

Dr. Asahel Clapp

[New Albany is pleasantly situated on the Ohio a short distance below Louisville, in Kentucky. It is the largest town in the state and is rapidly increasing in population, trade and wealth. – Geography of 1840.]

BY KATE MILNER RABB.

In 1849 the population of this city was 7,000. Its prosperity was due largely to the industry of steamboat building and repairing. There were other flourishing industries as well, foundries, machine shops, etc. It was a beautiful city, too. It had wide, tree-bordered streets, set with frame and brick houses, most attractive of which were those whose back yards sloped down to the river. A traveler of 1840 described one of these as "One of those old mansions which give the place its character, situated on the high bank of the river, with its terraced garden sloping down to the water, its three-storied latticed porches facing the stream."

A man who knocked impatiently at the door of such a house on a very rainy night in 1849 – he was to learn later that it was the first two-story brick house built in New Albany – saw a curious sight. First a man in a nightcap looked out of an upstairs window. Then he heard steps descending the stairs and soon the door was opened and he was greeted by a man in a nightcap, carrying a candle.

Meets Man He Seeks.

"Where is Hale's tavern?" asked the stranger.

"About a hundred yards west," replied the man with the candle.

"The stage in which I was traveling broke down on High street," explained the stranger," and I was sent on in this direction to find the tavern." Then fortunately he added, "I am travelling in America and came to New Albany to meet a Dr. Clapp." Fortunately, because the man in the nightcap was Dr. Clapp himself, and the visitor was no less a personage than Sir Charles Lyell, noted British geologist, who knew of Dr. Clapp's studies of the geology of the falls of the Ohio. The account of this visit may be found in his "Visit to the United States of America," Vol. 2, Pages 208-9, if you care to read it.

In "Kemper's Medical History of Indiana" Dr. W. B. Fletcher is quoted as saying that while a district medical society was formed in 1817 at Vincennes, "the state society was not formed until 1820, when it met in Corydon, then the capital of the state." The Western Censor gives the list of officers elected at this meeting; the president was Asahel Clapp of New Albany.

An Interesting Citizen.

Dr. Clapp was one of Indiana's most interesting citizens during his long residence in the state, from 1815 until his death in 1862. His diary, kept continuously from April, 1819 until a few days before his death is one of the most valuable contributions of its kind in the state. Each entry is prefaced with a weather report, thermometer and barometer and it is

said that when the United States Weather Bureau was established at Louisville, Ky., a copy was ordered made for it of the temperature and barometer records from Dr. Clapp's diary for the early years, which was also used for comparisons published in the newspapers. As the Weather Bureau was not established until sometime in the seventies, the diary covered a long period, from 1819 to 1862, which it would not otherwise have had.

The diary reveals Dr. Clapp's scientific interests – geology and botany both being a passion with him – and also his interest in the affairs of the community for he took part in the elections and was interested in the management of the city. He was the first fire chief of the first volunteer fire company. Whenever possible he was taking a boat "up the river" to Cincinnati to hobnob with his friends the famous Dr. Drake and other scientists of that town; at other times going over to Louisville. He organized the Philosophical Society of New Albany and the Medical Society. There are entries which disclose the fact that almost every notable who came to New Albany was entertained at his home. His brief comments on these people are illuminating. Dr. Andrew Wylie, president of Indiana university, attended a synod held in New Albany and was entertained at the home of Dr. Clapp.

Intelligent Gentleman.

"He is a very able, learned and intelligent gentleman," wrote the doctor in his diary; "ingenuous, candid and liberal in his opinions to such a degree as to expose him some times to the enmity of ignorant and bigoted minds." An analysis said to be correct in every particular. How delightful if he had only recorded his conversations with this man, with "Prof. McGuffey who staid with us for a few days," and with the many others who were entertained in his hospitable home.

The brief accounts of his three long journeys east in 1831, 1833 and 1835, show the high regard in which he was held by scientists. Prof. Silliman of Yale and he corresponded regularly, and when he visited New Haven on these occasions he was entertained with great honor by president and faculty. Everything that was worth seeing in the various cities he visited. His trips were for buying drugs as he had a drug store, too, and one, at least, was made for the treatment of his eyes. He saw museums, monuments and plays. He attended lectures and concerts; he visited art galleries, so from his brief record we are able to form something of a picture of the times.

The only sketch of Dr. Clapp's life is the obituary which appeared in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal Feb. 12, 1863. It was written by Dr. J. L. Chandler of St. Albans, Vt., a fellow pupil of Dr. Clapp's. From this we learn that he was born in Massachusetts, Oct. 5, 1792. His father soon moved to Vermont and it was from Montgomery, Vt., that Dr. Clapp emigrated to Indiana in 1817 Dr. Chandler wrote of him:

Clothing of Backwoodsman.

