

## **Dr. George Winfield Stipp** (Jan. 27, 1799 – Aug. 22, 1879)

He was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, a staunch Republican, a loyal American, and a skilled surgeon. Probably all these were reasons why Dr. George Stipp chose at the age of 62 to join the Union Army and serve his country during the Civil War.

George W. Stipp was born in 1799 in Virginia. Sometime during his childhood, he moved to Ohio where his father farmed. Upon graduation from medical school, George began practicing in Troy, Ohio, where he met and married Francis Reid in 1820. They had two children.

From Ohio, the couple moved to Indiana in 1829 where he became a skilled surgeon. In 1846 they moved again, this time to Bloomington, Illinois. He decided to move to McLean County after visiting here and being impressed with the community and its potential. One of his earliest offices was located on Front Street between Main and East Streets. Stipp's patients included some of the best known citizens in Bloomington including the David Davis family. As one of the earliest physicians to settle in McLean County, he was a charter member of the McLean County Medical Society to which he belonged for over 25 years. In 1855, Dr. Stipp's wife, Frances died at the age of 54. Two years later, he married Sarah "Sally" Harris.

When the Civil War began, there were few military doctors or hospitals. Those that did exist usually were attached to a particular regiment. Hospitals were small, the largest at Leavenworth, Kansas, had only forty beds. As the wounded began flooding back from the battlefields, it soon became apparent there was a great need for more doctors and hospitals. At the height of the war, the Union Army would have over 11,000 doctors on its payroll. The government took over buildings such as hotels, seminaries, jails, warehouses and factories and turned them into makeshift hospitals. Many of these lacked even minimal requirements such as a sterile environment for a hospital.

In November of 1862, Dr. Stipp was put in charge of one of the largest of these, the Union Hotel Hospital located in Georgetown, District of Columbia. The Union Hotel had been built in 1796 and in its heyday had hosted presidents and other prominent figures. Now it was an old, decaying building with kitchens and toilets so placed as to promote rather than prevent disease. An official report of conditions in 1861 said "there are no provisions for bathing. The water closets and sinks are insufficient and defective and there is no dead house...the area is damp and decaying." Under such circumstances, disease spread rapidly. 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 wildfire. Dr. Stipp was placed in charge of the Union Hotel Hospital to change these conditions.

The hospitals in Washington D.C. were inundated with sick and wounded soldiers constantly because of being so close to the front lines of battle. Doctors would rush from patient to patient patching up soldiers as best they could. They would visit patients twice a day whenever possible. Shortly after coming to Union Hotel Hospital, Dr. Stipp arranged for his good friend, Dr. Lee Smith, to join him there. Both men would work with volunteer nurses such as Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, and Hannah Ropes, a well-known reformer and abolitionist. Toward the end of 1862, both women contracted typhoid pneumonia. Dr. Stipp proscribed calomel for both women. This was one of his favorite medications and he had used it for many years. Unknown to him, the mercury in calomel can slowly poison the body and, for one in a weakened condition such as a typhoid patient, cause death. Sadly, Mrs. Ropes died in

January, 1863. That same day Louisa May Alcott's father arrived to take her home to recuperate.

In March of 1863, Dr. Stipp was made a Lt. Colonel and a Medical Inspector of the Army by President Lincoln. These inspectors had to make frequent visits to hospitals and camps to check on conditions and doctors' competencies. Much of this work was in the South, where the hot, humid weather affected Stipp's declining health. Judge David Davis in Bloomington wrote to President Lincoln requesting that his friend, Dr. Stipp, be reassigned to an area where he could recover his health. Dr. Stipp was moved to the Department of the Gulf (of Mexico), then to the Northwest and finally to Ohio. He was mustered out of service in October of 1865, after the end of the war.

Dr. Stipp returned to Bloomington and continued to practice medicine for the next fifteen years from his office at Washington and Main Streets. He died in 1879. His obituary in *The Pantagraph* stated that he was "one of the most widely known and oldest physicians of the city." He is buried at Evergreen Cemetery.

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**Discussion Question:** What evidence can you find in this story of the Union Army trying to improve its medical care of wounded soldiers?