

The Atlee Family: A Progression of Medicine in Lancaster County through Lineage

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Foreword

This summer I had the absolute pleasure of interning at the Edward Hand Medical Heritage Foundation. As a pre-medical student, I started this internship to gain insight into the history of the profession to which I aspire. Among the eleven-thousand artifacts, I found instruments unique to the past and those which resembled tools used in the modern day. On one of my first days at the internship, I looked at an artifact similar to a narrow flashlight. I thought it was a dental tool, until I realized I recognized the box that held the artifact. It looked very similar to the box which housed the instrument my mom would use to check our ears, eyes, and throat when we were little. “It has to be an otoscope,” I thought to myself. Sure enough, I searched around the warehouse a little more until I found the pieces which attached to the main body. I was so excited. I had solved the mystery. It was, in fact, an early version of the otoscope. These associations revealed to me that not only was I making a connection to the history of medicine, but also connecting to my personal history.

As a toddler, I moved to Lancaster from Philadelphia with my mom and dad as my mom started her residency at Lancaster General Hospital. It was a challenging time for our family, however rewarding. My family gained a new respect for the hard work and sacrifice required in the field of medicine.

During my internship, I met Ann Atlee Webber, daughter of a prominent physician in Lancaster, the late Dr. John Light Atlee, Jr.. Together we were able to relate to growing up in a house with a parent deeply rooted in their medical profession. Ann Webber shared her own personal accounts which inspired me to learn more about the Atlee family and the impact they had on their community. The Atlee family served Lancaster as generals, committee chairs, presidents of various organizations, vestrymen of the church, lawyers, and doctors. They changed the world of medicine through new procedures, patient care, participation in medical societies, and contributions to many medical and academic buildings to encourage education. The Atlee family was engrossed in the medical profession, completely consumed by the health of humanity.

By studying the Atlee family, I am not just studying the history of one procedure or artifact, I am studying the transition of ideas and thoughts amongst a family, a family that made significant contributions to better the practice of medicine for years to come.

The Atlee name originated in England and can be traced back to the twelfth century in the Kent region.¹ English surnames were first coined during the Middle Ages. The original surnames of England described where a family lived; however, by the 1200s surnames also could have been based upon a personal name, occupation, relationship, or a nickname.²

The Atlee family surname was based upon a topographical reference, “At the Lee” as early as the 1000s.³ The first time “At the Lee” was seen in writing was in the ballads of Robin Hood. According to these works, “Syr Rychard at the Lee” was a dear friend of Robin Hood. Sir Richard’s family lived at the Lee and “At the Lee” became the locally known surname of the family. Throughout the ages, it became shortened to “Atte Lee, At Lea, and finally Atlee.”⁴

Due to the nature of population changes such as genetic disease, migration, infection, and infertility, many surnames were affected and altered throughout the Middle Ages. Most English surnames created between the period of 1200–1350 no longer existed by the 1400s.⁵ Thus, it is unusual that the Atlee family name was able to survive to this day.

The Atlee family became well-established and was a prominent family in England. Many were loyal knights and generals to the kings and queens of England. Sir John Atte Lee was recognized for service as a knight by Edward III, who was king from 1327 until 1377. Sir Richard Atte Lee was mentioned in ballads by Queen Katherine as a “knight full good.” Other knights included Sir Walter at Lee, of Essex (1380s) and Sir John at Lee, of Lee Hall. Generals included Major General Charles at Lee of the Continental Army and General John at Lee of Chesire, England.⁶

The most well-known property owned by the Atlee family was the Fordhook estate located in the Parish Acton right outside of London. This property was handed down for generations to the Atlee family until 1793 when it accidentally passed out of the family name.⁷

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The Move to America

The Atlee name first appeared in America in 1734 when William Atlee (1696–1744), of Fordhook House, second son of Samuel Atlee, and his wife, Jane Alcock, left for Philadelphia.⁸ Jane Alcock (1695–1777) came from a wealthy family in England and was a lady-in-waiting to the queen.⁹ Against the wishes of her family and the king and queen who wanted her to marry into the royal family, she left with Atlee for America. It took the Atlees approximately three weeks to reach Philadelphia.¹⁰

