

Dr. Cyrenius Wakefield (1815-1885)

Dr. Cyrenius Wakefield was born on July 12, 1815, in Watertown, New York. He was the son of Joseph and Susan Wilder (Sawyer) Wakefield, and the second to last youngest of five children. Cyrenius grew up on a farm, and when he was old enough, he attended school in the winter and worked on the farm in the warmer months. Around 1835, he began teaching school, which helped him earn some income.¹

In May 1837, Cyrenius decided to go west to Bloomington, traveling first to Chicago, then to LaSalle, Illinois, and finally traveling by boat via the Illinois River to Pekin, Illinois. Because there was no stagecoach to Bloomington, he made the over-land journey by ox.² The trip was long and consisted of his trunk being carried by the ox team to Bloomington. He then finally made it to the farm of his brother, Orin, which was thirty miles south of Bloomington near the township of Marion in DeWitt County.³ Cyrenius labored on the farm until November and moved to Bloomington where he lived for two years and taught school in Diamond Grove, in Downs Township.⁴

He then moved south of Bloomington to Point Isabelle in DeWitt County, which was west of Farmer City.⁵ Cyrenius established a farm, built a home using the \$100 left to him by his father after he passed away, and taught school.⁶ During this time, Cyrenius made several trips back to New York, including a trip back to Watertown, NY for the death of his brother Egbert on August 3, 1843, and his marriage to Harriet Richardson (who was his neighbor and schoolmate), on August 17, 1843. Two weeks after the wedding the newlyweds made the month-long trip back to Illinois to Cyrenius' eighty acres of land in DeWitt County.⁷ The couple had seven children: Emma Jane, Oscar, Amelia, Dalphine, Della, Hattie, and Dr. Homer Wakefield.⁸

In the summer of July 1846, Cyrenius and his brother Dr. Zera Wakefield went into the dry goods and patent medicine business. They bought goods from New York and constructed a building that faced the intersection of the main roads about a hundred yards north of what would

¹ E., Duis, Dr. C. Wakefield" *The Good Old Times in McLean County, Illinois: containing two hundred and sixty-one sketches of old settlers, a complete historical sketch of the Black Hawk war and descriptions of all matters of interest relating to McLean County*, (Bloomington: Leader Pub. and Print. House, 1874), 355, <https://archive.org/details/goodoldtimesinmc00duis>.

² *Ibid.*, 355.

³ Marion is now known as the Village of Dewitt.

⁴ Homer Wakefield, M.D., *Wakefield Memorial Comprising an Historical, Genealogical and Biographical Register of the Name and Family of Wakefield* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1897), 82.

⁵ Chapman Brothers. *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County, Ill., containing full page portraits and biographical sketches of prominent and representative citizens of the county, together with portraits and biographies of all the governors of Illinois and of the presidents of the United States*. (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1887), 201.

⁶ Now worth \$3,950.03 according to "\$100 in 1842-2025" CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1842?amount=100>; Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial*, 82; Duis, *The Good Old Times in McLean County*, 355.

⁷ Cyrenius Wakefield, Homer Wakefield, *Unpublished autobiography of Cyrenius Wakefield*, 1889, 1; Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial*, 82.

⁸ "Dr. Cyrenius Wakefield," Find a Grave, [Ancestry.com](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/40516308/cyrenius-wakefield), accessed March 6, 2026, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/40516308/cyrenius-wakefield>

become the Illinois Central Railroad station of Fullerton, Illinois in DeWitt County.⁹ His brother, Zera, focused his medical practice on treating malignant congestive fevers.¹⁰ Today “malignant congestive fever” is known as typhus. It is a name used for different bacterial infections that are spread through bug bites which cause similar symptoms of rash and high fevers. Zera traveled within a fifty-mile radius to treat people, but soon people could not get an appointment with him so they turned to his brother Cyrenius, who made patent medicines like “Blackberry Balsam”. Like many who sold tonics, pills, and creams, Cyrenius called himself a doctor. “Though, like many “doctors” of the day, he had no formal medical training.”¹¹ Dr. Cyrenius Wakefield’s patent medicine quickly became in high demand, and the store became a medicine factory. However, because Zera had been repeatedly exposed to a variety of illnesses through his practice, his lungs became horribly congested and he died within thirty-six hours of falling ill on June 22, 1848, from pneumonia.¹²

During the beginning of the brothers’ business, Dr. Cyrenius Wakefield had patented his “Blackberry Balsam”. Patent medicines were trademark protected, nonprescription cure-alls. Patent medicines were typically harmful, often containing alcohol and opiates which are addictive substances. Wakefield’s “Blackberry Balsam” claimed to treat a variety of diseases of the bowels including diarrhea, dysentery (a bacterial or parasitic infection with symptoms such as diarrhea, fever, nausea, vomiting, weight loss, and stomach cramps which can be treated with antibiotics today) and constipation.¹³

