

THE INFORMATION BUREAU

LAFAYETTE HOUGHTON BUNNELL

Dr. Kelley is preparing a paper on Lafayette Houghton Bunnell (1824-1903) to present to the Johns Hopkins Historical Society and is searching for data concerning Dr. Bunnell. Will you be so very kind as to give him any information which you may have?

I spent yesterday searching in the Congressional Library but while I found much biographical material relating to Minnesota Dr. Bunnell was literally conspicuous by his absence. Vol. 14 of your Collections gave a brief note of Dr. Bunnell and a most interesting reference to your Scrap-books, Vol. 28; would it be possible for the Society to lend its Scrap-book to Dr. Kelly, or could you furnish him with data from the book? Dr. Kelly particularly wants to obtain all possible information regarding Dr. Bunnell's connection with medicine; where did he receive his degree? Did he practice? M. D. is signed after his name in his books. Was he not surgeon in a Wisconsin regiment?

Please make your information as full as possible. Dr. Kelly's paper will be published later and will be a just recognition of a brave and interesting man.

Can you tell me who was the first physician in Winona? One writer gives Dr. Allen, another Dr. Cole.

HARRIET BLOGG, Baltimore, Maryland¹

Lafayette Houghton Bunnell was born in Rochester, New York, in 1824. He was the son of Dr. Bradley Bunnell, who was born in New London, Connecticut, in 1771, and of Charlotte Houghton, who was born in Windsor, Vermont, in 1785. In 1833 Dr. Bunnell, who had visited Detroit in 1828, decided to locate in that city. He had been there but a short time, however, when he removed with his family to Saginaw. Again dissatisfied with the field for his profession, he returned to Detroit within a few months, leaving his family at Saginaw. In this frontier settlement Lafayette spent several years of his

¹ Miss Blogg is in charge of the library of Dr. Howard A. Kelly of Baltimore. Dr. Kelly's article has been published in the *Annals of Medical History* (vol. 3, no. 2) under the title "Lafayette Houghton Bunnell, M.D., Discoverer of the Yosemite." It also has been issued as a separate (16 p.). See *ante*, 4: 187.

boyhood. His playmates were young Chippewa Indians, from whom he quickly gained a knowledge of their language. Here he came in contact with fur-traders, whose stories caused young Bunnell to long for the life of the extreme frontier. A visit from his mother's cousin, Dr. Douglas Houghton, a member of the Schoolcraft expedition of 1832, served to intensify this longing. Later, in Detroit, the boy lived in the same hotel with Henry R. Schoolcraft, and here also he heard exciting tales of the upper Mississippi country from the Detroit Snellings.

Lafayette's parents, however, had other plans for the future of their son. When he was twelve years old he was sent to a classical school in Detroit, the Latin school of Mr. O'Brien. He soon left this to attend the "Bacon Select or High School." Here he made good progress, but his studies ended when his father met with financial reverses. Lafayette was forced to earn his own bread, and he found employment in the drug store of B. T. Le Britton. His employer sent him into Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia to take orders and make collections. In 1840, much against his wishes, he was taken into his father's office to study medicine. For two years he attended private clinics and demonstrations and did some reading.

Then came the opportunity to enter the life of which he had been dreaming. His brother Willard, who had entered the fur trade in Wisconsin several years earlier, was in poor health and wished to move to the dry climate of the upper Mississippi. He sent for Lafayette to accompany him. The eighteen-year-old boy crossed the lakes and joined his brother at the mouth of the Menominee River; from here the brothers journeyed to Green Bay and thence followed the Fox and Wisconsin rivers to the Mississippi. They settled at Trempealeau, east of the river. Here Willard Bunnell resided until 1849, when he crossed the river and founded the town of Homer, slightly south of Winona.

In 1844 Lafayette helped to build the first house in Winona. It was probably in the same year that, becoming dissatisfied with frontier life, he returned to Detroit and resumed his medical studies in the office of Dr. Scoville, only to be interrupted by the outbreak of the Mexican War. Bunnell was appointed hospital steward of the First Michigan Volunteer Infantry. During the illness of the doctors, while the regiment was quartered in Cordova, Mexico, he had entire charge of the hospital and at the close of the war he had the medical charge of one battalion.

After the discovery of gold in California Bunnell went overland through Mexico to Mariposa. Soon after his arrival trouble arose with the Indians, and when the Mariposa Battalion was formed for defense against them, he became a member. In March, 1851, members of the battalion were attempting to find the village of the Yosemite Indians, which was known to be in a deep valley. Thus was discovered the Yosemite Valley, named upon Bunnell's suggestion for the Indian tribe which inhabited it. The name means "a full-grown grizzly bear." The Indians told the members of the party that they were the first white men who had ever entered the valley. Dr. Bunnell's book, the *Discovery of the Yosemite* (New York, 1880), is a history of this expedition.

