

Dr. Henry Armstrong Denson Bennett Doctor ~ 1912-1932

by Beverly B. Wiggins, June 2021

For the twenty years that he practiced medicine in Chatham County, Dr. Henry A. Denson was well-liked as a physician and outspoken as a community leader. His time in Chatham is well-documented in the *Chatham Record*. There are many reports in the Bennett News section of the paper of him attending the sick and injured, and when Dr. D himself was under the weather, it made the news.



Over the years, there are several instances reported in which Dr. Denson speaks his mind about political or community issues. In 1921, for example, he advocates putting up road signs to keep people from getting lost due to the number of new roads being built in the county. In 1922 he suggests that Pittsboro needs to step up and act like a county seat—embracing improvements such as moving the County Fair from Siler City to Pittsboro, and building a new jail and courthouse. In 1924 he made a number of political endorsements, declined to run for coroner (too busy), and proposed a way to recruit and employ much-needed nurses.

Dr. Denson was the first mayor of Bennett and later a town commissioner. Mrs. Denson was also active in the community. She organized clubs for girls and boys in 1922.

Dr. Denson was born in neighboring Moore County in 1854, and came to Chatham only after spending much of his adult life in Indiana. Fortunately, he provided much of the story of his pre-Chatham life in an interview in the *Indianapolis Daily News* in 1900 while he was practicing medicine there. The interview was reprinted in the *Chatham Record* when he died in 1934 and is transcribed here. The introduction notes that Dr. Denson made quite an impact in Indiana as

well as in North Carolina, serving as treasurer, vice-president, and president of the Marion County Medical Society. The paper notes that Dr. Denson “is entitled to the credit of having walked more miles to receive the credit of Hoosier citizenship than any other member of the medical profession in this state.” Dr. D’s own words, which follow, explain that honor.

“At the close of the Civil War, said the doctor, “I was living at my birth place in Moore County North Carolina, in the hills below the Blue Ridge range. I was 16 years old when I left there in November 1869. The county was impoverished. The Confederate army, under Johnson and afterward the Union army, under Sherman, had passed over our farm, crossing the Deep River at our place.”

“When both armies had passed through, our fences were gone, our cattle were gone along with our sheep, hogs, and chickens. My recollection is that the chickens went first. Our family and kin were Unionists, but they had to go into the Confederate army—my father, three uncles and a brother. I have a younger brother and two sisters in North Carolina, living near the old home place.”

“Among the soldiers who camped on the farm were a good many from Indiana. The war, that was 1865, and I was a boy of 12, was nearly over. These were enthusiastic soldiers; they were soon to return to Indiana and were joyful over the prospects. Talking to me, they said: ‘Now that this business is over, young fellow, you ought to get away from here, come to Indiana and see us.’”

“Now, that was Hoosier all over. It impressed me, boy as I was. So four years later I flung an old knapsack given to me by an Indiana soldier, over my shoulder and started westward ho! for this Hoosier Utopia. When I had walked as far as the Blue Ridge, I was offered a job on the road that was being cut through the mountains. There were two other boys there somewhat older than myself. They were bothers, Jesse and Kelly Small. There we made a little money. The Small boys were both fiddlers and had their fiddles with them. I could dance, so we fiddled and danced from the Blue Ridge to West Point, Hardin County, Kentucky, on Salt River, twenty miles below Louisville. We did not spend any money on this journey. Wherever we stopped the people were glad to furnish us with food and lodging for our fiddling and dancing. There was scarcely a house on the way where we might not have been hospitably entertained for a week at least.”

“But at West Point, the Small brothers lost heart, would go no farther northward and induced me to go with them to Knoxville, Tenn. At that place I found a man who wanted hands to build a road bed and lay the rail of Wills Valley railroad to run from near Chattanooga to Ealington, now Birmingham, Ala. I was hired to keep the men’s time. I had been there a month when the negroes began to die with congested fever. That frightened me, and I quickly made up my mind to get out. With four others I walked north to Decatur, Ala., 100 miles.”

“There was only one house on that road—a cabin on the mountainside. There was a porch in front of this cabin and my companions and myself slept at one end of the porch; a pet deer slept at the other end of this shelter place.”

“With Indiana still in my mind, two of my companions and myself took the train. We rode until finally we came to Stinesville, Ind. They knew a farmer there by the name of Joseps Demarchus. We stayed with him over Sunday, sleeping in the barn. His father-in-law, Jesse Burton, a relative of Dr. W. H. Wishard, of Indianapolis, was there on a visit. Incidentally he wanted a farm hand. I had got up early in the morning while my fellow travelers were yet sleeping and fed the horses. Burton said to his son-in-law, ‘Jo, that boy from North Carolina is the fellow I want.’ I went with him and stayed on his farm near Freedom, Owen County, a year.”

“From there I came to Indianapolis and kept time on the Belt Valley road until it went into liquidation in 1883. From here I went to Onio, where I taught school, clerked in a country store, and studied medicine. I came back to Indianapolis in 1884 and in 1887 graduated from the college of Physicians and Surgeons. I’ve been here ever since.”



Photo of Dr. H.A. Denson's diploma from the Indiana Medical College. Donated to CCHA by Ryan Jones, whose grandparents purchased the Denson house. This certificate was left in the house and saved by the Jones family.

In 1879, while he was in Indiana, not-yet-Dr. Denson married Miss Alpha Bartlett. They moved to Indianapolis where Denson enrolled as a student at the Indiana Medical College, from which he graduated with honors in 1887. He did post-graduate work at Chicago Clinic and returned to Indianapolis where he practiced medicine for more than 25 years.

The Densons moved to Bennett in 1912 and built a house there. Dr. Denson had an office in a small house next to the residence.



The Denson residence and Dr. Denson's office on Liberty Street in Bennett.



It was reported in his obituary that “Dr. Denson will be missed throughout this section, for he was a good doctor, always jolly and liked by all people and always spoke to do the right thing. He always paid his bills when buying anything and if he ever had a charge account it is not known to the writer. He and his wife always contributed to any good cause...He was always interested in the schools and presented several prizes to the students of this school for their work.”

Dr. Denson died on 2 June 1934 at his home in Bennett at the age of 80, having practiced medicine in Bennett until he became ill at age 78. Several hundred people gathered for the funeral service, and he was buried, according to the *Chatham Record*, in the town cemetery.

The Denson residence was purchased in the late 1940s by John Wilbert and Mildred Maness Jones. Mrs. Denson moved into Dr. Denson’s former office. Dr. Denson’s medical diploma (pictured above) was left in the residence and saved by the Jones family. It was donated to CCHA in 2021 by Ryan Jones.

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