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The Lasting Legacy of the Brothers Risk

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Dr. William H. Risk was a physician in town, and was active with the library, Kent Place School, Central Presbyterian Church, the Highland Club and other organizations. Risk Avenue in town is named in honor of him and his brother, James. (Photos from the Summit Historical Society archives)

chose Summit as their home also shared the rare attributes and lofty virtues of remarkable men who were of profound significance to our city. They were both highly trained and effective physicians, noted philanthropists, visionaries, activists and men of faith and family.

William Henry Risk and his younger brother, James Boyd Risk, were born in Muncy, Penn., a tiny town approximately 130 miles northwest of Philadelphia. William was born in 1842 and James in 1858. Their lives took similar paths on their way to becoming the catalysts in creating what many historians agree were the foundational underpinnings that define our city as a community of quality and prestige.

They both earned undergraduate degrees from Lafayette College and went on to obtain medical degrees from the University

of Pennsylvania. When it was announced that a new office building called the Claremont Corporate Center would be built on the site of the old Risk mansion on the corner of Morris and Springfield avenues, a reference was made to the fact that the stone structure would be preserved, noting that "it was the residence of a prominent physician of the day who was a pillar of early Summit civic life." Even a cursory look into the history of the Risk name reveals this as quite an understatement. In the pantheon of great figures in the history of Summit, no name looms larger than Risk.

The two brothers who shared the Risk name and

completed his medical studies in 1866. For the following eight years, he practiced medicine in Philadelphia. During that time, in 1871, he married Sophia Woodruff. They had one daughter, Margaret Henderson Risk.

It is not known what drew William to a small village in New Jersey, 20 miles or so west of New York City. We can only speculate that a man of the unbounded curiosity and social consciousness he would exhibit throughout his life compelled him to search for a place where his profession and personal instincts of serving society could flourish, building elements of lasting value. His choice of Summit was without doubt a fortunate one for all of us who have benefited in so many ways from the fruits of the Risk legacy.

William, Sophia and their daughter moved permanently to Summit in 1874, taking up residence in the magnificent Richardsonian Romanesque-style mansion completed the previous year. It did not take long for William to set up a successful medical practice as a trusted family physician for countless Summit households. He saw to people's problems with respect and compassion, without regard to social or financial status. To patients of modest means, William would provide care and medicine and advice, often without any fee at all. His benevolence earned him the informal appellation "a veritable ministering angel." His reputation for honesty and his distaste for hypocrisy were hallmarks of his practice, along with his skill as a healer and confidant.

In addition to serving the community, William also had a sense of obligation to his profession. He was an active member of the New Jersey Medical Society, lent his support and time to Orange Inter-Medical School and served as the attending physician to the Fresh Air and Convalescent Home in Summit — a facility he was instrumental in establishing. Soon, William's deep concern for public health began to awaken in him a broader sense of public service. The Risk legend was about to take form.

It is hard to believe today, but in those latter days of the 19th century, clean, pure and safe running water on a large scale was a relatively new and rare technological advancement. The same can be said for public sewage facilities. It is not difficult to imagine that William Risk's concern for public health would eventually intersect with these two issues — both at the heart of much of the disease and illness he was called on to treat. He joined with other powerful figures in Summit society including George Manley,

William J. Curtis, Parker W. Page and Carroll P. Bassett in an effort to advocate vigorously for a comprehensive water system to serve the residents of the rapidly expanding community. A New Jersey law enacted in 1889 allowing municipalities to establish holding companies to facilitate the development of public works was the impetus needed to begin the transformation of Summit's water supply in earnest.

In rapid succession, the Commonwealth Water Company was established in 1889 and an operating company was put in place to build the necessary infrastructure to begin the flow of fresh water throughout the city. Through William's diligent efforts to gain popular support, build coalitions, address the technical challenges of a town built upgrade from natural water supplies and attract adequate funding — a substantial portion supplied from his own resources — construction finally began. The new system was inaugurated in 1890 and life in Summit was changed forever.

While he tirelessly led the effort for a clean public water system, he was also raising awareness for the pressing need for a public sewage system for the now growing community. Inexplicably, a majority of residents and town officials were against the idea. This was a significant challenge to Dr. Risk's skills as an inspirational leader, his good judgment and his fearless public spirit. He was unrelenting in his quest to make this a reality along with the newly forming water system. Once again, he prevailed and the new system went into use.

Amidst his extensive practice and public advocacy projects, Dr. Risk made time for an incredible array of other activities. Among them was his work on establishing the Summit Board of Health and serving for a time as its president. Along with his brother James, who moved to Summit in 1892, he was a founder of the highly respected private Kent Place School.

His interest in education extended to numerous projects in support of Summit's excellent public school system. Along with a prominent New York attorney and Summit resident, William Z. Larned, Dr. Risk was a catalyst in a plan to open the city's first public school. In 1878, Public School No. 1 opened at 512 Springfield Ave., establishing the excellent system of public schools that became one of the hallmarks of the City's reputation and substantial real estate value. The Summit Public Library can also trace its origin back to the public spirit of William Risk. He was one of the original organizers of the Summit Library Association and until a suitable building to house the growing array of books

was opened, the initial supplies of books and other reference materials were housed in the Risk Mansion.

