

A Blacksburg Surgeon with Stonewall Jackson

Dr. Harvey Black

A Montgomery County doctor rode with the Stonewall Brigade and attended to Jackson after he was wounded, assisting in the amputation of General Jackson's arm.

Harvey Black was the second of twelve children born to Alexander and Elizabeth McDowell Black. Born on August 27, 1867, he was the grandnephew and grandson of the founders of Blacksburg.

After enlisting as a private in the First Virginia Volunteer Regiment in 1846, Black set out to fight in the Mexican War. He was made a regimental hospital steward. He saw no action, and was discharged in July of 1848. Following, he entered medical school at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. After completion of his studies, Dr. Black set up practice in Blacksburg, and married Mary Irby Kent—whom he affectionately called “Mollie”—in 1852. Four children soon followed, all born prior to the outbreak of the Civil War:

- ❖ Kent, 1853;
- ❖ Elizabeth, 1855;
- ❖ Alexander, 1857; and
- ❖ Charles, 1859.

By 1860, Dr. Black was one of three practicing physicians in the small town whose population was 406. Of the 406, 52 were slaves and three were free blacks. Prosperous, Dr. Black and his family owned one slave, Adeline, who assisted with work in the house. Dr. Black counted about thirty of the townsfolk as his blood relatives.¹

An ardent Confederate, in 1861, Dr. Black enlisted as a regimental surgeon in the 4th Virginia Infantry, a group formed

from men living west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The 4th Virginia Infantry became part of the 1st Brigade of Virginia, initially commanded by Thomas J. Jackson. After the battle in July, 1861, "First Manassas," the group became known as the "Stonewall Brigade."

A strong family man who expressed deep affection for his wife and children, Black expressed his devotion thusly: "I do not think I would be half so good a soldier if I did not have so many little fellows to fight for."

Many letters were exchanged between Blacksburg and the front lines as Dr. Black and his wife corresponded with one another. He often kept the harsh details of war from her, and it is from the words of another that we know about his attending Jackson after the battle at Chancellorsville where Black was surgeon in charge of the Second Corps Field Hospital. The hospital received its most famous patient, Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, after he had been wounded at Chancellorsville at dusk on May 2. Frank E. Vandiver described the scene:

Not until sometime after 11 P.M. did the ambulance roll up to the field hospital at Wilderness Old Tavern. Quickly Jackson's litter was carried inside a tent already warmed for him by Dr. Harvey Black, the surgeon in charge. More whisky and water were given the general; he dozed and gradually began to revive. After two quiet hours had passed, Dr. McGuire, seconded by Surgeons Black, Walls, and R. T. Coleman, told him that chloroform would be administered preparatory to a careful examination of his wounds. From all indications, said McGuire, the left arm must be amputated; if that proved necessary, should the operation proceed at once? 'Yes, certainly; Dr. McGuire, do for me whatever you think best.' Early in the morning of May 3, Dr. Hunter McGuire, Jackson's personal

physician, amputated Jackson's arm, with Black and two other surgeons assisting.

Years later, John S. Apperson, one of the hospital stewards at the Second Corps Field Hospital, recalled how he learned of the events that transpired that evening.

After Jackson was wounded he was brought to our hospital at the old Wilderness Tavern. For some time after he was brought in his being wounded was kept from the soldiers as much as possible. I noticed Drs. Black and McGuire were in close conversation and the subject was of serious import I could well see. Sometime during the night Dr. Black told us that Gen. Jackson had been wounded. How seriously he did not say.

Realizing that Jackson would die, Black wrote in a letter to his wife, "you can scarcely conceive the affection which his men have for him. He has outlived every prejudice and is regarded as a great Military Chieftain and a faithful Christian." No one is sure if Black ever wrote about the amputation of Jackson's arm, however, as no records of such writing remain.

After surrender at Appomattox two years later, Dr. Black returned to Blacksburg and his medical practice. In 1872, he became president of the state medical society and was instrumental in the establishment of a land grant university in Blacksburg, "Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College"—now affectionately called Virginia Tech.

In 1875, Dr. Black became the superintendent of Eastern Lunatic Assylum in Williamsburg, now called Eastern State Hospital. He served in that capacity for six years and returned to Blacksburg in 1882, resuming his private practice. Then, in 1885, he was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates where he served two sessions. He fought for the establishment of a mental

health institution in Southwest Virginia. Built in Marion, the Southwest Lunatic Asylum opened and Dr. Black was named the first superintendent in 1887. The hospital is presently called Southwest Virginia State Hospital.

After suffering for many years from the disabling symptoms of two diseases, Dr. Black underwent two surgeries a year apart. Weakened by the second one, Dr. Harvey Black died in 1888 at the age of sixty-one. He is buried in Westview Cemetery on Roanoke Street in Blacksburg along with other members of the Black family.