

Dr. Joseph McDowell

Biography

Dr. Joseph McDowell, founder of the Missouri Medical College, was one of the most controversial and colorful personalities in the history of medicine in the West. Although passionate and intelligent, he had an “erratic temperament” that “at times approached insanity.” Many St. Louisans knew McDowell to be “a tall man, with clean cut features” whose “intensity toward profanity, his high pitched voice, his swaggering and independent bearing made him always interesting, awesome and peculiar.”

McDowell was a nativist who was against unrestricted immigration, had great antipathy for Catholics, was a self-professed atheist (although he often referenced God and scripture in speeches), and gave orations in which he blamed Britain for instigating abolitionists to destroy the slave-based economy of the South, which competed with the East India Company.

Since he attacked so many opponents, McDowell took measures to protect himself. He wore breastplate armor and often carried weapons. When high attendance rates pushed him to build a new college at the corner of 8th and Gratiot streets he built it as a fortress. McDowell ordered 1,400 condemned muskets from the U.S. government and trained his students how to use them. He also had six cannons made from brass (he even melted down the school bell for one of them) and used them as a show of force on patriotic holidays. On one such occasion he dressed in a three-cornered hat and wore a cavalry saber while directing his students in the firing of a cannon that they had placed on sawbucks, giving them the command to “make Rome howl.” McDowell also had a cinnamon bear chained inside the basement of the schoolhouse to ward off rioters.

During the War

At the outset of the Civil War, Dr. McDowell left St. Louis for Vicksburg and joined the Confederacy, serving as medical director of the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate army. Because of this disloyalty and because of the fortress-like nature of the Missouri Medical College, Union military officials in St. Louis turned McDowell’s college into Gratiot Street Prison. This prison held Confederate prisoners of war, guerillas, spies, civilians suspected of disloyalty, and even Federal soldiers accused of crimes or misbehavior.