The physician as social architect: John Evans

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The list of contributions of John Evans, MD (1814–1897) is both long and extraordinary. He founded the first, and largest, mental hospital in Indiana, published one of the first American articles to argue that cholera is an infectious disease, and co-founded the Illinois Medical Society.

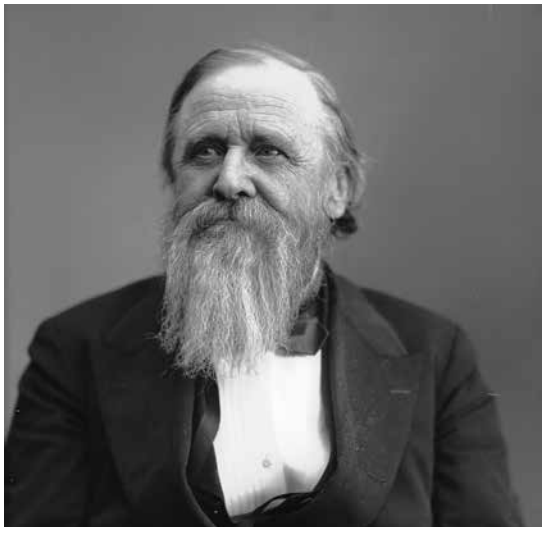
Beyond medicine, Evans also served as the principal founder of both Northwestern University and the University of Denver, accepted an appointment by his friend Abraham Lincoln to be governor of the Colorado territory, became a great railroad builder, and served as the namesake of three United States' cities and one of the tallest peaks in the state of Colorado.

Evans was an unusually ambitious self-made man who exerted great influence over his profession and his community. His remarkable story offers insight, inspiration, and a warning to contemporary physicians aspiring to contribute to their communities in ways that transcend patient care.

Ohio and Indiana

Evans was born in 1814 in southwest Ohio. His father, a businessman, had reservations about his son's ambition to become a physician, but as Evans later wrote to his first

Mount Evans, 14,262 feet, and the Rocky Mountains rise over the downtown Denver, Colorado skyline. In 1895, the mountain was officially named Mount Evans, after John Evans, the second territorial governor of Colorado.



Studio portrait of John Evans. Denver Public Library

wife, Hannah, "In the whole range of scientific pursuits there is no one path that leads to a wider range for contemplation, nor a more fruitful source of investigation, than the medical profession."[1]

After completing his medical training in Cincinnati, Evans moved to Attica, an Indiana town northwest of Indianapolis. He established a successful medical practice. Evans married in 1838, and had four children, only one of whom, a daughter, survived to adulthood.

Recognizing the need for a hospital for the mentally ill, Evans lobbied for the founding of what later became Central State Hospital in Indianapolis, accepting an appointment as its first superintendent in 1845.

Evans' sense of mission as a physician and activist were deeply grounded in his religious faith. The son of Quakers, during his years in Indiana, Evans converted to Methodism, largely through the influence of Matthew Simpson. Simpson served as the first president of what would become Depauw University and believed that a combination of self-discipline and commitment to service could improve the lot of humankind, a conviction Evans thoroughly absorbed.

Illinois

While helping to secure funding, planning, and directing the construction of the mental hospital, Evans also began lecturing at Rush Medical College. For three years, he continued his work in Indianapolis in the summers and then lectured in Chicago during the winter. In 1848, he decided to accept a faculty position at Rush, as professor of obstetrics and the diseases of women and children, a post he would hold for nine years.

In 1850, Evan's wife Hannah died of tuberculosis. In 1853, he married Margaret Patten Gray, the daughter of a prominent shipbuilder. The couple soon moved into a large house in what is now Evanston, Illinois, where their four children were born. Years later, Margaret served on the board of Trustees of what became the University of Denver, helped to organize the Denver School of Fine Arts, and played a leadership role in what became the Denver Art Museum.

Having published numerous papers in what was to become the *Northwestern Medical and Surgical Journal*, Evans and a physician partner soon became the journal's owners. In 1852, he sold his interest in the journal for five acres of central Chicago land that soon became a quite valuable piece of real estate.

