



## **Dr. Sarah R. Adamson Dolley (1829-1909)**

Birthplace: Schuylkill Meeting, Pennsylvania

Sarah Read Adamson was born on March 11, 1829, to Charles and Mary Corson Adamson, in Schuylkill Meeting (Chester County), Pennsylvania. Her father was a farmer and a storekeeper. Her parents were Quakers (Society of Friends).

Adamson was first educated at a school run by her cousin, Graceanna Lewis. She then attended the Friend's School in Philadelphia. She decided to become a doctor, and asked her physician uncle, Hiram Corson, to accept her as his apprentice. He initially refused, believing that the practice of medicine was an unsuitable profession for ladies. However, when it became apparent that she would not give up her quest, he relented.

Adamson studied medicine at her uncle's office until she was accepted by the Central Medical College, which was founded in Syracuse, New York, in November, 1849. The College moved to Rochester shortly thereafter, and Adamson received her medical degree on February 20, 1851, just two years after Elizabeth Blackwell had become the first woman graduate of a modern American medical school.

A few months later, in May 1851, Adamson was accepted as an intern at the Philadelphia Hospital (also known as "Old Blockley") in Pennsylvania. Adamson's internship provided rigorous training for the young medical graduate. Edwin Sayers describes the institution as a "120-year-old final haven for homeless misfits, destitute aged, alcoholic derelicts, mentally ill, incurably ill and, most pathetic of all, abandoned children and orphans."

On June 9, 1852, upon completion of her internship, Adamson married Dr. Lester Clinton Dolley, who taught anatomy and surgery at her alma mater, Central Medical College. She returned with him to live in Rochester, New York. The two opened a practice together at Five Main Street, where they also had living quarters.

The Dolleys had two children, Loilyn, born April 19, 1854, and Charles Sumner, born June 16, 1856. Loilyn died in 1858 of typhoid pneumonia. Charles was to graduate from medical school and become a marine biologist.

In 1869, Sarah Read Adamson Dolley and her husband took an extended tour abroad to Europe and the Middle East. There she attended lectures and courses and visited medical facilities.

In 1872, Dolley's husband died of spinal meningitis. In the years following his death, she accepted a temporary position as an obstetrics professor at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania.\* She also returned to Europe and pursued further medical studies in France, Prague and Vienna. When she came back to Rochester, she resumed her medical practice, teaming up with Dr. Anna H. Searing.





In 1886, Dolley was among the group of women physicians who established the Provident Dispensary, a Rochester clinic for women and children run by women physicians. In addition to Dolley, these pioneering women doctors included her partner, Dr. Searing, and Dr. Marion Craig. The women who formed this clinic also founded the Practitioners' Society, an organization of local women physicians. The Society was organized at her home on January 13, 1887. She became its first president.

The Practitioners' Society later became the Blackwell Society and, on March 11, 1907, at a celebration honoring Dolley's birthday, the Society organized the Women's Medical Society of the State of New York. Dolley became the first president, and the Society met in Rochester annually on her birthday. Dolley was also a member of the Monroe County (NY) Medical Society, where she served as a speaker, a committee member, and (at least once) as a delegate to the American Medical Association.

In addition to her professional affiliations, Dolley was also known for her leadership in other organizations. In 1879, she helped to found the Rochester Society of Natural Sciences, and served as its head. She was also present when a group of business and professional women decided to form the "Ignorance Club" at an informal meeting on December 8, 1880. The Club got its name because author Jane Marsh Parker had mentioned at the meeting that she had recently seen an article which suggested that people should keep an "Ignorance Book," or a notebook where they could write down questions or topics which they would like to study in the future. Parker said that she thought this would be a good idea for a group as well as for individuals. Dolley then passed around her prescription book and asked the women present to write down a question, which they would like to explore. The women found the questions so intriguing that they decided to establish a club using the "Ignorance Book" idea as an organizing principle. The Ignorance Club, officially organized on January 17, 1881, elected Dolley as its first president. She served in this capacity for twenty years.

Dolley was also instrumental in the establishment of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union of Rochester, in 1893. She had called a meeting of all Rochester women's clubs to discuss the formation of an umbrella organization. However, before the meeting occurred, the region's women were disturbed when a homeless and destitute woman fainted in the street and was placed in jail, for lack of an alternative place for her to stay. Dolley readily agreed with Susan B. Anthony and Mary Gannett that the proposed meeting should be used instead to talk about forming a group which concentrated on helping poor and working women, similar to organizations in Boston and Buffalo. A speaker from the Buffalo Union was called in, Dolley asked Gannett to preside in her place, and at the meeting, the Rochester Women's Educational and Industrial Union was born. Dolley became one of the organization's first members.

In addition to her work with women's organizations, Dolley had many connections with the women's rights movement. In a report to the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention in 1866, Caroline Dall stated that Dolley had written a letter to a women's rights activist stating, "May your labors be prospered, that the women of our country may





have a sphere rather than a hemisphere!" In 1872, Dolley was one of the women of the First Ward-- along with Amy Kirby Post, Mary Fish Curtis and Mrs. L.C. Smith -- who registered to vote in the national election. Although she was ultimately not allowed to vote, she was among those who later contributed money to help defray trial costs of the inspectors who had allowed Anthony to vote.

Dolley was also a close friend of Susan B. Anthony. In 1889, Anthony spent a week in July at Dolley's summer home in Monroe County. In 1890, Dolley was one of those who graced the receiving line for the celebration of Susan B. Anthony's seventieth birthday, held on December 15th.

Sarah Read Adamson Dolley quietly enhanced the lives of both rich and poor women by her example and her work as a physician, by her leadership in women's organizations, and by her quiet support for women's rights. She died at her home in Rochester, New York on December 27, 1909, at the age of eighty. She was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery.

\*WorldCat database shows that Duke University Medical Center Library has "Correspondence and lecture at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania" by Sarah A. Dolley (in [Women in medicine and other addresses and lectures], S.I., S.N., 1870 1880.)

From the website: <http://winningthevote.org/F-SDolley.html>

### **Bibliography of Suggested Books & Articles**

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**Location**

Lot 107: Sarah Dolley

**Area Markers**

Lot 107: M. Michelson

