SARAH ADAMSON DOLLEY (1829-1909)
FIRST FEMALE AMERICAN DOCTOR,
LEADER OF SOCIAL CHANGE
by Melissa D. Squires

The success of a woman in a male-dominated field is, even today, considered somewhat remarkable. In addition to prominent figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, there were other women who pushed the envelope, opening doors previously closed to women both socially and economically. Sarah Adamson Dolley was such a woman. Born into a Quaker community in the early nineteenth century, some would later say that she “was a physician born, not a physician made.” Despite her modest beginnings, she became one of the most influential women in American politics, social justice, and medicine.

When Charles and Mary Adamson welcomed their daughter Sarah Riley into the world on March 11, 1829, they did so with the belief that they would raise their daughter in accordance with Quaker traditions of equality, truth, modesty, and faith that were the foundations for her community of Schuylkill Meeting, Pennsylvania. The determination and perseverance they instilled in their daughter enabled her to become an agent of change despite the enormous obstacles of her time.

Following Quaker traditions, Sarah Adamson attended school as a child. Her primary education took place in a schoolhouse run by her cousin Graceanna Lewis. Unlike other girls her age, who reserved their energies for literature and poetry, Sarah devoured books on physiology and botany. Having completed her primary education, Sarah attended Philadelphia’s Friends Central School, where she was tutored with other Quaker children from the Philadelphia area. Upon her graduation in 1847, she decided to enter the medical profession. This decision was certainly affected by her interactions with two uncles, Dr. Hiram Corson and Dr. William Corson, who performed medical procedures in her presence.

At that time, medicine was not an option for women even though an English woman, Elizabeth Blackwell, had been accepted to Geneva Medical College in Ontario County that very year. When Sarah asked her father for his support in her medical endeavors, he replied, “If it was not a mere freak of fancy, and she would make a success of it…then he would do just as he would for [his sons].” Though at the time this was certainly considered a progressive stance, it corresponded with Quaker values that did not make a distinction between the qualifications of gender.

The first step to receive a medical degree at that time was to apprentice with a practicing doctor. Sarah went straight to her uncle, Dr. Hiram Corson, and asked that he take her on as an apprentice. Dr. Corson, feeling that the medical profession was no place for females, refused her request. Not one to beg or plead, Sarah approached a young, good-looking physician, Dr. Edwin Fussel, and asked to study under his tutelage. He readily accepted her offer, and she began to study anatomy with him. Even for progressive Quaker attitudes, this was indecent; to have a young lady studying the human body with a young, single doctor was outrageous. Dr. Corson, hearing of his niece’s persistence and scandalous behavior, relented and agreed to take her on as an apprentice. With this announcement, Sarah’s family rallied behind her. Her father raised the east level of their house to give Sarah a proper studying room, while her mother bought her a real skeleton and medical books for her use.

