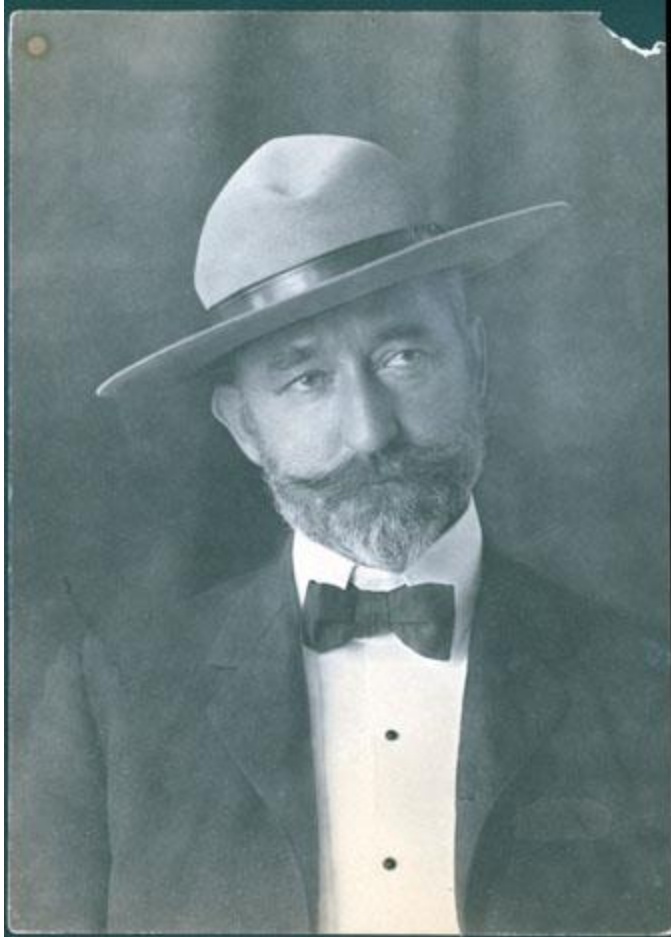


Asheville Archives: 'More than a citizen'

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MANY HATS: Dr. Samuel Westray Battle began his career as a Navy doctor. He moved to Asheville in 1885, promoting the area as an ideal place to recover from respiratory illnesses. Photo courtesy of North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville, North Carolina

Certain names ring a bell when it comes to Asheville's history: **George Washington Vanderbilt, E.W. Grove** and **George Willis Pack** are among the old-timers who come to mind. Others have since been lost in the pages of history (or in many tragic instances, never written about or recorded in the first place). Dr. **Samuel Westray Battle** was certainly not among the latter, but speak his name today and you'll likely receive a blank stare.

Born Aug. 4, 1854, in Westrayville, N.C., Battle served 10 years as a Navy surgeon before launching a private practice in Asheville in 1885. Some of his earliest patients are among those old, familiar Asheville names. Mrs. **W.H. Vanderbilt** came to Western North Carolina in the late 1880s, seeking the doctor's professional services. She was accompanied by her youngest son, George, who, needless to say, took a liking to the area. Grove also sought out Battle's expertise; like George Vanderbilt, he saw potential in the mountain town.

On Jan. 2, 1888, Battle presented a paper before the County Medical Society at Asheville. The presentation was titled "Climate; And the Climatic Treatment of Disease with Special References to the Merits of The Asheville Plateau." In it, Battle addressed the ideal temperature, humidity levels and amount of wind, rainfall and atmospheric pressures believed to play a role in curing such respiratory infections as tuberculosis.

After offering his detailed findings on the ways in which Asheville met all the requirements for "climato-therapy," Battle noted:

"[L]et us briefly sum up [Asheville's atmospheric] advantages without bestowing indiscreet or over zealous praise. [Asheville's climate] is pre-eminently a suitable one for the early stages of pulmonary phthisis, especially for such subjects as can and will get out in the air, and are determined to take benefit of the dry, tonic, invigorating, bracing qualities thereof — and keep good hours. Conditions which seem to favor germ propagation and prolong the species of the genus Bacterium do not exist here. ...

"The mortality from pulmonary phthisis is not large in any part of North Carolina, being, according, to the Mortality Tables of the Tenth Census (1880). 13.4 for every 10,000 of population throughout the State. But it is interesting to note that the mountain counties show a mortality of only 10.6 in every 10,000 of populations, as against 16.1 for every 10,000 of population of all the other counties of the State in the aggregate; or in other words, in a State where pulmonary phthisis does not figure prominently in the mortality tables, the death rate is still fifty per cent less in the mountain section than in the other lower-lying portions of the State."



BATTLE SQUARE: A patient of and friend to Dr. Battle, E.W. Grove named the street in front of the Battery Park Senior Apartments, after the physician. Photo by Thomas Calder

Throughout his tenure in Asheville, Battle held office in a number of buildings. Among these were the original Battery Park Hotel, the Miles Building (see “No Girls Allowed: The Asheville Club Moves to Haywood Street, 1901,” Sept. 13, *Xpress*) and the Jackson Building.

On April, 29, 1927, Battle died at Rex Hospital in Raleigh. In a 1938 Sunday edition of the *Asheville Times*, reporter **James B. Caine** reflected on Battle’s life. Caine wrote, “Dr. Battle was more than a citizen of Asheville; he was an institution. He came here while this community was yet in its infancy; he watched, and materially aided in its growth with pleasure and pride.”

In the same Aug. 14, 1938 article, Caine went on to note the doctor’s sense of style, writing:

“Strikingly individual in all things, Dr. Battle was particularly so in his attire. He never followed fashions; he set his own, and no matter what he wore, it always seemed a part of him, rather than an external decoration. His favorite headgear, outside of the formal evening silk ‘topper’ was a soft felt hat of the wide-brimmed variety. In winter he wore a cape, reaching almost to his knees; a white flannel suit, with a black silk sash in lieu of a waistcoat, was his usual summer attire. ... Always he carried the small rattan cane so popular with English and Indian army officers. Who of the old-timers here cannot mentally see him now? Dressed with meticulous care; with pointed moustachios and carefully trimmed Vandyke, and a military air withal; with cape and cane swinging as he came down Battery Park hill, across Haywood and up the avenue, is it any wonder that fellow members, sitting in the windows of the old Asheville club, watched him with admiring interest until he disappeared around the corner?”

About Thomas Calder

Thomas Calder received his MFA in Fiction from the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. He has worked with several publications, including Gulf Coast and the Collagist. For his weekly #tuesdayhistory tidbits on Asheville, follow him on Instagram @tcalder.

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