

1844-1994



Our

Medical

Heritage

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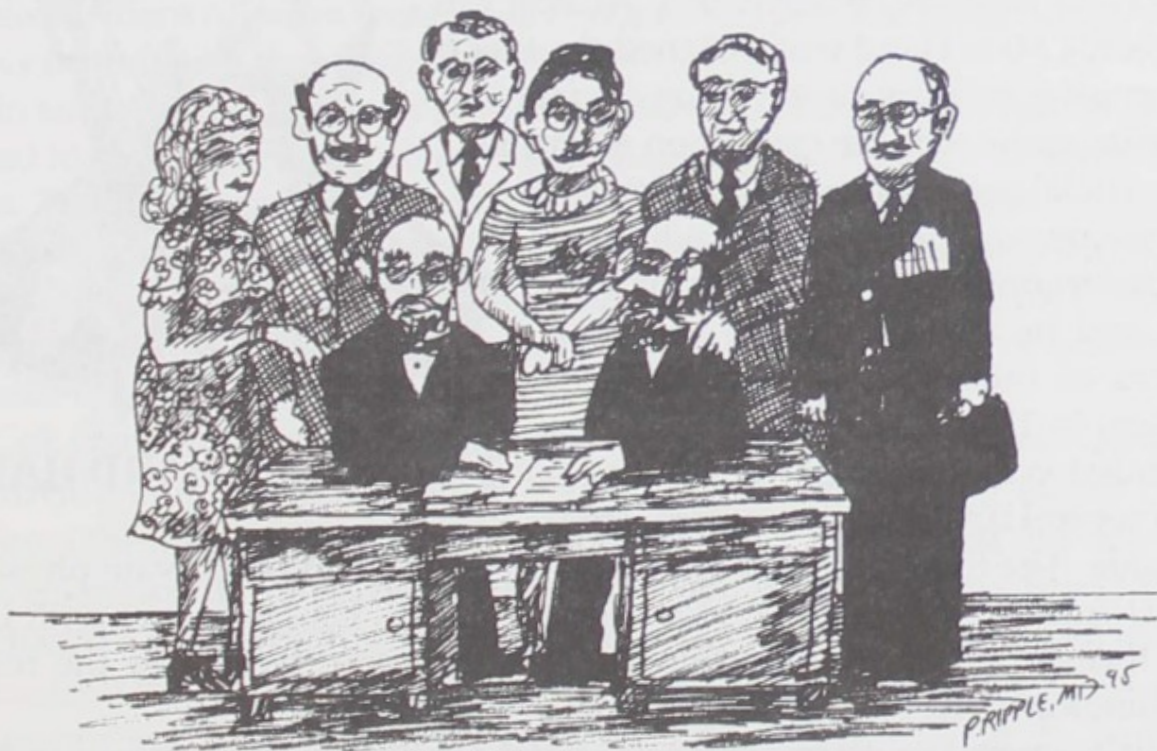


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Lancaster City & County Medical Society

Section 3

Prominent Physicians



History Of The Doctors Atlee

*Who Served The Lancaster Community 170 Years
(1820-1990)*

*Delivered to the Lancaster City & County Medical Society
on Tuesday, May 5, 1981 by William A. Atlee, M.D.*

The Atlees in America were traceable to the Parish of Acton, Middlesex County a few miles from London. Samuel Atlee of England had a number of sons one of whom was William, who was the founder of the family in America. He left England in March, 1733, having been appointed secretary to the Governor of Barbados. His eldest son was William Augustus Atlee the colonist, lawyer and jurist who was born in Philadelphia July, 1735. William had three sons. The eldest was William Pitt Atlee born September 24, 1772 who resided in Lancaster where he was a coppersmith, deputy sheriff of the County and marshal of the District.

Edwin Augustus Atlee, son of William Augustus, was born on November 16, 1776 and died in Philadelphia in 1852. He attended Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA and practiced law in Lancaster. He volunteered for the Army and was one of General Washington's guards at Headquarters. He relinquished his legal practice and read medicine with General Edward Hand, who was Washington's Adjutant General, and under Professor Barton of Philadelphia. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1804 and practiced in Philadelphia until 1820. He and his wife, Esther, became members of the Religious Society of Friends. He was prominent in Anti-Slavery Movements and became an eminent physician and writer. He moved to Michigan where he was nominated and served in United State Congress for two terms. The eldest son of Edwin Augustus was John L. Atlee, who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1853 and practiced in Tennessee for about 50 years.

