

DR. JOHN PATTON BLANKENSHIP

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Of his many achievements in 73 years of living (1839-1913), Dr. John Patton Blankenship's medical career is certainly the most noteworthy. As early as his student days at Friendsville Institute (predecessor of Friendsville Academy), John Blankenship studied sciences. At age 20 he came to Maryville to study medicine with practicing physicians Isaac Taylor and Benjamin Morton. By the end of a second year with these preceptors, he was treating some patients on his own.

Unfortunately for the beginning of a new career, the year was 1861. Within a few months he had to leave a young wife and make the perilous walk to Kentucky, evading Confederate conscription teams along the way, to join the Federal Army. He was named assistant surgeon with the Third Tennessee Infantry, USA. In Kentucky he was able to attend a few lectures at the medical school of the University of Louisville. While gathering medical supplies to use with his unit, he fell ill with typhoid, complicated with pneumonia. As federal forces abandoned Kentucky, the Third Tennessee Infantry departed without their assistant surgeon. Ironically, Dr. Blankenship was saved from death by civilians in Confederate-held Williamsburg. He rejoined his unit in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, early in 1863, but, not fully recovered, he was given an honorable medical discharge in April of that year.

Dr. Blankenship returned to Maryville and, as his health improved, began practicing medicine and surgery in Blount County. In 1866, shortly after war's end, a severe epidemic of small pox broke out in the area and the young doctor was named Blount County Physician and Health Officer, a position he held until the end of the century. One of his first acts was to order a "pest house" constructed at the edge of town to isolate those with "the pox."

He worked diligently to improve sanitary conditions at the county jail, in the town streets and alleys, and along Pistol Creek. You can imagine the challenge—all those horses and occasional ox carts in the streets, privies out behind the town's houses, a livery stable at the creek's edge (earlier there had been a tanning operation along the waterway), stagnant mill ponds up around the horseshoe bend. Dr. Blankenship wanted clean water, a clean environment, and clean people. He gave speeches and wrote newspaper articles to that effect. Later he lobbied the Tennessee General Assembly to pass legislation giving local government power to enforce clean-up.

Among all his duties, Dr. Blankenship took time to further his medical education at Vanderbilt University's young medical school. With his work with preceptors and years of experience in practice, he was able to complete Vanderbilt's degree requirements

in five months in 1874-75. His course included lectures and demonstrations, followed by examinations, laboratory dissections, and clinics at Nashville hospitals and the state prison.

With his skills and interests whetted by these new studies, Dr. Blankenship helped establish the Blount County Medical Society and became its first president. Medical societies, of course, sponsor continuing medical education, urge good health practices among the populace, and discipline physicians to assure good standards of practice. He later affiliated with the Tennessee Medical Society and the American Anti-Tuberculosis Association.

Deeply interested in the betterment of Maryville and Blount County, Dr. Blankenship was politically active. In the rather grim postwar years of 1867-69 he was a member of the Union League of Maryville. League minutes quote him as stating his understanding of the League's purpose as "the elevation of all without distinction of race, color or creed." In a period when there was still bitterness and some fear that the gains of the war—the end of slavery and the preservation of the union—might still be lost, the League firmly believed that loyal, Union Republicans must retain control of government. Dr. Blankenship was a Republican and across the years served as a delegate to numerous county and state nominating conventions for his party.

In the last decade of the 19th century, he was a founding member of the Maryville Board of Enterprise—most likely an early version of our current Economic Development Board, but probably with private rather than public funding. He was especially interested in the expansion of railroads for trade and tourism. He was a life-long Presbyterian, a member of the Grand Army of the Republic, the International Order of Odd Fellows and Masonic lodges.

A family man, he was twice left a widower, first with four teenage youngsters, and second with three very young children. He managed to find a third wife who became his companion and a loving mother to his children. In his medical practice he was aware of the challenges faced by families, especially illness, poverty and alcoholism. He became an advocate for the temperance cause in Maryville. Perhaps his last medical call was to deliver a baby in Cades Cove in January 1913. Riding home in a snowstorm, he became ill and died a few weeks later.

A brief biography of Dr. Blankenship, written while he still lived and later published in *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans*, summed up the man:

Dr. Blankenship has made a success of his life. He owes no man a dollar, has raised a family, has a comfortable property, and is contented and happy in the practice of his profession. His success is due to perseverance and application to his calling; to staying at one place; being honest in his dealings with mankind, and liberal to the poor. He began without inheritance and owes his position to his own efforts.

Not a bad model for our own day!