

Dr. George Winfield Stipp (1799-1879)

Dr. George W. Stipp was born on January 27, 1799 near Winchester, Frederick County, Virginia. The details of his family are unknown other than he moved with his father to Ohio at a young age. His father would farm while George attended school. After finishing regular school, George went on to study medicine. After completing his medical studies, he moved to Troy in Miami County, OH where he began to practice medicine. While in Troy, he met and married Francis Jane Reid on September 12, 1820. They had two children: a daughter, Francis M., and a son, Milton. Unfortunately, after a brief illness, Milton died at the age of 18 in July of 1847.¹

Not long after they were married, the couple moved to Xenia, OH where George set up another medical practice. In 1829, at the age of 30, George and his family moved to Indianapolis, Indiana. George became a skilled surgeon and was well known for prescribing Calomel which was his favorite medicine to prescribe. Calomel was a mercury based medicine used to heal a variety of diseases, most of all diarrhea and dysentery.² Unfortunately, calomel, when used in excessive amounts, could lead to mercury poisoning and death.³ It was recorded in an early Indiana history that Stipp “prescribed calomel as soon as he looked at you, no matter what the ailment.”⁴

After living and practicing medicine for several years in Indianapolis, he moved his family and practice to Bloomington, Illinois in 1846. The decision to do this was based upon a visit Stipp made to the area which left a strong impression on him.⁵ The earliest known location for his office was one door west of the American Hotel located on Front Street between Main and East streets.⁶ Stipp’s patients included some of the most well known citizens in Bloomington, including the David Davis Family. In letters written by David and Sarah Davis, they discussed their bouts with different ailments and encounters with the Stipp family: “Dr. Stipp says your lungs are as sound as a dollar and that nothing is the matter with you but your liver...”⁷, “I saw Mrs. Manna, Dr. Stipp’s daughter to day. She is pleasant and agreeable but not pretty.”⁸ Dr. Stipp also had a brief partnership with Dr. Thomas F. Worrell of Bloomington in the early 1850s.⁹

Being that Stipp was one of the early physicians to settle in McLean County, he was a charter member of the McLean County Medical Society. On March 20, 1854, Stipp and thirteen other distinguished doctors from McLean County met at the McLean County courthouse for the purpose of organizing a medical society. Stipp was appointed to the committee of five which was charged with the responsibility of drawing up a constitution and by-laws for the society.¹⁰ Stipp would be a member of this society until his death 25 years later.

¹ “The Last Hour,” *The Pantagraph*, August 22, 1879

² “Calomel” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/90120/calomel> (2011)

³ “Calomel”

⁴ Oliver Johnson. *A Home in the Woods: Pioneer Life in Indiana*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978) p. 43

⁵ “The Last Hour”

⁶ *Bloomington City Directory 1855-1856*

⁷ Letter from David Davis to Sarah Davis, March 19, 1848

⁸ Letter from David Davis to Sarah Davis, May 30, 1847.

⁹ W.B. Carlock Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives

¹⁰ *Biographical History of the Members of the McLean County Medical Society of Illinois*. (Bloomington: McLean County Medical Society, 1954) p. 14

In the mid-1850s, Dr. Stipp purchased the former home of Bloomington's founder, James Allin, located at 203 E. Grove Street. The house was used by Allin not only as a residence, but as a general store and was the first courthouse of McLean County. Before moving into the property, Dr. Stipp's wife Frances fell ill. She died on January 9, 1855 at the age of fifty-four.

Almost two years later, on January 20, 1857, Dr. Stipp married Sarah "Sallie" W. Harris.¹¹ Sarah Harris was born in Centerville, OH on May 29, 1828. As an adult, Sarah came to Bloomington with her parents, Israel and Elizabeth McCann Harris.¹² After their marriage, Dr. Stipp finished remodeling the Allin House and moved his newly formed family in.

Dr. Stipp was a staunch Republican and close friend of Abraham Lincoln. Because of this, Stipp probably felt that it was his duty to join the Union Army and serve his country as a physician when the Civil War broke out in April of 1861. At the beginning of the war, there were only Regular Army Surgeons, surgeons of state troops (who enlisted with the volunteer regiments), and civilian surgeons working under contract. This would change as many physicians answered the call to serve. By the height of the war, the Union Army would come to have 11,000 doctors on its payroll.¹³ In October of 1861, Stipp arrived in St. Louis, Missouri. He took the position of Brigade Surgeon in the U.S. Volunteers from September 1861 to April 1862.¹⁴