Sarah completed a one-year apprenticeship with her uncle during which she witnessed the everyday tasks of a doctor and studied the medical techniques of the time. She still was determined to pursue a career in medicine, so she applied to medical schools. Dr. Corson felt that his niece had done an outstanding job as an apprentice and so he became her advocate in the application process. He began courting Geneva Medical College because they had already accepted a female student, Elizabeth Blackwell. Unfortunately, Blackwell’s acceptance had resulted from a tactical error. The administration at Geneva had allowed the all-male student body to vote on Blackwell’s acceptance, certain that their students would not allow her in. This would enable the administration to avoid controversy by passing the decision and the responsibility for it on to the students. However, the administration misread their students; the boys voted to accept her, never dreaming that the administration was in earnest. After that humiliating scandal, Geneva was determined not to make the same mistake again, although they called it “an experiment.” Geneva denied Sarah’s application, as did the Philadelphia College of Medicine, Jefferson Medical College, and ten others colleges throughout the country. The issue was not only the idea that women should not be taught in the science of medicine, but the fact that women would attend classes with men and sit beside them in an academic setting. Frustrated, but still determined, Sarah was delighted when her uncle, Dr. William Corson, found an advertisement in the paper about a college in Syracuse, New York that would accept women students. He accompanied Sarah to Central Medical College where she was accepted and began her formal medical training.
In 1849, Central Medical College was not an impressive sight, but it had a progressive curriculum. Unlike other medical colleges of its time, Central believed in a more naturalistic approach, relying on herbs and organic remedies to relieve ailments as opposed to harsher medicines with lead or mercury in them. Central also emphasized treating the patient as a whole person, not merely the ailment, and refraining from the traditional practices of bloodletting and purging, which they believed ultimately caused more harm than good. In 1850, the Syracuse division of Central Medical College merged with its sister campus located in Rochester, NY, so Sarah moved to Rochester to finish her medical training. It was here that she met her professor of anatomy and surgery, Dr. Lester C. Dolley, and fell in love. Sarah graduated from medical school in 1851. At graduation, diplomas were handed out in alphabetical order, so she received hers before two other female classmates, making her the second female to be a certified doctor in the United States. It should be noted that since Blackwell was English, Sarah had the honor of being the first female American doctor.

Following graduation, Sarah believed that it was important for her to have the same skill-sets and training as her male peers. She wanted an internship at a hospital like her male colleagues though no woman had ever interned before. She was received at Philadelphia Hospital near her hometown. In 1851, Philadelphia Hospital was 120 years old and serviced the "untouchables" of society. With such a needy population to attend to, Sarah gained vast experience and was able to apply her training in many fields and develop new methods of her own. Not only were patients challenging, but her male colleagues resented her presence and were both hostile and condescending. Sarah handled her environment with grace and tolerance worthy of the Quaker upbringing that had instructed her to look for God in everyone.

During her internship, Sarah and Dr. Lester C. Dolley were married in the tradition of the Friends in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 14, 1852. For the first few months of their marriage they were separated, as Sarah finished her internship in Philadelphia while her husband continued to teach in Rochester.

Sarah Dolley finished her internship during the fall of 1852 receiving the highest testimonials that had ever been paid to an intern. With that success under her belt, she returned to Rochester to live and work with her husband. Together, they opened an office at 5 Main Street and, as the Rochester Democrat stated: "the twain will go forth conquering the ills of humanity."

At the time, it was unthinkable for a woman doctor to treat a man, so Sarah was limited to treating female patients. This did not prove to be a difficulty of any sort for several reasons. First, many women held rigid Victorian modesty principles and felt more comfortable with a woman physician. Also, other women went to Sarah because they felt very strongly about the women's rights movement that was gaining momentum in Rochester thanks to the help of women like Susan B. Anthony.

Long before the debate of the working mom versus the stay-at-home mom, Sarah Dolley proved that working moms could be successful. On April 19, 1854, Sarah gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Liolyn Dolley, and two years later, to a son, Charles Sumner Dolley, on June 16, 1856. Unfortunately, tragedy struck the young family. On the morning of January 28, 1858, little Liolyn died of typhoid pneumonia at the age of 3 years, 9 months, and 9 days. Despite mourning the loss of her daughter, Sarah still believed that life was good, that it was important to experience the heaven on earth, and that whatever occurs after death must be for our own good.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, Rochester, New York was a hotbed of political activity. It was home to such notable people as Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, both of whom believed strongly in the emancipation of slaves and equality for all Americans. The Dolleys also shared these principles and despite the risks, opened their home for the cause and became involved in the Underground Railroad. After the Civil War broke out, Sarah worked with Clara Barton, establishing the Rochester chapter of the American Red Cross. Sarah's wartime aid included caring for soldiers and the families they left behind, providing food, clothing, and other essentials in addition to medical care. Sarah did not seek personal recognition for her efforts, but her contributions made her a notable person in Rochester.

