Luke Pryor Blackburn: The Good Samaritan

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LUKE PRYOR BLACKBURN
THE GOOD SAMARITAN

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LUKE PRYOR BLACKBURN: THE GOOD SAMARITAN

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LUKE PRYOR BLACKBURN: THE GOOD SAMARITAN

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Luke Pryor Blackburn, Kentucky's only physician governor, is one of the forgotten public health figures of the 19th century. As health officer of Natchez in the 1850s he instituted the first effective quarantine used in the Mississippi Valley and became a strong advocate of its use as a preventive measure in the control of yellow fever. During his lifetime Blackburn also became well known for his unselfish aid to communities stricken with the disease.

In March 1878 Blackburn announced his candidacy for governor of his native state. Local politicians scoffed at his chances for election, but his actions during the 1878 fever epidemic assured his nomination. Despite scandal the philanthropist was elected by a large majority.

As the Commonwealth's first citizen Blackburn led a crusade that achieved major prison reforms. To do so, however, he was forced to harass an uncooperative legislature and buck the state's professional politicians, who had expected the physician to be a puppet governor. Thus, the state's "good samaritan" governor became one of the most unpopular men ever to serve the Commonwealth.
LUKE PRYOR BLACKBURN:
The Good Samaritan

Is a physician as capable as a lawyer, farmer or military man of directing state affairs? Nearly fifty-five per cent of Kentucky's voters in 1879 apparently thought that a doctor could cure the state's ills when they elected as their governor Dr. Luke Pryor Blackburn. Loved by thousands who owed their lives to his heroic activities during yellow fever epidemics and disliked by those who opposed his fight for economically and politically unpopular causes, Blackburn was one of the most versatile, controversial and maligned physicians of nineteenth century America.

Little is known about Blackburn's early life. He was born at Spring Station (Fayette County), Kentucky in 1816, studied medicine briefly in Europe and completed his medical training at Transylvania Medical School in Lexington. While attending Transylvania, Blackburn aided local physicians in caring for the victims of the 1833 Asiatic cholera epidemic that killed more than one-sixth of Lexington's population in less than a month. Blackburn's senior thesis, completed 18 months later, presented unusually modern clinical observations on the pathology of cholera, expressed doubt in the prevailing theory that the disease was caused
by alisma (poisonous gas created by rotting vegetation) and raised questions on the possible connection between the malady and the community's water supply.¹

Shortly after Blackburn commenced his private practice in Lexington in the spring of 1835, cholera broke out at nearby Versailles. Local physicians became victims of the disease or fled from it, and the community was without medical aid. Blackburn volunteered his services to the stricken area and for the duration of the epidemic provided the town with its only professional help. The appreciative populace begged him to remain in their community, and for 12 years Blackburn and Versailles enjoyed mutual saturation.²

In November of 1835 Blackburn married Ella Gist Bowell, and their only child was born 18 months later. To supplement the income needed for his growing household, Blackburn invested in the manufacture of hemp products, but the enterprise was one of the victims of the 1837 panic, and he suffered a considerable financial loss. In 1843

¹ Blackburn Family Bible, owned by Eugenia Blackburn, Frankfort, Kentucky; L. P. Blackburn, "Cholera Maligna," (senior thesis, Transylvania University, 1855). It may have been during the 1833 epidemic that Blackburn first met Jefferson Davis. Davis was then stationed in Lexington on recruiting duty for the army and was also involved in caring for those persons stricken by cholera.

Blackburn was elected to the state legislature, but he served without distinction and apparently was not interested in another term. Despite his dabbling in political and commercial endeavors, Blackburn's medical career flourished, and in 1845 his brother joined him in the practice of "medicine, surgery and obstetrics."^3

Flush times in Mississippi during the 1840s attracted many Kentuckians, including Blackburn. In 1847 the Blackburns moved to Natchez, where the doctor built a small hospital and became active in community affairs. He was elected Honorary Captain of the Natchez Fencibles, an elite militia group, and when Natchez honored Jefferson Davis and the First Regiment of Mississippi Volunteers returning from the war with Mexico, Blackburn served as president of the planning committee and was toastmaster at the gala reception.^4

It was during his years in Natchez that Blackburn first became involved in public health affairs. Yellow fever, the terror of the Mississippi Valley, had plagued

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^3McCormack, Medical Pioneers, 168; Frankfort Yeoman, Feb. 5, 1845. Miss Boswell was the daughter of a Lexington physician who died during the 1833 epidemic.

