



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: William Story Latta: Pioneer Nebraska Doctor

Full Citation: Minnie Latta Ladd, "William Story Latta: Pioneer Nebraska Doctor," *Nebraska History* 25 (1944): 223-234

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1944WSLatta.pdf>

Date: 10/13/2017

Article Summary: Latta was an old-time family physician. As a young man he served as a military surgeon during the Civil War. Later in life he pursued business interests and was a professor and dean of Lincoln Medical School.

***Scroll Down for complete article.***

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Story Latta, Samuel Maxwell

Place Names: Rock Bluff, Nebraska; Cincinnati, Ohio

Keywords: William Story Latta, Second Nebraska Cavalry, "bushwhackers," malaria, scurvy, amputation, United Presbyterian Church (Rock Bluff), flour mill, Masonic order, Eclectic Medical Association, Eclectic School of Medicine, Allopaths, Homeopaths

Photographs / Images: William Story Latta, Latta home at Rock Bluff

# William Story Latta

## Pioneer Nebraska Doctor

MINNIE LATT A LADD\*

This is the biography of a pioneer doctor, a national figure in the Eclectic School of Medicine, civil servant, consultant and humanitarian in the full sense of the word.

Dr. W. S. Latta was born May 3, 1826, in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, of Scotch-Irish parents who had come to the United States of America about 1800. His father, a ship-builder and merchant, having lost money through the failure of the first contractors of the Erie Canal, moved his family to Cincinnati, Ohio, when the boy was eighteen years old. The schools of Pennsylvania in those early days provided instruction for two months and occasionally three months each winter. Young William Latta and his brothers and sisters had taken full advantage of this instruction.

In Cincinnati young Latta, an eager student, though working, continued his studies and became quite proficient in English. Under a private tutor he studied Latin, German and Hebrew. He entered the Cincinnati Eclectic Medical College as a student in 1851, graduating from the three-year course on February 25, 1854. He had the fine record of never having been absent from one of the lectures, of which there were seven a day six days a week.

The following year, March 1, 1855 he graduated from the Newton Clinical Institute, of which his preceptor of the Medical College was the head.

Aside from being a scholar and scientifically interested in his chosen profession he was a natural philosopher, as is shown by two of the many poems found among his papers. This one,

\* Winner of First Prize in 1942 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska

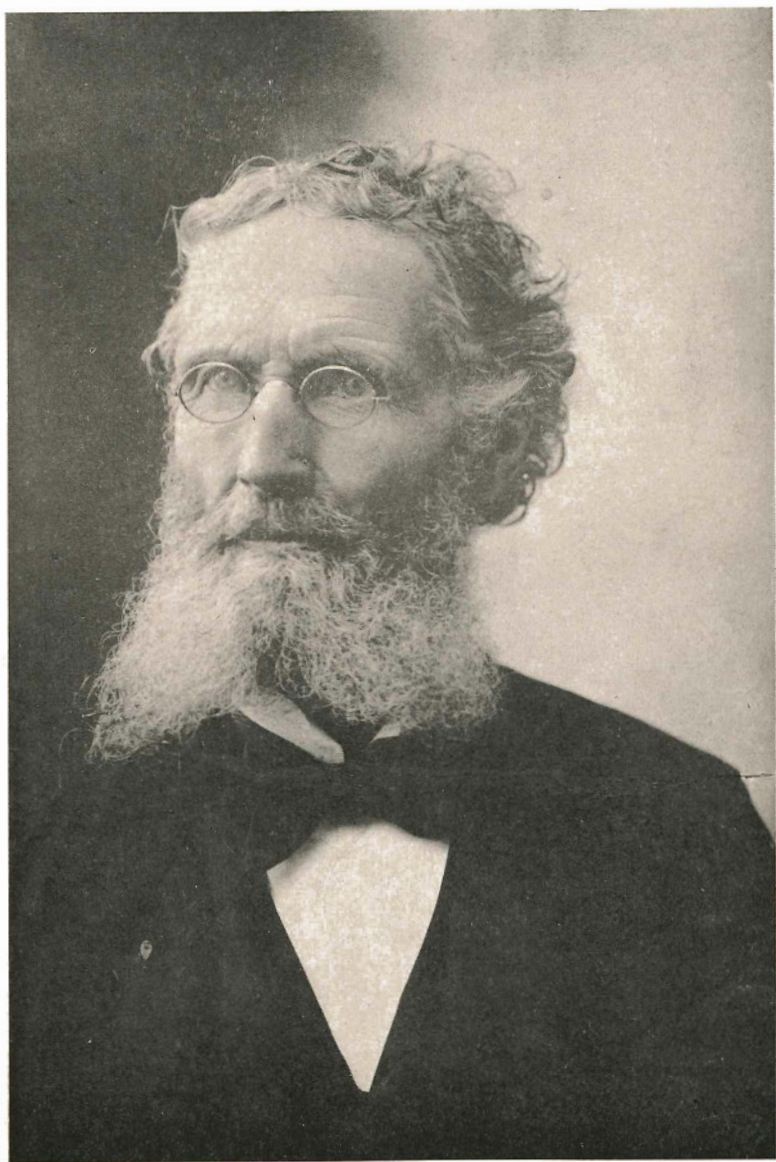
written during his first three years of practice in Cincinnati, is characteristic of his attitude towards life:

