



In 1940, Dr. Edward J. Tracey of Norwalk, right, brought seven of his eight children, to his 20th anniversary reunion at Yale University. A creative photographer lined them up for a picture that in 21st century jargon “went viral,” appearing in newspapers across the nation. The Norwalk Traceys did things in large numbers: Dr. Edward was just one of five Tracey physicians.

Tracey family established a medical dynasty in Norwalk

By Paul Keroack

William J. Tracey, son of Irish emigrants, became not only one of Norwalk’s first Irish Catholic physicians, but a community leader and a long-time school board president who lived to see an elementary school named for him. Two of his sons and two grandsons also became local physicians — an Irish-American dynasty in medicine not unlike that of the Kennedys in politics.

John and Catherine English Tracey emigrated to the United States by the 1850s, likely from Tipperary, Ireland. Most often anglicized as Treacy or Tracey, the surname O Tressy originated in Leix and is found often in Tipperary. John’s place of birth was not included in his 1896 death record, but Catherine who lived into the 20th century is listed as born in Clonmel, County Tipperary.

John and Catherine were married at Norwalk’s St. Mary Church on Nov. 14, 1858. Two unnamed sons were born in the next

two years, one probably the John Edward who died in 1867. James was born early in 1863, following his father’s enlistment in the Norwalk-based Company F of the 17th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. John served as a private (his surname spelled as Treacy) from August 1862 until the end of the war.

The Traceys’ eldest surviving son, James, worked in skilled trades, later relocating to Pennsylvania. His father is early listed as a laborer and later as a gravedigger. Since he then lived on Plattsville Avenue, opposite St. Mary’s cemetery, he may have worked for that cemetery. Several other Tracey men lived on that short street at the time, perhaps relatives.

William, their youngest son, was born in Norwalk on May 15, 1866, in the Broad River neighborhood. He worked as a paperboy while attending elementary school, first at St. Mary’s and then at Center School on Camp Street. He went on to Dr. Fitch’s Academy in Norwalk and began medical

school training at Bellevue Hospital Medical School in New York City, finishing his studies in Dublin at Ireland’s Rotunda Maternity College and the Jarvis Street College of surgery.

Returning to Norwalk in 1889 he took over an existing practice and within a decade he had a large clientele. In 1893 he was one of a group of physicians who opened the city’s first hospital. He served on the surgical staff and as a director for many years, as it relocated and expanded in 1899 and in 1918. He was appointed town health officer in 1896 and was a pioneer in the control of infectious and contagious diseases, especially tuberculosis.

Local newspaper biographer E. Humphrey Doulens, in his 1932 essay on Dr. Tracey, noted that he “continued his research in medicine and surgery, usually spen[ding] his vacation going to clinics.”

Outside of his profession, Dr. Tracey’s most avid interest was education. He

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served on the town school committee from 1911, then on the Board of Education, of which he was chairman for many years, retiring in 1943.

In a final accolade for his years of educational service, a new elementary school which opened in 1940 was named the William J. Tracey School, though not without opposition by some board members whose only objection was to the naming of a school for a living person. The new school replaced the Center School building where Tracey studied as a child. He was also active in St. Mary's parish as a prominent layman, a founder of the Catholic Club.

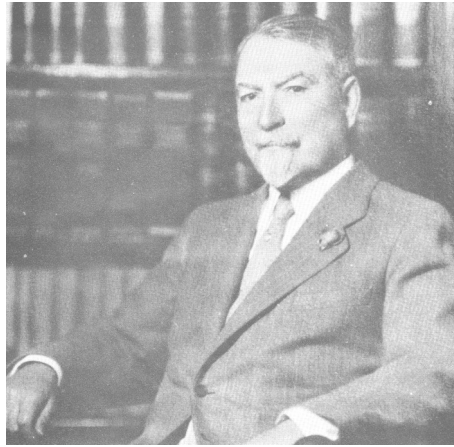
On Oct. 2, 1891, William Tracey married Katherine Anne Finnegan, a former elementary school classmate. In the third grade, they won the boy's and girl's annual prizes for best work. They had two sons and one daughter. Both of their sons graduated from Yale University and became physicians. Their daughter Katherine married John T. Dwyer, an attorney and later a Norwalk judge. The Dwyers had one daughter.

In 1939, Dr. William J. Tracey was given a testimonial dinner by his fellow citizens. The news account reviewing his career of 49 years, noted that, "... unstinted praise from speaker after speaker left him with his feet firmly on the ground. Praise will never affect Dr. Tracey. He's too busy to pay much attention to such blandishments."

In a letter to the editor following the same event, his hospital board colleague and fellow local leader Russell Frost, while joining the praise, added that Tracey had "a touch of Irish belligerency, [though] not looking for a fight, he was not running away from [one] when he believed he was right."

Dr. Tracey died in Norwalk after a long illness on Dec. 17, 1948, following his wife by two years and his younger son by one month. He was survived by one son and nine grandchildren.

Elder son William Wallace Tracey graduated from Yale in 1912 and later the Columbia Medical School. He served as a lieutenant in the Army Medical Corps during World War I. He practiced medicine in New York until returning to Norwalk in 1926 to join his father's surgical and medical practice. He married Anna Phelan of Bridgeport.



Dr. William J. Tracey

They had no children. He relocated to Macon, MS, where he served as health officer before returning to Norwalk in 1949 after his father's death. Unfortunately, "Dr. Bill" Tracey died less than a year later at age 66 on Feb. 14, 1950.

His younger brother, Edward J. Tracey, studied at Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine. He joined his brother and father in surgical and medical practice in Norwalk in 1927. He married Clara Hammond of Toronto, Canada. They had eight children, three daughters and five sons. His eldest and youngest son both became physicians, after graduating from Yale in 1954 and 1959, respectively.

Offering his services to firemen at local conflagrations, "Dr. Ed" was appointed to the position of physician to the Norwalk Fire Department in 1931, a position that he held for the rest of his life. He was later appointed a city fire commissioner.



Dr. Edward J. Tracey

Dr. Edward J. Tracey was also involved with the Red Cross and other local civic organizations, and elected town chairman of the Democratic Party in 1932. In 1940, a photograph of Dr. Tracey and his then seven children lined up on the field at his 20th Yale University reunion appeared in national publications. Dr. Tracey died at age 48 on Nov. 17, 1948, in New York City.

In 1965, Edward J. Tracey, a son of the late Dr. Edward J., began his career in Norwalk as a general surgeon, becoming the first of a third generation of the family to practice medicine in the city. He served in the Navy as a surgeon in the Dominican Republic operation earlier that year.

He was selected as president of the Norwalk Medical Society in 1976. His younger brother James P. Tracey, after service in the Army Medical Corps in Vietnam, opened his practice in general medicine and gastroenterology in Norwalk in 1969 — a break in the family tradition of general surgery — thus becoming the fifth physician in his family within a three-generation span of eighty years.

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