^4Natchez Courier, June 16, July 6, 1847, Sept. 19, 1848. One of the most interesting sources of information on Blackburn's day-to-day activities in Natchez, 1847-1851, is Wm. R. Hogan and Edwin A. Davis, eds., William Johnson's Natchez: The Antebellum Diary of a Free Negro (2 vols., Baton Rouge, 1951). Blackburn was the Johnson family's physician and friend. After Johnson's death in 1851, Blackburn acted as one of the administrators of his estate and continued to take a fatherly interest in Johnson's family throughout his life.
Natchez throughout its history. The cause of the disease was unknown, but most nineteenth century physicians believed that the malady was spread either by infected persons and their personal belongings or by a miasma. Half-hearted attempts to enforce quarantines had been instituted by various health officers, but the businessmen of Natchez strongly resented any restrictions on trade. Thus, the measure had never been demonstrated effectively. In 1848 Blackburn was elected Health Officer of Natchez, and that summer when yellow fever began its deadly journey up the river, Blackburn and the local Board of Health enforced a quarantine below Natchez. All persons from infected areas were held at the quarantine station for 24 hours to "allow the yellow fever to escape from their person," and the entry of any sick persons into the city was forbidden. Blackburn also urged residents to clean and disinfect their property to eliminate sources of the yellow fever "poison." Although neighboring towns were severely stricken, Natchez apparently remained free from the disease in any large degree. The local press repeatedly announced that Natchez was "as healthy a place as there is on earth," and invited refugees from infected areas to seek safety there.\(^5\)

Because of the large number of persons stricken with

\(^5\)D. Clayton Jones, Antebellum Natchez (Baton Rouge, 1968), 86, 220-221, 267; \textit{Natchez Courier}, Sept. 5, 19, 1848. Newspapers frequently ignored or denied rumors of the presence of epidemic diseases in an attempt to prevent panic. Therefore, one can assume that the prevalence of the disease may have been more serious than indicated by the press.
yellow fever, cholera and other diseases while aboard river vessels, Blackburn opened his hospital, free-of-charge, to all sick rivermen. He also urged Governor Albert Brown of Mississippi to encourage the state legislature and the state's representatives in Congress to appropriate money for Marine Hospitals along the Mississippi River. The eventual building of such hospitals can be credited, in part, to Blackburn. When the Marine Hospital at Natchez was completed in the summer of 1852 Blackburn was named as its chief physician and surgeon.  

To provide adequate medical attention for the Negroes of the community, Blackburn established a small infirmary for blacks only. This facility advertised that it would accept any medical problem except smallpox and would perform "surgical operations of whatever description." The cost of room, board and medical care was $1.00 per day, but no patient was refused because of insufficient funds.

In the summer of 1853 the Mississippi Valley was again plagued with yellow fever. Before the epidemic reached Natchez, Blackburn urged the new Health Officer and Board of Health to institute protective measures, but the merchants who controlled the Board refused to consider his suggestion. Their stubborn attitude was costly, for an esti-

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6 Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, June 29, 1848; Louisville Courier Journal, Mar. 11, Apr. 3, 1878.

7 Mississippi Free Trader, June 29, 1852; Charles S. Sydnor, Slavery in Mississippi (New York, 1955), 55.
mated 450 persons in Natchez perished from the scourge.
when the disease began its northward march the following
summer, Blackburn was drafted as the town's health officer
and, despite protests, he rigidly enforced the quarantine.
Persons from ravaged areas were now required to spend two
weeks at the station below the city, and all vessels from
stricken areas were forbidden to dock. A city ordinance
was passed which required all physicians to report sus-
ppected cases of yellow fever, which Blackburn personally
investigated. The Natchez press constantly assured its
readers that the city was experiencing a healthier season
than it had known in years, and Blackburn was praised as an
excellent health officer. Despite loud complaints voiced
by local businessmen, the quarantine remained in effect
until late October when, according to the local press, it
was "too late for yellow fever to originate from atmospheric
causes."

In his report to the Board of Health, Blackburn
emphasized that the use of the quarantine had been tested
and proved effective, for Natchez remained healthy while
nearly every town below Memphis was plagued with the
disease. He expressed hope that the town would continue to
use the quarantine whenever necessary to protect her citi-
zens.

With the lifting of the quarantine, Blackburn
resigned his position. He noted that he had fought against
much opposition, but had that opposition been "ten-fold
greater, I should not have been deterred," and added that "nothing could tempt me again to solicit or accept this responsible yet thankless office." The city council voted to pay the doctor $200 for his services during the epidemic, and when he refused to accept any compensation, the citizens of the area expressed their gratitude to him with a gift of twin pitchers and trays that were appropriately engraved.8

Having successfully prevented "yellow jack" from striking his home area, Blackburn encouraged Louisiana to erect a quarantine station below New Orleans and thus provide greater protection for the entire Mississippi Valley. During its 1854-55 session, he appeared before both houses of the Louisiana legislature and made a passionate plea for the preventive measure. His appeal was echoed by several physicians from the Crescent City who were favorably impressed with Natchez' success in preventing epidemics. In March of 1855 Louisiana established a quarantine station below New Orleans, and Blackburn aided local physicians and politicians in writing the health laws for the station. Unfortunately, the laws were ineffectively administered, and

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8 James, Antebellum Natchez, 268; Natchez Daily Courier, Oct. 5, 4, 10, 17, Nov. 2, 5, 1854; Natchez Health Officer's Book, 1854 (City Clerk's Office, Natchez). One of the pitchers was lost during the Civil War and a tray was given to a niece. The other set is now the property of the Kentucky Historical Society in Frankfort, as are numerous other gifts given to Blackburn by grateful communities served by him during fever epidemics.
the disease returned.

In September of 1856 Blackburn answered the call for help issued by Long Island officials when an outbreak of yellow fever threatened to engulf the New York City area. The frightened residents on the island had stormed the barricades at the temporary hospital and tried to force the authorities to remove all fever victims from the vicinity. While officials of the island and the port authorities calmed the panic-stricken residents, Blackburn and other physicians cared for the scores of fever victims. No records were kept, but an estimated 160 deaths occurred.

