

Dr. George Bronson Philhower, MD

Much more than a 'country doctor with a casual approach'

By David Wilson

The Early Years



The beginning years of Franklin Township, now Nutley Township, was a period of rapid growth with many personalities applying their talents, time, visions, and monies to ensure a prosperous future for the town. Researching this history is fascinating, inspiring local historians to organize their finds into storylines that highlight individuals whose civic contributions formed Nutley.

This is the story of Dr. George Bronson Philhower, who served twenty-three years on the Board of Health, nine years on the Board of Education, two as president, twenty-four years on library board, of which he was a charter member, fifteen on the park commission, twenty-three as town physician, and numerous other social, religious, and civic groups. Somehow, he found time to have a medical practice, marry, and have three children.

The story begins August 2, 1862, in Croton, Hunterdon County on the family farm. George had private tutors, attended Franklin Academy, State Normal School, then onto New York University for his medical training and interning at Bellevue Hospital, receiving his medical degree in 1886.

He immediately hung his shingle out on a large, rambling house with a wrap-around porch at 281 Grant Avenue in the town that would be known as Nutley. He termed himself a country doctor with a casual approach. House calls on foot or horse and buggy, with payments due when you had resources, sometimes ten or twenty years later. Founded as a family practice, with an expertise in treating pneumonia cases.

He was kindly, generous, scholarly, short-tempered, and inclined to be intolerant. A staunch prohibition supporter, he hated liquor in all forms and refused to prescribe it, calling it evil and an underlying cause to many illnesses. Office visits were two dollars, and if you weren't very sick, he told you to go home and forget about it. A house call was three dollars if you were really sick. Hypos were cleaned with a simple pants wipe. Virginia Bennett worked with him during the 1918 flu epidemic and had to change clothes and take a green soap bath at every home visit.

George married Florence Rowan in a grand celebration at her father's Central Hotel on Chestnut Street. They were both riding the new bicycles around 1895, starting their family, and being active community members. Florence was township clerk for a short time and worked with the Women's club promoting "safe & sane fireworks" and other quality of life issues. George taught First Aid as a WW I preparedness activity, preceding the Red Cross. The doctor spent Saturday afternoons cheering the high school baseball team until he was hoarse.



Philhower's most important public service was creating Nutley Memorial Parkway in 1919. He spearheaded the formation of this walkway that recognized all Nutleyites who served in World War One. He was passionate about the park, visiting every day to ensure his vision of a place where the elderly could rest and meditate, lovers could walk together, and the young could play. His words, "Generations, as yet unborn, will rise and call us blessed for that". He was a keynote speaker at the 1925 Raymond Blum footbridge dedication.

The Later Years

Dr. Philhower was a pillar of Vincent Methodist Church (VMC) serving as board president for twenty-seven years. During

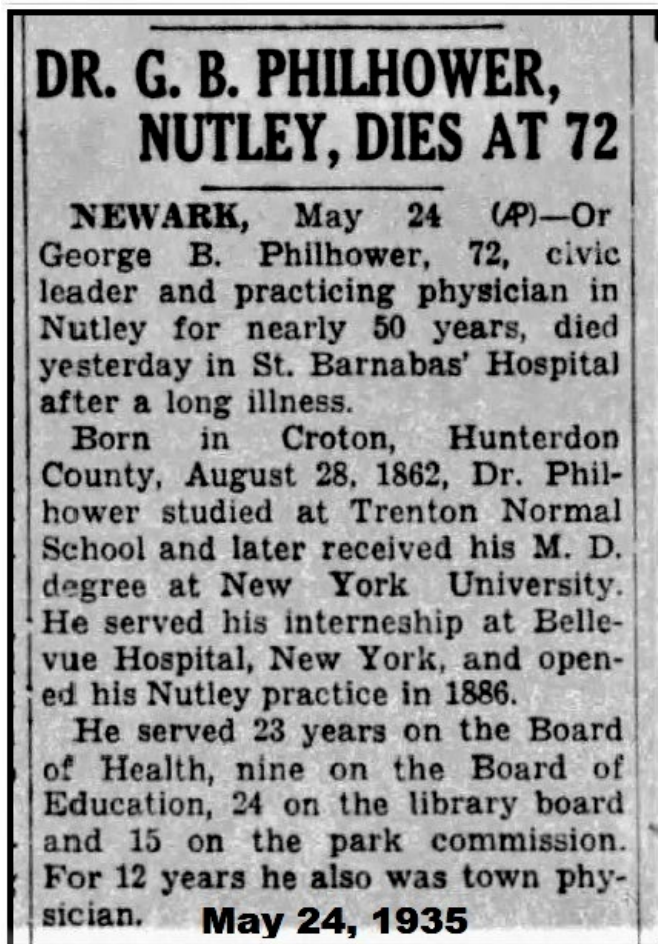
his tenure, the 1930 educational wing was constructed and the chapel was named in his honor.