Some advertisements for “Blackberry Balsam” suggested it be used to help with teething children and breaking fevers. Some customers even claimed that the medicine had cured their cholera morbus (an outdated term for Gastroenteritis or better known as the stomach flu; often occurred during summer and autumn, characterized by severe cramps, diarrhea, and vomiting).¹⁴ On one of the boxes of the “Blackberry Balsam”, produced sometime in the mid-20th century, ingredients were listed as “Alcohol 12%, Blackberry Root, White Oak Bark, Columbo Root, Rhubarb Root, Culvers Root, Prickly Ash Bark, Catechu Gum, Potassium Carbonate, Cranesbill, Camphor.”¹⁵ Most of these “medicines” probably caused more harm than good. However, the blackberry, bark, and root in the alcohol solution did have an astringent quality useful for some conditions.¹⁶

⁹ Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial.*, 82.

¹⁰ Duis, *The Good Old Times in McLean County*, 356.

¹¹ Kemp, Bill. “Wakefield’s guaranteed cure all,” *The Pantagraph*, March 25, 2007.

¹² Duis, *The Good Old Times in McLean County*, 356.

¹³ Charlie, Schlenker, “McHistory: A Bloomington huckster’s best-selling ‘medicine’ was Blackberry Balsam,” *WGLT*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.wglt.org/local-news/2022-01-12/mchistory-wakefields-blackberry-balsam>; “Dysentery,” Cleveland Clinic, Health Library, accessed November 21, 2025, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/drugs/23567-dysentery>

¹⁴ “Cholera Morbus,” Med Gen, National Library of Medicine, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/medgen/64524>

¹⁵ Jessica D. Griffin, “Dr. C. Wakefield & Company, Bloomington, IL.” *Old Main Artifacts*. WordPress.com. <https://oldmainartifacts.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/dr-c-wakefield-company-bloomington-il/>

¹⁶ Schlenker, Charlie. “McHistory: A Bloomington huckster's best-selling 'medicine' was Blackberry Balsam,” January 12, 2022, accessed April 20, 2026, <https://www.wglt.org/local-news/2022-01-12/mchistory-wakefields-blackberry-balsam>

Until about the mid to late 1990s, Wakefield's "Blackberry Balsam" could still be purchased from a New York based company, though there were some adjustments to the ingredients that were used.¹⁷ Dr. Wakefield's version used more alcohol, so it is safe to assume that the "newer" version was a little safer. The more modern version used 12% of alcohol which was 2% over the Department of Health and Services recommendation. In 1996 the recommended percentage was 10% for people ages 12 and over, for children ages 6 to 12 it was 5%, and children 6 and under it was .05%.¹⁸ Many of the ingredients in the most recent version of the medicine are primarily safe to be consumed and were used in other homeopathic medicines. But there are other ingredients that are not very safe such as potassium carbonate, an ingredient that is often found in glass, dish and soft soap, hair perm solution, and wood ash that is used in fertilizer for plants.¹⁹ This ingredient is poisonous and should never be ingested, however it did work as expected. The symptoms of potassium carbonate poisoning include, but are not limited to, diarrhea and vomiting.²⁰ The other ingredient that gives the "Blackberry Balsam" its name is blackberry root. Blackberry root is commonly used to help dysentery which Dr. Wakefield claimed. Another active ingredient was culvers root, a plant that induces vomiting and excessive diarrhea.²¹ This ingredient was also used to help with coughing, which was probably one of the ingredients that Dr. Wakefield used to claim "Blackberry Balsam" as a cure-all. Each ingredient in the medicine had some sort of aid for constipation or a cough. However, some of these ingredients were not safe, which was not widely known when Dr. Wakefield first created "Blackberry Balsam" due to the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) not being established until 1906.

"Blackberry Balsam" was not the only medicine that Dr. Wakefield was known for. He had multiple products, such as "Wakefield's Golden Ointment." The Golden Ointment was used for sunburns, insect bites, cold sores, chapped lips, cuts, and minor burns and scalds.²² There were also "Cathartic Pills," which were used to "help maintain a healthy liver."²³ He also produced a cough syrup, which according to ads, claimed to "aid coughs, colds, asthma, consumption (known as Tuberculosis today), whooping cough, croup, hives, measles,

¹⁷ Griffin, "Dr. C. Wakefield & Company."

¹⁸ Food and Drug Administration, "Over-the-Counter Drug Products Intended for Oral Ingestion that Contain Alcohol," *Federal Register*, 60, no. 48 (1995): 13590, [https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1995-03-13/pdf/95-6128.pdf#:~:text=Administration%20\(FDA\)%20is%20issuing%20a%20final%20rule,principal%20display%20\(fron%20panel%20of%20product%20labeling.](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1995-03-13/pdf/95-6128.pdf#:~:text=Administration%20(FDA)%20is%20issuing%20a%20final%20rule,principal%20display%20(fron%20panel%20of%20product%20labeling.)

