

Medical miracles were missing in the 1830s

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were using and drinking stale river water from old whiskey barrels, and everywhere, the public squares and the streets and the alleys were the receptacles of garbage and all kinds of litter and filth.")

At the time that Wylie wrote his wife, Margaret, they had just lost their son, William. Holman, a classmate and friend of the Wylie boy, gave a brief tribute to him and a description of his last days. Holman, himself, was seriously ill, but recovered.

He wrote, "The last night

he (William) spent in health was spent at my bedside. I was then dangerously ill, many had given up all hopes of my recovery. But oh! How anxious was I to hear from my dear friend William, who was lying but a few hundred yards from me."

Both were attended by Dr. David Maxwell, an IU trustee. Since medicine in those days was primitive, at best, there was little else the doctor could do except ease the suffering of his patients and hope they would recover.

If Monroe Countians were

not carried off by diseases caused by bacteria, accidents — not necessarily fatal today — did them in. In his letter to his wife, Wylie wrote about their son, John, who seemed to have been accident-prone.

"The mare threw him and only came home this morning. Yesterday the luckless fellow fell off the sawpit and hurt his head against a log. He is well enough now; but I was sadly frightened for a while lest he had sustained some serious or perhaps fatal injury."

Wylie had reason to

worry. Though Maxwell was reputed to have been a good doctor, brain surgery was not among the skills of a frontier practitioner.

More vivid than the fears expressed by Holman and Wylie were the grim statistics of early IU students. Of the 40 who graduated between 1835 and 1839, 20 percent died young. Five of them died in their 20s and the rest before their 40th birthday.

Small wonder, then, that Holman and Wylie expressed — in different ways — the same hopeful, but realistic resignation to the will of a power they felt was greater than their own.

Holman — "I was then through the mercies of a

kind providence, recovering, and was able to walk to the window and see the funeral procession as it slowly proceeded across the College Campus — to the grave."

Wylie — "Our duty, in the mean time, is meekly to resign ourselves to his most holy will."

Ironically, modern medical science could have saved both Holman and Wylie. The "extended illness" that the student died of — at age 24 — was probably tuberculosis. As for IU President Andrew Wylie, he accidentally cut his foot with an ax and died of pneumonia he contracted after the loss of blood weakened him.