Bunnell enlisted in the Union Army at the very outbreak of the Civil War. His military record, quoted from James M. Aubery's history of *The Thirty-sixth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry*, follows:

Enlisted April 18, 1861, at La Crosse, Wis.; appointed hospital steward July 22, 1861, and discharged May 9, 1862, as hospital steward by order of General McDowell. Above service in Company B, Second Wisconsin Infantry Volunteers.

Enlisted in Company B, Second Wisconsin Cavalry Volunteers, November 14, 1863, and discharged March 1, 1865, to accept commission as assistant-surgeon Thirty-sixth Wisconsin Infantry Volunteers.

Commissioned assistant-surgeon Thirty-sixth Wisconsin Infantry Volunteers February 21, 1865, to rank from same date;

mustered as such March 20, 1865; commissioned surgeon July 11, 1865, to rank from same date; mustered to date July 11, 1865, and mustered out with regiment, July 12, 1865.

Before he received his commission the degree of doctor of medicine had been conferred upon Bunnell by the La Crosse Medical College of La Crosse, Wisconsin, on October 20, 1864. His commission and his diploma are the most interesting items in the Bunnell Papers, which were presented to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1916 by Mr. James M. George of Winona.

At the close of the war Dr. Bunnell located at Homer and took possession of the land and buildings left by his brother, who died in August, 1861. The doctor resided in Homer during the remainder of his life. Here he practiced his profession to a limited extent, occasionally going as far as Winona to make medical calls.

In the district about his home Dr. Bunnell was well known as a writer of local history. He wrote the chapters on early settlement for a *History of Winona County* (Chicago, 1883). He also is the author of a volume entitled *Winona and Its Environs on the Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Days* (Winona, 1897). Both of these works contain some autobiographical material. An article on "Pioneer Doctors of Winona," in the *Winona Republican Herald* for June 30, 1917, includes a section on Dr. Bunnell. An obituary sketch, clipped from the *Winona Independent* of July 24, 1903, is in volume 28 of the society's scrapbooks.

The question of Winona's first doctor is discussed in a *History of Winona County* by Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge and William J. Whipple (Chicago, 1913). According to these authors Dr. Allen, of whom very little is known, arrived in 1853 and is supposed to have been the first man to practice medicine in the county. Dr. James M. Cole settled in Winona in 1854 and was the community's first practicing physician.

B. L. H.

Thank you for the memoranda *re* Bunnell. They are just what I wanted and a great help. I will of course send you the matter when printed. . . . I regret to say that I got Bunnell's name too late to go into my cyclopedia.

HOWARD A. KELLY

Dr. Kelly would be greatly obliged to you if you will have a photograph taken of Dr. Bunnell's diploma from the La Crosse Medical College. . . . Your society has furnished Dr. Kelly with the exact information wanted and was the only source which could give the place of his graduation

Your splendid paper on Dr. Bunnell, prepared by Miss Heilbron, does not give the date of his death; could you give this, and tell of what he died? One communication said he died in 1903 and stated that he left no children; another that he died in a hospital at Homer and left daughters and gives the date as the autumn of 1905. Please straighten this out.

Can you tell me something of the La Crosse Medical College?

HARRIET BLOGG

According to the *Winona Independent* for July 24, 1903, Dr. Bunnell "was taken to the Winona Hospital for treatment, and remained there for some weeks, and on improving was taken home, but suffered a relapse with fatal results." The nature of his illness is not mentioned. Since this statement appears in connection with the funeral notice, he probably died about July 20, 1903.² All accounts used in the preparation of the sketch of Dr. Bunnell agree that he had no children. He seems to have died at his home in Homer.

A brief history of the La Crosse Medical College appears in a *History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin* (Chicago, 1881). The college "was instituted in the fall of 1864, under a charter granted April 18, to Dugald D. Cameron, P. S. McArthur, J. B. G. Baxter, William L. Kennett, Ewen H. McMillan, William T. Wenzell and Augustus Brummel, as the charter members." The original board of trustees was made up of these charter members and the first officers were chosen from

² Dr. Kelly, in his article on Bunnell (see *ante*, n. 1), gives July 21, 1903, as the date of the latter's death. The author bases his statement on data furnished by Mr. Harry L. Buck, postmaster of Winona.

their numbers. At this time the college was conducted by an imposing corps of professors. "The college continued in active operation for two or three years, since which time no regular meetings have been held, but the charter has been kept good by the election of officers yearly, and it is the intention of the officers to again put it in operation at no distant day." So far as is known, however, this intention was never carried out.

B. L. H.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).