

Dr. Thomas P. Rogers (1812-1899)

Thomas P. Rogers was born on December 4, 1812 in Fairfield Township in Columbiana County, Ohio. He was one of 11 children born to parents Alexander and Catherine (Wallahan) Rogers. Both parents were of Northern Irish descent.

Rogers began school at the age of four but his early education was minimal. From the ages of 10 to 17, Rogers assisted with the tasks of the family farm before his “ambition to become something more than a plodder” took hold and he made the decision to pursue a career in medicine. Of the 11 Rogers children, the four youngest (Thomas included) made their careers in medicine. At the age of 17, Rogers took a hiatus from farm life, first to work for two years at a flourmill, then to further his studies. At this time, Rogers studied one year at a ‘select school’ in Lisbon and just over one year at Salem Academy, both in Ohio. Afterward Rogers did return to the farm but only for a short time before beginning his medical studies under Doctor Lewis in Tuscarora County, Ohio. In order to pay for this apprenticeship, Rogers taught in the winter months and carried on his own studies in the summer months. In 1837 Rogers completed his medical training with a course at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From Philadelphia, Rogers returned to Tuscarora County as a trained physician and started to practice medicine with his former mentor.

He spent one year in practice with Dr. Lewis. During that time Rogers was able to acquire enough money to pay off his course dues, finance a move westward, and still retain \$100 cash. With that \$100 in his pocket, Rogers traveled to Marshall County, Illinois on horseback in the spring of 1838, planning to reside in Decatur in Macon County.

Prior to establishing residence in McLean County, Rogers spent four years in Macon County and then spent the next seven years in Washington, Illinois practicing medicine in partnership with Dr. G.P. Wood. According to local lore, Rogers was passing through Washington when he stopped to tend to a case of scarlet fever. The resident doctor (Dr. Wood) was so impressed that he offered Rogers a partnership on the spot. Rogers claimed his move to Bloomington resulted from a recommendation of U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas in March of 1849. Douglas assured Rogers that the Illinois Central Railroad would soon become a permanent fixture in Bloomington, bringing with it guaranteed growth and prosperity. Rogers made Bloomington his home for the last 50 years of his life.

Rogers was a practitioner in mostly “internal medicine.” Rogers regularly prescribed a combination of remedies to treat such ailments as fever, infections of the chest, and gastrointestinal issues. In addition to his treatment of internal medical matters, Rogers was also accustomed to treating skin diseases, pulling teeth, and delivering babies when the needs arose.

As for fees, one must keep in mind that doctoring in the nineteenth century was not the lucrative career path that professionals enjoy today. Rogers’s fees were moderate and patients with lingering illnesses were allowed to charge their expenses to a tab that Rogers would collect on monthly. Rogers’s regular bookkeeping suggests that the doctor charged \$1.00 for house calls

(which would be about \$33 in 2018), \$0.50 for a routine dental extraction (about \$16 in 2018), and \$5.00 to deliver a baby (about \$162 in 2018).

Despite minimal financial compensation, medical practice was fraught with hazards not limited to the actual treatment of disease. Apart from the exhaustive nature of the profession and the obvious danger of exposing oneself to potential contagious diseases while in the process of treating a patient, doctors had to travel great distances through rough terrain and unpredictable weather to reach those in need of medical attention. In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette for the *Daily Bulletin*, Rogers recalled that after tending to a man who had suffered a concussion in the middle of the night, he left the home of the patient at 3 a.m. in order to ensure that he would make it on time to the residence of another patient he was scheduled to meet that day. “The snow was six inches deep and it was a bitter cold night, and out on the prairie I was overhauled by a pack of wolves. My horse was a fine traveler and an exceptionally tall beast, and by keeping my feet well up on his body—you can imagine the comfortable position I had to maintain—I was comparatively free from danger. I was followed 10 miles by the wolves, and those were exciting miles, I assure you. I was in hopes that when I reached the Mackinaw, which was then very deep, that the water would herd them off, but not so, they displayed their persistency by crossing the stream and following me until we reached the settlement.”

In addition to doctoring and land sales (the latter by which Rogers was able to accumulate most of his personal wealth), Rogers was extensively involved in the political work of the day. Throughout his career, and following his retirement from medicine in 1867, political matters commanded Rogers’s attention. He served as a delegate to every state Democratic convention from 1844 to 1874 with the exception of only one, served for 18 years as chairman of the Democratic Central Committee of McLean County, and from 1872 to 1880 served in the Illinois General Assembly. Rogers also participated in four national conventions, including the 1860 Democratic National Convention in Baltimore, Maryland, at which his “good friend” Stephen Douglas was selected as the presidential nominee. Steven Douglas was running against Abraham Lincoln for president. Dr. Rogers described “Old Abe Lincoln” as an “infernal, perjured old rascal.”

Dr. Rogers was married twice. In June 1840 he married Harriet Wilcox of North Bergen, New York. The couple had one daughter, Harriet Julia, who died at the age of nine months. Rogers’s wife Harriet followed her daughter in death only four years after she and Rogers had wed. Two years later in 1846, Rogers married Minerva Burhance, a widow with one daughter. Minerva, along with her daughter, her daughter’s husband, and their two sons, called Rogers’s “commodious red brick house” at 306 E. Washington St. home. Rogers had a well-kept vegetable garden and an “occasional clump of peonies” in the yard.

On August 5, 1899, white haired and “worn out,” Dr. Rogers died at the age of 91 in the house that he called home since his arrival in Bloomington in 1849. The doctor had taken ill months before and his death was expected. At the time of his passing, Rogers was the oldest physician in Central Illinois. He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.