

**LATTA, SAMUEL WHITEHILL, 1848-1923
LETTERS, 1869-1870**

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dr. Samuel Whitehill Latta was born in Parkersburg, Pennsylvania on July 23, 1848. He was the son of William Sutton Latta (1822-1871), the First Surgeon for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and Mary Eckert Whitehill (1822-1891).

As a young man, Samuel W. Latta was educated at Parkersburg and Media Academies. He was enrolled at Lafayette College from 1863 to 1866. While at Lafayette College, Latta was a member of Zeta Psi Fraternity and the Washington Literary Society. He went on to earn a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1868.

Latta served as an assistant surgeon in the U.S. Navy from 1868-1873, stationed in the West Indies, South America, Africa, China and Japan. In the Korean Expedition of 1871, Latta served as Surgeon in charge of landing forces under Rear Admiral John Rogers. After retiring from the Navy in 1879, he worked as the surgeon and purser on the Steamship *Nederland* of the Red Star Line from 1879 to 1880.

Latta worked as Chief Medical Examiner of the Pennsylvania Railroad from 1886-1918. His brother William J. Latta also worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad from 1871-1899 as a telegrapher and General Agent. Latta was a member of the State Board of Medical Examiners 1894-1899 and served as the President of the Pennsylvania Railroad Surgeons Association in 1917. He also served as the director of the John Wanamaker Life Foundations for Employees. Latta was a member of the Pennsylvania Society of the Sons of the Revolution and was descended from Private John Wilson Jr. of the Fourth Battalion of the Pennsylvania Militia.

Latta was married to Ann Abel of Easton, Pennsylvania in 1873. The couple had no children. He died on March 1923 at the age of 66.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Samuel W. Latta Letters (1869-1870) contain 37 letters Latta wrote while serving as an Assistant Surgeon in the U.S. Navy. The collection contains 34 letters Latta wrote to his mother, Mary Whitehill Latta, and 3 letters addressed to his father, Dr. William Sutton Latta. The letters are organized in chronological order and are accompanied by transcripts of the letters compiled by his niece, Rachel Latta Franck (1892-1986).

The letters describe Latta's first two years of service in the Navy, including his experiences in Key West and Cuba in 1869 and as a member of an 1870 expedition to Asia on the *USS Alaska*. Latta references many important historical events in his letters, including the 1869 Cuban Rebellion, the death of British philanthropist George Peabody, the election of Hiram Rhodes Revels (first African American Senator), the 1870 Tientsin Massacre, and the Franco-Prussian War. The letters also contain mentions of local history and the 1869 Pennsylvania

Governor's Race. The collection also includes several miscellaneous items of Latta's, including a prescription he wrote in 1917.

Latta wrote the first five letters from April through August 1869 while onboard the *USS Gettysburg* and *USS Contoocook* in Key West, Florida and Cuba. In these letters Latta describes life as a naval doctor, dealing with outbreaks of yellow fever and dysentery among the troops. The letter also mentions the ongoing conflict between Cuba and Spain and how he has witnessed large violent mobs and the besieging of a local town by rebels. Latta was unhappy with the warm climate and living conditions onboard the *USS Gettysburg* and expresses a desire to return home to his family and fiancée in Pennsylvania.

The next four letters were written in September 1869 from a Naval Quarantine Hospital in Portsmouth, New Hampshire as Latta recovered from an unspecified severe illness. In the letters, Latta details his recovery process and life in the Quarantine Hospital, including a fishing trip. Latta was frustrated with the slow pace of his recovery and wanted to return home as soon as possible.

After being discharged from the hospital, Latta was stationed on the *USS Gettysburg* in Brooklyn, New York in October and the *USS Alaska* in Boston, Massachusetts for the month of December. He recounts the bittersweet experience of celebrating Christmas away from home and his future plans to marry his fiancée Annie Abel of Easton, PA.

Latta's first 11 letters of 1870 are dated from January to March and describe the *USS Alaska's* preparations for its upcoming journey to Asia. He describes the process of setting up medical facilities on a new ship and vaccinating the crew against smallpox. While waiting to set sail, he attended a performance of *Hamlet* with Edwin Booth in the title role. Latta also writes about his experiences navigating the New York social scene, and his friendship with the wife of Silas Weir Roosevelt (1823-1870). He also mentions making several trips back to Easton to see family and friends while waiting for the *USS Alaska* to finally set sail.

The *USS Alaska* set sail for China in late March, 1870. In his next ten letters, Latta describes the journey from New York to Cape Town, South Africa, including the Neptune Ritual, during which men crossing the Equator for the first time have their heads ceremoniously shaved. The letters also contain descriptions of life at sea and Latta's organization of an onboard Church choir. The ship reached South Africa in late June and Latta greatly appreciated finally receiving letters his family had written him and wrote about the beauty of Cape Town.

