



Pioneer Physicians



By Irma West, MD

This article is adapted from Dr. West's Self-Directed Tour to Gravesites of Medical Pioneers at Sacramento's Historical City Cemetery. Omitted are sections on Doctors Frederick Hatch, Louise Heilbron and Gustavus Simmons, which appear elsewhere in this issue

THE INFLUENCE of Sacramento's pioneer physicians went far beyond caring for the sick and injured. Most were uncommonly public spirited. Their numerous and substantial contributions made Sacramento and the state a more healthful, more pleasant, and more prosperous place to live.

Some of these pioneer physicians held political offices, while others established the public health agencies for the city and the state. Twelve physicians established the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement - the oldest continuously operating county medical society in the state. One physician was a founding member and president of the American Medical Association, and others served as Presidents of the California Medical Association.

Among the pioneer physicians:

Charles Duncombe, MD

Dr. Duncombe was a native of Stanford, CT who moved to Upper Canada to become a landowner and member of Parliament. Ontario's first medical school, the Talbot Dispensary, was established by Dr. Duncombe and a Dr. Rolf. Both men helped lead the William Lyon Mackenzie rebellion in 1837. These reformers tried, unsuccessfully, to undo the system under which the British Governor and appointed administrators could overrule the elected assembly. The rebels were hunted down as traitors, and many found their way to the United States.

Dr. Duncombe's escape was described as follows:

"Dr. Charles Duncombe who had rallied a rebel force at Scotland, south of Brantford, spent one night hidden in a bed between a farmer and his wife. Another night, after friends put him to bed dressed as 'Grandma' he received respectful goodnights from a posse tramping through the house in search of Dr. Duncombe. After a four week flight he reached his sister in London, Ontario. Disguised as 'Aunt Nancy' he was taken by sleigh to the border post at Sarnia. Militia guards escorted him across the St. Claire River to the American shore - whereupon 'Aunt Nancy' shouted 'Go back and tell your Commander you have just piloted Dr. Duncombe across the river!'"

Dr. Duncombe found his way to Sacramento in about 1843, although there is no record of his practicing medicine until 1851. He was active in Masonry, in fact he was one of its founders in upper Canada. Upon his death in 1862, his friends erected a monument with the inscription, "A Friend of Liberty."

Thomas Muldrup Logan, MD

Dr. Thomas Logan arrived in the Sacramento area soon after the California gold rush

began. He had practiced medicine in South Carolina since 1828, but the lure of the gold fields brought him around Cape Horn to California in 1850. While mining in Coloma he heard about the cholera epidemic in Sacramento, and decided to abandon the gold fields to help the sick. His abilities were eminently suited to his task, for he had conducted studies on cholera during his travels abroad.

Following the epidemic, Logan remained in Sacramento, where he became the most widely-known physician in the West. His contributions, both in research and in organizational activities, helped to promote his reputation. His interest in epidemics and communicable disease fostered much of his research. Through that research he determined that communicable diseases caused over half of the deaths in Sacramento.

In addition to his research, Dr. Logan contributed to medical and public health organizations. In 1847 he participated in the founding of the American Medical Association, and in 1871 brought the first meeting of that organization in the West to San Francisco. The next year, the association elected him president. During his presidency he acknowledged the rights of women to study and practice medicine, by introducing a resolution accepting women as doctors. The resolution failed.

Dr. Logan died on February 13, 1876.

John Frederick Morse, MD

In 1849, Dr. John Morse left his New York medical practice for California in the hope of improving his health. He mined gold for a short time before settling in Sacramento to practice medicine.

Dr. Morse both practiced medicine and helped to improve conditions. During the cholera epidemic of 1850 he gave generously of his services to the sick and destitute. His willingness to help the sick without pay forced him to look for other work to support his family. He worked at a variety of jobs, including selling real estate, running for public office, owning a drug store, and, in 1851, editing the *Sacramento Union* newspaper. He also wrote a vivid history of Sacramento. His writing earned him both popularity and respect in the community. In his writing and his activities in politics, he strongly promoted public health measures to clean up Sacramento.

In 1863 Dr. Morse left Sacramento for San Francisco and a position with the Medical Department of the University of the Pacific, the first medical school in California. In 1873, his deteriorating health forced him to retire from both teaching and his medical practice. He died soon after on December 30, 1874. A statue to his memory stands in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in San Mateo County.

Theodora Tiffie Purkitt, MD

Theodora Tiffie was born near Petaluma and grew up in a prominent Glenn County pioneer family. Her father, John Richard Tiffie, came from Kentucky to the gold mines of Placer County, but soon moved to Sonoma County where he became a successful stock raiser. He then acquired 2,500 acres of land in Glenn County where he built the family home and a general store. Mr. Tiffie was a firm believer in education for his three children, so Theodora attended the Sacramento Seminary. In 1873 she married George Purkitt, an engineer and surveyor whose Boston ancestor, Henry Purkitt, was reported to have participated in the Boston Tea Party. The Purkitts lived on the Tiffie ranch which Theodora inherited from her father. Six children were born to them.

To educate and care for these six children, Theodora sold her father's ranch and moved to Willows. Later she moved to San Francisco to attend Cooper Medical College, where she graduated with honors in 1894. She opened an office in Willows, joined the California Medical Association, and made numerous contributions to medical journals. She continued her agricultural and stock raising interests as well.

Dr. Purkitt died in 1923.

A close friend, Dr. Etta Lund, paid this tribute: "One of my pleasant early memories is of Dr. Theodora Purkitt. She paved the way for me, eased the situation, made life pleasant all the way around, for she had fought the prejudice against a woman doctor and had been accepted because of her fine competence. She was never too busy to give assistance or to explain to an inexperienced young doctor fresh from the city."

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