Local artist Virginia Bennett was commissioned by George Symonds to paint a life size portrait of the doctor that hung in the VMC board room. The oil painting disappeared one night in 1946 and was compared to the Mona Lisa theft. Years of searching have failed to locate this art work and the insurance settlement paid one hundred dollars. It was either saved by an admirer or destroyed by an enemy, but no one knows for sure.

Many lives were saved over the years by Doctor Philhower. A 1930 news clipping credits him, Dr. Harry Cherashore, and four police officers with saving Abram Blum our first mayor, who was overcome by gas and revived with an inhalator. Coincidentally, Philhower unsuccessfully ran for township commissioner in 1932 against the advice of friends, his health was failing, but he was determined to win the election.

The doctor's life took a tragic turn after a 1934 car accident. His broken femur never healed and a tumor grew in his leg. The final eighteen months of his life were spent in St. Barnabus Hospital, Newark. He was still very popular and over one thousand people visited him, bringing flowers, cheer, and food. His most cherished treasure was a baseball signed by all the NY Giants. He kept this on display and all the medical staff were required to visit him and hear fabulous polo ground stories or listen to radio broadcasts on game days.

Dr Philhower passed on May 22, 1935, at age 72, from a hemorrhage. The last letter he received that morning was from the Nutley Commissioners re-appointing him Nutley Superintendent of Parks.



He served in all his civic capacities without remuneration and joked that as soon as a salary was associated with the job, somebody else grabbed it. He laid in state at the Philhower Chapel and is interred at the Methodist cemetery on Passaic Ave.

He was memorialized in a resolution, bound in leather, prepared by the Nutley Sun and presented to son George B. Philhower Jr. The guiding spirit of Dr. George B. Philhower was evident in many history articles included in two books, Ann Troy's Nutley Yesterday & Today, Barbara Bennett's Oh, Me! and the archives of The Nutley Sun and Nutley Library.

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Lost Philhower Portrait

Board Of Trustees To Appeal For Information On Nutley's Unsolved Mystery

Nutley's oldest unsolved mystery—whatever became of the oil painting of Dr. George Bronson Philhower—has been revived.

Just as important in the community as was the theft of Mona Lisa, the portrait with the enigmatic smile, from the Louvre Museum in Paris was the disappearance three years ago of the Philhower portrait. It was taken one night from a chapel in Vincent Methodist Church and nothing has ever been heard of it since.

The portrait itself had a cash value of \$100, which was the sum that an insurance company reimbursed the church some years ago, but its sentimental value was great. Dr. Philhower, who, at one time, was one of but two physicians practicing in town, was the type of man who makes both enemies and friends and he had plenty of both.

New Appeal For Information

The Board of Trustees of the church have decided to make a new appeal for information, if anyone knows what happened to the portrait. They decided on the new action just because of Dr. Philhower's strong character. They believe that his enemies

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Lost Painting

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may have stolen the picture from the Philhower chapel, and in that case it may have been destroyed. Or an admirer, deeply grateful to the good doctor, may have been inspired by affection to take the portrait. In either case, the Directors of the church are making their new appeal for any information whatsoever.

It is a matter of historical record that Mona Lisa, or "La Joconde," was stolen from the Louvre by an Italian barber who fell in love with the faint smile of the portrait and took it, wrapped in the folds of his umbrella, because he was an admirer of the lovely Mona of the canvass.

Painted By Local Artist

The painting of Nutley's unsolved mystery was the work of a town painter, Mrs. Virginia Bennett, now dead. She had lived across the street from the doctor at Grant and Whitford Avenues. G. R. B. Symonds, who bought the portrait from the artist, gave it to the church.

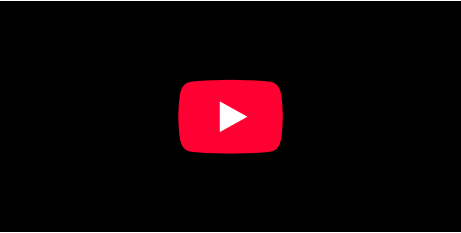
Dr. Philhower, who was the oldest practitioner in Essex

County when he died, had been active in town affairs. A quarter of a century ago he was president of the Board of Education and many of the enemies dated to that time.

Symonds, who is a member of the church board which is making the new effort to find the portrait, recalls that the thief left no traces, no fingerprints, no clues. The insurance company searched in antique and art shops in New Jersey and in New York. After several fruitless years of search, the insurance company paid the amount the picture was insured for.

If the portrait can be found again, it will be returned to Philhower chapel.

Presented by Historian, David Wilson



Tags

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