Shortly after his wife's death in 1857 Blackburn toured the major medical centers of Europe. In letters of introduction that he carried, his friends in Natchez described him as a "gentleman of the highest standing socially and professionally" who had "ample stores of worldly goods" and had been "crowned with honors . . . by the elite of Natchez." While visiting in Paris Blackburn met Julia Churchill of Louisville, and shortly after their return to the United States they married, lived briefly in New Orleans, and moved to Louisville on the eve of the

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9 New Orleans Picayune, Mar. 11, 1855; Courier Journal, Nov. 25, 1877; Gordon E. Gillson, "The Louisiana State Board of Health." "The Formative Years" (doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1960), 100-149.

10 New York Times, Aug. 1, 2, 4, 9, 11, 12, 29, 30, 1856.
Civil War.11

Following the outbreak of the war, Blackburn cast his lot with the Confederacy and served in numerous civilian capacities for the duration of the conflict. In April of 1861 Governor Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky sent Blackburn to Mississippi and Louisiana to secure arms. Finding none available, Blackburn wrote to and visited with Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker to discuss the possibility of obtaining arms from the Confederate government. He later joined the staff of General Sterling Price at Jackson, Mississippi and again was sent to secure needed arms. For several months he gathered broken muskets across the South and made arrangements for their repair. What other activities he participated in during the early months of the war are unknown, but in November of 1861 a Union general informed northern authorities that a Confederate agent named Doctor Blackburn was "poking around" at Clarksville, Tennessee.12

In January of 1863 Governor John Pettus of Mississippi appointed Blackburn as that state's medical commissioner to

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visit Confederate hospitals and to look after her sick and wounded. Blackburn set up several temporary hospitals in Mississippi and organized civilian nursing teams to aid the medical officers and local physicians who attended the wounded. He constantly stressed the virtues of cleanliness and proper sanitation measures in the camps and hospitals as a means whereby illness could be decreased. The effectiveness of his admonitions is not known.13

In the summer of 1863 Pettus sent Blackburn to Canada to gather supplies and supervise blockade-running activities. He established residency at the Queen's Hotel in Toronto, a center of Confederate intrigue, became well-acquainted with other rebel agents and traveled extensively across Canada and into the South. Knowledge of most of Blackburn's activities is vague, for all records kept by Confederate agents in Canada were burned in April, 1865. There is evidence that Blackburn was among the Confederate agents who held a secret meeting with John Wilkes Booth and Vice President Andrew Johnson's private secretary, and on several occasions Blackburn was seen in Booth's company.14

13 Jackson, Mississippi Daily Advertiser, Jan. 4, 1863; John Pettus to Dr. Foand [?], Jan. 2, 1863, Churchill Papers.

14 May Neff to author, May 5, 1973; Benn Pitman, The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators (New York, 1865), 38. For more than a century politicians and historians have tried to confirm or refute the rumor that the agents in Canada had knowledge of or were involved in the plot to murder Lincoln. To date no evidence has been published which proves or disproves the rumor. However, if any of the agents were involved, it is probably safe to assume that Blackburn was also involved, or at least had knowledge of the plot.
Blackburn reputedly also was involved in two plots, the 1864 election day scheme and the plot to introduce yellow fever into northern population centers. The former was a scheme to burn several northern cities, release prisoners-of-war from Union camps and cause general havoc in the North on the day preceding the presidential election. Blackburn's role in the affair was to burn Boston while his brother-in-law used the torch in Cincinnati and John Headley reduced New York City to ashes. The ill-planned scheme was thwarted when Union officials learned of the plot and rushed extra troops to the threatened areas.  

Blackburn's yellow fever plot was also unsuccessful, if indeed it was ever attempted. Several days after Lincoln's death Union officials received word from the United States Consul in Bermuda that during the 1864 fever epidemic, Blackburn, on a mission of mercy, gathered linens belonging to fever victims. Some of the linens had been stored in Bermuda, but five trunks of the soiled clothing and bedding were sent to Halifax. On receipt of the news, the War Department issued an order for Blackburn's arrest. However, the physician was in Canada and beyond United States' jurisdiction. After details of the scheme were revealed, the authorities in Canada arrested Blackburn, and he was tried for violating that nation's neutrality. The only witness

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to testify against Blackburn, a rebel turncoat in Union pay, swore that he had been hired in Canada by the physician to smuggle five trunks of infected clothing into northern cities, where the contents were sold to used clothing merchants. However, since no proof existed that the trunks ever had been on Canadian soil, Blackburn was acquitted. Testimony about the plot was also given at the Lincoln assassination hearing but, as in the earlier trial, witnesses were not produced to confirm or refute the story. For reasons never explained, the Attorney General's office did not investigate the matter further. 16

Blackburn decided to remain in Canada following the war's end. He had thrown his lot with the losing side, and in doing so had forfeited both his reputation and his fortune. However, when yellow fever broke out in the deep South in 1867, Blackburn wrote to President Johnson requesting permission to return to the United States, travel to New Orleans and aid his fellow southerners. Permission was denied, but Blackburn went to New Orleans anyway and worked with the Crescent City's medical personnel until the epidemic subsided. Shortly thereafter, the Blackburns moved to Arkansas, where they owned a small plantation. Farming was not for the physician, and in 1873

the Blackburns returned to Louisville and made their home at the Galt House.\textsuperscript{17}

