

Dr. Eli Kirk Crothers (1826-1893)

Eli Kirk Crothers was born on October 29, 1826 in Mt. Pleasant, Jefferson County, Ohio to parents Noble and Rachel (Brown) Crothers. Noble was a farmer by trade. In 1846, the family left Ohio and settled in Fulton County, Illinois where Noble went on to become the leading breeder of livestock in the county.

As a young person, Crothers divided his time between responsibilities on his father's farm and schoolwork. In 1845 at the age of 19, he taught for five months in a district school before beginning his medical studies. During the winter of 1847-48, he began attending lectures at McDowell Medical College in St. Louis, Missouri, before continuing his education in medicine at Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia, where he eventually received his degree.

Immediately following his graduation in 1850, Crothers moved to Bloomington to begin his own medical practice. He quickly became well known amongst his patients and colleagues in the McLean County area as a dedicated and knowledgeable professional, and developed a "large and lucrative practice."

On May 1, 1851, Crothers married Miss Marie Louise DePew, a native of Indianapolis, Indiana, who had come to the area ten years prior. Louise was the daughter of Elijah DePew, a successful businessman who made a name for himself in the dry-goods trade.

Inspired by the work of her husband, Louise eventually made her own name for herself in the medical profession. In 1877-78, she enrolled in the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia and then continued her studies at the Women's Medical College of Chicago in 1880-81. While in Chicago, Louise also took a specialized course in women's medicine at Rush Medical College. In the winter of 1882, Louise returned to Philadelphia to complete her studies and graduated with the class of 1883. Afterwards, she returned to Bloomington to engage in her own practice, specializing in women's medicine and pediatrics. Eli was quite supportive of his wife's professional aspirations.

The doctors Crothers had nine children, four of whom lived to adulthood. Those that survived included two sons, Noble E. and E.K. Jr., and two daughters, Louise (Lulu) M. and Rachel A. Both sons went on to make careers as jewelers, whereas Lulu followed in her parents' footsteps, becoming the first female pharmacist in Bloomington. Rachel, the most famous of the Crothers children, followed her artistic ambitions to New York where she established herself as a well-respected playwright during the course of the 1920s.

During the course of his medical career, Eli was involved with one of the very first medical "malpractice" suits in the state of Illinois. In October 1855, the city of Bloomington suffered a great fire, during which the entire south-side block of the courthouse square was more or less destroyed—apart from the McLean County Bank and a lone hardware store.

The fire began the night of October 16 and continued into the early morning of the following day. There was one fatality, that of drayman William Green, and estimated property damages amounting to \$150,000 (which in 2018 would be the same as \$4.3 million). A carpenter, Samuel G. Fleming, also suffered two broken legs.

Fleming suffered potentially crippling injuries to his two legs when the chimney of a building collapsed as the fire burned. Dr. Eli Crothers was one of three local doctors that assisted that evening in the treatment of Fleming's injuries. Though the doctors were hesitant to promise a full recovery, their observations during regular check-ups over the course of the 14 days following the incident indicated that his legs were healing correctly. However, Fleming began to experience pain in his right leg near where the break occurred; and after again removing the bandages one week later, it was found that Fleming's right leg had healed crooked. In order to fix the problem, the doctors suggested that the leg be broken a second time and reset. Fleming agreed to the procedure. However, Fleming stopped the doctors before they could complete the task, saying that the pain was too great. Dr. Eli Crothers reportedly explained to Fleming that, should they fail to complete the procedure, the leg would always be crooked and may not bear his weight. The doctor also made it clear that "he would not be responsible for the result."

Despite the doctor's warning, Fleming engaged a team of six local lawyers and sued two of the doctors (which included Dr. Crothers) on March 28, 1856, accusing them of failing to use "due and proper care, skill, or diligence." Fleming's asking price for damages was \$10,000. In response to the suit, Crothers engaged four Bloomington lawyers, as well as Abraham Lincoln and his former partner, John T. Stuart, to serve for the defense.

The trial was delayed until April 1857. When it finally began, every doctor in Bloomington was called to testify either for the prosecution or the defense. After hearing one week of testimony, the jury deliberated for 18 hours but was unable to come to a decision. The case was continued several times. Before the case could be tried in March 1858 under the Logan Circuit Court at Lincoln, Illinois, an agreement was reached that the case should be dismissed. The doctors agreed to cover any medical fees incurred by the plaintiff.

Though the case was eventually dismissed without a decision by the jury, Lincoln's closing remarks to said jury are what lend historical significance to this case—both for the Dr. Crothers and for Lincoln the lawyer. In an attempt to illustrate to Lincoln the scientific explanation for Fleming's right leg healing as it did, Crothers provided his lawyer with two chicken bones—one of from a young chicken and one from an old chicken. The purpose behind the visual aid was to make clear the decreased capacity for older bones to regenerate properly after withstanding severe trauma. Though the details related to biological chemistry may have escaped Lincoln when he adopted Crothers's approach in his address to the jury, the point was clear: the defense could not be held responsible for Fleming's advanced age, only for their attempts to provide the patient with proper medical care in the hopes that his legs would heal as well as possible considering his current stage in life.

Descriptions of Crothers suggest that he had a friendly disposition and maintained a genial rapport with his patients and colleagues. His physical stature has been described as "rather large." Repeatedly he is referred to with the highest praise as an "esteemed citizen, ranking high in the profession," as "among the best diagnosticians," and as "a man of marked decision of character," who was "never timid about stating what he believed to be right."

Crothers was also a charter member and three-time secretary of the McLean County Medical Society, organized on March 20, 1854.

At the time of his death, Crothers was the oldest physician in Bloomington. He passed away on Sunday, April 23, 1893 at 3:45 in the afternoon following a lengthy struggle with diabetes, leaving behind his wife and caretaker Louise and their four children. Louise continued to practice medicine following her husband's death, outliving him by almost 30 years. Eli Crothers is buried beside his wife at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.