appointment of Charles Huggins as a Hopkins "Professor of Urology, preferably on a full-time basis."⁽⁹⁾ In that letter, Blalock emphasized Huggins' capabilities as a "a good teacher, an excellent urologist, and an able investigator."

After Blalock contacted Huggins in late November 1945 to gauge his interest in coming to the Brady, Huggins expressed reservations. By letter dated December 14, 1945, Huggins requested Blalock's assurance that "there would be a good deal of time for research activities," saying that, "while I do not intend to neglect patients, I do not want to have the Hopkins faculty believe that they were obtaining the services of a

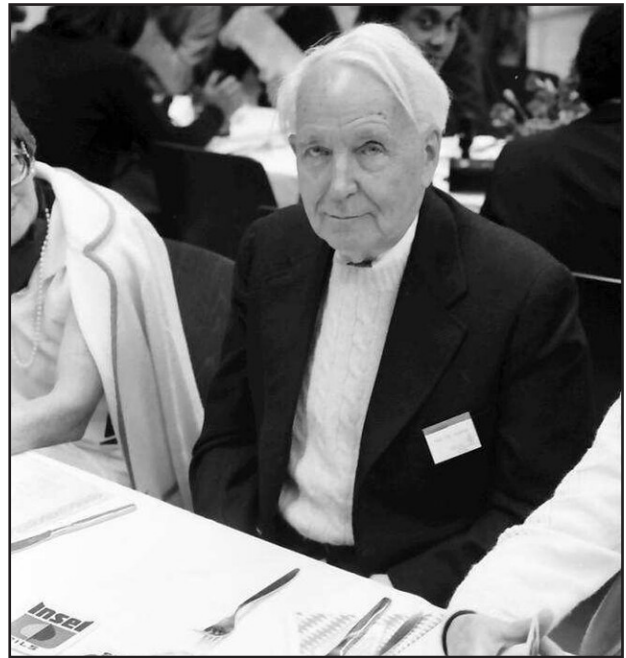


Figure 3. Left. Charles Huggins receiving the Nobel Prize in medicine, December 10, 1966, Concert Hall, Concert Hall, Stockholm, Sweden for his work on the relationship between androgens and prostate cancer. (Courtesy, SVT International, Stockholm). (Right) Huggins, at 77, as the invited speaker, Student Research Evening, June 1978, University of Freiburg, Germany (WikiCommons).

high powered clinician who would be expected to devote his time exclusively to clinical duties.”(9) If his needs were met, Huggins said he could ensure that the “Department will have a greater future than it has under the leadership of Doctor Young.”(9) A letter from Huggins to Blalock on December 14, 1945 suggests that Huggins believed himself well-positioned to surpass Young’s legacy through a combination of grit and tenacity: “if hard work will do it, it shall be done.”(9) Huggins was offered the job.

On January 11, 1946, Huggins accepted the appointment to serve as the second Chairman of the Department of Urology.(8) On January 16, 1946, the news broke to the general public via an article in the *Baltimore Sun*. The appointment was so monumental that the *Journal of American Medical Association* even included a one-paragraph mention in its January 26, 1946 issue:

“Dr. Charles B. Huggins, professor of surgery (urology) and head of the department of urology, University of Chicago School of Medicine, has been named director of the Brady Urological Institute and professor and head of the department of urology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore. The appointment will be effective July 1. The appointment fills the vacancy that occurred when Dr. Hugh H. Young, founder of the Brady Institute, died on Aug. 23, 1945. Dr. Huggins,

who has been affiliated with the university since 1927, has been professor of urologic surgery at Chicago since 1936. Prior to that he had been associated with the University of Michigan Medical School as instructor in surgery. He graduated at Harvard Medical School, Boston, in 1924.”(8,10)

This appointment was important news not only for the Brady but for the entire medical profession.

Huggins' cold arrival in Baltimore

At the end of February 1946, Huggins visited Baltimore to meet with the Brady faculty. Simply put, Huggins was not well received.(11) Like Blalock, Huggins believed that “one cannot have a mixture of part-time and full-time men with a great difference in their income working harmoniously together.”(9) However, there were members of the faculty, such as Hugh Judge Jewett, who wished to retain their private practices while continuing to serve as part-time faculty members. In a March 1946 memorandum to Winford H. Smith, the director of Johns Hopkins Hospital, Jewett lamented that “a serious situation has presented itself...[because] I am threatened with expulsion if I refuse to come to terms, and an attempt is made to coerce me, through intimidation, to sacrifice my personal liberty.”(12) Questions of who should have faculty status and how faculty should spend their time caused tension between long-time Brady personnel and the newly appointed

Chair.