What a foolish thing 'twould be  
To let the blues get hold of me  
While I am sitting all alone  
Shall all my friends think me a drone?  
Ah, let them think so! Though it seems  
I pass my time in idle dreams,  
I labor hard, do all I can  
To learn to cure my fellow man.  
My patients are but three or four,-  
Enough! 'tis well I have no more.  
For when the doctors all grow fat  
The people have to pay for that.  
The doctor that would wish to see  
The people all in misery,  
That he may fill his purse with gold,  
Must have a heart that is very cold.

These thoughtful lines, probably written before the foregoing example, denote the strength of character which marked him an outstanding leader through life:

Lines written whilst in a reverie  
Cincinnati, 1854

When first upon life's ocean  
I launched my little barque,  
Though all was in commotion  
I kept in view this mark:  
That all my time should still be spent  
In useful occupation,  
Whilst others with no such intent  
Indulged in dissipation.  
Around the taverns they would flock  
To drink and have their fun,  
But in my room I sought my book  
When e'er my work was done.  
For there I found my brightest hopes



WILLIAM STORY LATTA

For future exaltation,  
By searching out some precious truth  
In my investigation.  
I always kept this truth in view,  
Whatever I discarded,-  
That honesty and industry  
Should ne'er go unrewarded.  
Then with untiring zeal I strove  
To occupy a station  
Which would do honor to my name  
My City, State and Nation.

Dr. Latta, by this time thirty-one years old and physically strong, was inspired with the thought of pioneering in the West. He dreamed of the opportunities this vast new country offered for his service. Together with his widowed mother and her several children he traveled westward, having chosen the new Nebraska Territory for his field of endeavor. Many days were required to reach Nebraska by boat. Crowded on a small steamer, the young doctor's family crept down the Ohio and up the Missouri river, landing and locating at Rock Bluff in 1857.

In 1861, on May 10, Dr. Latta married Sarah Anne Eikenbary of Plattsmouth, Nebraska Territory, and took his bride to a new white cottage in the western limits of Rock Bluff. Rock Bluff, now one of the ghost towns along the river, was at that time a thriving little village with a tavern, blacksmith shop, general stores, and many would-be settlers traveling through. Here two sons were born to the Lattas—Samuel Eikenbary and William Crawford, who died in infancy.

It is not known where Doctor and Mrs. Latta met. Perhaps it occurred at one of the many dances to which the young people of that day drove many miles. Though Dr. Latta did not dance, it gave him great pleasure to play "Money Musk" and "Arkansaw Traveler" on his fiddle, that others might enjoy the pastime.