William Pitt Atlee married Sarah Light and they had six children two of whom were John Light Atlee, M.D. (1799-1885) and Washington Lemuel Atlee, M.D. (1808-1878). Dr. John L. Atlee, had eleven children, two of whom were physicians, Walter Franklin and John L. Atlee, Jr.

Walter Franklin Atlee, M.D. graduated from Yale University and studied medicine and surgery in France. His notes of the lectures of Dr. M. Claude Bernard (1853-1854) were published by Lippincott and Grambow & Co. in 1854 and covered characteristics of the blood and its contents including red cells, hematin, iron, magnesium and protein and the size of cells and studies that Dr. Bernard had made on oxygen, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide noting the changes in color of the blood and some superficial observations concerning acid-base balance. This book was entered in the Congressional library in 1854.

John Light Atlee, Jr. (1830-1885) practiced in Lancaster and died the same year as his father.

Dr. John L. Atlee, Sr. born 1799 had a son, William A. Atlee, who was an attorney and my grandfather. William married Elizabeth Champneys, daughter of Judge Benjamin Champneys, who had been President Judge of the Lancaster County Court from 1829 to 1842 and a state senator for six years. He was Attorney General for Pennsylvania from 1846 to 1848. Their oldest son was my Uncle Bill, who was a physician some 20 years my father's senior. William A. Atlee, M.D. graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and studied under Sir William Osler, who was Chairman of the Department of Medicine. He later moved to Washington and died in the typhoid epidemic there.

Dr. Washington Lemuel Atlee was born February 22, 1808 and graduated from Jefferson Medical College in 1829. He practiced with his brother, John L. Atlee, in Lancaster and is said to have had an office in Mt. Joy until 1845 when he moved to Philadelphia to accept the Chair of Medicine and Surgery in the Medical Department of that college. He resigned in 1852 and became an eminent surgeon in Philadelphia particularly noted for his ovariectomies. He died in 1878. While in Lancaster, Dr. Washington Atlee collected some 400 species of Lancaster County plants. He organized the Academy of Gynecology.

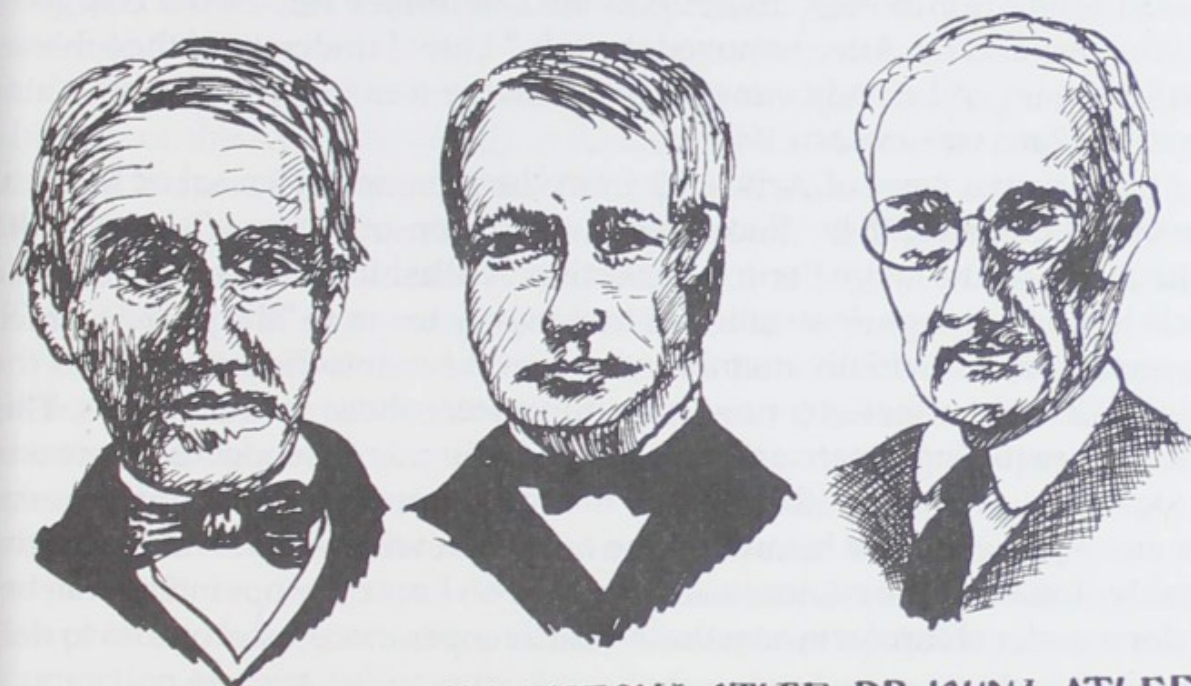
Lest I give the impression that everyone in our family has been physicians, I would say we have had our share of attorneys, jurists, businessmen, coppersmiths, soldiers, sailors, engineers, railroaders, salesmen and artisans. For our interest, I would select a few physicians.