Yellow fever traveled up the river again in the summer of 1873. Blackburn volunteered his services to the authorities at Memphis and was put in charge of the Howard Association's hospital, Wathall Infirmary. The epidemic struck all socio-economic levels in Memphis but was particularly devastating to the poor Irish population, most of whom were recent arrivals to the fever-ridden South. A Catholic priest who visited many of his ill parishioners with Blackburn noted in his memoirs that the physician was unlike other doctors, for he did not confine his help to the "marble halls of the town and never flinched from the call of the poor and needy." The priest also told of Blackburn's interest in a ten-year-old waif, Mary Sullivan, who had been orphaned by the epidemic. Blackburn proposed to adopt the child rather than allow her to be sent to an orphanage. The priest was aghast at the idea of a Catholic child being raised by a Protestant, and only after the doctor promised to send her to a good convent school would he allow the girl to leave Memphis. Blackburn outfitted Mary with lovely new clothes, and the child was taken to the Sisters of Charity at the Nazareth Convent at Bards-

\textsuperscript{17}L. P. Blackburn to Andrew Johnson, Sept. 4, 1867, in Andrew Johnson's Presidential Papers, Ser. I (microfilm); New York Times, Sept. 26, 27, 1867; New Orleans Picayune, Sept. 21, 1867.
town, Kentucky, where she remained until her education was completed. Several years later the priest met the young lady in Nashville, and when he inquired about her benefactor, Mary bitterly informed him that the physician had "abandoned her" to the nuns and was now the "high and mighty Governor of Kentucky" while she was forced to earn her own living. What her fate might have been had Blackburn left her in Memphis apparently received little consideration from either Mary or the priest. 18

Blackburn's Memphis activity that received the greatest attention by his contemporaries concerned his caning of a fellow "doctor." During the epidemic a volunteer from Chicago, who professed to be a qualified physician, visited one of Blackburn's fever patients and administered medications of which Blackburn disapproved. When the two met in the street several hours later, Blackburn accused the man of being a "quack." Tempers flared, additional words were exchanged and Blackburn caned the man severely with his walking stick. Blackburn received much criticism for his actions until the Memphis authorities learned that the bruised man was not a physician, had no previous experience

in caring for fever patients and was dispensing medications that were not considered acceptable. 19

Blackburn again answered the call from yellow fever victims in the early fall of 1877. The small community of Fernandina, Florida was stricken with the scourge, and when it became apparent that outside help was needed, the town's mayor wired his counterpart in Louisville requesting Blackburn's services. The physician repaired to Florida, and for six weeks he provided Fernandina with medical and nursing care and sent numerous messages to Kentucky and other areas requesting food stuffs and supplies, for the town's trade had been stifled by the epidemic. For his services at Fernandina — and all other towns that he aided during his medical career — Blackburn refused to accept any compensation or expense money. 20

In February of 1878 Blackburn embarked on a new career, when he announced his desire to become the Democratic nominee for Governor of Kentucky. The conversion from yellow fever expert to politician would appear to be

19 Courier Journal, Oct. 26, 28, Nov. 9, 1877. The people of Memphis presented Blackburn with a silver tray as a token of their appreciation for his help during the epidemic, and the physician received several other tokens from private individuals. Perhaps the most unusual expression of gratitude was made by a man from central Tennessee four years later, when he named his fine thoroughbred stallion for Blackburn. The horse, Luke Blackburn, was the nation's top race horse during Blackburn's first year as Governor of Kentucky.

20 Ibid., Sept. 11, Oct. 6, 9, 10, 20, 1877.
a peculiar one were it not for Blackburn's family background. His brother Joseph was then United States Representative from Kentucky and a serious contender for Speaker of the House, and another brother, James, was a state Senator. Two brothers-in-law were also active in politics. James Churchill had served as Kentucky's Secretary of State under Governor John W. Stevenson, and Thomas Churchill was Arkansas' Treasurer and would become governor of that state in 1880. It is not known whether it was from his family or perhaps from his friend Jefferson Davis that Blackburn first received the idea to campaign for the office. Davis had urged Blackburn and others not to let his (Davis') attitude toward amnesty prevent them from enjoying "whatever benefits they might receive . . ." through active participation in the political processes. On February 8, 1878 the Louisville Courier Journal announced Blackburn's candidacy for governor, and several weeks later Blackburn wrote to his former Commander-in-Chief that the announcement was the most important event in his life, for it was an "appeal to the people of my state to expunge from my name that obliquy [sic] which the venal press and people of the North put on it at a time when no friend could defend me unless at the peril of his life and liberty."21

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During the spring and summer months Blackburn made numerous speeches on behalf of his candidacy. He touched briefly on the national issues of the day - the greenback controversy, the corruption and evils of the Republican party and the North's harsh treatment of the South during reconstruction. He also assured his fellow Kentuckians that, unlike other politicians, he would not use the governorship as a stepping stone for future political offices. Despite his oratorical talents and political promises, many of his close friends saw Blackburn's ambition as an "indiscreet and hopeless venture," for his profession would be viewed by the populace as poor preparation for the state's highest office.22