Mrs. Latta was a real helpmate. She joined with her husband in all his political and religious interests.

Prior to their marriage. Dr. Latta had been a member of the Sixth Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, meeting in Omaha, December 5, 1859.



Much sympathy should be given to the landlady who rented a room to the four delegates from Cass County: W. S. Latta, Samuel Maxwell, T.M. Marquette and William R. Davis, who shared the one room. Dr. Latta was very tall and of an extremely strong athletic build. In the almost nightly wrestling matches between these young men that went on in that room Dr. Latta was usually the victor, according to the reminiscences between Dr. Latta and Justice Maxwell, who was a frequent visitor in the Latta home in Lincoln during the time he served as associate Justice and later as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

When the Civil War broke out Dr. Latta enlisted as a private in the Second Nebraska Cavalry. He was immediately made Assistant Surgeon, serving during his period of active service as Chief Surgeon in the territory extending from Brownville north to the Dakotas.

His initiative and ability as an organizer was shown when he organized the first military hospital in Omaha in the fall of 1862. In 1863, returning to his regiment in active service, he was in charge as Chief Surgeon in camps at Otoe City, Brownville, Nebraska City, Plattsmouth, Omaha, and up to the Dakotas. On account of the malaria and other diseases Dr. Latta made a scientific study of camp sites and of the land along both sides of the Missouri River. He wrote several medical articles diagnosing the cases, studying the causes of the malarias, typhoids and the typhus-pneumonia. He urged his men to eat of the wild fruit growing along the line of march, to relieve the almost universal ailment of scurvy. Among his papers on file with the Historical Society are lists of men sent to the Omaha Military Hospital, lists of recruits by companies; reports of sick and wounded, of sanitary, food and transportation conditions, accounts, medical and surgical treatment, and a great many other items dealing with military and civilian life.

The Second Nebraska Cavalry was almost wholly engaged in keeping down the depredations of Indians and "bushwhackers" from Kansas and Missouri, who sought to steal cattle, horses and other livestock of the settlers and to frighten the women and children. If a mother didn't keep a rifle handy, the Indians would even steal the pot of stew from her fire. There was a strong

element in the Territory opposed to slavery, and it was thought the depredations of the Indians and "bushwhackers" were instigated by pro-slavery agitators.

The loss of life caused by these skirmishes was small as compared to the deaths from malaria, scurvy and other illnesses. Dr. Latta's theory of germs and the consequent infection, which was written in 1879, was one of the first of such studies and theories published.

He performed many major operations and was among the first in the eastern part of Nebraska to do abdominal surgery. Amputation was the usual procedure following infected gunshot wounds or other serious injury to legs and arms. Many came miles for Dr. Latta's skilful handling of amputations.

On one of the expeditions against the Dakota Indians in 1863 the members of the regiment engaged in an argument which ended when one soldier hit another with the butt of his pistol, fracturing the upper part of the skull. Without a trephine Dr. Latta, with his pocket knife, made the proper parallel incisions along the wound and raised the crushed bones. The patient made a fine recovery. Dr. Latta never hesitated because of lack of professional instruments, but used the saw, the common knife, the kitchen table, and many such ordinary devices when necessity demanded. During one of these several trips Dr. Latta and his troops floated down the river in homemade boats — dugouts, they were called.

The Second Nebraska was mustered out December 24, 1863, in Brownville, Nebraska Territory. Back in Rock Bluff after the Civil War Dr. Latta immediately returned to the practice of medicine. He continued as a leader in the religious, social and political activities of the community, serving the little town as mayor in 1864 and as an elder of the United Presbyterian Church.

This church, organized in 1860, of which the brothers and sisters of Dr. Latta were charter members, erected the first building of its kind in Cass County. The members later added a belfry and a bell weighing forty pounds.

Mrs. Latta was equally helpful and busy with church work, teaching a Sunday School class, helping with the church dinners, and even making the unleavened bread for the communion service.