Dr. John L. Atlee (1799-1885) read medicine under Dr. Samuel Humes in 1815 and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1820. He immediately began his practice of medicine in Lancaster. He was outstanding for his commitment to his community and to his profession. He was a school director for 40 years beginning in 1822 and he was a senior warden of St. James Episcopal Church for 30 years. He was the first medical director of St. Joseph Hospital. He was a organizer in the birth of the Lancaster City and County Medical Society in 1844 (he served as president twice), the Pennsylvania Medical Society in 1848 (he served as president in 1857) and the American Medical Association in 1849 (he served as president in 1882). He was professor of anatomy and physiology at Franklin & Marshall College and that institution conferred an honorary degree of LL.D. upon him in 1878. He trained a number of students interested in medicine in his office.

He and his brother, Lemuel, revived ovariectomy. They kept careful records of their ovariectomy work. It is my impression that Washington Lemuel did the first ovariectomy and John L. did the first bilateral ovariectomy. They did an ovariectomy in 1843. McDowell had done one or two ovariectomies in Kentucky in 1809; Nathan Smith in Connecticut followed later about 1829. Drs.

John and Washington Atlee revived the operation. These were large size ovarian tumors weighing 15 to 20 pounds. One or two of these have been preserved in the Mutter Museum of the Philadelphia College of Physicians.

In 1843, Drs. John L. and Washington L. Atlee removed a calculus from the urinary bladder. This was a mulberry calculus of oxalate of lime which weighed 4-3/4 to 5 ounces. and its largest circumference was 8 inches and the smallest 6 1/8 inches. This was believed to be one of the largest extracted and was reported in numerous medical journals.



DR. JOHN L. ATLEE **DR. WASHINGTON L. ATLEE** **DR. JOHN L. ATLEE**
THE FIRST JOHN ATLEE **BROTHER** **THE THIRD JOHN ATLEE**

It was my good fortune to care for a patient operated upon by Dr. John L. Atlee of 1799. This was a Mrs. Wiltsie and her case was reported in Lancaster Medicine, October, 1976 - a special issue on the "History of Medicine in Lancaster County." I found this to be a thrilling experience to be doing a tracheotomy for the same laryngeal polyp problem treated by my great grandfather. The case was reported at a meeting of laryngologists by Dr. Jessberg of California.

Dr. John L. Atlee of 1799 was very active in the Sanitary Committee of Lancaster County and I have a report dated May 26, 1855, extracted from the transactions of the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania. He had concern about problems of cholera in Lancaster County and had written about improved methods of treatment and hydration of patients whose fluid balance had been disturbed. Quoting from the transactions of the Sanitary Committee "he was first appointed to consider Public Water Supply July 6, 1819. On February 22, 1836 or 1837, according to records the imposing spectacle of

introducing unfiltered water from the Conestoga River into the City of Lancaster was performed. A great parade was held on the above date from the Court House to the reservoir site on E. King St. where the arrival of the water was awaited. The delay was brief. About half past ten the water made its first appearance, slowly entering from the pipes amid the thundering and ringing of city bells. During the first year there were 22 customers who paid a total of \$197.86 for this service. An occurrence took place on July 13, 1849 when the Water Committee reported the startling fact that Dr. John Light Atlee had installed an extravagant innovation called a bath-tub without permission of the Committee. Thereupon the Committee imposed a charge of \$30.00 a year and Dr. Atlee removed the tub." Later I understand the tub was installed again and an adjustment on the charge was made. The City Water Filtration Plant was built in 1906.

I have here a copy of Article 82 from the American Journal of Medical Sciences of October, 1849 "Successful Exturbation of Fibrous Tumor of the Right Ovary by the Large Peritoneal Section by Washington Atlee, M.D." The article had a two-page description of the surgery to quote "the pedicle which was small and principally membranous was now detached close upon the tumor. The only adhesions now remaining were those to the vessels. This dissection requiring great care and the day being dark as a consequence of the sky being overcast with clouds, I had two sperm candles lighted to enable me to prosecute the balance of the operation with safety. This was satisfactorily done and the tumor was lifted away." I note the operation was being done under chloroform anesthesia. Earlier operations used opium to dull pain.

