

Dr. William Hill (1829-1906)

William Hill was born in Middletown, Butler County, Ohio on March 12, 1829, one of ten children born to William and Isabella (Barker) Hill. When he was seven years old, Hill's family moved to a farm near Dayton, Tippecanoe County, Indiana. There he helped his family with farm work, except for three months each winter when he attended a local **subscription school**. Though limited, this early schooling instilled in Hill a **motivation** and desire to do better for himself. So, at age 18, he left the family farm.

Hill traveled to Indianapolis, Indiana where he began to study medicine. After two years of training, Hill **supplemented** his **practical** education with a course of medical lectures held in La Porte, Indiana. He then attended Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, graduating with a degree in medicine and surgery in 1856.

Besides a medical practice, William Hill also began a family around this time. At some point he married Sarah Carr, with whom he had one daughter, Sarah Ellen. His first wife died between 1854 and 1856, and Hill then moved to Salem, Illinois. In November 1856, Hill married a second time to Frances P. Roach in St. Louis, Missouri. The couple had two children, Henry Otis and Daisy Deane.

Hill and his family remained in Salem for ten years, during which time he built up a successful medical practice and invested in local real estate. However, Hill's medical career was interrupted when he joined the **Union Army** during the U.S. Civil War in 1861. Hill traveled to Camp Butler outside of Springfield, Illinois and joined the 48th Illinois Infantry serving as a surgeon. He served until the following year when he **resigned** due to ill health. After recovering, he took another post as surgeon with the 1st Missouri Light Artillery. Hill remained in the army until February 1863, having attained the rank of Major. Per family **lore**, Hill's young son, Henry, served briefly in Hill's unit as a drummer boy.

After the war ended, Hill moved to Bloomington in October 1865 because he heard the city had a demand for doctors. Hill located his new practice in a small frame building on the southeast corner of East and Front streets. He remained at this site for the rest of his career, eventually expanding the original structure into a large brick edifice known as the Hill Block. Hill's wife and children joined him on April 1 of the following year. In 1870, Hill built a fine home for his family at 109 E. Olive Street (site of Bloomington's City Hall today), two blocks from his office, where he would reside the rest of his life.

Hill's **transition** to life in Bloomington was not a smooth one. Although he had served in the Union Army for two years, Dr. Hill came under **suspicion** as a potential **Southern sympathizer**, owing to the fact he was a **staunch** Democrat, a party then heavily associated with the rebellious South. Some of this suspicion may have fueled several incidents that took place shortly after Hill first came to Bloomington.

On two separate occasions, Dr. Hill was accused of being a "resurrectionist," or **body snatcher**. In addition to his regular medical practice, Hill regularly took on students and even ran a local institute for teaching **anatomy**. Part of his students' training included human **dissection**, for which **specimens** were kept in his office. One day, while removing the body of a deceased patient for burial, an **undertaker's** assistant discovered one of the dissected **cadavers** in the back room. This ultimately led to a mob gathering outside Hill's office and accusing him of body snatching. It took a committee of five men investigating the matter to eventually calm and break up the crowd. In 1891, Hill was again accused of being a body snatcher when the superintendent of the electric company came to retrieve an **arc lamp** from the basement of Dr. Hill's building. Hill, who was not in a good mood that morning, refused to allow him into his basement. A couple of days later, the superintendent returned with his manager/attorney to once again attempt

to retrieve the lamp. This time, Dr. Hill wasted no time and **slyly** welcomed them in, telling them to “make themselves at home.” They went down into the basement, which was dimly lit. In the corner of the basement, the attorney bumped into an object and upon lighting a match **illuminated** the “hideous corpse of a man within a foot of the attorney’s face. The arms of the **gruesome** object were lifted and extended as if to grasp the lawyer. The body had been pickled and **carbolized** for dissection,” with a portion of its face and neck having already been dissected. The frightened men fled the scene. The lamp was never found, and if it was in Dr. Hill’s basement, was likely to stay there.

Despite this rough beginning, Hill soon established himself as one of the area’s premier physicians. He was easily recognizable on the street, being over six feet tall and always wearing a silk top hat and **tailcoat**. He was also an active member and officer of both the McLean County Medical Society and the Central Illinois Medical Society.

Hill’s medical career thrived in Bloomington, so much so that he expanded into other opportunities. He expanded into the railroad business, becoming the local surgeon for the Lake Erie & Western Railroad, and served as president of the Tri-State Railroad Surgical Society. That same year, Hill and a fellow doctor were reported to be using **chloroformed** dogs to practice a new method for uniting severed intestines from gunshot wounds. This procedure may have been the use of Murphy’s button, invented in 1892 by Dr. John Benjamin Murphy, a prominent surgeon and friend of Dr. Hill who had often consulted with him on various cases. This device was designed to hold the two severed halves of an intestine together in a way that allowed them to heal without **obstructing** the organ while minimizing infection. Hill was the first surgeon to successfully use the “button” on a **typhoid** patient in Bloomington, repairing the intestinal tearing that was a common and deadly complication of the disease.

Hill was also a mentor to students, often teaching classes and hosting lectures at his office. It was noted that Dr. Hill was “always a great friend of the students...always lending a helping hand trying to assist him forward and upward.” Hill served as a mentor and trained thirty-six students throughout his career.

Hill was thoroughly beloved by many practitioners and his patients throughout the county and community. “He was kind, considerate and gentle to every patient” that he treated. One example of his compassion for his youngest patients came from a praiseworthy idea that he implemented in 1885. It was reported that he discovered a new and unique **anesthetic** for eliminating pain while performing operations on children. His method: simply to play upon a violin before the operation. Following the operation, he would continue to play to take a child’s mind from the wound. Dr. Hill employed this method to avoid the use of “dangerous gases” on children which were known to cause physical and mental injuries on his youngest patients.

In July 1902, at the age of seventy-three and after more than half a century of practicing medicine, Hill finally retired. At that time, he had one of the oldest practices in the city, having been in Bloomington for thirty-seven years. Although he no longer kept an office, Hill continued to provide **consultations**. In late 1905, his health began to fail and on March 1, 1906, just a couple weeks before his seventy-seventh birthday, Hill fell into a **coma** and died the same day.

His obituaries, published that same day in the local papers the *Pantagraph* and the *Daily Bulletin*, described Hill as a “born surgeon” who “**embodied** more qualities that appealed to the average man than almost any other doctor who ever lived in Bloomington.” Dr. William Hill is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Chelsea Banks, 2021