In his student days in Cincinnati, Dr. Latta sang in the choir of the Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church. He continued this practice, his fine voice ringing out with the rest of the church of Rock Bluff. A busy man accomplishes most, and he even found time to give vocal lessons. Later in Lincoln he regularly attended the weekly singing-school held in the First Congregational Church, taking his two daughters to join in the singing before they could touch their feet on the floor.

In 1866 Dr. Latta built a house from the native stone found on his 201-acre farm west of Rock Bluff, trying to copy the Pennsylvania houses he had known and loved in his youth. Their two daughters, Minnie Bell (wife of the late Dr. Charles Franklin Ladd) and Mary Olive (wife of Edward Garland Watson) were born in "the rock house", as it was called in those early days. Today, though sadly in need of repair, it still stands east of Route 73-75 on the road to Rock Bluff, and the second story is occupied.

For some time, instead of Mrs. Latta's fine flower beds bordering the long walk from the white picket fence up to the house, and her Prairie Queen rose which climbed to the roof, WPA trucks have rolled through the front yard from the stone quarry on the hill to the important river work a short distance east. So beauty gives way to utility.

Collections were slow in those pioneer days, and we find Dr. Latta widening his interests. Together with his brother he built and put into operation a flour mill. In pioneer days the roads in many places were mere Indian trails, and it was a long and difficult journey for those living near Rock Bluff to take their wheat (a bag of it slung over the horse's back) to Nebraska City for grinding. We read in the *Nebraska Herald* of Plattsmouth, under date July 23, 1868, that "Mr. Latta's mill at Rock Bluff will be ready for grinding about August 1st." On May 20, 1869, the editor says: "Messrs. W. S. Latta and J. A. Latta have now gotten their mill on Rock Creek in running order, and are turning out some of the best flour in the state. They have a new mill-house, new machinery, and everything in order for making the best flour in the state — and they make it. We have tried it and we know. Get Rock Creek Mills Family Flour and you





LATTA HOME AT ROCK BLUFF

are sure of a good article. They grind for toll, or give thirty pounds of flour and bran for a bushel of wheat."

In the same issue of the *Nebraska Herald* we find Dr. Latta mentioned as engaged in another line of business. The paper states: "Dr. W. S. Latta of Rock Bluff has on hand a couple more of those indispensable machines to the farmer — the Marsh Harvester. He is selling then from \$7 to \$10 cheaper than any other agency. Call soon if you want one."

A fine team of matched black horses which Dr. Latta sold to Judge George B. Lake of Omaha was from the many fine horses raised on his stock farm, and a long-remembered source of gratification and happy memories for the doctor.

The life of the pioneer doctor was hard, with long country drives and late hours. At dusk one evening at Rock Bluffs Mrs. Latta saw her husband coming slowly down the road on his horse which usually came charging home. Running to the barn lot she found the fine gray mare had slipped and, in falling, had broken Dr. Latta's leg. With the help of the hired man she got him into the house. His boots presented the hardest problem in getting him undressed. With the aid of a bootjack Mrs. Latta succeeded in getting them off. Together the doctor and his wife set the leg. Later that winter, in their homemade sleigh, Mrs. Latta would drive for the doctor, comfortably lying in the buffalo robes, his leg stretched out in front of him, as he made his visits to his patients.

April 7, 1869, Dr. Latta joined the A.F. and A.M. Masonic order No. 20, Rock Bluff, and with his wife enjoyed the social contacts at Plattsmouth and Nebraska City. "Members in Good Standing" in Lancaster Lodge No. 54, A.F. and A.M. of Lincoln, Nebraska, 1889-1890, included the name of William S. Latta.

When the Burlington completed its road from Plattsmouth and Omaha to Lincoln and ran an excursion train to Lincoln in 1870, Dr. and Mrs. Latta made the trip. Three years later Dr. Latta moved his family to the young capital city which had impressed him so favorably.