"When Asahel Clapp presented himself to my father, he must have been not far from 20 years of age. He was in the rough garb of a backwoodsman and announced his wish to commence the study of medicine forthwith. It was the custom of country physicians in those early days to receive pupils, boarding and sometimes clothing them, trusting to their future professional success for remuneration. He signified his wish to discharge his

pecuniary obligations as they accrued by labor on the farm, or in any employment my father might furnish. He had traveled some thirty miles on foot from a new settlement among the mountains, where he had resided from early childhood and where his ardor in the pursuit of knowledge must have been kindled. His training had all been effected in the rough and brief terms of the district pioneer school of that pioneer period, usually taught by backwoodsmen themselves.

"His bearing was indicative of intelligence and good sense, of solidity rather than brilliancy. My father was quick to discover and appreciate talent and watched its development with the gusto of an epicure. He acceded to young Clapp's terms at once. It was during my own pupilage and though the only advantage I could claim over him was a superficial smattering of Latin, I affected profound amazement at his temerity in presuming to enter upon the study of medicine with so little preparation, especially with the drawbacks on his time by the undignified employment of his own hands in catering for his daily support. My father replied to this sage announcement of my sentiments towards my fellow pupil that I should soon be relieved of the burden of such regrets by finding myself amply employed in following at a respectful distance my fellow student's lead in the acquisition of knowledge."

Leading Scientific Man.

Dr. Chandler told of a visit Dr. Clapp made him in late years, when he was "still the same enthusiastic and diligent student. He was at that time so absorbed in microscopic studies that he hardly allowed himself time for the hospitalities and enjoyments which relatives and old friends were anxious to offer him. Indeed, his traveling outfit seemed to consist mainly of lenses and other apparatus appropriate to the unremitting labor which at home or abroad, he made the great business of his life."

The obituary notice adds: "For many years, Dr. Clapp has been one of the leading scientific men in his adopted city and state; in everything relating to his profession he is represented to have been an enthusiast, reading every new work on medicine and surgery; and devoting much time to the study of botany and geology."

In 1820 Dr. Clapp married Mary Scribner, daughter of one of the founders of New Albany. They had one child, Lucinda. Mrs. Clapp died in 1831, and later he married the widow of Nathaniel Scribner. By this second wife he had seven children, only two of whom lived past childhood, Mary E. and William A., who studied medicine and practiced his profession in the same office in the house which his father had used. He died in 1900.

Dr. Clapp's funeral notice, in existence at New Albany – the black-bordered kind that was passed from house to house – reads: "Yourself and family are invited to attend the funeral of Dr. Asahel Clapp, from the First Presbyterian church tomorrow, Thursday afternoon, at 2 o'clock, New Albany, December 17, 1862." The date of his death is given incorrectly in Kemper's Medical History.

House Still Standing.

After I had read Dr. Clapp's diary last year (and there is now a photostat copy in the state library.) I wrote Griffin Pleiss of New Albany for information concerning the house which Dr. Clapp wrote of so much in the early entries of the diary, of this and of the garden in which he planted fruit trees and flowers. Mr. Pleiss sent two photographs of the house, front and back views, and wrote as follows:

"The old brick house is still standing, almost unchanged, on the south side of Main street on the west side of the alley and just a little east of the old Scribner house. It is a three-story brick, with stone foundation, stands on the street and alley line; the small square-paned windows have given way to larger panes. There are porches across the rear of the house on each floor, and as this side faces the Ohio river, and the ground slopes, there is also a basement, and, of course, in the doctor's time, the yard extended on down to the river bank and no doubt this was the garden. Now the yard is destitute of flowers and trees and the rear portion is a vitrified pipe storage yard. Imagine the contrast to what it must have been in Dr. Clapp's lifetime. The third story and the attic of the house, by the way, were added by Dr. William Clapp. A lantern once hung over the front door."

As a Memorial.

Since Dr. Clapp was one of the state's earliest and most famous physicians, well known to scientists throughout the country, and since he was first president of the state medical society, why should not the medical society secure this house and restore it as a memorial to him? The few historic houses which have been restored in this state have proved most satisfactory memorials and are much visited by tourists. The Lanier house, the Fautleroy house, the William Henry Harrison house, all preserve the atmosphere of their times. The Piankeshaw chapter of D.A.R. of New Albany owns the Scribner house and hopes some day to restore it completely. The Dr. Clapp house nearby would help to complete the picture.

Mr. Pleiss writes that the house could probably be completely refurnished with the original furniture which is still in New Albany. Among this is a hand-carved four-poster mahogany bed, a cord bed for which Dr. Clapp sent to Haddam Court, Conn., and for which he paid \$300. At the time of his death it was found in the fourth story attic and rescued by John A. Mitchell of New Albany, who owns many of these relics. Among these is a lard oil lamp similar to that of George Washington at Mt. Vernon, the identical candlestick which he carried when he greeted Sir Charles Lyell, and some of his bookcases. Mr. Mitchell also owns Dr. Clapp's portrait, in oils, framed under glass in an oval frame, also the portrait of his son, and much of his mineral collection and the prescription case from the old drug store of Clapp & Scribner. Many of the birds which he killed and mounted are in the possession of New Albany families.