In 1849, Evans published a paper in the *Northwestern Journal* arguing that cholera was a communicable disease. Specifically, he examined two outbreaks of the disease in New York and New Orleans, both of which he traced to the arrival of ships with afflicted passengers on board.[2] Evans' epidemiologic study and advocacy led to the adoption by the U.S. Congress of a national quarantine law.

It was also during Evans' tenure at Rush that the school graduated the earliest black and female medical school graduates in U.S. history. His interest in the challenges and opportunities facing the medical profession led him to a prominent role in founding both the Chicago Medical Society and the Illinois Medical Society.

Evans gradually developed his own philosophy of medicine, one that situated the profession in larger fields of knowledge and human endeavor. Speaking to Rush graduates in 1850, he said:

> No other science includes so extensive a range of knowledge, for in addition to the various departments already enumerated—anatomy, physiology, pathology, chemistry, materia medica, therapeutics, medical jurisprudence—there are collateral sciences which belong indirectly to it. Among these are natural philosophy, which is necessary to explain various actions in the living economy, and the influence of physical agents upon it—natural history, botany, and mineralogy, the storehouse of our remedial agents—geography, topography, and meteorology, which teach us how to understand the influences of locality, climate, and changes in weather in causing, modifying, preventing, and curing disease—mental philosophy, which

> enables us more readily to understand the diseases of the mind and its various influences over the physical system in exciting, complicating, and controlling its maladies. These with all the social, political, and religious influences that favorably or injuriously affect the health of body or mind, are proper, and to a certain extent, necessary studies for the physician.[3]

Evans also contributed a great deal to non-medical education. He chaired a committee seeking to improve Chicago's public schools and helped to found the city's first high school. He extolled the importance of public education as "the only sure ground for the improvement of our social and political condition. Everything that is calculated to improve our public schools...must be of the highest interest to every good citizen."[1]

In 1850, Evans led a plan to create a Methodist college, known as Northwestern University. He selected the school's site, secured funding, and became the first chairman of its board, a position he held until 1895. The town in which it was founded was later named Evanston in his honor.

Evans was a highly successful businessman. Realizing that railroads required land and that their presence could dramatically increase the value of property, Evans became both a real estate and railroad magnate. In 1852, he helped to organize the Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad, which served as a key connection between Chicago and eastern markets.

Evans also purchased and leased property in Chicago that was used as the city hall, the city's post office, and as offices for the *Chicago Tribune*. By the mid-1850s, he had become a very wealthy man who played a more prominent role outside of medicine than in it, helping to shape commerce, transportation, and even politics during two terms as a Chicago alderman.

Evans helped to found the Illinois Republican party and spoke at is first convention in Chicago, where he was known as a strong proponent of the abolition of slavery. He developed a friendship with Lincoln, whom he strongly supported in his campaign for president. When elected, Lincoln nominated Evans as governor of the Washington territory. Evans declined.

How could one person practice and teach medicine, found major institutions, and become such a successful politician and entrepreneur? The answer lies in Evans' convictions. As the founder of Methodism, John Wesley argued that human beings are divinely charged to "Employ whatever God has entrusted you with in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree, to all men."[4] Evans sought out every opportunity to leverage and synergize all resources available to him.

Evans was guided by the belief that any rewards he enjoyed were also accruing to his community. He helped to raise the city of Chicago, permitting the installation of water lines and sewers underneath buildings. By practicing medicine, promoting education, trading in real estate, and building railroads, he helped the city to grow exponentially in both population and wealth. He was aided in these efforts through collaboration with prominent men, such as the city's first mayor and fellow land speculator, William Ogden.

Colorado

In 1862, Lincoln offered Evans the governorship of the Colorado territory. This time he accepted the offer. At the time, Denver, which was not yet the capital, had a population of only a few thousand, and ongoing battles with Native American tribes constituted a major challenge. Evans hoped to convert the tribes to a pastoral way of life by giving them cattle and teaching them agricultural practices.