It is important to note that, unlike many of his contemporaries, William did not believe in development for the sake of development nor did he seek personal financial advantage in any of his causes and projects. For example, he was quite vocal in opposition to the granting of a franchise to a Newark-based company to bring electricity to Summit. He recognized that such technology would eventually be followed by the daunting and dangerous new innovation — trolley cars — from Elizabeth, Newark and other towns to the east. At the time, this was not an appealing prospect, and in 1895, another company was granted the franchise and the citizens of Summit entered the 20th century with electric lights to go with their new water and sewer systems. Trolleys eventually did come to town in 1909, but by then, people were becoming more comfortable with such technologically-advanced conveniences.

Another technology was, however, quite appealing to William and his prominent contemporaries — the telephone. He was one of the first group of five subscribers to the new service set up in Taylor's Drug Store on Springfield Avenue in 1884. Subscribers gradually grew over the next few years, and even William would be astounded by the breadth and extent of today's global communication technology — much of it pioneered years later on another nearby hilltop named Murray Hill.

He and James also collaborated as directors of the Summit Trust Company and as

congregants at Central Presbyterian Church, and were members of the Masonic Order and the Highland Club, a men's social organization in Summit of which William was a founder.

James Boyd Risk, 14 years younger than William, had no less a distinguished career in medicine and public service than his older brother. During his medical studies at Penn, James had the opportunity to study abroad at a medical school in Vienna. The experience he gained in Europe and other places provided him with perspectives that were valuable supplements to his work with William when he came to join him in Summit.

James began his medical career in Baltimore, and after several years of success had an opportunity to sell the practice and move to a new location in Morristown. Once again his prowess as an excellent physician combined with an acumen for business, he was able to establish a thriving practice. In 1892, James decided to move his practice to Summit to be closer to his brother and to join him in the array of initiatives he had undertaken. His reputation



The stately Richardson Romanesque stone building at the corner of Springfield and Morris avenues that was for many years Brough Funeral Home is being converted to become the centerpiece of a large office building. For many years, it was the home of William Risk, who with his brother James is credited with helping to found and support many of the organizations and services that helped Summit become the city it is today.

grew rapidly as he and William occupied positions of prominence in the Summit medical community and in many other quarters, as well.

In addition to those already mentioned, James' affiliations included the medical societies of both Morris and Essex counties, a vice president of the Summit Trust Company, a director of the First National Bank, an elected member of the Common Council of Summit and for two years, he served as mayor. James was also a member of the Baltusrol Golf Club, but considering his many professional and civic duties, it is difficult to imagine he had any time at all for leisure activities.

Both Risks were possessed of great character and self-conviction. They were respected and liked for their sincerity and diligence in the causes of bettering the community. It is known that although they had many skills in common, along with prodigious intellects, they had distinctly different personalities. William tended to be more serious, almost gruff at times, while James was quicker to smile and given to spontaneous humor. They navigated through their highly successful lives with outwardly different personas.

In 1901, William's wife of 30 years, Sophie, passed away. James married Mary Browning Butler in 1902 and they had two daughters, Mary and Catherine. In 1905, William died at the age of 63. When he participated in the celebration of Summit's incorporation as a city in 1899, he surely must have felt he had achieved at least one of his visions for the town he loved and to which he gave so much. Being a city meant Summit was facing new issues, problems and challenges. Like most significant changes from the comfortable institutions of the past, transforming Summit from a sleepy borough to a bustling city was fraught with political and parochial interests. The country, the state and Summit were growing up. William took up the last major struggle of his life and stood firm for what he knew was the best path for Summit into the new century. After his death, it fell then to James to carry on the many dreams and aspirations they had envisioned together. He did just that until he passed away in 1913 at 65 years of age.

One of the Risk brothers' more lasting and visible legacies is quite apart from medicine or public works. If you drive along

Hobart or Summit Avenues on what is known as the "north side," you will see beautifully laid out residential sites and lush stands of trees on gently sloping landscapes. The brothers Risk had always admired that part of the town and decided to dabble a bit in real estate — in addition to what some would consider "saving the world." With a small group of other investors, they purchased some land, mapped out a plan of beautiful home sites and the rest is well, history — a beautiful bit of history, compliments of these two extraordinary renaissance men.

In addition to the water and sewage systems, residential development and the myriad of other monuments to these extraordinary men, enduring signs of the Risk legacy are clearly visible in the downtown business district. Many buildings along Springfield Avenue housing offices and retail space were financed and built by the Risks. They remained in the Risk family for many years.

There were others who enjoyed life in the Risk house after William, James and their descendants had all departed. In 1944 it was purchased by a local resident and converted to Brough Funeral Home. It remained so until just a couple of years ago, when the new office building was approved and construction began with the Risk house as its centerpiece.

And it is comforting to note that the original house that rose in 1873 will still be here for another century or more. It will continue to stand as a sentinel over the bustling intersection of Summit's two major traversing roads. The brothers Risk could never have imagined how busy it would be or what Summit would be like today. Or maybe they did, as they imagined and created so many things in their time. Hopefully a hint of the special aura that permeated the Risk home will still be present to inform and elevate the efforts of the people who will work in the new building.

So as we pass that corner and ponder the past of the Risk house and family, we should note that there are many "Summits" in our nation, and a goodly number of men and women like the Risks who make their little corners of the world better, much better. We need to honor them, respect what they accomplished and be careful stewards over the gifts they have left for all of us.