Several months after Blackburn opened his campaign, yellow fever broke out in New Orleans and by late summer the disease had become the most severe and widespread fever epidemic in the nation's history.23 Thousands of refugees from the lower South fled northward, and Kentuckians welcomed them. Louisville erected two special hospitals for ill arrivals, and religious, educational, civic and frater-
nal organizations sponsored a variety of ingenious money-making events to provide necessities for them. The advisability of establishing quarantine stations at Louisville and the state's other transportation centers was discussed. However, most of the state's physicians refused to believe that the disease could exist so far north and labeled the use of a quarantine "inhumane." As one of the few physicians in Kentucky who had any first-hand knowledge of the disease, Blackburn predicted that the malady would reach Kentucky unless all precautions were taken. Such measures were not instituted, and indigenous cases of the saffron scourge appeared in Louisville in late August.  

Because of his state's threatened position, Blackburn discontinued his canvass in late August and returned to Louisville to help care for the sick refugees. He urged his associates to put aside their favorite remedies and secret concoctions and consider the comfort and welfare of their patients. His recommended treatment was bed rest and the use of blankets to promote "sweating," cracked ice to allay thirst, tea, ale and brandy to stimulate the circulation and chicken broth and cornmeal gruel to provide nourishment. Simple medication and good nursing care, said Blackburn, were more successful in the treatment of yellow fever than the usual pharmaceutical mixtures.

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Although rumors of indigenous fever had been denied earlier at Hickman, a small community in southwestern Kentucky, the town's mayor telegraphed the President of the newly formed State Board of Health on September 5 and requested the aid of Dr. Blackburn; yellow fever was epidemic in Hickman. Two days later Blackburn went to the river town as the official representative of the Board, and for seven weeks he worked day and night to care for the ill. Groups of citizens were organized and instructed in nursing techniques, clean-up crews disinfected the town with lime and burning tar and a town guard was formed to protect the numerous homes and businesses that had been vacated by frightened, fleeing townsmen. When all the local and volunteer physicians became victims of the disease, Blackburn assured the community that as long as fresh horses could be obtained, he would visit anyone who needed his care. Traveling 70 miles and visiting 30 patients became the usual daily schedule for the area's only physician.26

Throughout the epidemic the Courier Journal and other state newspapers kept their readers informed on Blackburn's activities. By late October, when the disease abated, Blackburn had become the Commonwealth's hero. Brass bands, street banners, gala receptions, commendations from the Governor and county medical societies and an array of costly gifts were expressions of love and appreciation from the

26 Ibid., Sept. 5, 6, 14, 15, 26, Oct. 5, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 22, 1878; Clark County Democrat, Oct. 50, 1878.
people of Kentucky. Newspapers throughout the state urged other gubernatorial candidates to withdraw from the race. Blackburn's name was a household word; his nomination was assured.

The Democratic Convention opened in Louisville on May 1, 1879. Blackburn was nominated by General Basil Duke, and the nomination was accepted by acclamation. A few weeks later Blackburn announced that an "extreme inflammation of the eyes and throat" compelled him to retire for the remainder of the campaign and convalesce at the resort at Crab Orchard Springs. While it is possible that months of campaigning and the fatiguing activities at Hickman had impaired the health of the 65 year old gentleman, it is also likely that his seclusion was precipitated by an Ohio newspaper.

In mid-May the Republican Cincinnati Gazette began to print stories of the old yellow fever plot and urged Blackburn either to admit or deny that he was the Doctor Blackburn who attempted to spread the disease among northern women and children during the war. When it appeared that no answer was forthcoming, the Gazette set out to prove that the two physicians were indeed the same man, and throughout the remainder of the campaign and the early months of Blackburn's administration, the Gazette conducted one of the most determined character assassinations in the history of American journalism. Trial transcripts, official

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27 Courier Journal, May 1, 2, 3, 7, 30, 1878.
records, letters, rumors and suppositions were quoted, and the scandalmongering was quickly echoed by other northern newspapers. Blackburn was labeled an ignorant "quack," the most hideous monster since the Emperor Nero and the murderer of hundreds of civilians who died of yellow fever at New Bern, North Carolina in 1864. It was even suggested that Kentucky should be forced to secede if "Dr. Blackvomit" were elected. Republican newspapers stated that only Democrats would nominate a "fiend" for office, and northern Democrats were quick to point out that it was southern Democrats who admired the "inhuman wretch." Although a few newspapers in Kentucky mentioned the "lie" and urged Blackburn to answer the accusation, little notice was taken of the affair within the state. The Commonwealth's Republicans might have made use of the charge had it not first appeared in the Cincinnati paper that "persistently lied about Kentucky all the time and under all circumstances." Henry Watterson, one of the state's leading Democrats and owner-editor of the Courier-Journal, later admitted that most Kentuckians would have supported Blackburn even if he had pleaded guilty to the accusations.  

