

Dr. Eugene Covington (1872-1929)

Eugene Gray Covington was born in Rappahannock County, Virginia on August 1, 1872. His parents were Joseph and Elizabeth Holmes Covington, who were both born into slavery in Virginia. He was their only son.

Eugene was a brilliant child whose high test scores led the principal of his segregated elementary school in Virginia to suggest enrolling him in a local Catholic school. Although the Covingtons were not Catholic, he attended the school and continued to excel in his education. When he graduated in 1895 he went on to study medicine at Howard University, a historically black college located in Washington, D.C.¹ He also served an internship at Freedman's Hospital located across the street from Howard. Eugene graduated from Howard University Medical School with his M.D. in 1899.

According to family lore, it has been said that he continued his education at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL after graduating from Howard. In a 1992 interview his son Eugene Covington Jr. stated that his father then went on to earn a graduate degree in gynecology and obstetrics from Northwestern University where he played quarterback on the football team. His son also said that an article written by Fred Young was published in *The Daily Pantagraph* about his father's football career. The article stated that quarterback Covington led the team to victory against Illinois Wesleyan University, located in Bloomington.² Northwestern University was unable to confirm that Covington attended or played on the football team.

In order to support himself through college, Covington spent the summers waiting tables at a restaurant in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York.³ It was here that through a friend who was also a waiter he met his future wife, Alice Alena Lewis of Oswego, New York. They were married in Oswego in 1902. Eugene and Alice had three children who survived to adulthood: Girard, Eugene Jr., and Joseph. They also had one or two daughters that died in infancy.

Dr. Covington moved to Bloomington sometime between 1900 and 1901. It is not known why he chose this place as his new home. His original office was located at 313 ½ N. Main Street. He moved it to a new location adjacent to his home at 410 E. Market Street. It is unknown if he had a nurse or receptionist. He also made house calls to patients who were unable to make it to the office. One of these patients, Mrs. Caribel Washington, remembered how Covington always arrived at house calls in a car driven by his son Girard. She also recalled that while he never did drive himself, he always owned a car.⁴ He was known for being well-dressed, classy, well-spoken, and occasionally thought of as pompous by some. "When he stepped into a room, you knew he was somebody. You knew he was Dr. Covington," recalled Mrs. Washington.⁵

He was voted into the McLean County Medical Society in 1901 and remained a member until 1910, when he was suspended from the society because he did not pay his dues.⁶ Although he was a successful doctor, he often felt hardships when other doctors

¹ John Muirhead. *A History of African Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1998) 31

² Oral History Interview with Eugene Covington Jr., 1992, McLean County Museum of History Archives

³ Muirhead., *A History of African Americans in McLean County*, 31

⁴ Interview with Mrs. Caribel Washington. McLean County Museum of History Archives.

⁵ Interview with Mrs. Caribel Washington.

⁶ *Records of the McLean County Medical Society 1891-1911*, April 1910

undercharged black patients who were otherwise able to afford the normal rate as he was mainly dependent on black patients for his living.⁷

Dr. Covington had a very successful and busy practice. It has been said that when he was beginning to establish his practice in Bloomington, he “used to rush his buggy in and out of the yard to give the appearance of having lots of business.”⁸ He had a good reputation among all his patients. In the African American community, when new people moved to town everyone let those newcomers know that “we had a very good doctor.”⁹ Besides owning his own practice, Covington was a member of the St. Joseph Hospital staff and had full privileges at the Mennonite Hospital (today known as BroMenn Hospital). He was also commissioned an assistant surgeon of the Eighth Infantry Illinois National Guard in 1902. However, despite his success in attracting a large black and white clientele, Dr. Covington faced certain challenges due to his race. Despite being a well-respected and talented physician, he was not allowed to perform surgery without having a white doctor in the room supervising him.¹⁰

Racial tensions increased in Bloomington throughout Dr. Covington’s life. When he first arrived in 1900, the black population of Bloomington was increasing.¹¹ The city’s 3,000 or so African-Americans lived in relative peace throughout the city as residential segregation was virtually unknown.¹² However in the 1910s and 1920s this was changing. Residential segregation became more common and higher education was no longer pursued by many young African-Americans in Bloomington. Very few graduated from Bloomington High School and those who were lucky enough to avoid unemployment held limiting and menial jobs. Unflattering images of blacks pervaded the newspapers along with “blackface” minstrel shows and segregation.¹³ The Ku Klux Klan was very active in the 1920s as well though there is no evidence that they threatened Dr. Covington or his family.