Though the first few years in Lincoln were very trying, due to drouth, grasshoppers, hard times, and an ill-advised investment

in a Nebraska coal mine, Dr. Latta kept up his interest in civic affairs. He was a constant attendant at the First Presbyterian Church which he and Mrs. Latta joined when they moved to Lincoln, seldom missing a service. Born a Scotch Presbyterian, the Doctor was strict in his religious principles and in the up-bringing of his children.

A cause which interested the whole community was the Temperance movement in the late seventies. The saloons of the early western towns were a center of the worst vices and evils. Dr. Latta entered wholeheartedly into the fight, speaking and writing open letters to the *Nebraska State Journal*.

That he was a builder and organizer was apparent during his whole life. In November, 1876, he was elected coroner, and on March 14, 1877, was appointed county physician.

A member of the State Eclectic Medical Association, of which he was president in 1879, of the county and local societies, he was always actively interested in the National Eclectic Medical Association, his membership in which is dated June 19, 1879. That was the year he delivered his article on Malarial Poisons—*Miasma Vivus* — in which he pioneered in the germ theory. The lecture was published in the transactions of that session. The early meetings at Detroit, St. Louis, Chicago and New Orleans he attended. He was honored by being chosen national president in 1881 and presided at the next national meeting at New Haven, Connecticut.

In 1883 the three schools of medicine — the Eclectics, the Allopaths and the Homeopaths — were asked to start medical schools in the University of Nebraska. Dr. Latta helped organize the Eclectic School which started with a good enrollment. He was appointed by the regents of the University as Professor of Principles and Practice of Medicine. In January 1884 he founded the Nebraska Medical Journal and continued its publication for several years. Dr. C. W. M. Poynter, Dean of the Medical School of the University of Nebraska, says he saw a complete file of this publication in the New York Library of the Academy of Medicine and it is highly valued.

The Eclectic School of Medicine withdrew from the University of Nebraska and established itself on South Fourteenth

Street, Lincoln. In the spring of 1890, on invitation, the school was moved to the campus and incorporated with Cotner College (Dr. Latta continuing as its Dean) with a faculty of fifteen members. It offered the usual three-year course in medicine. Later it became known as the Lincoln Medical School. Dr. Latta was Professor of Principles and Practice of Medicine, of Pathology, and taught Histology, Microscopy, and Bacteriology. He served as Dean until his death on October 17, 1901.

In addition to the diploma Dr. Latta received from his three years of work at the Cincinnati Eclectic Medical College, he received an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine from the Georgia Eclectic Medical College of Atlanta, Georgia, granted him March 3, 1883. Another honor came to him in June, 1901, when Chancellor W. P. Aylsworth of Cotner University notified him while vacationing in California, that he had been granted the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws and the certificate was being forwarded to him. In his letter the Chancellor said: "The degree was heartily accorded you by our faculty and trustees. This is an expression not only of your professional worth, but of your loyalty to the institution, of which you have been an honored member so long."

Many young men through Dr. Latta's encouragement and financial aid were able to receive a medical education. Among his papers are three contracts of medical apprentices at Rock Bluff, one for five years and two for three years each. In Lincoln there were five young men who made their home at different times with the Lattas while attending the Eclectic Medical College.

Two resolutions from the student body of Cotner, sent to his wife at the time of Dr. Latta's death, indicate how much he was loved and revered. A part of one of the resolutions follows: "In his death we realize an irreparable loss of a pioneer in Eclecticism, of a guiding hand and noble professor in the Lincoln Medical College, of a wise counselor in time of perplexity, of a kind, fatherly, personal friend, a worthy example to each student." The other resolution, also by the students, on the death of their "beloved Dean" reads in part: "His ear was never closed to our lightest appeal. He was ever ready to advise, aid and sympathize with us. His kindly, fatherly care for our

welfare endeared him to us, but 'the results of a great man's labors survive him,' and the educational institution founded, nurtured and brought thus far to the enjoyment of a successful, useful existence will stand as an ever-living memorial to him whose life was centered in its welfare. Therefore we do from the depths of our hearts bemoan the loss sustained, and with feelings tender, born out of his affection for us, we unite as a student body in expressing to you our heartfelt sympathy in the loss of him whom you loved and we revered."