After the war, Sarah and Lester traveled abroad to expand their medical horizons. They made arrangements with neighboring doctors and left Rochester, bound for Europe, in 1868. While abroad they visited the hospitals of Paris, witnessing new medical techniques that had yet to be used in the United States. After Paris, they visited the Holy Land and had the good fortune to witness some exotic Middle Eastern medicine. The husband-and-wife team returned to the United States after several months abroad with many wonderful memories and new medical techniques that they introduced in Rochester.

Sadly, on April 6, 1872, Dr. Lester Dolley died of spinal meningitis at the age of forty-seven. Sarah was now forty-three and a widowed mother. After her husband's death, Sarah took a brief trip abroad to France and Germany to further study emerging medical techniques. Particularly in Europe, sanitation, or rather the lack thereof, had been an issue for a long time. Infections and their causes were now gaining attention, and methods of sanitation were also developing. Intrigued, Sarah studied new washing and surgical procedures that she brought back to America. Upon her return, in the fall of 1872, Sarah set up a partnership with another female doctor, Dr. Searing, in Rochester, where she practiced and preached the new cleanliness and hygiene standards.

In 1874, the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania asked Sarah to teach a class on women's health for a semester. Sarah readily agreed and brought with her to the college the beliefs she had acquired from her early Quaker education, foreign lands, and her years of practical experience. Her underlying message to her female students was to regard the

**EPITAPH**

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patient as “something more than a static entity whose muscles, nerves, and joints are not simply a bundle of levers, pulleys, and hinges, but the instruments of that mysterious something we call life.” Sarah also believed that women had a special view and a different perspective from men, and she advocated a cooperative community with their male colleagues for the general advancement of the medical society as a whole. Despite her distinguished credentials and widespread respect for her professional accomplishments, Sarah Dolley still encountered resistance from many men, not only doctors. It was this attitude that prompted her to expand her crusade for women’s rights beyond the medical community, because she felt that it was her duty to do so.

In 1881, Sarah Dolley and a few female friends decided that they were lacking in certain knowledge and felt that it was their responsibility to educate themselves. Dolley proposed that they form a group dedicated to investigating their queries. The questions covered a plethora of subjects: history, politics, science, philosophy, and religion. Their perspective was that the only bad question was the one that went unasked. Thus, the Fortnightly Ignorance Club (FIC) was formed. While the newspapers poked fun at this group of women asking and answering their own questions, it was clear that these women saw information and education as a means to equality. By taking the first step, asking questions, they prepared to enter debate with their male counterparts. Sarah Dolley was elected president of the FIC and remained in that position until 1893.

An account of their questions and results can be found in the Ignorance Book which the secretary of the group wrote notes at every meeting. Inside the cover of the first volume appears a quote that set the tone for the entire group: “Only this I know,” said Socrates, “that I know nothing.” Within these books is a detailed account of the time, place, and members present at each meeting. The secretary reviewed previous weeks’ questions, reported on who found the answers, and presented new questions. Any member of the group could ask a question, and any member could answer it. If a question was not answered to the satisfaction of any group member, they would research the topic further and present their findings to the group at the next bi-weekly meeting. The book also contained pertinent newspaper articles (often written by members) and correspondences from research sources. These women were ahead of their time. Some of the early topics included: theology in schools, cremation, the Bible of the World, prison reforms, and the trouble in Ireland. Some of the questions specifically discussed were: “Are Jews unfairly persecuted in Germany?,” “Is sin like bile or bacteria?,” “Has Darwin even considered man is descended from the ape?,” “What is the Associated Press?,” “What is panic? Is it of the mind or body?,” and “What ever shall we do with our old hoop skirts?” Though some questions are now considered rather amusing, others we still wrestle with today.