The 1879 election returns gave Blackburn a 55 per cent majority of the popular vote, and on September 3 the "Hero of Hickman" became the 28th Governor of Kentucky. The leaders of the state's Democratic party were thrilled with

\[28\text{Ibid., Aug. 10, Sept. 26, 28, 1879; Cincinnati Gazette, May 11 - Nov. 1, 1879.}\]
their novice politician, and residents of the state's capital were overwhelmed by the polish and charm exhibited by the Governor and his lovely lady. However, those who listened carefully to Blackburn's inaugural address and to his first message to the legislature heard forceful plans for reforms that the Governor intended to direct—reforms in the state's fiscal, judicial, educational and penal systems. Blackburn intended to be more than a puppet who charmed visiting dignitaries and flattered the egos of the Commonwealth's politicos.

Blackburn believed that one of the immediate solutions to the financial problems of the state was the elimination of the "great frauds" that "robbed the treasury of tens of thousands of dollars." These included the scandalous payments to unnecessary trial witnesses, padded court costs and the expense of transporting witnesses and accused persons across county lines. Blackburn urged eliminating the frauds and setting up equal and uniform evaluation for all taxable property, thereby increasing revenues. The legislature was responsive to all but the last suggestion, although the tax on real property was increased slightly.29

Blackburn's reforms not only improved the state's financial status but also helped in the administration of justice. The appellate court, unable to hear all the cases

presented to it, was aided by the creation of a Superior Court consisting of three magistrates with the same qualifications as the appellate judges. The new Superior Court was given original as well as appellate jurisdiction over many cases, and within a year the backlog of the Court of Appeals' docket was cleared.\textsuperscript{30}

Educational reforms were another of Blackburn's interests. Kentucky's schools were overcrowded and underfinanced, and her teachers were among the most poorly trained and underpaid in the nation. Realizing that the people would oppose state tax increases, Blackburn urged local taxation as a means by which the state's funds could be supplemented and at the same time increase local interest in area schools. Blackburn also requested that the legislature reorganize the A & M College, which was affiliated with Kentucky University. Lexington offered her city park as a site for the new school, and the city and county contributed funds for the purchase of additional land and the erection of buildings. The first classroom structures of the new University of Kentucky were dedicated in 1882.\textsuperscript{31}

Of all the reforms that he innovated, Blackburn is best known for his efforts and achievements in prison

\textsuperscript{30} Acts of the Kentucky General Assembly, 1879-1880 (Frankfort, 1880), I, 111-114.

reforms. During the spring of 1879 the *Courier Journal* waged a verbal battle against the wretched conditions that existed at Kentucky's "Black Hole of Calcutta," the state penitentiary at Frankfort. As the state's chief executive, Blackburn continued the war. He called for the creation of a second penitentiary to relieve the facility at Frankfort where 953 inadequately fed and clothed convicts were crowded into 780 filthy cells that measured 3' 9" x 6' 8" x 6' 3". Blackburn also urged the adoption of a warden to replace the barbarous lessee system, the separation of young inmates from hardened criminals, the maintenance of a resident physician to supervise medical care and the sanitary condition of the prison and the introduction of educational, vocational and religious instruction to upgrade the prisoners' feeling of self-worth. It was time, Blackburn informed the legislature, for the state to "abandon a policy which is based on abasement and cruelty and whose only marks are degradation from the moment the wretched convict dons his zebra striped suit until he emerges from the prison with hope forever crushed."\(^{32}\)

The 1880 legislature postponed action on the penitentiary question until the end of its session. Various prison bills were introduced, but calls for adjournment or postponement continually delayed action. When it became apparent that numerous convicts would die while the General

\(^{32}\) *Courier Journal*, Oct. 28, 1879; *Journal of the Senate, 1879-1880* (Frankfort, 1880), 40, 42, 47.
Assembly dawdled with their fates, Blackburn began to use his executive privilege. Elderly convicts and those who were severely ill were pardoned and allowed to return home to die, and juvenile offenders were released, lest their association with hardened criminals forever ruin their chances for rehabilitation. As the legislature continued to ignore the pressing problem of crowded conditions, Blackburn continued to use his executive privilege. Men convicted of minor offenses and those imprisoned by mercenary prosecuting attorneys, who collected fees for convictions, were freed. The press, previously horrified about the overcrowded facilities, now voiced horror at Blackburn's solution for the problem, and neighbors of the freed convicts expressed fear for their lives and property. Party leaders who tried to pressure the Governor to change his tactics discovered that the novice politician, whom they expected to manipulate, was an independent individual who was controlled by his personal convictions.  

As the uproar over pardons increased, the legislature passed a rather superficial reform bill that was probably meant only to pacify the Governor, who threatened to call a special session of the legislature if they adjourned with-

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33 Blackburn pardoned more convicts than his predecessors, although he approved a smaller percentage of the pardon requests than had previous Governors. During his four year term he granted about 1,000 pardons, 391 of which were granted to persons convicted under the KKK act in Lawrence County. Blackburn's pardons were granted with the welfare of the prisoners in mind, not as political favors.
out taking action. The new act provided for a warden, deputy warden, resident physician and branch penitentiary. The selection of the prison officials, except for the legislature-appointed warden, was to be made by a three-man commission chosen by the Governor. Able men were appointed to the commission and the selection of officials was made. However, the legislature failed to provide the necessary money to implement the new provisions. Despite their financial handicap, the newly-appointed officials assumed formal control of the penitentiary in June, 1880 and within a month adopted new rules and regulations similar to those of the more progressive Ohio State Penitentiary.34

Shortly after their appointment, Blackburn sent the prison commissioners to the 1880 Conference of Charities and Corrections at Cleveland and instructed them to examine the progressive penal systems of several northern states. Following their visits to prisons in Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the commissioners recommended that a branch facility be built on the Cumberland River near Eddyville. The new building, similar to the fortress-like Illinois penitentiary at Joliet, would house 320 men and 32 women and contain shops and other vocational and recreational facilities. The estimated cost of the branch penitentiary was $233,572.