One year later, William and Jane Alcock Atlee had their first son, William Augustus Atlee (1735–1793).¹¹ The Atlee family later moved to Trenton, New Jersey, where they welcomed three more children—Samuel John (1739–1786), Joseph Edwin (1740–1767), and Amelia (1743–1807).¹²

Shortly after the birth of Amelia, William Atlee died at Caleb Ranstead’s House in Philadelphia. He was buried at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church on April 27, 1744. Widowed Jane Atlee moved her young family to Lancaster where she would die in 1777.¹³

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Making an Impact in Their Community

William Augustus Atlee (1735–1793), the son of William and Jane Alcock Atlee, was a well-respected lawyer and jurist.¹⁴ Since his father passed away when William Augustus was just fourteen

years old, William Augustus learned a great deal of responsibility as he cared for his mother and three younger siblings. He studied law and began practicing in Lancaster at age twenty-three. His accomplishments included First Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania (two seven-year terms) and President Judge of the First District Court of Pennsylvania. During the Revolutionary War, he was Chairman of the Committee of Safety and Commissary and Superintendent of the arsenal, barracks, and British prisoners.¹⁵

William Augustus married Esther Bowes Sayre (1747–1793). They had eleven children and lived in Lancaster.¹⁶

William Augustus Atlee died of bilious fever on September 9, 1793. He was buried at St. James Church in Lancaster.¹⁷

William Augustus's fourth son, Dr. Edwin Augustus Atlee (1776–1852), was the first of the Atlees to obtain a medical degree. He, like the rest of the Atlee family, was practicing law in Lancaster with his degree from Dickinson College. He served in the Continental Army under an inspiring young general, Dr. General Edward Hand, a passionate physician and politician who was from Lancaster. Dr. Hand's enthusiasm and dedication to the field inspired Edwin Augustus to study medicine. After the war, Edwin Augustus graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1804 and practiced medicine in Philadelphia until 1829.¹⁸

Although Edwin Augustus enjoyed medicine, his passion was the ministry. His wife, Margaret Snyder (1780–1866) and he became members of the religious Society of Friends where he became a minister. Eventually, he joined the Swedenborgian denomination and moved to Cincinnati to minister to the New Jerusalem Church. He later moved to Michigan as a member of the United States Congress for two terms.¹⁹

Margaret Snyder and Edwin Augustus Atlee had three children. Their eldest son, Dr. Edwin Pitt Atlee (1799–1836) received his M.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, and he practiced in Philadelphia. Barber states, "He was a physician of unquestionable skill, a man of the kindest affections and the most virtuous habits."²⁰ At the same time, Edwin Pitt Atlee's cousins were also making great contributions to medicine. Together, they would elevate the reputation of the Atlee family name within the medical community.

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From a Family of Law to a Family of Medicine

William Augustus and Esther Bowes Sayre Atlee's second son, William Pitt Atlee (1772–1815) was a lawyer in Lancaster County. Although he did not pursue the medical profession, his sons brought advanced procedures and practices in the medical field of surgery. William Pitt's sons would inspire future Atlee generations to pursue medicine; ten doctors would be the result of the line of William Pitt Atlee.²¹

William Pitt Atlee married Sarah Light (1783–1850) in 1798 and had six children. Two of their sons became doctors—their eldest, Dr. John Light Atlee (1799–1885) and their youngest, Dr. Washington Lemuel Atlee (1808–1878).²² Dr. John Light Atlee attended Franklin and Marshall College and then the University of Pennsylvania where he obtained his M.D. in 1820. Dr. Washington Lemuel Atlee received his M.D. from Jefferson College of Medicine in 1829.²³

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Surgical Pioneers

After receiving his medical degree in 1820, Dr. John Light Atlee began practicing in Lancaster. While a general practitioner, he also gained a reputation as a skilled surgeon and obstetrician.

In 1843, Dr. John Light Atlee performed the first successful double ovariectomy, removing cysts from both ovaries of a female patient. The woman recovered, but the procedure was controversial.

