

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. 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. He also served an internship at Freedman's Hospital located across the street from Howard. Covington graduated from Howard University Medical School with his M.D. in 1899.

In order to support himself through college, Covington spent the summers waiting tables at a restaurant in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York. 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. 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. 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.

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. He was a successful doctor, although he did not always make enough money for his family. Other doctors sometimes undercharged black patients who were otherwise able to afford the normal rate. Dr. Covington, was as mainly dependent on black patients for his living, but some would go to a doctor that charged less.

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." 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." 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 Advocate 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.

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.

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.” At one point, he promised 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.

Dr. Covington was a staunch Republican (at that time, the Republicans were the party that supported equal opportunity for African-Americans). He 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 Covington’s opponents posed as his supporters and spied on his campaign meetings. 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. He also participated in organizing a Negro Business Men’s Society, and was a very active member of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Color People.

His wife Alice was active as well, especially with the Progressive Club. Though, she was not very happy 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. Alice died on June 3, 1925.

Three years after Alice died, Dr. Covington married Amanda Thomas. They 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.” He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his first wife Alice.