Evans foresaw great things for Colorado. He built railways that paved the way for Denver to become the most important commercial center in the Rocky Mountains. He imagined that great mining fortunes would be made and that the plains would become important agricultural centers. As a commissioner of the Union Pacific Railroad, Evans promoted the transcontinental railroad.

The Civil War delayed much of the development Evans and others envisioned, but he predicted an economic boom as all but inevitable. He also became involved in the effort to secure statehood for Colorado, believing that it would help to attract the railroads and increase federal assistance for ongoing conflicts with the tribes.

In 1864, Evans founded the University of Denver. He served as president of the institution's board from 1864 to 1879, and was succeeded on the board by his son, grandson, and great grandson. Believing that a strong endowment was necessary to secure the institution's future, he matched all contributions dollar for dollar.

As had been the case with the founding of Northwestern University, Evans was driven by his Methodist faith, which led him not only to found two non-sectarian universities but also to offer the sum of $100 to each church built in Colorado. Education, he believed, could not only help people acquire valuable knowledge and skills but also build the kind of civic and moral character necessary for democracy to flourish.

Perhaps the darkest chapter in Evans' career occurred during his tenure as Colorado governor. He was convinced that Native American tribes including the Cheyenne and Arapaho were plotting war against the Colorado settlers. Having relocated hundreds of tribal members to a spot near Sand Creek, Evans received authorization to form a regiment of soldiers.

In November 1864, the soldiers moved on Sand Creek with orders from their commander, an associate of Evans, to take no prisoners.[5] In what has become known as the Sand Creek massacre, more than 150 men, women, and children were killed, and many more were wounded. The next year, an inquiry condemned the action and Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, requested Evans' resignation.

After his tenure as governor, Evans focused his attention on his business interests, particularly in transportation. He worked hard to connect Denver with railroads in every direction, and developed the city's first streetcar system. He died in 1897 a wealthy and admired man, and his funeral was widely regarded as the largest in Colorado history.

Legacy and lessons

Evans left a rich legacy. His surviving children by two mothers went on to become important business, civic, and educational leaders in their own right, and today, three U.S. cities—Evanston, Illinois; Evans, Colorado; and Evanston, Wyoming—bear his name. He is also the namesake of Mount Evans in Colorado, which dominates the Denver skyline to the west.

Though not unmixed, Evans' legacies as a physician, professor, public health advocate, educator, publisher, entrepreneur, financier, politician, and statesmen are remarkable. These contributions stemmed from his prodigious vision and energy, and from his ability to serve as a nidus around whom other talented people and their energies could coalesce.

Evans' story offers lessons to contemporary physician-leaders. He had a knack for recognizing needs and opportunities in his community, and he built teams of collaborators and institutions to meet those needs. Believing for both religious and political reasons that education is crucial to improving quality of life, he was a tireless advocate for learning.

Evans saw himself not as someone who was extracting value from those around him, but building value for all. He became quite rich, but he regarded his wealth in terms of stewardship. In the final analysis, it did not belong to him, but he bore responsibility to a higher power to build and care for it as well as he possibly could.

Like all human beings, Evans also had his shortcomings, which were never more regrettably on display than in his role in the Sand Creek massacre. Evans did not order the attack, nor did he participate in it, but he did adopt a rather harsh stance against the tribes and failed to protect them.

Evans was to some degree merely mirroring the fears of his constituents, but the tribes had been the victims of injustice and cruelty on multiple occasions. Ironically, the leader of the Sand Creek attack was not only a friend of Evans but also a Methodist preacher and a strong abolitionist. Such horrendous acts serve as a reminder that no creed, no matter how noble, completely immunizes against inhumanity.

Perhaps the most important insight to emerge from Evans' remarkable life is his vision and dedication to purposes that transcended his own life. He built railroads, founded institutions and universities, and sought to implant ideas and build characters that would persist long beyond his own life.

Evans saw his life as a chapter in a larger story, part of which he had inherited from those who preceded him, and part of which he would leave as a legacy to those who would follow him. He was an imperfect human being, but he pursued a career and led a life that he rightly hoped would contribute to his faith, his nation, and his profession.

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