¹⁹ "Potassium carbonate poisoning," Medical Encyclopedia, Medline Plus, accessed February 27, 2026, <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002481.htm#:~:text=Potassium%20carbonate%20is%20a%20white,or%20breath%20in%20potassium%20carbonate.>

²⁰ Ibid., "Potassium carbonate poisoning," Medical Encyclopedia.

²¹ USDA NRCS Norman A. Berg National Plant Materials Center, Beltsville, MD, "Culvers Root," *United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service*, April 2011, https://plants.usda.gov/DocumentLibrary/factsheet/pdf/fs_vevi4.pdf.

²² Wakefield's Golden Ointment: Bottle, Medicine, c.1910. *McLean County Museum of History*, Accessed September 12, 2025.

²³ Susan Hartzold and Mike Matejka, "After the Railroad: Reaching a National Market," *Challenges Choices and Change: Working for a Living*, Accessed on August 27, 2025. <https://mchistory.org/digital-exhibits/working-for-a-living/after-the-railroad/reaching-a-national-market>

pneumonia, and lung or winter fever.”²⁴ Then there was “Wakefield’s Wine Bitters” which claimed to “cure dyspepsia (otherwise known as indigestion), general debility, and constipation.” And “Wakefield’s Eye Salve” which claimed to “aid sore, inflamed, and weak eyes; along with sore lips, and removing proud flesh from sores and ulcers.” Wakefield eventually produced 11 different patent medicines, though his best-seller was “Wakefield’s BlackBerry Balsam.”

Wakefield did not only focus on medicines, he also contributed to a farmers’ almanac. A farmers’ almanac is a calendar that contains information about weather predictions, astronomical events, farming tips, and other important dates for secular and religious holidays. Wakefield had two known almanacs; 1846 and 1879.²⁵ In his *Wakefield’s Western Farmer’s Almanac and Account Book*, the book contained astrology, phases of the moon throughout the year, short stories that were usually life lessons, advertisements for his medicines and where they could be purchased, recipes, farming advice, and advertisements for other companies such as “Browens Rat Killer.”²⁶ This almanac was a perfect way for Wakefield to sell his medicine and go into further detail about what his medicines did. The stories contained advertisements of the medicine and even the rat poison. In the segment, “Josh Billings” in May 1879, the story goes into hearing mice nibble and wander through a church and then due to the weather, colds become more rampant. In the story there is a recommendation to use “Browens Rat Killer” and Wakefield’s Cough Syrup.²⁷ Each page in the 1879 almanac has a story like this; given as some sort of advice and throughout the writing the solution to the characters issue seems obvious that it should be a Wakefield product. In the “Domestic Recipes” section, there is an advertisement for “Browens Rat Killer” in between two cake recipes.²⁸

In February 1850, Wakefield sold his property in DeWitt County and moved to Bloomington. He and his brother-in-law, Robert Thompson, purchased ground that included the western two-thirds of the block facing the south side of the courthouse square in downtown Bloomington, and a two story frame building and stable located on what would later be the site of Phoenix Hall, located in the 100 block of West Washington.²⁹ Dr. Wakefield moved his family onto the second floor of the building and utilized the first floor as a drug store.³⁰

Business was booming and people were actively seeking out Wakefield’s patent medicine. Then in spring 1851, he purchased a building, adjoining his three-story building and this new property is where he stored his drug stock. In summer 1851 he purchased land at 506 East Washington Street and built a two story home for his family.³¹ Unfortunately in February

²⁴ Susan Hartzold and Mike Matejka, “After the Railroad: Reaching a National Market,” *Working for a Living*.

²⁵ Dr. C. Wakefield & Co., “Wakefield’s western farmers’ almanac and account book,” *Almanac*, 1846, <https://archive.org/details/wakefieldswester18971898bloo>.