A biography of Dr. Latta is in reality the history of the Eclectic School of Medicine in Nebraska. He was enthusiastically and vitally interested in its principles. To elect the best of the stronger medicines of the Allopaths and the milder remedies of the Homeopaths, as indicated in the treatment of ailments, was a leading principle. For over fifty years the Eclectic School of Medicine had a large national following.

Dr. Latta was frequently called out into the state and often to surrounding states in consultation. Many letters of appreciation of his medical advice were among the papers in his desk. That he was known outside of his own locality is attested to by the fact that Mr. C. G. Bullock, when moving his family from Ohio to Lincoln in 1874, was given his name by their own family doctor who recommended him as "a very excellent physician."

Another activity this busy doctor found time for was to serve one of the large life insurance companies as medical examiner.

Dr. Latta was interested in and proud of his home town, Lincoln, for its enterprise and cultural opportunities. Art was included among his interests. In 1889, the second year of the local art association, Dr. and Mrs. Latta were listed as members.

At this time Frederick Remington, was creating much interest with his paintings of cowboys and Indians, and his graphic depiction of Western life. The Latta girls had a set of his pictures of Indian Chiefs, which were highly colored and greatly glorified the Indian. Justice Maxwell and Dr. Latta were so irritated by these posters which the daughters had placed on the mantel, that they said: "If they knew the sneaking, cheating, thieving, dirty Indians as we knew them in pioneer days, with the constant menace to the safety of our womenfolk left at home



during the Civil War, they wouldn't even look at them, let alone think of putting them up in their rooms."

The hours of a family physician in the early days of Nebraska statehood were long and grueling. Dr. Latta was often called as far as twenty-five or thirty miles from home to attend his patients, with only his horses and carriage as a means of transportation. In winter he returned at times chilled through, in spite of the huge wolf and buffalo robes and his large beaver fur gloves with cuffs coming well over his coat sleeves. Hoar frost coated the two-yard-long hand-knit scarf which he had wound about his neck and head, and clung to his full gray beard. Tired, stiff and worn, he appreciated the good hot supper which his ever-watchful wife had ready for him.

The summers were quite different. His children played hitching-post for him on his town calls and accompanied him on the long drives over the hot Nebraska roads. A favorite game was to drive as far and as long as they could in the shade of a drifting, billowing cloud.

When looking for a hammer or saw I am afraid his family was often a sore trial to Dr. Latta. He was orderly both in mind and habits. He liked to have "a place for everything and everything in its place."

In the Latta sitting room was an old-fashioned clock that sang out the hours with vigor. One evening when the two daughters were to have favorite callers they decided the clock shouldn't remind the young men of the passing time and scare them away. About eleven Dr. Latta returned from late study in his office and after visiting a few minutes he sensed that something was not as it should be. Locating the trouble — that the clock was not ticking as usual — he struck the hours patiently, steadily, and with so much clanging of the bell that, taking the hint, the boys were blocks away by the time he had finished his task.

Such a busy man might seem to neglect his family, but such was not the case with Dr. Latta. He would listen approvingly to the fun and nonsense of the young people in his home. His greatest pleasure was to join a group singing popular college songs around the square, carved Chickering piano. His rich bass voice swelled the melody of such songs as "Old Solomon Levi" and



"She drove her ducklets to the water." Such frivolous tunes were confined to week nights. Sunday evenings were reserved for the singing of the fine old hymns he loved so well.

It has always been a source of satisfaction and pride to the family that Dr. Latta was a doctor during the era of the high silk hat and gold-headed cane. His erect carriage, his bright blue, intelligent eyes, his fine curly and full beard, with high resolve and character showing in his smiling face, made him an outstanding figure on all occasions.

Dr. Latta was the epitome of the old-time family physician, who was doctor, confidant, beloved friend and father. His life was an achievement that men of this generation may well envy.