ELLIS REYNOLDS SHIPP

Ellis Reynolds Shipp had a long and distinguished career as one of the early leaders in the practice and teaching of medicine in Utah. She was one of Utah’s first female doctors and established a school of obstetrics and nursing in 1878.

Born Ellis Reynolds on 20 January 1847, the oldest child of William Fletcher Reynolds and Anna Hawley, Ellis came to Utah with her parents in 1852. The Reynolds family was among the first settlers of Pleasant Grove. Following the death of her mother in 1861, fourteen-year-old Ellis took over as homemaker for nearly a year until her father remarried. Jealousy or incompatibility with her new stepmother caused Ellis to move in with her grandparents.

On 5 May 1866, at the age of nineteen, Ellis married Milford Shipp, a recently returned missionary of thirty who had lost one wife by death and another by divorce. The Shipps moved to Fillmore where Milford tried to establish a store. After that enterprise failed, the couple returned to Salt Lake City. Two years after his marriage to Ellis, Milford entered the practice of polygamy when he married Margaret Curtis in 1868, Elizabeth Hilstead in 1871, and later Mary Smith.

Ten children were born to Ellis and Milford Shipp, but four of them died in infancy. In October 1873 Brigham Young announced that women would be sent east for training as doctors so that they could return to Utah and serve as physicians. The first one sent, Romania Pratt, enrolled in the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in the fall of 1874. The following year, Margaret Curtis, Ellis’ sister-wife, also enrolled in the Philadelphia school but after a month returned to Utah and her family because of homesickness. (She later returned to complete her degree in 1883.) Ellis willingly took Margaret’s place and, with little time for preparation, set out for Philadelphia on 10 November 1875, leaving behind her three small children in the care of her three sister-wives.
Despite financial difficulties and some doubts about her ability to complete the degree, Ellis passed her first-year examinations and returned home to Utah. She returned for her second year, pregnant and without money. By taking sewing jobs and guarding the hall of cadavers at night she earned enough to cover her tuition and living expenses. Her sixth child, a daughter, was born in the spring of her second year in Philadelphia, and mother and child did not return to Utah until after her third year, when she graduated with high honors and a Doctor of Medicine degree.

Back home in Utah, Ellis established her own practice and during her career delivered more than 5,000 children. The School of Nursing and Obstetrics, which she founded in 1879, trained five hundred women who became licensed midwives. She continued her study of medicine with graduate courses at the University of Michigan Medical School in 1893. Her medical career lasted more than fifty years and she continued to teach obstetrics classes into her eighties.

Beyond her medical career, she remained an active and devoted member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, serving on the general boards of the Relief Society and the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association. In public life, she was president of the Utah Women’s Press Club and a delegate to the National Council of Women. She also wrote poetry. She died in Salt Lake City on 31 January 1939 at the age of ninety-two.


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