He was then appointed as a regimental surgeon by President Lincoln. Surgeons during the Civil War were doctors commissioned by both the Union and Confederate armies. Most Union surgeons "were average in their education and experience" and as far as surgical experience went, most had little if any experience. Most of these surgeons gained their surgical experience by treating the wounded from the battlefields. This was dangerous to the survival of the patients as doctors attempted to treat gunshot wounds or perform amputations without ever having done so or even seen one performed.¹⁵ Regimental surgeons usually served on the field during battles. The wounded received initial treatment on the field where they lay and then they were brought to the surgeon's tents or field hospitals where amputations, dressings, and/or cleaning of the wounds were performed.¹⁶ When a wounded man arrived at the field hospitals, he "would find himself one of a large number of men lying on the ground or upon piles of straw and waiting their turn on the operating table." The less serious cases were attended to by the "dressing surgeon" and would then be left alone while the more serious cases were attended to. Those that were deemed mortally wounded were passed over altogether in most cases.¹⁷

On November 10, 1862, Stipp was then put in charge of a general hospital outside of Washington, D.C. That hospital was the former Union Hotel which had been converted into a hospital by the Federal Government. At the beginning of the war, the government was lacking in a sufficient number of hospitals to care for the influx of wounded. There were no general hospitals at that time, only post hospitals that were "habitually small in size." The largest of

¹¹ Illinois Regional Archives Depository, "Illinois State Marriage Index,"

<http://www.ilsos.gov/GenealogyMWeb/MarriageSearchServlet>

¹² "Mrs. Sarah Stipp Dead," *The Pantagraph*, May 12, 1917

¹³ George Washington Adams. *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) p.9

¹⁴ Don Munson, ed. *It Is Begun! The Pantagraph Reports the Civil War*, (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing, 2001) p. 37

¹⁵ Adams, *Doctors in Blue*, p.115

¹⁶ "Sanitary Commission American Civil War" http://americancivilwar.com/sanitary_commission.html

¹⁷ Adams, *Doctors in Blue*, p.117

those post hospitals was located at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas and had forty beds.¹⁸ In order to accommodate the massive numbers of sick and wounded that began pouring in from battlefields, the government quickly began to establish general hospitals by commandeering buildings such as hotels, seminaries, jails, warehouses, and factories to turn into makeshift hospitals. Unfortunately, the buildings which were seized were not equipped with the necessities to make a suitable hospital, most importantly, a sterile work space. These structures were hardly adequate to give the sick and wounded soldier proper care, “but were the best the government could provide on such short notice.”¹⁹

Union Hotel was built in 1796 and had hosted many past presidents and prominent figures. It was located on the northeast corner of Bridge and Washington Streets in Georgetown, District of Columbia. On May 6, 1861 the government turned the hotel into a hospital. The new hospital began receiving patients on May 25 of that same year. However, the building was “an unsavory old three storied building, with an unfortunate interior juxtaposing latrines and kitchen which aggravated the already prevalent problems of disease, “making the hotel very unsuitable to being a hospital.”²⁰ In fact, the Union Hotel Hospital was once known as the “Hurly Burly House” because of its extremely unclean environment. But government officials were so desperate for hospitals, those conditions were often ignored.²¹

A major problem which would develop in these make shift hospitals would be the spread of disease. Twice as many men died from disease and infection than died on the battlefield during the Civil War. This was caused by the terribly unsanitary conditions and inadequate space of many hospitals. Disease, specifically typhoid, malaria, and dysentery, spread like wild fire. Conditions were so poor in some hospitals that sewage would be known to leak from the floorboards, stench from the deceased polluted the air, and dirty laundry from injured soldiers lingered for weeks under patients.²² In an investigation report of hospitals in the area around Washington, D.C. published in July of 1861, it was reported that at the Union Hotel Hospital: “*There are no provisions for bathing. The water closets and sinks are insufficient and defective and there is no dead house. The wards are many of them overcrowded and destitute of arrangements for artificial ventilation. The cellars and area is damp and undrained, and much of the woodwork is actively decaying.*”²³ Conditions at the hospital had improved little by the time Stipp took over as the head of the hospital.

Shortly after Stipp began working at the Union Hotel Hospital, he secured a position for his good friend, Dr. Lee Smith who was also from Bloomington. Smith began working at Union Hotel Hospital on December 2, 1862. Shortly after Smith began working there, wounded soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg poured into the hospital to receive treatment from both Dr. Smith and Dr. Stipp.²⁴ Injured and dying soldiers lined up and down the hospital hallways waiting to be treated.