While many men considered the group to be a benign gathering of silly women discussing sewing, the Fortnightly Ignorance Club was one of, if not the most influential group in Rochester of its time. One of the first issues they tackled was the presence of women on school boards. The question appears in the Ignorance Book in late April 1881. The members did their homework. In Massachusetts, women served on school boards in seven districts, including Cambridge. They saved the related correspondence with both male and female members of co-educational boards in the Ignorance Book and used their information to formulate an argument. On June 2, 1881, The Express newspaper published an article by Mrs. Parker, a member of the FIC, who wondered why women should not be allowed to serve on school boards, since they had already proven themselves to be more capable in the positions of teacher and principal. On this issue, the club encountered heavy dissent from the public. Readers, particularly men, wrote letters to the editor professing their profound disapproval to the idea that women could hold places of office. The members publicly responded to their contentions. The public debate reached other towns and counties in New York State. Eventually, it reached the Attorney General of New York State, Leslie W. Russell. He sent the following message to Rochester via the area’s assembly member in Albany, Charles S. Baker:

“At common law a woman might fill any local office of an administrative character, the duties attached of which were of such a character that a woman was competent to perform them. I am therefore of the opinion that women, possessing the qualifications specified in your question, if elected to the office of school commissioner in the city of Rochester may, both by the common and statute laws of this state perform the duties of such office.”

This announcement came as a victory to the group, which now encountered the challenge of electing a woman when they were not able to vote themselves. However, in the next election, a woman won a seat on the school board.
Sarah Dolley was the recipient of another honor in 1884, the dedication of a book. Author Jenny Marsh Parker penned the book, *Rochester: A Story Historical*, and dedicated much of the book to progressive movements that took place in Rochester. She admired Dolley for her courage, perseverance, and patience and memorialized her contributions by dedicating the book to her.

Yet, Dr. Sarah Dolley was far from finished in her committee work. In 1886, she co-founded one of the first societies in the country dedicated to the education of women in the medical field. The Practitioner’s Society of Rochester, New York sought to bring together women practicing medicine in an effort to build camaraderie and strength in numbers. On March 11, 1907, Sarah Dolley’s seventy-eighth birthday, the Society formed the Women’s Medical Society of New York State; Dr. Dolley served as its first president.

Many want to keep their private and personal lives separate. This was never the case with Sarah Dolley. She devoted herself to medicine, and demonstrated her dedication in a multitude of ways. In 1886 she opened her home as a provident dispensary for young women. In her house, she provided free medical care for Rochester’s poorest residents. Not only did this serve as a great asset to the community, but it also provided medical training for newly licensed doctors. These parallel motives were a great success that is even today mimicked in clinics around the country.

In 1893, Susan B. Anthony invited Harriet Townsend, of Buffalo, New York to speak with some of the women in Rochester about a group called the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union that was gathering momentum in Buffalo. After hearing Harriet Townsend’s message, Dolley united all of the women’s groups of Rochester under this title and worked together pursuing desperately needed reforms. Chosen to temporarily lead this group, Dolley focused on social reforms such as welfare programs for the poor, better working conditions for the young ladies in factories, women’s rights, and disease prevention and treatment in cities. Under Dolley’s guidance, many social improvements were made in Rochester. They established a foundation for public parks and playgrounds, the very first of its kind, so that the children of Rochester would have safe places for recreation and exercise. They also made great strides for the legal protection of women. The society later became the Legal Aid Society of Rochester, which still exists today.

Sarah Dolley continued her medical practice with Dr. Searring until the latter retired due to health issues in 1888. Dr. Dolley continued to practice medicine in Rochester until 1900, when she decided that at the age of seventy, it was time to retire. In 1907, she was made a life member of the Rochester Academy of Science, and was inducted with the then president of the University of Rochester, Rush Rhees. Later in 1909, Dr. Dolley began suffering from what was called an “acute form of neuralgia,” a painful degeneration of nerves. She did not want her friends to see her in this state, and thought that she would inform them of her illness when she had recovered and was of sound mind. She did not recover, however, and on Monday, December 27, 1909, Dr. Sarah A. Dolley passed away during the early hours of the morning at her home. The cause of death was officially stated as senility. At the time of her death, she was eighty years old, and the oldest woman physician in the United States.

