

Memories & Reflections

Academic Medicine, 1936-2000



John B. Graham, M.D.

Professor (Emeritus) University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, N.C.

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*The James Bell Bullitt Enigma:
A Case of
Metaphorical Siamese Twins*

When I became a physician in the 1940s, there must have been a shortage of suitable names. For instance, the 1979-1980 Directory of Medical Specialists lists three John B. Grahams who obtained their medical degrees between 1940-1952. One became a gynecological surgeon in Buffalo, another was a urologist in Chicago, and the third (I) taught and practiced pathology in Chapel Hill. I never met or spoke with either of my co-triplets, but was kept aware of their existence by an occasional misdirected request for a reprint on cancer of the cervix or the prostate, subjects on which I had never published.

Last year, while collecting and analyzing historical data about the UNC Department of Pathology, I encountered an even more remarkable coincidence. It began in the mid-19th century, and I call it—with apologies to Arthur Conan Doyle—"The Case of the Metaphorical Siamese Twins." My reasons for so denoting it will become apparent as the tale unfolds.

Dr. James Bell Bullitt of Chapel Hill

I knew one of the now-deceased twins, Dr. James Bell Bullitt, of Chapel Hill. He had been a member of our department for 51 years, and the building we now occupy is named for him. He was my teacher

from 1939-1940, my colleague from 1946 until his death in 1964, and the subject of an essay I prepared when the Brinkhous-Bullitt building was dedicated in 1983 [1]. But, though I knew him for 30 years, I did not know very much about his family. Evelyn McCarthy, his granddaughter and a former staff member at the UNC School of Medicine, led me to the facts about the remarkable Bullitt family, which produced leaders for the state of Kentucky and the nation for 200 years.

In brief outline, this is Dr. Bullitt's story. He was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1874; attended Rugby School there, graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1894; and obtained his MD at the University of Virginia in 1897. After two postgraduate years in Charlottesville, he accepted the chair of Histology and Pathology at the University of Mississippi where he served for 14 years. He came to Chapel Hill in 1913 as Professor of Histology and Pathology, retired in 1947, served as a beloved Emeritus Professor until 1960, and died in 1964.

The Prolific "Dr. Bullitt"

I knew little about Dr. Bullitt's publications and was unable to find a curriculum vitae in the school's somewhat chaotic files. I decided to generate a bibliography by systematically searching Index Medicus, Volume One of which had been published in 1879. It was a bewildering experience. For the years prior to 1907, I found 72 citations listed under the name of James B. Bullitt, M.D., of Louisville, Kentucky. This explosion of papers was followed by a publication eclipse that lasted from 1907-1925, after which there were seven more publications by James B. (or James Bell) Bullitt.

The papers published before 1907 covered a wide range of subjects, mostly surgery or gynecology, including descriptions of new surgical instruments and techniques. The most astonishing was a paper published in 1900 that described a kitchen-table operation at which a 245-pound ovarian cyst had been removed from the wife of a Kentucky farmer [2]. The cyst was unilocular and contained at least 36 gallons of fluid. The report names 10 doctors from Shelbyville, Kentucky, who witnessed the operation, at which "we had to nail [the

kitchen table] to the floor and brace [it] with pickets knocked off the garden fence." I remembered that my medical school classmates had known of and had ascribed this publication to our Dr. Bullitt. Yet the operation, at which Dr. James B. Bullitt was recorded as anesthetist, had occurred on May 13, 1897, and our Dr. Bullitt did not obtain his MD until later that year. I came to the obvious conclusion: there must have been two Drs. James Bell Bullitt, both of them born about the same time and both of them natives of Louisville, Kentucky.

The Mystery Solved

The correctness of my conclusion was established when I located biographies of both men on page 214 of the first (1925) edition of *Who's Who in Medicine*. The citations show that one Dr. Bullitt had been born in 1863 and the other (our Dr. Bullitt) in 1874. Our Dr. Bullitt had lived in Chapel Hill, while his prolific "Siamese twin" originally practiced in Louisville, moved West in 1907 and, after a medical eclipse of several years (while he farmed), re-entered medical practice in San Jose, California. It was the restless California Bullitt who had published the 72 papers from Louisville prior to 1907.

I wondered why two prominent physicians from the same city bore exactly the same name when they were obviously not father and son. Mrs. McCarthy knew nothing of the earlier Dr. James Bell Bullitt, nor did other living members of her family. I was able to construct an informative pedigree from data provided by a current genealogist [Fig. 7]. It shows that the Drs. Bullitt were sons of brothers, therefore first cousins. Both had been named for their fathers' (unmarried) brother who had been killed on July 6, 1863, during the Civil War. Joshua Bullitt, the oldest brother, named his son born in 1863 after his recently deceased younger brother. Our Dr. Bullitt (born in 1874) was the son of Thomas Walker Bullitt, who was two years older than the deceased warrior. Both Jim Bullitts had gone to medical school—a rarity among Bullitts, who were more apt to be lawyers and statesmen—and had become prominent. The older James B. had not only been a prolific writer but had also been president of the American Roentgen Ray Society in 1904. His presidential address,

decraying the then current fad of treating pulmonary tuberculosis with x-ray [3], makes fascinating reading. When he gave up farming, he returned to medicine in 1920 as a radiologist and practiced in San Jose until his death in 1946 [4].

