



Stories in Stone: Dr. Jesse Burnett Bell

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By Alexandra Luken, Cave Hill Heritage Foundation



Dr. Jesse Burnett Bell and Mrs. Geneva Bell.

An advocate for equal medical care for the African American community, Dr. Jesse Burnett Bell transformed the way African Americans provided and received care in Louisville. Dr. Bell was one of the first African American physicians to practice at Louisville's Jewish Hospital in the 1950s. Through his practice and continual lobbying efforts, Jewish and other local hospitals gradually began to accept African American patients and grant hospital privileges to African American physicians. Because of his sustained effort, by 1975, Louisville's hospital that solely for the African American community, Red Cross

Hospital, was closed, as access to medical care was provided equally.

Dr. Jesse Burnett Bell was born in Tallulah, Louisiana on April 20, 1904. In 1918, his parent sent him to Alcorn College, the first public historically black land-grant college established in the United States. Bell remained at Alcorn until 1924, when he transferred to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. He attended Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, and graduated in 1931 with an M. D. He first practiced medicine in Frankfort, Kentucky, where, after two years, he contracted tuberculosis.

While recovering from tuberculosis at Louisville's Waverly Hills Hospital, he decided to devote his medical career to public health, focusing on both lung ailments and public access to care. Dr. Bell was among the first African American physicians to work a Waverly Hills Hospital.

Dr. Bell continued to advocate for public health, working with the Health Department of Louisville to improve access for the African American community. He was appointed Medical Director of the Red Cross Hospital from 1942 until 1946. Red Cross Hospital (no affiliation with the American Red Cross organization) was the only accredited private hospital in the commonwealth of Kentucky where African American physicians could take their patients for treatment. It was the only approved cancer clinic in Kentucky for African American patients, as well as the only teaching hospital in the state for African American physicians.

Dr. Bell continuously sought ways to improve the quality of care at Red Cross Hospital. His efforts eventually led to a grant to improve the hospital equipment and provide educational opportunities for physicians. The resulting provisional approval from the American College of Surgeons, led to the acquisition of dedicated operational management of the hospital. Red Cross Hospital gained a reputation for providing quality, compassionate care. In 1947, Dr. Bell opened a part-time medical practice and over the next two decades, was appointed to several hospital boards, as well local civic boards, and local and state health-related boards.

In 1965, Dr. Bell was appointed the first African American to serve on the University of Louisville Board of Overseers, a panel of 51 voting members elected by the University's board of trustees to advise the University president on development and community relations.

Dr Bell initiated the first program in Kentucky for screening disadvantaged persons for high blood pressure. He served on the boards of the Kentucky Heart Association and the Kentucky Health Services Advisory Council, as well as numerous local and state medical associations. In 1980, he was appointed to the national American Lung Association Hall of Fame, and in 1983 he received the Louis B. Russell, Jr. Award from the American Heart Association for outstanding service for minority health programs in Kentucky.

Dr. Bell's passionate concern for the advancement of education is evidenced by his membership in the Kentucky Commission on Higher Education (he was elected chairman in 1967), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Ursuline College Advisory Committee. Additionally, he was a former vice chairman of the Louisville Urban League and, in 1990, a founding member of 100 Black Men of Louisville, an organization established nationally to provide mentorship to young black men in local communities.

Dr. Bell and family are buried in Section 35 Lot 411A.

<https://bricksandmortarpreservation.wordpress.com/tag/dr-jesse-bell/>

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