In harmony with her modest upbringing and lifestyle, Dr. Dolley requested that there not be a eulogy at her funeral, which was held at St. Peter’s Presbyterian Church, where she had been a member ever since moving to Rochester. She asked that the hymns “Rock of Ages,” “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” and “Crossing of the Bar,” be sung and that the Reverends J.E. Kittridge and G.B.F. Hallock perform the service. Her wishes were carried out, with the exception that a eulogy was given. Many were not surprised that this was how she preferred her funeral to proceed. Though it seems that she was always on the forefront of radical movements, it was a role that she took reluctantly, and she shouldered the obligation as a duty instead of a desire. Close friends knew her to be a quiet person who preferred to leave this world with the simplicity and unassuming manner that she enjoyed in life. Though the ministers could have spoken for hours about her life and accomplishments, the Rev. Kittridge spoke briefly about her character and the contributions she made to medicine:

“Dr. Dolley’s life was rich and long in years. In her qualities and graces there was a charming simplicity, the unobtrusiveness of her Whittier-like heritage, coupled with a masterful strength of intellect. Dr. Dolley was a pioneer woman, a pioneer among women in the profession which was so sacred to her. It was her privilege to be an eye-witness and sharer in the achievements science has made in medicine and surgery in modern times, and that means all times.”

Dr. Dolley’s funeral attracted a large gathering from around the country as fellow physicians, both male and female, as well as others who respected her and her causes arrived by horse carriages and blocked off several streets in Rochester.

Sarah Dolley ultimately joined her husband in Mount Hope Cemetery in the family plot, located in section I. Their gravestones are very similar. On the front are their names with a symbol of nature, and on the back there is information about their dates of death and their ages. Each of the marble gravestones has two branches at the top; the left branch is freshly in bloom with small fruits and lush foliage, the right branch is withered with acorns on it. The symbolism is in agreement with their core beliefs and values. Sarah was trained to appreciate the natural healing powers of herbal remedies and was respectful of nature. The aging of plants becomes a metaphor for human life. We bloom, we age, we wither, we die—a cycle that she respected as a doctor and which demonstrates that she respected her own mortality. Finally, the acorn illustrates the impression that something great, like an oak tree, comes from something small.

Sarah Adamson Dolley was the small acorn on the ground that helped the progression of women in medicine to take root and grow.

(Editor’s Note: The author, Melissa Squires, as a freshman student at the University of Rochester, prepared this essay as part of the course requirements for Religion 167, Speaking Stones, taught by Professor Emil Homerin, who is also a trustee of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery.)
THE RAU MAUSOLEUM RESTORATION; YOUR MEMBERSHIP DOLLARS AT WORK by Donald S. Hall
Reconstruction photos by author

It seems impossible when you look at the Rau mausoleum from Indian Trail Avenue above it that sometime in the 1980s the driver of a cemetery truck lost control and managed to smack the granite cross on top of the mausoleum, causing it to crash down onto the mausoleum forecourt, damaging both the cross and the slab of stone that made up the front porch of the mausoleum. That accident, coupled with the erosion of the glacial hill into which the mausoleum is built, did major damage to the structure.

The Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery decided to attempt a restoration, if the price was right. After pursuing several contractors, we selected E. G. Sackett Company, who agreed to do the job for $20,140. That was exciting news, since the city estimated a restoration figure of three times that amount and was therefore considering demolition of this important historic mausoleum.

On Wednesday, September 5, 2007, Sackett employees Jason Requa, Dave Barrett, and Mike Smith along with their wonderful machine, a Volvo Gradall, began work restoring the mausoleum façade. The first step was to move some of the headstones in front of the mausoleum to open a clear work area. Next the men took away the fallen stones plus those remaining in place from the “wings” of the mausoleum, numbering and placing them safely out of the way. A new drain line was established from behind the wings of the mausoleum to relieve pressure from the interior that might do damage in the future.