There was little rest or down time for doctors during the Civil War. The makeshift hospitals were constantly inundated with the wounded and dying soldiers from the battlefield or

¹⁸ John R. Brumgardt, *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979) p.37-38

¹⁹ Brumgardt, p.38

²⁰ Brumgardt, p.39

²¹ Brumgardt, p.39

²² Robin Oliveria. *My Name is Mary Sutter*. (New York: Viking, The Penguin Group, 2011) p. 129

²³ Brumgardt, p. 40

²⁴ “Experiences of Army Surgeon Dr. Lee Smith talks of the Suffering he Witnessed in the Civil War ---Old Union Hotel Hospita” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 9, 1905

the soldiers who had taken ill. The hospitals in Washington D.C., in particular, were typically inundated with sick and wounded soldiers because of its close proximity to the front lines of battle. The hospitals in Washington always had to be ready for a steady stream of wounded and had to treat them and evacuate those patients as fast as they could to be ready for the next wave.²⁵ Doctors rushed from patient to patient with their “housewives,” or surgeon’s kits, cutting, sawing, piercing or patching up soldiers as best they could. Doctors usually visited patients twice a day, in the afternoon and the evening. The nurses were responsible not only for washing, feeding, giving medicine, and preparing the wounded for surgery, but also for reading aloud, writing letters, and entertaining day and night.²⁶ Often there was no time for sleep. “All was hurry and confusion” recalled Louisa May Alcott, who served as a nurse at the Union Hospital for six weeks during the winter of 1862-1863 with Dr. Stipp.²⁷ Alcott worked the midnight to noon shift and followed Dr. Stipp as he tended to patients.

Stipp and Smith also worked closely Mrs. Hannah Ropes, a well known reformer and abolitionist, who served as a nurse and matron of the hospital from July of 1862 until January of 1863.²⁸ Ropes had been partially responsible for Dr. Stipp being placed in charge of the hospital. Ropes had protested the poor conditions within the hospital and the conduct of the doctors, the steward, and the former head surgeon. She wrote in her diary that every day the nurses and their patients brought to her charges against the hospital steward. When she approached the head surgeon of the hospital, he would ignore her.²⁹ In late 1862, Ropes ignored the chain of command and personally contacted the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Upon learning about the conditions of the hospital and the actions of those in charge, Stanton took action to have the conditions of the hospital inspected and had the steward and chief surgeon arrested.³⁰ Shortly after, Stipp was made the head surgeon in charge of the hospital.

After only working with Alcott and Ropes for a few months, both women contracted typhoid pneumonia towards the end of December of 1862. Ropes wrote in her diary that “the head surgeon [Stipp] placed me under arrest the day before New Years and visits me twice a day.” Stipp administered calomel (among other medicines) to both Ropes and Alcott, which only made their conditions worse as the calomel slowly poisoned their bodies. Ropes succumbed to her illness on January 20, 1863. The day after Ropes passed away, Alcott’s father came to the hospital to bring her home so she could recover.

In March of 1863, Dr. Stipp was made a Lt. Colonel. He was also made a Medical Inspector of the Army by President Lincoln.³¹ The Inspectors were charged with the duty of making frequent visits to hospitals and convalescent camps in order to inspect the conditions and render an opinion based on inspection as to whether the surgeons in charge were competent.³² In April of 1863, he began a new post in the South near Hilton Head, South Carolina. Unfortunately, the hot and humid weather contributed to his declining health. Judge David Davis of Bloomington wrote to President Lincoln requesting a change of location for Dr. Stipp: “I wish he could be transferred to the West. He does not ask a relief from labor....could you not

²⁵ Adams, p.153-154

²⁶ Louisa May Alcott. *Civil War Hospital Sketches*. (Moneola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006). p. 29

²⁷ Alcott, p. 21

²⁸ Brumgardt, p. 4

²⁹ Brumgardt, p. 74-75

³⁰ Brumgardt, p. 6

³¹ *Biographical History of the Members of the McLean County Medical Society of Illinois*, p. 48

³² “Civil War,” www.civilwar.com

have this done?"³³ Lincoln in turn wrote to the Adjutant General of the Union Army, Edward Townsend on June 24, 1863 and requested that his old friend, Dr. Stipp, be removed to a post of his choice. Townsend then referred the letter to Surgeon General William Hammond who granted him a temporary leave of absence to recover by the end of June of that year.³⁴ By December 19, 1863, Stipp was assigned to the Department of the Gulf. From there, he was appointed to the Department of the Northwest from June 1864 to December 1864. His last post was in the Department of Ohio from March of 1865 to October of 1865 when he mustered out of service now that the war was over.

Dr. Stipp returned home where he continued practicing medicine for the rest of his life at his new office located at the southeast corner of Washington and Main streets. On August 22, 1879 Dr. Stipp passed away from an unknown illness. The obituary in *The Pantagraph*, stated that he was "one of the most widely known and oldest physicians of the city."³⁵ He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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³³ Letter from David Davis to President Abraham Lincoln, May 19, 1863

³⁴ *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Volume 6*, Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Edward Townsend June 24, 1863. (University of Michigan Library, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln6/1:630?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>)

³⁵ "The Last Hour"