The unnamed woman complained of pain in the lower abdomen accompanied by its gradual swelling, eventually to the size of a full-term pregnancy. Dr. John Light Atlee treated her for several years with the customary methods of the era, namely cathartics and drainage of the abdominal cavity. Eventually two masses were felt, one on each side, and Atlee realized the only possible cure would be surgery. Even knowing the grave risks of infection and death, the woman gave her consent to the operation. She was placed on a dining table (“with the leaves down,” according to Atlee’s detailed account), given opium for the pain, and encouraged to shout out whenever necessary. With his brother Dr. Washington Lemuel Atlee assisting, an incision was made in her lower abdomen, and the cysts were removed. Before the incision was closed, the doctors Atlee chose a novel approach of using sponges to dry the interior of the abdomen rather than the usual method of turning the patient face down to drain. The operation took about forty-five minutes and the patient only complained of pain twice. Atlee’s report does not mention that any sterilization or antiseptics were used and, as they would have been new and noteworthy, we can assume nothing of the kind was involved. The stalwart woman recovered with no complications.²⁴

The controversy over the procedure was based on the fact that in this pre-antiseptic age, abdominal incisions were usually fatal, and performing of ovariectomies was considered too dangerous to be worth risking. The primary risk was in exposing a patient’s insides to the air which, even to the best scientific minds, was thought to be the source of infection. Debate raged over whether a small incision might be less dangerous than a long one, but all in all, the practice of ovariectomy was disparaged.

Nevertheless, both John Light Atlee and his brother Washington Lemuel Atlee persisted. Dr. John Light Atlee performed seventy-eight ovariectomies with an 82% rate of success. His brother Washington Lemuel Atlee performed almost 400, but was “misrepresented before the medical public, and was pointed to as a dangerous man, even a murderer. The opposition went so far that a celebrated professor ...invoked the law to arrest me in the performance of this operation!”²⁵ The largest two removals he made were of approximately eighteen pounds can be viewed at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia.²⁶

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John Light Atlee’s Legacy

In addition to being a successful surgeon and doctor, John Light Atlee made many significant contributions to medicine and to his community.

Dr. John Light Atlee not only perfected the ovariectomy, but also successfully removed a large calculus from a bladder. Due to his significant surgical contributions, he helped found the Pennsylvania Medical Society in 1848 and the American Medical Association in 1849. He served as president of the Pennsylvania Medical Society in 1857 and then president of the American Medical Association in 1882.²⁷

In his community, Dr. John Light Atlee served as a professor of anatomy and physiology at Franklin and Marshall College, a warden of St. James Episcopal Church, and first medical director of St. Joseph Hospital. John Light advocated for better water supply in Lancaster. His passion helped to expedite the process, and Lancaster received a water filtration plant which was installed in 1906.²⁸

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The Legacy Lives On

John Light Atlee was married to Sarah Howell Franklin (1799–1880) in 1822. They had four children, two of whom followed in their father’s shadow as a doctor.²⁹

Dr. Walter Franklin Atlee (1828–1910) was John Light’s eldest son. He attended Yale College where he graduated in 1846, and later went to the University of Pennsylvania for his medical degree which he received in 1850.³⁰ He traveled to France and studied under Dr. Claude Bernard where he met his wife, Louise Caussade (1835–1922).³¹ The two then returned to Philadelphia where he practiced medicine.³²

Dr. John Light Atlee, Jr., (1830–1885) was John Light’s second son. He was a physician in Lancaster County and practiced there until his death at age 55.³³ John married Katherine Brian Rogers (born c. 1835), the great granddaughter of Dr. Edward Hand.³⁴

William Augustus Atlee (1832–1900), John Light’s third son, was a graduate of Yale in 1851. Although he did not practice medicine, he served Lancaster County as the district attorney and mayor of Lancaster.³⁵ Although William Augustus did not follow the path of medicine, his two sons would.

Dr. William Augustus Atlee (1864–1889) and Dr. John Light Atlee, Sr., (1875–1950), William Augustus Atlee’s sons, graduated from Penn Medical School. Dr. William Atlee practiced in Washington, D.C., and was the chairman of the department of medicine. He died in a typhoid epidemic at the age of twenty-five. Dr. John Light Atlee, Sr., practiced in Lancaster.³⁶

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Moving to the Twentieth Century

Dr. John Light Atlee, Sr., was the first of the Atlees to undergo a formal specialty and board certification, as formal specialization took root at the beginning of the twentieth century. He specialized in general surgery and gynecology and was particularly skilled in performing appendectomies.³⁷ Dr. John Light Atlee, Sr. opened his own office building in Lancaster on East Orange Street, which housed eight other specialists.³⁸

