



Dr. James Edmund Reeves - *Business, Industry and Professions*

“The medical student who would win eminence in his profession must deny himself the glory and tinsel of society life; he must be that ceaseless worker to whom idleness is an impossibility and a thing incompatible with his calling; he must be fearless – brave enough to utter the truth whether it bring him joy or sorrow ... none but the learned can read the mysteries of nature, and feel from the movements of vital metamorphosis of protoplasm the wisdom and power of an ever-present Deity.” These were the words of Dr. James Reeves.

Born in Amissville, Virginia, in 1829, Reeves was to become one of the most renowned doctors in the world. When he was sixteen, his father, a Methodist minister, was assigned to Philippi. Studying borrowed textbooks, working as a tailor during the day, and teaching himself Latin, French, and German by candlelight, James pursued his goal.

When he had saved enough, he enrolled at Hampden-Sydney College, near Richmond. His first practice was in Philippi, where he treated covered-bridge builders who contracted typhoid fever. He became an authority on the subject and published many papers on it.

Just at the start of the Civil War, his sister Ann Jarvis (for whom Mother’s Day was originated) called on him for help. Ann had thirteen children, only four of whom lived to adulthood. The death of so many children caused her to ask her brother to teach local women’s groups how to improve sanitation, nurse the sick, and treat the wounded. His advice prevented the deaths of thousands.

Reeves returned to medical school and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia, then moved his practice to Rivesville, near Fairmont, where he stayed for seven years. It was from there that he sent out invitations to doctors around the state to attend a conference and established the West Virginia Medical Society in 1867.

In 1868, Dr. Reeves moved to Wheeling where he persuaded the City Council of the need for a permanent public health officer and then served in that capacity for four years. As Public Health Officer, Dr. Reeves investigated and improved the town water supply, cleaned up the foul-smelling waters of Wheeling Creek, regulated the ice supply, and checked on the health of prostitutes, coal miners, and steel workers. He cataloged the various industries and studied the types of disorders that they fostered, checked the milk supply and breweries for cleanliness, and investigated cases of tobacco poisoning among cigar rollers. From these studies, he published two scholarly reports. While serving in this office, he submitted a bill to the state Legislature, which created the State Board of Health. He served as the Secretary and then Executive Officer of this Board. At the same time, he served on the Judicial Committee of the American Medical Association and founded the American Public Health Association.

In 1876, Dr. Reeves organized the first International Medical Congress held in Philadelphia. He became an expert at making medical slides and microscopy and wrote textbooks on the subject. He identified the bacillus that caused the skin disease lupus. He was invited to England by Queen Victoria to teach sanitary practice to her troops. He was given medals and a reception at her palace.

Because he had asthma, Dr. Reeves was not able to tolerate the sooty air of Wheeling and moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, becoming the first pathologist of that city. When he diagnosed himself with liver cancer, nine doctors traveled from Wheeling to attempt treatment, but it was in vain. He died on January 4, 1896 and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Wheeling.