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The legislature refused to appropriate such a large amount for care of criminals, and not until 1885 did they approve spending $150,000 to build 300 cells. 35

The lessee system was another of the evils that Blackburn made every effort to abolish. Blackburn accused the prison's lessor, Jerry South of Frankfort, of permitting cruel beatings, providing inadequate food and clothing and showing a general disinterest in the welfare of his charges. The legislature was concerned about the reported negligence and requested that South, a man of considerable political influence, present his case before the members of the General Assembly. South arrived from his sick bed and, to the horror of all concerned, fell dead of "apoplexy" in the Senate chamber. Cries of "they have murdered him!" were uttered by family and friends. Although South's death solved the problem of how to terminate his contract with the state, the belief that those who criticized his administration of the prison were somehow responsible for South's death added fuel to the fire of the growing anti-

35 Ibid., 159.
Following South's death a warden was appointed for the prison and shortly thereafter the state issued contracts that permitted able-bodied convicts to be hired out for work on railroads, in mines and in other public and private works. While the use of convict labor, which Blackburn heatedly opposed, was not a major improvement over the lessee system, it did temporarily solve the overcrowded conditions at the penitentiary. Those men who remained at the prison were employed with a variety of tasks which included making chairs, whiskey and flour bar-

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36 *Courier Journal*, Feb. 5, 6, 10, 1880; Report of the House Committee on the Penitentiary, *Journal of the House, 1879-1880*, 461-562; Hambleton Tapp, "Three Decades of Kentucky Politics, 1870-1900" (doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1950), 59, 61. Under the lessee system the lessor purchased a contract from the state to operate and manage the penitentiary and to sub-lease the labors of the prisoners. By skimping on the quality and quantity of necessities he provided for the convicts and by neglecting to properly maintain the prison facility, it was possible for the lessor to make large profits. The warden was a salaried employee of the state who was hired to supervise the care of the inmates and the prison, and contracts for the labors of the convicts were made directly with the state by railroads and mine owners. The conditions experienced by convicts under the lessee system and by those hired out to the railroads, etc., were quite similar, but for those who remained within the walls of the penitentiary, the new system could be a great improvement.

37 The railroads wielded considerable political influence in Kentucky during the late nineteenth century. The use of convict labor by the railroads had been an acceptable practice in many southern states after the war, for it provided the prisoners with constructive work and excused the state from the expensive responsibility of caring for its charges. Most of the opposition to the use of convicts was based on its unfair competition with free labor. Blackburn opposed the system for humanitarian reasons—prisoners generally received minimal care for their exploited labor.
rels and spinning hemp chains for rope and bagging. The latter was one of the most unpopular tasks, and numerous convicts committed acts of self-mutilation to escape duty in the "hemp room." One prisoner later noted that he prayed that God would "wither the arm that built that room." 38

Blackburn was also deeply concerned about the punishment of uncooperative prisoners. The Governor and the prison's physician made several accusations against the warden for permitting severe and inhumane disciplinary measures. Similar accusations were also voiced about the treatment received by convict laborers working on railroads and in mines, and newspaper accounts of deaths and the loss of limbs from falling rocks and other debris, exposure and beatings were numerous. The furor became so great that the warden was dismissed - a situation that would reoccur several times during the remainder of the century - and there was talk of cancelling contracts with railroad construction and mining companies. Despite complaints and tales of horror, the legislature refused to comply with Blackburn's request that money be provided to care for and rehabilitate the penitentiary's inmates. 39


Perhaps the most novel penal reform instituted by Blackburn was that of providing religious instruction for the prisoners. He arranged for Protestant and Catholic Chaplains to conduct weekly services for the inmates and ordered that the chapel be cleaned of debris and painted. Mrs. Blackburn organized and taught Sunday School classes, the first ever held at the prison. Her constant kindness to the prisoners and her canvass for funds for Bibles and supplies won the affection and trust of the inmates, their families and of the charitable women across the state. In the summer of 1882 Evangelist George O. Barnes visited the penitentiary and held daily services there for several weeks. His memoirs are full of praise for the Governor and his gracious wife who took a personal interest in the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants of the "city of dead souls." 40

As Blackburn waged his battle against the evils of the state's penitentiary, he received considerable notice across the nation. The Cincinnati Gazette, influenced by political, sectional and economic animosities, noted that Blackburn's pardons were a logical expectation from a "mass murderer" who could not imprison men whose transgressions were less serious than his own. Other non-Kentucky newspapers, however, generally lauded Blackburn's sincere