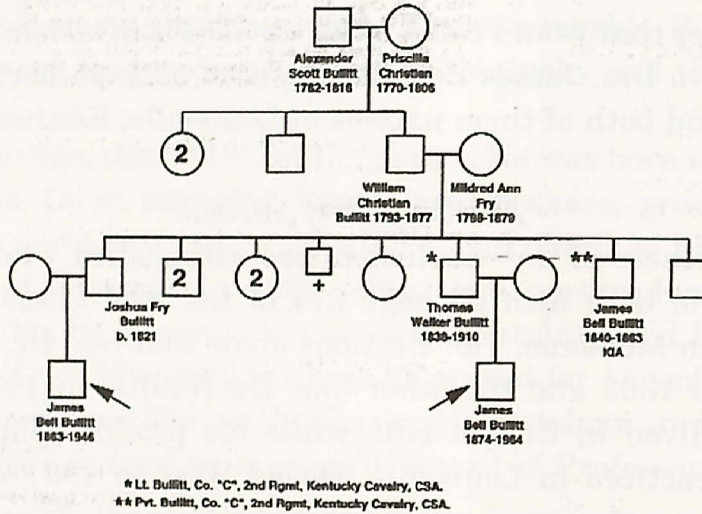


Figure 7. Partial pedigree of the Bullitt family of Louisville, showing the first cousin relationship between the Drs. James Bell Bullitt, indicated by the arrows.

Our Dr. Bullitt was also a polymath who included Early American archeology among his many interests. But I found only two articles by him in Index Medicus, both published between World War I and World War II. A true Bullitt, he did not lack ego, but he published sparingly, One of his indexed papers was the annual oration to the Mississippi State Medical Society in 1931, a talk entitled “State Medicine” [5]. It makes very interesting reading and is pertinent to our present concern with universal medical care.

The Loss of Private Bullitt

Since my curiosity had been piqued, I wondered where and how the original James Bell Bullitt had been killed on July 6, 1863. He had been a member of Morgan’s Brigade of Cavalry during their quixotic, 1,000-mile Confederate raid of July 1863. The Brigade had swept from Tennessee around Louisville, crossed the Ohio River into Indiana and Ohio, bypassed Cincinnati, and almost reached

Pittsburgh. Morgan's purpose was to shake up the Yankees by taking the war directly to them, causing them to divert troops and thereby relieve some of the pressure on General Bragg in Tennessee [6]. Morgan succeeded in both respects, but lost many of his men; was captured and imprisoned; made a daring escape; and was killed in battle a year later. Mrs. McCarthy obtained the full story of Morgan's raid for me, and it is a thriller [7].

The Filson Club in Louisville, dedicated to "collecting and publishing historical material especially pertinent to Kentucky," supplied me with the roster of Company "C" of the 2nd Regiment of Morgan's Brigade. James B., Neville, and Richard S. Bullitt were privates, and Thomas W. Bullitt (the father of our Dr. Bullitt) was a 2nd lieutenant. James Bell Bullitt was killed near Bardstown, Kentucky, early in the raid. Bullitt family legend holds that he was killed by a perfidious Yankee while trying to succor a wounded comrade under a flag of truce. His brother, Lieutenant Thomas Bullitt, was later captured and imprisoned with General Morgan, spending the remainder of the war in prison.

James Bell Bullitt's death in battle had a direct impact on the naming of male infants in his large family, and a secondary, confounding effect on the medical literature (resolved here). In recent years, an increase in immigration from the Third World, a trend to smaller nuclear families, and the recruitment of medical students from minority groups, lessen the probability that others will be confused by the phenomenon of multiple John B. Grahams. And the probability of seeing another pair of metaphorical Siamese twins such as the James Bell Bullitts, never very large, must now be vanishingly small.

References and Notes

1. Graham JB. James Bell Bullitt, M.D. 1874-1964: a University of North Carolina medical giant. *NC Med* 1984; 45:99-102.
2. Bullitt JB. Mammoth ovarian tumors. *Ann Surg* 1900; 31:87-96.
3. Bullitt JB. Comparison of Roentgen ray and surgical treatments of tuberculosis. *A. Medicine* 1904; 9: 62-5.
4. .Obituary. James Bell Bullitt, 1963-1946. *Am J Roentgenol* 1946;56:651-2.
5. Bullitt JB. State Medicine. *New Orleans Med Surg J* 1931;84:227-33.
6. Gen. Braxton Bragg—after whom Fort Bragg, NC, was named—was an indecisive and ineffectual Confederate general. Because he had been at West Point with Jefferson Davis, Davis depended heavily on him for military advice. Davis's preference for Bragg was greatly resented by the other generals under Bragg's command, especially the brilliant and charismatic cavalrymen John Hunt Morgan of Kentucky and Nathan Bedford Forrest of Tennessee. Forrest once bitterly remarked that "Jefferson Davis is trying to do what God couldn't do, make a soldier out of Braxton Bragg." Forrest—who organized the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction—is also credited with the military axiom that victory comes to the leader who arrives earliest at a battlefield with the largest force. ("Be there fustest with the mostest.")
7. The story of Morgan's Raid was published in the January 1891, issue of *Century Magazine*. The account was written by Brig. General Basil Duke, Margin's second in command; Orlando B. Willcox, a Union general who served in Indiana at the time of the raid; and Captain Thomas H. Hines, who had planned Morgan's Ohio prison break. The full account was republished privately after World War II by the Book Nook Press of Louisville, Kentucky. Mrs. McCarthy obtained a copy for me. The title of the (undated) reprint is: "The Great Indiana-Ohio Raid by Brig. General John Hunt Morgan and his Men, July 1963." It contains a good introduction and commentary by Don D. John, several useful maps, and a number of good pen sketches.

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