

Dr. E.G. Covington: A Pioneer in Medicine and Civil Rights

Dr. E.G. Covington was the first well-known African American medical doctor in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. He cared for both Black and white patients. He wasn't just a great doctor and surgeon—he also worked hard to fight racism and support African Americans after the Civil War. He gave his time, energy, and skills to help make life better for his community. He helped organize events, gave speeches, wrote articles, and even got involved in politics. At the same time, he was a devoted husband, father, and son.

Eugene Gray Covington was born on August 1, 1872, in Rappahannock County, Virginia. His parents, Joseph and Elizabeth, were born into slavery. Not much is known about his father, but his mother was a strong church member who was loved by her community. She moved to Bloomington later in life to live with her son and died in 1922.

As a child, Eugene was very smart. His elementary school principal saw his potential and recommended he attend a Catholic school, even though his family wasn't Catholic. He continued to do well in school and later went to Howard University, a historically Black college in Washington, D.C., where he studied medicine. He graduated in 1899 and became a licensed doctor that same year.

Family stories say he also studied women's health at Northwestern University and even played quarterback on the football team, though there's no evidence of this. While working summers in New York, he met his future wife, Alice Lewis. They got married in 1902 and had several children, including Girard, Eugene Jr., and Joseph.

Dr. Covington moved to Bloomington around 1900 and started his medical practice. He lived and worked on Prairie Street before moving his office downtown. He made house calls and often had his son drive him. One patient remembered that even though Dr. Covington always had a car, he usually didn't drive it himself. However, in 1917, he got into a car accident and was ordered to pay \$100 in damages.

Dr. Covington was known for being stylish and well-spoken. Some people thought he was arrogant, but many admired his confidence. When he entered the room, people noticed. He joined the McLean County Medical Society in 1901 but was dropped in 1910 for not paying dues. Some white doctors tried to steal his patients by charging less, but Dr. Covington still had a strong reputation, especially in the Black community.

He cared deeply about public health and taught people how to keep their homes clean to avoid sickness. He worked at two local hospitals, but because of racism, he could only do surgery if a white doctor "supervised" him.

In 1902, he became an assistant surgeon in the all-Black Eighth Infantry Regiment of the Illinois National Guard. During World War I, he supported Black soldiers and gave speeches to honor their service. At one event in 1919, he shared the stage with important local and state leaders.

In 1900, Bloomington's Black community was small and lived peacefully alongside white neighbors. But as the population grew, racism increased. Schools and housing became more segregated, and jobs for Black residents were limited. Dr. Covington began to speak out more about these problems.

In 1903, the local newspaper asked him to write a piece addressing racism. He spoke out against unfair claims that Black people were unfit to vote, more likely to commit crimes, or trying to take over. He defended African Americans by pointing out their achievements and asking for equal rights under the law.

Dr. Covington encouraged young Black people to stay in school and work toward success. He even promised to buy a suit for a student who graduated from high school—and he did. He also spoke out against racism in movies, like the film *The Birth of a Nation*, and pushed for more Black representation in local jobs, such as police officers. His own son later became a police officer.

Eventually, Dr. Covington ran for local office. He supported the Republican party, which at the time backed equal rights for African Americans. He ran for city council in 1915. Though he didn't win, he ran a strong campaign. Just before the election, he received a threatening letter telling him to quit or risk being killed. He bravely responded in the newspaper, saying he would not back down.

Dr. Covington was not just a doctor—he was a leader who worked hard to fight injustice. His life and work helped shape Bloomington's history and improve life for the Black community.

In the early 1900s, the “Black Hand” was a criminal group from Italy that used threats and extortion, especially in big U.S. cities with many Italian immigrants. But there was no proof that it was a large, nationwide organization. Still, the name “Black Hand” scared people, and some people used it as a fake name to send threats. In McLean County and nearby areas, some rich or important people, like judges, got these fake letters. Dr. Covington also received one, likely to scare him away from running for city office. But he didn't back down and kept going with his campaign, just like he promised.

Dr. Covington faced other challenges during his run for city commissioner. His son, Eugene Jr., said that some of his opponents pretended to support him but were actually spying on his meetings. They saw him as a serious threat. Even though he lost the election, Dr. Covington stayed active in politics and kept working for civil rights. He supported groups that helped empower Black people. He helped start the Bloomington Republican Club and strongly supported the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which tried to stop the violent attacks on Black people after World War I.

He also helped start a local Negro Men's Business League and was the secretary of the Illinois Negro Business League. In 1915, their group brought the famous Black leader and educator, Booker T. Washington, to Bloomington-Normal to speak. Dr. Washington gave talks at several places, including Illinois State Normal University. He was very sick at the time and died a few months later.

Dr. Covington was also a leader in the local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). He served as its president and made sure the group followed its original goals: to help Black people be free from unfair labor, ignorance, not being allowed to vote, and social disrespect. On May 12, 1919, he organized a meeting called "Cooperation Between the Races" and invited a local religious leader, J. Dickey Templeton, to speak.

Outside of politics, Dr. Covington was very involved in his church, the Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, where he was on the board of trustees. He also belonged to several Black fraternal organizations. He was a medical leader in the United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of Mysterious Ten, and he served as a major and surgeon in the Knights of Pythias. He was also a member of other groups like the Antioch Lodge No. 19, the Free Masons of Pontiac, and the Omar Shrine of Davenport, Iowa.

He sometimes joined public debates about race and justice. On May 12, 1921, he debated at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church about whether Black people should stay in the South for better opportunities. Dr. Covington and his debate partner argued that they should not.

On March 24, 1925, Dr. Covington became president of a group that planned to publish *Glad Tidings Magazine*. The magazine was meant to help improve the religious and civic life of Black people across the country.

Dr. Covington's wife, Alice, was active in her own ways too. She was part of the Progressive Club, which focused on good citizenship and education for Black women. She also joined the Physical Culture Club, which supported moral development for young Black girls. Alice spoke out against segregation in Bloomington. After being treated unfairly at the Majestic Theater, she refused to attend any place that separated people by race, including the local beach. She also supported her husband's work with the NAACP by joining its leadership team.

Alice passed away on June 3, 1925, from an unknown illness. She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery and was remembered as someone loved by everyone. Dr. Covington loved her deeply. After mourning her for three years, he married Amanda Thomas, a widow and a long-time friend. Eugene and Amanda had no children, but they had known each other for years and had shared many happy times with their former spouses.

Dr. Covington died on February 3, 1929, at age 56, after a short illness. He had continued to care for patients until shortly before his death. A newspaper tribute said he had spent 29 years helping people through medicine and kindness. His campaign slogan, "Malice toward none and goodwill to all," was something he truly believed in. He worked his whole life to bring that spirit to Bloomington and beyond. He was buried in the same cemetery plot as Alice and his mother, Elizabeth.