40 W. T. Price, Without Script or Purse (Louisville, 1883), 357-362; Lucien Rule, City of Dead Souls (Louisville, 1920), forward, 145-147.
efforts to accomplish a humane, although unpopular, task. When the National Conference of Charities met in Louisville in 1883, Blackburn received special praise from the guest speaker, novelist-reformer George W. Cable, for his efforts to erase the horrors of the lessee system and improve the general welfare of the state’s charges. 41

Blackburn’s governorship was monopolized by bitter fighting for an unpopular cause, and because of his unremitting struggle with the legislature and party leaders, he made powerful enemies. Ambitious politicians knew that spending the taxpayers’ money on thieves and murderers was political suicide, and they resented the Governor’s attempt to force them to accept measures that threatened their political security. In 1879 Blackburn stated that he was not interested in future political plums, and after four years of pushing an unpopular cause, he would have received none had he been willing to accept them. When the physician-governor rose to speak at the 1883 nominating convention, he was booted by his party associates, and in the resulting moments of frustration, he lost his temper and a degree of his dignity. Nevertheless, the record of his accomplishments rather than the reaction of his contemporaries is considered when evaluating Blackburn’s governorship. He was the state’s first post-war executive to

accomplish major reforms, and he has been labeled the "father" of prison reforms in Kentucky.

Blackburn left the governor's mansion in the fall of 1883 and returned to the practice of medicine. Despite his declining health he opened a private sanitarium in Louisville, where he provided quality care for persons afflicted with nervous disorders and mental diseases. Luke Blackburn died in 1887, still under the cloud of unpopularity, and in the subsequent near-century since his demise, the story of Kentucky's only physician-governor and his contributions to his state and nation has almost disappeared into the depths of obscurity. His remains lie in Frankfort beneath a gravestone inscribed

LUKE PRYOR BLACKBURN
THE GOOD SAMARITAN
BIBLIOGRAPHY

To date little information has been published on Luke Pryor Blackburn. The only biographical studies are found in the brief sketches of the *Dictionary of American Biography* and similar collections. A few of these sketches contain errors; all of them ignore the physician-governor's most interesting and controversial activities.

Blackburn's relative obscurity can be explained partially by the absence of his private papers. Several years after his death, his papers were given by his son to a Louisville historian who planned to write the former Governor's biography. The proposed study apparently was never published, and the fate of the papers is unknown. A few letters to and from Blackburn are found in the Churchill Papers, The Filson Club (Louisville), and in the Blackburn Files of the Kentucky Historical Society (Frankfort).

Blackburn's senior thesis, "Cholera Maligna," is preserved at Transylvania University, Lexington, and his family's Bible containing birth, marriage and death statistics belongs to Mrs. Eugenia Blackburn, Curator of the Museum at the Kentucky Historical Society.

Because of the lack of private papers, contemporary newspapers were the major source of information for this
Blackburn's activities were mentioned occasionally in the Natchez Courier, the Natchez Mississippi Free Trader and the Jackson Daily Advertiser. Unfortunately his influence in Louisiana corresponded with the immediate pre- and post-Civil War years and the New Orleans Picayune usually exhibited greater interest in the crucial political events of the period than in the activities of the physician. The New York Times gave some attention to Blackburn's humanitarian activities and, in view of its biased presentation of the yellow fever plot, was considerably fairer in reporting his fight for prison reforms than was the Cincinnati Gazette.

Blackburn and the owner-editor of the Courier Journal, Henry Watterson, were close friends, and Watterson's reporting of the physician's courageous actions during the yellow fever plots of 1873, 1877 and 1878 was largely responsible for his widespread popularity in the state. However, Watterson was one of the state's political manipulators who hoped to influence the physician-governor, and his failure to do so evidently caused some hard feelings for his "Pygmalion." Watterson's autobiography does not mention or even make reference to Luke Blackburn.

Although the state's newspapers carried news items about Blackburn, only a few of them have been preserved. The Clark County Democrat, Frankfort Yeoman, Lexington Transcript, Lexington Press and the Louisville Daily Commercial were consulted for this study.

City, state and national collections of documents also contain information on Blackburn's activities. The physician's 1854 report to the officials of Natchez is found in the Natchez Health Officer's Book, 1854 (City

The official records of the Kentucky legislature during Blackburn's administration are found in Acts of the Kentucky General Assembly, 1879-1880 (Frankfort, 1880), 2 vols.; Journal of the House of Representatives, 1879-1880 (Frankfort, 1880); and the Journal of the Senate, 1879-1880 (Frankfort, 1880). Blackburn's Governor's Papers, housed at the Kentucky Historical Society, were temporarily unavailable because of the remodeling of the Society's historic home.

Numerous other works containing information on Blackburn were used for this study. J. N. McCormack, ed., Some of the Medical Pioneers of Kentucky (Bowling Green, 1917), contains a superficial biographical sketch on Blackburn. Hambleton Tapp, "Three Decades of Kentucky Politics, 1870-
1900" (doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1950), and R. G. Crawford, "A History of the Kentucky Penitentiary System, 1865-1937" (doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1955), are the two most complete studies to date on Blackburn's administration but contain little information about the physician's pre-governor years. Nancy D. Baird, "The Yellow Fever Plot," Civil War Times, Illustrated, XII (Nov. 1974), 16-23, is the only known study of any of Blackburn's Civil War activities.