The description of the brothers, John L. Atlee and Washington L. Atlee, appeared to depict John as having been the older and perhaps more conservative and more committed to his community. Washington Lemuel was younger and perhaps a more able surgeon. H. B. Clapesattle, of Doctors' Mayo gives the following description "on his way home from New York Dr. Mayo stopped off at Philadelphia and went out to Lancaster to visit the Atlee brothers, the great apostles of ovariectomy." The older Dr. Mayo, the father of the famous Mayo brothers visited Lancaster to observe the ovariectomies being performed by John and Washington Atlee. Sometime later Washington Atlee made a trip to Rochester, Minnesota during the winter to perform or assist in an ovariectomy. It is reported that his sleigh was caught in a severe snow storm and upset so that he had rough going but returned safely.

The operation for removal of ovarian tumors had first been performed by Ephraim McDowell on a Kentucky frontier in 1809 under circumstances that make one of the most dramatic and most often told stories in American medical history. McDowell's success in that and succeeding attempts made the operation a "Nine Day Wonder," but after its originator's death it fell into disuse; it was too seldom successful in other hands. John and Washington re-

vived the procedure about 1845 and set about demonstrating its practicality for saving lives. At the time that Dr. Mayo arrived, Washington Lemuel, the younger and abler of the brothers, was nearing his 300th ovariectomy with an average mortality of slightly over 30%. The little Western doctor was moved to deep admiration, but watching the Atlees work did not give him the courage to immediately attempt the operation himself. In spite of their success and that of a few others who were following their footsteps, the main body of the medical profession condemned such a procedure as foolhardy. Any abdominal operation was a method of the executioner that no wise humane surgeon would use. Ovariectomists were "belly rippers who ought not to be at large."

The recently published book by Mark Ravitsch having to do with the history of the American Surgical Association 1880 to 1980 entitled "A Century of Surgery" indicated that Washington L. Atlee was an honorary member of the American Surgical Association which recently had its 101st meeting. Some additional information indicates that John L. Atlee also attended this meeting and may or may not have been an honorary member.

A quotation from Dr. Mark Ravitsch's book referred to Washington L. Atlee "of what one Atlee suffered the writer of this knows since as his assistant and co-laborer for several years he was a witness of the great wrong done him. Denounced as a murderer and one who should receive the attention of the district attorney by distinguished professors, a teacher in a prominent medical college deprived of recognition and displaced in the societies of his profession, he pursued his work with unswerving fidelity and in the firm conviction of right. Without the knowledge of today and without the help of modern technique, he grappled successfully with cases surcharged with complicated conditions and of greater gravity than seem to come to the surgeon's hand today. With undaunted courage he met the dangers of hemorrhage, apparently beyond control and of universal adhesions and seldom closed the abdomen without completing the operation. His last days were made happy in the reception of professional honors and the assurance and high esteem and regard from those who had most strenuously opposed him."

My father, John L. Atlee, was born in 1875 and died in 1950. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1900 and had his intern training at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. He was well aware of his heritage but preferred to demonstrate his own ability and commitment to medical and surgical care. He took additional training in surgery and I recall that near the outbreak of World War I he returned from a trip to London where his interests and studies were in surgery. In 1915 he decided to limit his practice to general surgery and at that time this included all specialties of surgical care. I have before me a copy of a record and article published December 28, 1907 in the American Medical Association Journal "Brain Tumor and Jacksonian Spasm and Unilateral Paralysis of the Vocal Cord and

Late Hemiparesis and Astereognosis, the Growth Successfully Localized and Removed" John L. Atlee, M.D., Lancaster, PA and Charles K. Mills, M.D., Philadelphia. Another article from the Pennsylvania Medical Journal of April 8, 1909 entitled "Chronic Diarrhea Relieved by Removal of a Chronically Inflamed Appendix" by Joseph Saylor, M.D., Philadelphia and John L. Atlee, M.D., Lancaster. This was delivered in the Section in Medical Specialties State of Pennsylvania. He had a special interest in appendicitis and operative gynecology and obstetrics.

In the early days of this century, hospitals and particularly university hospitals had problems related to infections as had been pointed out by Semmelweiss in his work. Some of the problems may have been related to the surgical amphitheaters being filled with students. Partly for this reason many patients had a fear of hospitals and therefore surgery was performed in the homes in the city and in the country. The age of Lister was dominated by the use of carbolic acid and carbolic acid sprays in the operating rooms. My father had a portable operating table and a cadre of nurses, and Dr. Clarence Farmer frequently assisted him. General practitioners would frequently give the anesthesia and do some assisting in the operations. Surgical experience in the early days of this century was limited and therefore my father was rather frequently called into consultation in areas distant from home. He had a strong commitment to medicine and surgery and felt that two good strong centrally located hospitals were desirable. My father was medical director of St. Joseph Hospital.