²⁶ Dr. C. Wakefield & Co., “Wakefield’s western farmers’ almanac and account book,” *Almanac*, 1879, <https://archive.org/details/wakefieldswester1879bloo>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial*, 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

1852, the house burned down and Dr. Wakefield did not have insurance on the home.³² He was able to rebuild the home and move back into it in the autumn.³³ Bad luck continued to follow Dr. Wakefield. On October 16, 1855, a fire had burnt down eight buildings on the Phoenix Block, bounded by Main, Washington, Center and Front streets; which included the two buildings that he owned. Those two buildings were the adjoined building on the Phoenix Block. Unfortunately, the newly formed fire department did not have the materials readily available to fight this fire. The only materials available to help combat this fire were buckets, ladders, and hooks.³⁴ Insurance was able to cover only \$2,000 of the \$17,000 worth of damage.³⁵ In 1858 Dr. Wakefield was able to rebuild the factory and drug store and continue business. The new building included a fourth story and was relocated to 110 and 112 West Washington Street, on the south side of the courthouse square.³⁶

By the 1880s, Wakefield had a well-established factory at the corner of East Washington and Evans streets just east of downtown Bloomington. This is where the old Bloomington High School was located, since renovated into apartments (510 E. Washington Street). Also on the site was a printing company to supply the advertisements used to spread the name through ads in almanacs, account books, and other useful publications.³⁷

After a few short years, Dr. Wakefield gave his undivided attention to the drug interest which included working with his brother-in-law, Charles S. Jones in 1857.³⁸ During this time, Dr. Wakefield employed forty people, half of whom were women.³⁹ Dr. Wakefield and Charles S. Jones still continued to make good revenue, where the annual sales were \$10,000.⁴⁰ The business mostly profited off of the sales of remedies for fevers. Throughout the years profit was still increasing and the business was doing just fine. On March 1, 1872, his son, Oscar Wakefield joined him and Charles S. Jones in the medicine business. Dr. Wakefield began to slowly remove himself from the business to focus on his declining health.⁴¹

Dr. Wakefield did not just create patented medicines; he was involved with helping organize the local Republican Party in 1856. The foundation of the Republican Party in Illinois began in Major's Hall in downtown Bloomington. Major's Hall is famously known for Abraham

³² Ibid., 83.

³³ Ibid., 83.

³⁴ Aingeal Stone, McLean County Museum of History, *Bloomington Fire Department Collection*, Spring 2014, 2, <https://mchistory.org/assets/resources/finding-aids/bloomington-fire-department-collection.pdf>

³⁵ Now worth \$74,477.24 according to "\$2000 in 1855-2025" CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1855?amount=2000>; Now worth \$633,056.55 according to "\$17000 in 1855-2025" CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1855?amount=17000>; Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial*, 84.

³⁶ Ibid., 84.

³⁷ Schlenker. "McHistory: A Bloomington huckster's best-selling 'medicine' was Blackberry Balsam,"

³⁸ Wakefield and Wakefield, *Unpublished Autobiography*, 3.

³⁹ Duis, *The Good Old Times in McLean County*, 357.

⁴⁰ Now worth \$390,332.53 according to "\$10000 in 1860-2025" CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1860?amount=10000>; Wakefield and Wakefield, *Unpublished Autobiography*, 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

Lincoln's "Lost Speech" where Lincoln expressed being against the expansion of slavery which led into the founding of the Illinois Republican party. However, it is unclear if Dr. Wakefield was in attendance for Lincoln's "Lost Speech." Before joining the Bloomington Republican party, he considered himself a "Jacksonian Democrat."⁴²

Wakefield was not one to seek political office. However, he was civically minded and when called upon, served his community. In 1871 Wakefield was elected chairman First Ward in order to select a nominee for alderman of his ward.⁴³ In 1857 Wakefield ran for a position on the Board of Education but did not gain a position.⁴⁴ Then he ran again and served on the Bloomington Board of Education for three years, from April 1872 to April 1875, declining re-election.⁴⁵ He also served as a director and secretary of the board of People's Bank for nine years following his time on the Bloomington Board of Education.⁴⁶

For the remainder of his life, Dr. Wakefield traveled, spent time with his family, and in 1879 he began selling his "Blackberry Balsam" in California.⁴⁷ Similar to his brother, Zera, on February 13, 1885, Dr. Cyrenius Wakefield fell ill with a congestive chill along with pleuropneumonia. A week later, February 20, 1885, he passed away. Wakefield was laid to rest in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. He left property to his children, widow, and the local Unitarian church.⁴⁸

In December 1889 his family purchased the medicine business from Charles S. Jones for \$10,000.⁴⁹ This then brought the business back into the hands of the family.⁵⁰ Dr. Wakefield had lived a very fulfilling life between being a businessman, a man of the people, and a father and husband.

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⁴² Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial*, 85.

⁴³ "Ward Meetings: Republican Alderman Nominated in all except the Fifth Ward- Delegates to the City Convention," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 14, 1871.

⁴⁴ "The Board of Education," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 25, 1857.

⁴⁵ Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial*, 85; "City Council," *The Pantagraph*, April 5, 1872.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁷ Wakefield and Wakefield, *Unpublished Autobiography*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ Now worth \$352,147.33 according to "\$10000 in 1889-2025" CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1889?amount=10000>

⁵⁰ Wakefield and Wakefield, *Unpublished Autobiography*, 4.