Dr. John Light Atlee, Sr. had two sons who also were surgeons, Dr. William Augustus Atlee (1914–1987) and Dr. John Light Atlee, Jr. (1904–1979).³⁹

Dr. William Augustus Atlee graduated from Yale University and received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. He served in the Army during World War II and returned to Washington, D.C., where he completed graduate training at George Washington University.⁴⁰ A man proud of his family name, he addressed the Lancaster City and County Medical Society in 1981 about his family’s dedicated service to the community of Lancaster for almost 200 years.⁴¹

Dr. John Light Atlee, Jr., (1904–1979) graduated from Franklin and Marshall at the age of eighteen and received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania at the age of twenty-one. He practiced in Lancaster with his father.⁴²

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St. Joseph Hospital, Lancaster

“My grandfather and father played a major role in the development of St. Joseph Hospital into what it is today,” stated Ann Webber, daughter of Dr. John Light Atlee, Jr.

Atlee, Senior, was the Medical Director while Atlee, Junior, was Chief of Surgery. Together, the two of them started a surgical residency at St. Joseph Hospital. Four residents stayed and practiced in Lancaster with them.⁴³ A memorial was placed outside of St. Joseph Hospital to honor Dr. John Light Atlee, Senior, for his contributions.⁴⁴

Today St. Joseph Hospital is known as Lancaster Regional Medical Center.

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Caring for the Patient and the Community

The Atlee family was a well-respected and well-known family in Lancaster County. Atlee Senior and Junior were praised for their medical work and practice, not just for their skill, but for the sacrifices they made on behalf of their community and patients.

“Medicine was his life,” Ann Webber stated, talking about her father. “It felt as if he worked twenty hour days. I knew that he was very dedicated and that he loved his profession.” When Ann Webber would come to visit St. Joseph Hospital, staff would marvel at her father’s talent and patients would talk about his humor and kindness. Ann welcomed the conversation as it showed her another side of her father, whom she experienced as also kind and gentle, with a marvelous sense of humor, but often a bit detached from family life as could not help but be preoccupied with his patients.⁴⁵

Ann also has personal recollections of stories told by her grandfather. She remembers her grandfather telling the story of how he received a call that a woman was in trouble. Although she was far from a hospital and had no money to pay, Atlee, Senior, decided to travel out to the woman’s house, about an hour away, to see what he could do. At the end of the visit, this young girl handed him a nickel and asked him to please take it. He took the nickel as a sign of respect for this young girl.⁴⁶ For Ann, these stories reveal the character of her father and grandfather attesting to how deeply they cared for their patients.

Dr. John Light Atlee, Jr., was asked to stay in Lancaster during the Second World War because he was one of few surgeons left in the area. He traveled to Hershey and Columbia helping out wherever and whenever he could. Ann Webber recalls seeing him during this time. Since he was not serving overseas, Dr. Atlee, Junior, made his contribution to the war as an air raid warden, making sure all lights were turned out during drills.⁴⁷

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The Atlee Family Today

Today, the Atlee family remains dedicated to medicine and dedicated to Lancaster County. Dr. Atlee, Jr. had four children, three daughters and one son. His son, John Light Atlee, III, still carries on the tradition of medicine; however, he left Lancaster County for Wisconsin. He practiced from 1988–2005 as an anesthesiologist, when he had to retire for medical reasons. Dr. John Light Atlee, III, has also published several medical books and started a company which works to improve a therapy probe “designed as an extended esophageal stethoscope which works better than the commonly used pulmonary artery catheter.”⁴⁸ Two daughters still live in Lancaster today. Ann and Elizabeth have served as vestry members of the St. James Episcopal Church, holding up the tradition which has been carried down through Atlee generations since their great-great grandfather. The third daughter, Margaretta, died in 1995.⁴⁹

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Conclusion

Even more important than the Atlee name itself, however were the ideals of the people behind it. Today, the procedures, the inventions, the societies continue to be an important part of the practice of medicine. It is our responsibility, as members of a growing medical community, to keep the Atlee vision of medicine alive, a vision where the patient is treated with respect and care, where the patient's health comes before a doctor's reputation, and where the art of healing is based upon a passion of helping others. By pursuing medicine with these principles the legacy of these contributions and practices will continue to honor the Atlee name.

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Endnotes

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