The next four letters describe the journey from South Africa to China, mentioning stops on Johanna Island, Singapore and the Straits of Malacca. Latta found the culture in these places to be very foreign and also about writes serving on the Court Martial of several sailors who tried to desert in Cape Town.

The *USS Alaska* reached China in September, 1870 and the rest of Latta's letters are written from Asia. He describes his impression of U.S. diplomacy following the murder of French nuns at Tientsin. Latta asserted the French would retaliate if they were not occupied with the ongoing war against Prussia. Latta recounts experiencing the U.S.S. *Alaska's* journey to

Shanghai and 640 mile trip down the Yang Ste Kiang River from Shanghai to Hangchow, the first American war ship that made this trip. Latta's letters from China include a rough sketch of the *USS Alaska's* route from Saigon to Shanghai and a drawing of the *USS Alaska*.

Latta describes the experience of visiting several Asian cities including Hong Kong and Nanking and his impressions of Chinese culture. After visiting Shanghai in December, 1870, Latta described it as the "Paris of the East" and proudly described the number of American ships in the city, believing only England could rival America's financial influence in the late 19th century. Latta's last letters of 1870 describe celebrating Christmas at sea and his belief that he would remain at sea until at least 1872.

Latta's letters reveal a deep devotion to his family and friends. He inquires often after family members and friends and loved to receive local gossip. Latta also expressed a desire that his siblings would write to him more often. He often adopted a teasing tone when mentioning his fiancée, Annie Abel and offered career advice to his brother William Jr., urging him to pursue his education. Latta was also interested in local news and politics, often asking his mother to send him copies of the local newspaper and to keep him informed about current events. He was a Democrat who supported Asa Packer in the 1869 Pennsylvania Governor's race and a devoted Presbyterian.

Additional Latta family papers can be found at the Winterthur Library and Museum in Winterthur, Delaware.

INVENTORY

Folder

1	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Apr. 25) 4p.	Key West, FL
2	SWL to Mother: 1869 (May. 11) 4p.	Key West, FL
3	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Jul. 13) 8p.	Santiago de Cuba
4	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Jul. 21) 4p.	St. Iago de Cuba a
5	SWL to Father: 1869 (Aug. 1) 5p.	Key West, FL
6	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Sep. 16) 6p.	Portsmouth, NH
7	SWL to Father: 1869 (Sep. 17) 3p.	Portsmouth, NH
8	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Sep. 20) 4p.	Portsmouth, NH
9	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Sep. 22) 4p.	Portsmouth, NH
10	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Oct. 10) 4p.	Brooklyn, NY
11	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Dec. 15) 2p.	Boston, MA
12	SWL to Mother: 1869 (Dec. 28) 4p.	Boston, MA
13	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Jan. 25) 2p.	Battery, NY
14	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Jan. 29) 2p.	Battery, NY
15	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Feb. 2) 4p.	Battery, NY
16	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Feb. 18) 3p.	Battery, NY
17	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Feb. 23) 3p.	Battery, NY
18	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Mar. 4) 4p.	Battery, NY
19	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Mar. 10) 4p.	Battery, NY

20	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Mar. 17) 2p.	Battery, NY
21	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Mar. 23) 4p.	Battery, NY
22	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Mar. 29-30) 4p.	Battery, NY
23	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Apr. 26-Jun. 23) 16p.	At Sea
24	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Jun. 26-Jul. 1) 2p.	Cape Town. South Africa
25	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Aug. 7- Aug. 8) 8p.	At Sea
26	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Aug. 17-Aug.22) 4p.	Singapore
27	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Sep. 17) 8p.	Saigon Cochin, China
28	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Oct. 2) 3p.	Hong Kong
29	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Oct. 4) 2p.	Hong Kong
30	SWL to Father: 1870 (Oct. 6) 4p.	At Sea
31	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Oct. 15-Oct. 16) 8p.	At Sea
32	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Oct. 25) 3p.	Shanghai River
33	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Nov. 14) 4p.	Nanking
34	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Nov. 24-Nov. 28)	Woosung River
35	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Dec. 5) 4p.	Shanghai
36	SWL to Mother: 1870 (Dec. 10) 2p.	Shanghai
37	SWL to Mother: 1870-1871 (Dec. 30-Jan. 3) 8p.	Pagoda
38	Miscellaneous	

PROVENANCE NOTE

In December of 2013, Samuel W. Latta's letters were donated to Lafayette College by his great-great nephew, Oscar A. Huettner, Lafayette College class of 1977.