Marker Text

Born near Kent, Jefferson County, Dr. Wiley graduated from Hanover College (1867), received his medical degree from Indiana Medical College (1871), and taught at Butler and Purdue universities. As Chief Chemist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture he led the nationwide movement which culminated in the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 and the establishment of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Report

The text of this marker is accurate and supported by primary sources. This review will provide further information on Harvey Washington Wiley’s career as a national advocate for safe, unadulterated foods, beverages, and medicine and provide context for his work amidst the Progressive Era reform movements of the early twentieth century.

Harvey Washington Wiley was born on a small farmstead near Kent, Indiana on October 18, 1844. As a young man he attended Hanover College from 1863-1867, serving in Company I of the 137th Indiana Volunteers in the American Civil War for a few months in 1864. After graduation, Wiley moved to Indianapolis, where he got his Ph.D from the Medical College of Indiana and taught Latin and Greek (1870-71) and chemistry (1873-74) at Butler University. From 1874-83 he taught chemistry at Purdue University.

During his tenure at Purdue, Wiley developed an interest in adulterated (impure or artificially enhanced) foods and beverages, a topic which was also slowly coming to the attention of American consumers. According to historians Clayton Coppin and Jack High, a demographic shift from the farm to the city in the late nineteenth century altered the food industry, encouraging mass production of food and drink and convenience food such as canned goods and condensed milk. Wiley argued that this mass-produced food, as opposed to food produced locally in small quantity and in a simpler style, contained harmful additives and preservatives and misled consumers about what they were actually eating. In the coming decades Wiley would become the most visible public face behind the growing pure food movement; as a 1917 advertisement in The (New York) Sun put it, “Dr. Wiley it was who, at Washington, first roused the country to an appreciation of purity and wholesomeness in foods. He has been the one conspicuous figure in food betterment and food conservation in the present generation.”

In 1883, Commissioner of Agriculture George Loring appointed Wiley Chief Chemist of the Bureau of Chemistry, a division of the United States Department of Agriculture. While serving in this capacity, Wiley made the establishment of federal standards of food, beverages, and medication his priority. Other reform groups, particularly women’s organizations with an eye on national Prohibition of alcohol, chimed in to present a united front against lobbyists of food and drug companies. From 1902-1906, Wiley administered governmental testing of food, beverages, and ingredients, most famously in the
“Poison Squad” experiments in which he fed food laced with suspected toxic ingredients to twelve volunteers to test for side effects. According to historian James Young, aided by this publicity, Wiley “consolidated his allies and recruits—segments of business, state agricultural chemists, physicians, women’s club members, reform-minded journalists—into an effective pressure group.”

The biggest success of Wiley’s career was the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. In 1906, Upton Sinclair published his hugely influential novel The Jungle, which exposed health hazards of the grisly meat-packing industry and provided the final impetus Wiley and his supporters needed to convince Congress to pass legislation on federal control of food, drink, and medicine. The Pure Food and Drug Act established the mechanism by which the Bureau of Chemistry could exert regulatory control over consumable goods produced or sold in the United States. By requiring that companies clearly indicate what their products contained and setting standards for the labeling and packaging of food and drugs, the Act helped consumers make informed decisions about products that could affect their health. Wiley also helped found the Non-Smoker’s Protective League of America in 1910 to “[conduct] a crusade against smoking in public or semi-public places,” suggesting a public health risk in secondhand smoke nearly fifty years before the Surgeon General formally recognized the connection between cigarettes and lung cancer. Wiley asserted, “There should be a law, strictly enforced by the authorities, prohibiting smoking and chewing in public places or on the cars where other people are obliged to be.”

Wiley resigned as Chief Chemist on March 15, 1912, citing attempts by his detractors (whom he alleged represented the special interests of food and drug manufacturers) to weaken or chip away at the Pure Food and Drug Act. In his letter of resignation, Wiley said, “I saw the fundamental principles of the food and drugs act, as they appeared to me, one by one paralyzed and discredited.” Immediately upon leaving the Department of Agriculture, Wiley took up a position with Good Housekeeping magazine as their Director of Food, Health, and Sanitation, believing he would be more influential if he could communicate his ideas about the pure food movement directly to the public. Wiley wrote feature pieces for Good Housekeeping on the importance of the pure food movement; he also answered questions from the magazine’s mostly female readership, advocating that women take responsibility for the health of their households through pure home cooking and reap the rewards of a “peaceful, happy, and unbroken” domestic life.

Wiley also contributed articles to the Chicago newspaper The Day Book in 1912. Newspaper coverage from this period indicates that Wiley, his young wife (suffragist Anna Kelton Wiley), and their two sons attained near-celebrity status as an example of a modern, clean-living, white American family. Such articles connect the pure food movement to what public health historian Ruth Engs has termed the “Clean Living Movement,” which included Progressive Era health reform, educational reform, the temperance movement, and the eugenics movement. Eugenicists sought to “improve” the human race over generations by preventing those they considered degenerate, or genetically inferior (including but not limited to non-white people, those living in poverty, and those with mental or physical disabilities), from reproducing. Although Wiley’s beliefs about creating genetically superior, longer-
living Americans through improved public health closely resemble eugenic discourse, more research is required to determine the extent to which Wiley’s ideas about purity and clean living extended to race.

Along with his work for the magazine, Wiley published more than a dozen books over the course of his career. His early books, like 1897’s *Principles and Practice of Agricultural Analysis*, were mostly intended for academic readership; later books, like *1001 Tests of Foods, Beverages, and Toilet Accessories* (1914), his contributions to Good Housekeeping’s *The Pure Food Cook Book* (1914), and *The Lure of the Land: Farming after Fifty* (1915), were intended for consumers or casual readers. In 1929, the year before his death, Wiley published *History of a Crime against the Food Law*, airing his grievances about the perceived failure of the 1906 law. He continued to lobby for a stronger interpretation of the Act through his old age, writing to President Coolidge in 1925, “It is the crowning ambition of my career, before I die to see these illegal restrictions, which now make a prisoner of the Food Law, removed and the Law restored to the functional activity which Congress prescribed for its enforcement at the time of its enactment.” Wiley died in 1930 at the age of eighty-five, falling fifteen years short of his stated goal to live longer than a century.

In 1927 an act of Congress reorganized the Bureau of Chemistry, creating the Food, Drug, and Insecticide Administration to serve as its regulatory arm; in 1930 this was renamed the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA website points out that “although it was not known by its present name until 1930, the FDA’s modern regulatory functions began with the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act.” While it now resides within the Department of Health and Human Services rather than the Department of Agriculture, the FDA continues to regulate and provide federal oversight on food, beverages, and medication produced and consumed in the United States.

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Wiley took a year off between his two terms at Butler to get a B.S. at Harvard University in Massachusetts.


Wiley remained circumspect about his personal feelings toward the Prohibition movement while employed by the U.S. government. After his resignation from the Department of Chemistry, he publicly came out in favor of national Prohibition, serving as a Vice President for a local chapter of the Anti-Saloon League. During his tenure as Chief Chemist, he did focus considerable effort on the regulation of whisky, arguing that most whisky sold in the U.S. was mixed with lower-quality alcohol (or even water) to keep production costs low.

11 Young, Pure Food, 5.


16 Untitled article, Swayzee Press, July 14, 1911, 4.


30 Per the FDA’s website, its current duties include “agency testing of insulin and antibiotics; regulation of chemical pesticides and food and color additives; distinction between prescription and nonprescription medications; regulation of drug efficacy; ensuring of good manufacturing practices; control of prescription drug advertising; regulation of therapeutic agents of biological origin; and oversight of nutrition labeling.”