Accounts of how Huggins reacted to the cool reception of his intended Brady colleagues provide insight into Huggins' state of mind. According to one of Blalock's biographers, when Huggins visited the Brady in February, he and Willard Goodwin, a Brady house officer and distant family friend, took a walk on a particularly cold day. Huggins remarked, "Will, it is a bleak prospect." Goodwin himself later quoted Huggins as having said, "It certainly is a forbidding prospect isn't it?" Regardless of the precise words spoken, Huggins may not have been talking about the weather.(6,11)

Huggins reconsiders

It is hardly surprising, then, that on March 1, 1946, shortly after his visit to the Brady, Huggins sent a letter to Hopkins President Bowman asking to be released from his commitment. Huggins explained that the Brady was a "large venture...[that] cannot be run successfully by a single man even if he had new assistants." (9) Some scholars have interpreted this letter as evidence that Huggins did not believe he could run the Brady by himself, particularly at the sacrifice of research time.(1,2) However, a letter Huggins sent Blalock on the same day as the resignation letter suggests that Huggins' decision was more complicated than previously thought.

Huggins wrote to Blalock, noting the "complex problem involving whole time men, free lance surgeons, [and] the necessity to run a very large institute together with scientific productivity." (9) Huggins expressed keen awareness of those who opposed his leadership: "I am too weak to cope with the situation and emotionally unprepared to tackle a job which would require me to come out swinging... I operate on a very small scale conceiving myself in a very modest way to be a scholar, surgeon and investigator..." Thus, Huggins acknowledged that his desire to be released from his obligations to the Brady was not merely a matter of thinking the job was too big for one person. Rather, Huggins recognized he could never metamorphosize into the type of physician-leader the Brady wanted.

On March 8, 1946, after Huggins declined the appointment, William F. Braasch, a urologist at the Mayo Clinic, sent him a letter: "In fact, many of your friends have wondered whether you could be happy in the much publicized Baltimore field. Frankly speaking, in order to keep up with the Brady traditions, they need a super-salesman at its head...it is far better for you to readjust your position now than it would have had you found it necessary to do after you had made the change." (8) It is not clear whether Braasch was trying to console Huggins or provide his own opinion on the topic, but Braasch's letter suggests that the Brady had a

specific reputation of producing "super-salesman" capable of pushing forward the department's vision and priorities. This vision – of excellence in three domains of surgery, patient care, and research – may not have been shared by Huggins. In this way, Huggins' decision may not have been guided simply by a question of circumstance but one of character. He was an accomplished researcher and physician but not a Brady physician, after all.

After Huggins officially resigned, he returned to The University of Chicago where another drama awaited him. Huggins' former student, William Wallace Scott, had succeeded him. Now that Huggins wanted to resume his position, few options other than a joint appointment with Scott remained.(1) Scott, however, did not want to share the leadership position with Huggins.(1,13) In a surprising turn of events, the problem resolved when Scott was offered the Brady Chair in June 1946.(13) Contrary to the drama surrounding Huggins' appointment, Scott's transition to the Brady was relatively seamless.(2)

CONCLUSION

Despite new insights into the history of the Brady presented in this essay, several archival gaps remain. Future research may analyze institutional barriers that precluded Huggins' appointment in 1942. Precisely what role did Blalock play in 1945 in to ensure Huggins was offered the job? Who, other than Jewett, did Huggins target for dismissal if they did not give up their private practice? Who was pushing for a "salesman"-leader model at the Brady? Despite a turbulent period of transition, Huggins' decision – his path not taken – kept the Brady aligned with Hugh Hampton Young's original vision of an institution dedicated to research, surgical excellence, and patient care.

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ENDNOTES

i. It is possible that Blalock became acquainted with the Chicago model through Huggins, whom he undoubtedly had encountered in professional contexts. It is not known how the two men first became acquainted.

ii. At the Annual American Surgical Association meeting in April 1942, Blalock was on a commentary panel following Huggins' presentation: "if a real contribution is made in cancer in any one field, such as Doctor Huggins has made... it raises our hope of being able to find out something about cancer in other parts of the body." Huggins and Blalock appear to have been in a continued and regular correspondence. For example, in September 1945, Huggins shared a reprint of his recently published article with Blalock, writing "The cancer problem is a good one, full of interest and extremely broad. Things are looking up a little from the standpoint of therapy, at least in the dogs."⁽⁹⁾ It appears that the two men maintained an amicable relationship even after Huggins was not hired to lead the Brady in 1942.