

Earliest doctors embroiled in controversy over Wylie

"To establish his authority, (Dr.) Foster said he was a scholar of English literature, having read several hundred books in the field. In reply Cornelius) Pering said that Foster was a silly, vainglorious ass, comparable to a Billingsgate fisherwoman. He was as capable of judging a list of classic books 'as a barnyard cock was the interior of a jewelry store.'"

— *Indiana University: Midwestern Pioneer*, by Thomas D. Clark.

In the early days of Bloomington's history, physicians were not plentiful. That would seem to suggest that it would have been wise for them to stick together philosophically.

Three of the city's earliest doctors were at one time practically at each other's throats. The controversy surrounded Indiana University first president, Andrew Wylie.

On the one side of the argument were those who believed that Wylie was not a suitable person for the office of trust that he held as head of the state's premier higher education institution. Dr. William C. Foster led the attack against Wylie. He was accused of misappropriating money in connection with the



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

purchase of books for the school's library.

In addition to his position as a physician and a community leader in Bloomington, Foster had the additional prestige of having served on the IU board of trustees. He used the *Bloomington Post* to harass President Wylie.

In a letter to the editor, Foster charged Wylie with having gone to Philadelphia where he overspent the amount he had been authorized to spend for books. The difference between the two amounts was \$1,494, a great deal of money in those days.

Foster also charged that Wylie had bought some obscene books that would corrupt the morals of innocent Indiana youths. Another point of contention was what the doctor called an expensive edition of John Milton's

works.

Actually, IU's most ardent supporter was another physician, Dr. David Maxwell. But it was Cornelius Pering, head of the Bloomington female seminary who defended Wylie at the hearing.

Foster damaged his case by claiming to be an educated man while writing a statement that included a glaring piece of bad grammar (... "you have been complemented and highly eulogized for presenting 4 or 500 dollars worth of books to the College, and procuring a seal & plate for diplomas: and the impression is sought to be made that you done this of your own free will...").

The first big Foster/Wylie dispute erupted in the summer of 1838. Almost a year later, Foster, having failed the first time, went on the attack again. The physician had tried to get a bill through the Indiana General Assembly calling for an investigation of Wylie, but it failed in the Senate.

A hearing in Bloomington was called, this time with Dr. Maxwell on one side and Dr. Foster on the other. More than 20 witnesses were asked to tell what they knew and were

subjected to cross-examination by Foster or Maxwell.

In that hearing, another Bloomington physician who was a current member of the board of trustees was involved. His name was Chester G. Ballard, who had been born in Wendell, Mass. He joined Foster in making some new accusations against Wylie.

Again, the IU president was vindicated. Ballard resigned from the board of trustees and at some point in time left Bloomington. He died in Perryville, Ind., in the summer of 1858.

In spite of being on the losing side of the controversy, Foster remained in Bloomington. He was a sergeant in the Army during the Mexican War and a part of the Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1851.

During stormy meetings at the Monroe County Courthouse just before the outbreak of the Civil War, Foster spoke vehemently in favor of preserving the union at all costs. He lived through the bloody war that preserved the union and died in January of 1866.

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