As one of the few African-American professionals in Bloomington at the time, Dr. Covington tried very hard throughout his life to fight back against racism. When the 1915 silent movie *Birth of a Nation* was released, Dr. Covington fought to keep it out of Bloomington theaters due to its romanticized view of slavery and blatant racism towards African-Americans. Also, according to family tradition, he requested that the mayor of Bloomington hire an African-American policeman. The policeman was hired and dismissed a few weeks later when an African-American minister suggested that his race would start a riot. As soon as he found out, Dr. Covington persuaded the mayor to give the policeman his job back which, eventually, he did.¹⁴

He also emphasized education as a way for young African-Americans to have opportunities for success. At the Wood River Sunday School Convention, which he attended in 1903, Dr. Covington stated that “he felt proud of the progress his people had made in the past forty years” and hoped that it would continue. He also stated that he was willing to do “all in his power to help to build up members of our race, strong young men and women are needed. Men and women with education, religion and money.”¹⁵ At one point, he promised

⁷ *Records of the McLean County Medical Society 1891-1911*, February 6, 1908

⁸ Muirhead., *A History of African Americans in McLean County*, 31

⁹ Interview with Mrs. Caribel Washington.

¹⁰ Interview with Mrs. Caribel Washington.

¹¹ Muirhead., *A History of African Americans in McLean County*, 31-35

¹² “Colored Population, Bloomington’s Has Grown Rapidly,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 9, 1906

¹³ Muirhead., *A History of African Americans in McLean County*, 36-37

¹⁴ Oral History Interview with Eugene Covington Jr.

¹⁵ “Negro’s Standpoint On Some Race Questions,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 11, 1903

a young African-American man that he would buy him a suit if he finished high school. The young man received his suit and wore it proudly on graduation day.¹⁶

He was a staunch Republican (at that time, the Republicans were the party that supported equal opportunity for African-Americans) and ran for city council in 1915 but did not get enough votes in the primary to continue to the general election. His son recalled that his opponents posed as his supporters and spied on his campaign meetings.¹⁷ Yet, he supported Republican causes throughout his life. His personal motto was “malice towards none and justice towards all,” which was adapted from Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address. As a founding member of the Bloomington Republican Club, he strongly supported the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which attempted to end or significantly diminish the large amount of vigilante violence against blacks after World War I.¹⁸ He also participated in organizing a Negro Business Men’s Society, was a very active member of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Color People, attended Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church and served on their trustee board, was grand medical director of the United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of Mysterious Ten, and served as major and surgeon of the Knights of Pythias in Bloomington.

His wife Alice was active as well especially with the Progressive Club. Although the club did have social activities, the main focus was to take on civic and educational tasks. However, she was not very happy to be living in Bloomington because of segregation. Once she attended a performance at the Majestic Theater and was so bothered by the segregation that after that, she refused to use segregated facilities such as the theater and the Miller Park Beach.¹⁹ Alice died on June 3, 1925.

Three years after Alice died, Dr. Covington married Amanda Thomas. The Thomases and Covingtons were good friends even before Alice’s death and spent a lot of time socializing together. Eugene and Alice attended a Christmas party held by Amanda and her husband George in 1923,²⁰ and the two couples traveled by car to Springfield in November 1924 to hear African-American orator Colonel Roscoe Conkling Simmons speak.²¹ Eugene and Amanda had no children together.

After a short illness, Dr. Eugene Covington died on February 3, 1929 at the Mennonite Hospital. He was only 56 years old and had continued to practice medicine up until the day of his death. In a newspaper memorial the writer stated that “Dr. Covington spent 29 years of his life in this vicinity for the sole purpose of administering relief and happiness through his knowledge gained and medicine to those concerned.”²² He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his first wife Alice.

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¹⁶ Oral History Interview with Eugene Covington Jr.

¹⁷ Muirhead., *A History of African Americans in McLean County*, 29-30

¹⁸ “Bloomington, Ill: The Republican Club Rally,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1922, p.16

¹⁹ Muirhead., *A History of African Americans in McLean County*, 31

²⁰ *The Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1924; part 2, page 5

²¹ *The Chicago Defender*, November 8, 1924; part 2, page 10

²² Unknown newspaper, J. Whittaker Scrapbook. McLean County Museum of History Archives.