Dr. John Burrett, first cardiologist in Alabama, arrived in Birmingham in 1946. Dr. Burrett had lived on East 88th Street in Manhattan when he graduated in 1937 from New York Medical College, where his father was dean. He subsequently moved to Boston and worked in the physiology lab of Dr. Walter B. Cannon at Harvard, then trained as a cardiology fellow with Dr. Paul Dudley White, who had begun the first cardiology service in the U.S., at Mass. General Hospital, in 1916. Dr. Burrett and Dr. White co-published a research article on congenital heart disease in 1945.

One question regarding the John Burrett story is why an established physician from the Northeast would move to the South in the mid-40s and join the faculty of the Medical College of Alabama, which had moved in 1945 from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham. The facts are that Dr. Burrett had met Dr. Joseph Donald, an Alabama surgeon, during his military service and he had met and married a nurse, Clara Bray, who was training in Manhattan. Her home was in Orlando, Florida, but her extended family was from Georgia.
Tinsley Harrison came to UAB in 1950. His roommate and close friend during med school and residency at Johns Hopkins (in the 1920s) was Al Blalock, who performed the first-ever elective cardiovascular surgery on November 29, 1944, with Vivien Thomas talking him through the operative procedure. Two decades later, Levi Watkins - by happenstance - followed the pathway of Vivien Thomas to Vanderbilt and later to Johns Hopkins. Levi Watkins enrolled in Vanderbilt School of Medicine in 1966 and then moved through Johns Hopkins as a surgical resident and joined the faculty at Hopkins as a cardiac surgeon.

Earlier, Luther Hill had performed the first successful emergency cardiac surgery in the U.S. - in Montgomery, Alabama in 1902 - when he sutured the heart of patient with a penetrating stab wound. Michael DeBakey, while a medical student at Tulane in New Orleans, pioneered use of the roller pump for blood transfusions in the 1930s; the roller pump was later used in the first heart-lung bypass machine in 1953. In 1955, while at Mayo Clinic, significant improvements were made by John Kirklin and his team. Kirklin was recruited to UAB in Birmingham in 1966.
Andreas Gruentzig arrived at Emory School of Medicine in Atlanta in 1980. One of his cardiology fellows was Gary Roubin. While on faculty at Emory, Roubin pioneered development of the intracoronary stent. He came to UAB in 1989.

Contributions of physicians working in Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Georgia - Luther Hill, Tinsley Harrison, Michael DeBakey, Al Blalock, Vivien Thomas, John Kirklin, Levi Watkins, Andreas Gruentzig, and Gary Roubin - are thus connected to both early and recent pivotal events in cardiology and cardiovascular surgery.

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