I remember that it was my father's observation that he never visited a surgical suite or clinic without learning something. Dr. John Deaver was one of his close friends and advisors. My father built up a large practice and in addition to being helped by Dr. Clarence Farmer he had in his office over the years Dr. Roland Klemmer who subsequently became Chief of Medicine at Lancaster General Hospital, Dr. Harvey Seiple in internal medicine, Dr. Henry Walter, Dr. Robert Skinner, Dr. David Nutter in orthopedics, Dr. Armen Kabakjian, radiologist, Dr. Ian Hodge, urology and Dr. Edward Ziegler in pathology. The development of a group on Orange Street was an outgrowth of my father's thinking that patients in Lancaster should have the very best medical and surgical care available and, where necessary, the attention of specialists. The department of radiology for diagnostic work and later for therapy was developed and available. This was up to the best standards of the time but not developed to the sophisticated needs of today.

About 1945-46 a three year surgical residency program was established and approved by St. Joseph Hospital under the aegis of my brother, John, Jr., and the support of my father and myself. A number of surgeons went through the training program there. I would like to mention those who remained in the community: - Paul J. Rowan, M.D.; Peter P. Pranckun, M.D.; Frank K. Mears, Jr., M.D. and Julius Sandhaus, M.D.

My brother, Dr. John L. Atlee, Jr., graduated from Franklin & Marshall College at the age of 18 and University of Pennsylvania Medical School with honors. He then had two years of internship training with Dr. John Deaver, Lankenau Hospital, Philadelphia and subsequently trained in Europe. The European experience for my brother, John, was cut short by the great depression. It was necessary for him to return to Lancaster and help my father in his practice. He became Chief of Surgery at St. Joseph Hospital and did a large volume of all types of general surgery including orthopedics. He operated at the Hershey Hospital once or twice a week and for emergencies. He worked at Lancaster General Hospital as well. It was also my understanding that my brother, John, was the third surgeon to pass the American Board of Surgery examinations when they came into existence so that his certificate read #3. I am happy to be able to report that my brother John's son, John L. Atlee, III, is a physician and anesthesiologist and a tenured professor in anesthesiology at the University of Wisconsin.

There is an old story that, when Jefferson Medical College was endeavoring to obtain a charter from the State Legislature my great grandfather lent Dr. McClellan and his group the horses to get to Harrisburg in time to have the charter approved. I think this might have been about 1839. There have been many scientific and technical advances made in the knowledge and practice of medicine and surgery in the last 150 years. I have enjoyed trying to cover it in a relatively brief period of time. The things that stand out to me are the effects of prophylaxis against childhood infections, improved sanitation, effective treatment of infections by antibiotics, much improved anesthesia and supportive measures, blood transfusions and an increased knowledge of immunity and the treatment of disturbed metabolic response. These things have made improved surgical techniques possible.

I come now to a short note about myself. I was born in March, 1914, at 129 E. Orange St. in a home newly built by my father. His office was on the first floor of our home. He was quite busy and at times I wished for more of his time and attention. However, he was strict but an attentive and loving father. I often accompanied him on his visits. My first major surgical experience came in 1924 when I had acute hematogenous osteomyelitis and was operated upon by Dr. John Deaver who had come from Philadelphia at my father's request. Future care was from Dr. Farmer and my father. The last problem with that, I am happy to say, was while I was in college about 1936. I attended Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School and had my internship at the Pennsylvania Hospital. My wife, Mary, and I were married during my internship - November 29th one week prior to Pearl Harbor.

At that time I had a commission in the Armed Services and after having been discharged from an active duty status, I joined the State Guard for the remainder of the war. My future training was at the Graduate Hospital and

School of the University of Pennsylvania and at George Washington University. Most of all I profited by the training and experience working with my father and brother as well as my own peers. I have become a member of a number of medical and surgical societies and continue to lead an active life. I have hobbies and interests outside of medicine and surgery. Each year I plan to devote more and more time to them. My progress in that area has not been great as I continue to enjoy and need to be involved with the active practice of surgery.

I would like to give you a quotation from a famous World War II columnist, Walter Lippman: "The lesson of these tremendous days through which we are passing is that men cannot live upon the achievements of their forefathers, but must themselves renew them. We cannot escape - the elementary facts of life - that for a people there is nothing for nothing - that what they have they must themselves make; that what they cherish they must themselves achieve; what they wish to keep they must themselves defend." This quotation seems appropriate to the times.