Having been surprised by a minor rock slide on the right-hand wing, Jason & Co. were concerned that when the capstones on the left hand wing were removed that the remaining face stones would come tumbling down, so they braced the wall before lifting the capstones. With the face stones safely out of the way, the original, roughly laid stones behind the façade were exposed. It was these stones that were pushing the face stones out of place, so the crew cut and removed stones to create an open space about a foot deep between the rubble wall and the face stones.

Then work began to rebuild the wings. The foundation for the wings turned out to be sound. The men were able to replace eight to ten stones a day, using mortar and stainless steel clips to hold them in place. The huge, rugged tires of the Gradall moving over the site turned the former lawn into a sea of textured mud whose pattern changed with each pass of the machine.

After the wings were rebuilt, it was time to replace the gently curved capstones on each side. The second of the two capstones on the right hand wing would not drop into place. The fit was too tight between the edge of the roof slabs and the downhill capstone. It was the end of the day; the crew was tired, and after four attempts to place the stone, they knocked off for the day. They would try again the next morning, this time using a chain fall to micro-position the stone so that it would slip into place. Once the wings were complete, Jason refilled the space behind the wings with gravel. This would permit water to drain down and out through the weep holes at the bottom of the wings, and not slowly slide the wing stones forward again.

A cemetery staff member delivered a load of sand and gravel to the “front porch” of the mausoleum. Once the gravel was leveled, the three large stones that paved the entrance were placed in position.

The Sackett crew presented the Friends with a present by righting some fallen headstones and the toppled curb on the left-hand side of the mausoleum forecourt. These projects were not in the contract, but they helped give the project a finished look. Marilyn Nolte, vice-president of the Friends and project committee chair, guided the repair of the damage. She selected E. G. Sackett to do the work and was on the site every day, frequently conferring with Jason. A few days after the Sackett crew departed, the cemetery staff took

Historic photograph of the Charles Rau mausoleum as it appeared in the early 1900s.
over re-grading and seeding the demolished lawn.

You may inspect the work for yourself. At the north entrance to the cemetery, walk to the Florentine fountain. The Rau mausoleum is in the hillside to your right. George Marburger purchased the plot in 1852. He died two years later and the property passed to his widow, Elizabeth, who married Charles Rau. The Marburger monument is white marble and sits on the ground above the Charles Rau mausoleum. The mausoleum is a hillside crypt with nine interments: Charles and Elizabeth Rau; Franz Rau, Charles’ brother; George Marburger and his wife, Marie, plus his brothers, Ludwig and Jacob; and Emil Reisky and his wife, Arebella, who was George and Elizabeth Marburger’s only child. Emil was Charles Rau’s business partner at the Rau and Reisky Brewery, which became Reisky and Spies Brewery after the death of Rau, which in turn, became Genessee Brewing, which stopped production during prohibition. After prohibition was repealed, a new brewery was formed, Genessee Brewing Company, which has become the present High Falls Brewing Company.

Charles Rau (1823-1911) came to Rochester from Germany in 1848 and started working in the brewery business. He also organized the Rochester German Insurance Company and the Standard Sewer Pipe Company and was an important philanthropist.

Stone mason crew chief, Jason Requa, had never visited Mt. Hope Cemetery before he began work on the Rau mausoleum, but he was aware that his great, great, great grandfather, Josephus Requa, was buried there. He was also aware that Josephus had played a role in winning the Civil War with his invention of the first machine gun, a 25-barrel, battery-firing rifle. The family possesses a letter from President Abraham Lincoln acknowledging the invention. One day, on a lunch break, Jason visited Josephus’ gravesite. Jason also loaned the Friends his files on his famous ancestor. In addition to inventing a battery rifle, Josephus Requa was also Susan B. Anthony’s and Frederick Douglass’s dentist. The Sunday before he, Mike, and Dave finished their restoration work, Jason returned to the cemetery with 14 members of the Requa family who took the 2 p.m. tour. At the conclusion of the tour, over lemonade and cookies, Jason became a member of the Friends of Mt. Hope.